

Investigating Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) - A Multi-Perspective Approach: (1) Conceptual Issues

Accumulated evidence from Australian and international studies has led to a general acceptance that quality programs in early childhood education and care (ECEC) make a difference to outcomes for children. Despite differences in approach and methodology, recent findings reported by Harrison (in press), Love et al. (2003), NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2005) and Sylva et al. (2003) all confirm the benefits for children's language, learning, health, and socio-emotional development of receiving higher rather than lower quality care. These studies, however, have relied on definitions and measures of quality that can be seen as being reductionist and limited in their scope. They focus on two dimensions: structural features, such as staff qualifications and the number of children and adults in the group, and process features, which are seen in children's interactions, language, and engagement in play, and the nature of the relationships between adults and children. Whilst these aspects of ECEC contribute much, recent theorising posits that quality is multidimensional (Press, 2006) and requires multiple sources of information to ascertain differences in children's experiences of education and care.

In this symposium, we develop this position through a series of five papers in which the authors explore conceptual issues inherent in taking a broad, multi-dimensional view of quality. Harrison begins with approaches to defining and measuring quality that are typical of recent large-scale quantitative studies. The paper is illustrated by design features and findings from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. This paper is followed by a presentation by Fenech that moves beyond an approach that measures and quantifies quality. This paper is supported with examples from a new study that seeks to elucidate less tangible but equally critical dimensions of quality.

Each of the following three papers then presents a different vision of quality. Burgess and Hard address the question of leadership and what this means for quality in relation to the effective professional development of staff who work in early childhood services. McFarland and colleagues speak to the issue of quality when seen in the wider context of families and communities. Sumsion presents the child's perspective on quality by drawing on the insights of lived experience (van Manen, 1990) to address the intriguing question of what life is like for babies and toddlers in childcare. The symposium concludes with a discussion by Press who considers the case for drawing on multiple perspectives of quality to influence early childhood policy.

Paper 1

Linda Harrison

Measuring, quantifying, and establishing quality as a critical aspect of children's experience of early childhood education and care

In research seeking to establish links between children's outcomes and the contexts in and through which they develop, quality has been conceptualised as encompassing the features of early childhood education and child care (ECEC) programs that are beneficial to children's well-being, learning and development. Broadly, these are

defined as structural (such as caregiver qualifications, group size, ratios of children to adults) and process (the recurring patterns and interactions that occur between children, staff and parents), with structural features seen as providing the underlying conditions to support quality processes. Large scale well funded research studies, such as the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, the Early Head Start evaluation in the U.S., and the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education project in the U. K., have given a greater emphasis to process measures of quality. In these research programs, quality has been defined and measured objectively through the use of standardised procedures and a painstaking process of training uninvolved observers. Approaches vary, however: some rely on global assessments of program quality specific to centre-based programs that are collected at the level of the room; others use child specific assessments suited to both centre- and home-based settings to quantify the extent to which the study child is stimulated and supported in his/her learning and socio-emotional needs.

In this paper, attention is given to alternative methods of quantifying process quality that give emphasis to the information that teachers and caregivers within the setting can provide. Models include carer-report systems that quantify typical daily practices, such as the extent to which carers are involved in interactions with children in play and routine caregiving tasks, as well as non-contact tasks such as organising space, equipment, or meals. Child-specific approaches ask teachers/caregivers to complete questionnaires that measure of the extent to which the child-adult relationships at child care/school are emotionally supportive, warm and trusting. Information on the work environment for carers is a further indicator of quality, that carers/teachers have been asked to provide. Whilst this approach is subject to bias, the benefits are that data are provided by respondents who work in the program and with the child and have specific, accurate, current and comprehensive knowledge of the child and the early childhood setting. These models will be illustrated by data collected in the first year of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children on indicators of quality for the 1,782 three to 18-month-olds infants who were receiving regular child care.

Paper 2

Marianne Fenech, Linda Harrison, Jennifer Sumsion, Frances Press & Jennifer Bowes
A multi-perspective approach to quality: Considerations for the accreditation of long day care services

The OECD (2006) Starting Strong II report identified two broad categories as being critical to the provision of quality in children's services: external legislated requirements and internal processes and practices. In this paper, the authors suggest that the regulatory environment in which long day care (LDC) centres in New South Wales operate (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005; NSW Department of Community Services, 2004), and the observation ratings scales predominantly used in research to assess quality practices in children's services (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998; Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2003), are grounded in positivist approaches. Drawing on Foucauldian (1978, 1980, 1983) notions of power and discourse, they argue that while useful, such positivist understandings of quality have their dangers. Resisting a binary positioning, we propose that a multiple perspective approach to quality, and one that embraces positivist and poststructuralist underpinnings, has the potential to lead to richer, and appropriately, deeper understandings of the complex

processes and practices that underpin the consistent provision of high quality LDC.

This conceptual problematising of quality is complemented by drawing on preliminary findings from a multi-phased project, A multi-modal investigation of current and proposed structures and processes determining and sustaining quality in Australian centre based child care, funded by the Australian Research Council to Charles Sturt University (Discovery Grant DP0881729, 2008 -2010: L Harrison, F Press, J Sumsion, J. Bowes, M Fenech. \$257,196). This project is investigating current and proposed structural and process level elements that determine and sustain quality in Australian centre based child care. Findings from an in-depth case study of an identified high quality LDC centre will be used to elucidate less tangible but equally critical dimensions of quality - teachers' reflective practices being a notable example (Goodfellow, 2003) - than those generally acknowledged in quality child care research and accreditation discourses. As the Rudd Labor government moves to a five tiered system of accreditation in Australia, this paper will raise considerations for how a multiple perspective approach to quality, and its ensuing refined understandings of 'within centre' processes that determine high quality, might inform current Federal government policy.

