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Reflecting on 'quality' in early childhood education: practitioners' perspectives and voices

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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread availability, accessibility and affordability of early years settings in the Maltese context, the quality of services within childcare and kindergarten has never been explored. This study presents the perspectives of 436 practitioners from 50 childcare or kindergarten settings who were invited to reflect upon their understanding of quality through an interview or focus group discussion. Practitioners are key, influential stakeholders, responsible for supporting young children and their families at a significant time of growth, development and transitions. Given their crucial role in providing quality learning experiences, it is imperative to access their insights into 'quality' issues which can offer much-needed evidence for policy development. NVivo analysis of practitioners' responses to an open-ended question yielded five broad factors including environmental factors, relationships, practitioner matters, child-oriented factors and issues associated with policies and praxis. These results are interpreted in light of their implications for policymakers and practitioners.

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Quality in ECEC practice; practitioners' perspectives; structural and process factors; practitioners' voices; professionalisation

Introduction

Despite decades of research focusing on quality in early childhood education, the topic remains highly debated and contested. It involves the perspectives of multiple stakeholders who perceive and interpret quality depending on their roles, positions, cultures and contexts. Discussions about quality and attempts at identifying how factors interact and contribute towards achieving it persist. Quality is a relative concept (Moss and Pence 1994), construed through different conceptualisations about the education and social dimensions of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). Notwithstanding diverse perspectives there are principles about which there is agreement: 'the importance of "quality" cannot be disputed' (Sylva 2010, 86); high quality in ECEC matters; poor quality services are detrimental, especially for children at risk (Vandenbroeck, Lenaerts, and Beblavý 2018; OECD 2018; van Belle 2016; European Commission 2014). Quality issues are often classified as structural or process factors: the former support the latter in providing meaningful learning opportunities within a caring and responsive environment (EURYDICE & EACEA 2009). Yet conclusions about the

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relationships between structural and process quality have not all been strong or consistent (Slot et al. 2015).

Practitioners' roles and voices

Various stakeholders have an interest in quality provision. Practitioners are best positioned to offer 'insider' perspectives (Katz 1999). They play a crucial role in the quality debate since they are responsible for negotiating the curriculum, identifying effective pedagogical practices and offering supportive interactions among themselves and with the children in their care (Janta, van Belle, and Stewart 2016). A review of studies on the impact of quality on children's development indicated that caregiver-child dynamics, including adults' sensitivity and responsiveness in interactions with children, were at the heart of quality, although structural features provided the foundation for rich dynamics (Love, Schochet, and Meckstroth 1996). Well-trained, highly qualified and engaged practitioners are instrumental contributors to rich, meaningful educational environments (European Commission 2018a; Sylva et al. 2004; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

Gathering data from practitioners has two advantages: it ensures practitioners' voices are valued and authentic accounts of their experiences are preserved and can be shared (Blenkin et al. 1995). Yet the literature is sparse on practitioners' insights and their contribution towards quality. Although they play a pivotal role in contributing to quality provision, little consideration seems to have been given to their voices, insights or the extent to which they themselves contribute to providing and supporting positive learning environments (Ceglowski and Bacigalupa 2002). Small-scale studies in different cultural contexts suggest that practitioners attribute importance to structural matters, including provision of safe, secure environments; group size; ratios; and their professional and personal characteristics (Ikegami and Agbenyega 2014; Ceglowski 2004; Fthenakis et al., as cited in Textor 1998; Farquhar 1991). Textor's (1998) review of early studies concludes that professionals have a 'sound understanding of what high quality in childcare means' (p. 170) but practitioners need time to reflect upon their work and its potential influence on children's learning experiences.

Structural quality indicators, including staff qualifications, are easily measured and objective. Process quality is more fluid and subjective. It is associated with and manifested through child-adult interactions and the implementation of learning activities, both indicative of the day to day functioning within early years settings (Rao and Sun 2015). Professionals with higher levels of education and specialised training in ECEC provide stimulating and supportive interactions with children (OECD 2006) leading to favourable cognitive and social outcomes (OECD 2011). In the absence of appropriately trained early childhood educators, the quality of ECEC is adversely affected (Sun, Rao, and Pearson 2015). Staff training and programme quality are two issues which regularly feature in professional discourse about quality in ECEC systems (Oberhuemer 2004). Many EU member states need to 'bridge the gap between the reality of the ECEC workforce and their ambition' to offer quality ECEC services, because they 'face a historical burden of having invested in a workforce with low qualifications' (Vandenbroeck et al. 2016, 3).

Quality services require knowledgeable, engaged, competent, committed and confident practitioners who can create and design stimulating learning experiences and environments; respond to children's needs sensitively and invest time and energy in

building solid relationships with the children and their families. This article focuses on the voices of practitioners who were invited to reflect on their understanding and interpretation of 'quality' in early years.

ECEC in Malta

Compulsory education in Malta starts when a child turns five. Non-compulsory early childhood education services are organised by age and are referred to as 'childcare' for under three-year-olds and 'kindergarten' for three- to five-year-olds. The number of childcare settings increased rapidly over the last two decades. The majority are privately owned and managed. Settings registered with the Ministry for Education are entitled to participate in the free childcare scheme, introduced in April 2014 as an incentive to encourage women to return to the labour market. Service providers receive €3.95 per hour per child.

Kindergarten (KG) has an older history (Sollars 2018). Three sectors offer services: the largest is the State sector, with a KG setting attached to each of the 63 primary schools across the islands. Some Church and Private fee-paying schools offer KG services (Sollars 2017, 2018). Most settings are located within primary school premises and follow school opening hours. They operate for 6 hours a day. KG children attending private schools have a shorter day. Before and after school services are available in state and private schools for KG and older children.