Paper 3

Carol Burgess & Louise Hard

What is the impact of leadership? Exploring the relationship between quality leadership activity and quality outcomes of professional development for early childhood teachers

Leadership continues to be researched and written about widely in many discipline areas. According to some authors leadership has "...become ubiquitous" and all are encouraged to participate (Sinclair 2007, p. xiii). Others have made problematic the theoretical and methodological concepts and practices of leadership (Blackmore 2007, p.5). In the popular literature leadership is considered a desirable aspiration yet acknowledged as both elusive and "tricky" (Sample 2003, p.1). Does quality leadership have tangible outcomes or does it remain a concept that is ill-defined with the unquestioned expectation that enacted effectively there are positive results? In the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) literature suggests that leadership is an important professional issue and in fact the key element in increasing "...quality in service provision for young children and families..." (Rodd 2006, p.1). So how in this context is leadership evident and evaluated for the quality of its impact?

This paper explores current literature around leadership and its relationship to tangible outcomes. It draws on a recent research project which investigated the professional development needs and outcomes of staff in the field of ECEC and suggests that there is a link between effective leadership enactment and the professional development of ECEC personnel. There is emerging evidence to suggest that quality leadership is a key factor in the strategic identification of appropriate professional development activities for staff. It also suggests that the application of knowledge gained through such "PD" is applied more effectively as a result of certain leadership activity. Conclusions recognise a relationship between leadership and effective professional development in these data however, what is also apparent is a need to make more explicit the impact and outcomes of various leadership enactments to ensure they

produce quality outcomes for children, staff and families in ECEC.

Paper 4

Laura McFarland, Alison Lord, Melissa Smith & Belinda Downey

Community involvement and participation in children's services: Implications for quality

Children's development is situated within the context of family, culture and community, rather than in isolation (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). In order to fully understand and respond to children in early childhood settings, educators must be aware of these contexts and facilitate community and family involvement in the setting. Quality services focus on building collaborative partnerships, whereby communication and connections are established between educators and families in order to benefit the child (NSW DOCS, 2002b). However, pre-service teachers may not get much experience in developing ways to build links with communities in their teacher education courses. Thus, to improve quality for children, teacher preparation and practical experiences for pre-services teachers should ensure that community links are built.

It is widely recognised that establishing genuine University links with the community is beneficial to both universities and members of the community (Bartlett, 1995; Reardon, 1999). One way that university-community relationships can be created is through the use of play groups, which can not only provide opportunities for student professional learning, but positive outcomes for families (Jackson, 2006). The use of playgroups can provide experience for pre-service teachers in making links to families in the community and experiencing the benefits for these families. Playgroups can also be a way of minimising social isolation of families (Berry, 1983). This may be of particular relevance to families in rural communities who may not feel they have many social connections.

This paper explores the connections between community and family involvement in early childhood services and outcomes related to quality for parents, children, and educators. The paper draws on a research project examining the impact of community involvement in children's play sessions organised by a rural university campus. Focus groups were conducted to understand parents' and pre-service teachers' views on community involvement and how it impacts quality experiences for families and children. Implications for building community connections for EC services and teacher education programs are discussed.

Paper 5

Jennifer Sumsion, Linda Harrison, Frances Press, Sharynne McLeod, Ben Bradley, Joy Goodfellow

Infants' Perspectives on Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

What is life really like for babies and toddlers in childcare? How can we understand their 'lived experience' (van Manen, 1990)? And what do their lived experiences tell us about the quality of infant early education and care? These questions underpin a recently awarded ARC Linkage Project LP0883913 involving Family Day Care

Australia and KU Children's Services as Industry Partners. The project is premised on the assumption that understanding how pre-linguistic infants "see" childcare is critical to identifying how their quality of life in childcare can be enhanced.

This paper identifies some of the inherent conceptual, methodological and ethical challenges associated with investigating the perspectives of pre-linguistic children. It also describes how the project has been designed to support the research team's endeavours to address these challenges. Central to the research design is a commitment to recognising infants as competent social agents, co-constructors of and active participants in their social worlds, and capable of conveying their experiences, while acknowledging the impossibility of conclusively knowing their experiences and the need for tentative interpretations.

In brief, the project brings a team of researchers from different disciplines (early childhood education, with expertise in child development, policy, and professional development; psychology; and communication and speech pathology) together with service managers, carers (used here to refer to all staff in long day care centres who work directly with children, as well as carers in family day care homes), parents, older children, and where possible, the infants themselves, to investigate what life is like for infants in long day care and family day care. Using 'mosaic methodology' (Clark & Moss, 2001) and a 'joint exploration' approach (Dolby & Swan, 2003), they will draw on their respective theoretical, professional, familial, contextual and/or experiential frames to interpret edited video data of infants day-to-day experiences, and jointly construct and negotiate meanings. It is anticipated that the use of multiple interpretative frames from diverse knowledge bases will ensure analytic richness and depth; avoid the limitations of reliance on any one source of knowledge or expertise; and dislodge researchers and participants from the 'certainties' of their habitual reference points. It is also envisaged that drawing on a range of specialist expertise, while simultaneously shaking free of its constraints, will create new spaces for 'listening' to infants' 'voices' (Clark & Moss, 2001). Joint exploration with carers and parents is likely to assist in establishing a climate of trust that will open up investigative possibilities not otherwise feasible.

Discussant

Frances Press

Envisioning quality in ECEC: Perspectives on policy