All schools follow the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2012). This is the first national document which included a distinct framework for the early years, and which recommended an early years vision incorporating 0–7-year-olds. The framework proposed five broad learning outcomes to be attained over the time children spend in childcare, kindergarten and the first two years of compulsory primary school. A guide for pedagogy and assessment (Ministry of Education, 2015) promoting a Learning Outcomes Framework elaborated 'achievements expected for each of the broad outcomes.

ECE practitioners in Malta and professional education

Initial and in-service education has faced several challenges. A two-year pre-service training programme for KG was introduced two decades after the introduction of State provision in 1975. Prior to this programme, four school-leaving certificates were requisites for recruitment. Upon employment, practitioners attended intensive six-week training programmes (Sollars 2017, 2018). At a time when the handful of childcare settings available were completely unregulated, mothers who had raised a family were deemed suitably qualified (Sollars 2002).

Over the last decade, various initiatives sought to address pre- and in-service education and qualifications. An undergraduate course leading to a bachelor's degree in ECEC was introduced at the University between 2009 and 2016. Graduates could become teachers in kindergarten, hence raising the profile of early years and making KG staff's qualification comparable to primary and secondary school teachers. However, holders of this degree were deployed in primary schools. Currently, an undergraduate degree (EQF Level 6) in Early Years is available for prospective practitioners (European Commission 2018b),

although the minimum qualification requirement for staff working in either childcare or kindergarten remains an EQF Level 4 diploma (Ministry of Justice, Malta 2019). Level 4 programmes are offered by accredited private institutions and the state vocational college. Practitioners are referred to as kindergarten educators (Ministry for Education & Employment 2017). In the absence of a University qualification accredited to the teaching profession, staff in KG cannot be referred to as teachers.

Continuing professional development (CPD) was traditionally carried out through 12 to 15 hour in-service courses, offered at the beginning or end of a school year. Upskilling courses ranging from 70 to 210 hours were available between 2010 and 2011 and linked to financial progression (Sollars 2017). CPD is currently offered through the 'Community for professional educators' (Ministry for Education & Employment 2017). There are no compulsory CPD requirements for staff working with under three-year-olds. Urban and Vandenbroeck (2011) report that in-service training positively influences quality. It has limited effects if it is focused on knowledge and skills and must be followed annually with 20 hours as minimum duration (Vandenbroeck et al. 2016).

Within the Maltese context, much remains to be addressed to ensure quality services. An overall vision and strategy on the way forward is lacking. Over the years, toing and froing between Ministries seeking to share or take over the responsibility for the early years contributed to the sector being perceived as an appendix to the education system or a social service. Different entities have partial responsibilities for policies, their development and implementation. A top-down approach to policy actions implies that practitioners are often at the receiving end without any say in shaping or directing their work. Leadership issues compound the situation: a low-level qualification is required for 'managers' in childcare settings; heads or deputy heads of schools do not necessarily have specific qualifications or experience in early years. Thus, policy changes are not necessarily supported, monitored, or sustained at length. Sporadic attempts to raise the qualifications of the workforce have been undertaken but undermined in the absence of any national agreement about principles or content to be covered. Research, monitoring and evaluation of the sector are limited. In such circumstances, the quality of services is based on hearsay or personal experiences rather than scientific evidence.

Methodology

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological systems theory offered an appropriate theoretical framework for the current research. The strength of Bronfenbrenner's theory lies in the definition of 'development' of the active person at the centre of the model, within the surrounding contextual variation; and the phenomenological nature of ecological systems (Darling. 2007). The bidirectional interactions between children and their proximal and more distant environments shape human development (Burchinal 2018). Practitioners are pivotal influences, immersed in children's micro- and meso-systems (Bronfenbrenner 2005). They too are 'active persons at the centre': their own contexts, experiences, knowledge and insights contribute to their beliefs and practices which impinge on the quality of children's learning.

The study was conducted in 16 childcare and 34 kindergarten settings across Malta and Gozo. To have a representative random sample, practitioners from State, Church and Private settings were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview or a focus group

discussion. Irrespective of the data collection tool, identical questions were set for all participants. Data were collected through a phenomenological research approach where the researcher sought to obtain insights and record the lived experiences of practitioners. Phenomenology allows for data collection from participants who have direct experiences of the phenomenon under study, yielding rich descriptions and allowing for comparability. The reading and re-reading of recorded responses facilitate elicitation of phrases and themes which lead to clusters of meaning, a deep understanding of the phenomenon and informed interpretation by researchers (Creswell 2013).

The interview consisted of 16 open-ended questions. Of relevance to this article is the introductory question which invited participants to define or describe quality by identifying factors they consider to be indicative of it. The choice of an interview or a focus group discussion depended on the size of the setting, the number of practitioners within each setting who expressed interest and willingness to participate, and the practical arrangements which the setting could afford. Where all the staff in the larger settings agreed to participate, a two-hour session dedicated to professional development and held once a term after school hours was utilised. Since the study was undertaken by one researcher, in the larger settings discussions were introduced and monitored by the researcher but led by practitioners as they were organised in groups of four to six participants. This encouraged and facilitated participation. Written records were kept by one member within each group. Subsequently, each group shared its views with all the staff through a rapporteur. The written documentation was collected by the researcher. Where interviews were possible, these were conducted with individuals, pairs or groups of three to five adults. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data were collected from 64 interviews and 10 whole group discussions involving 436 practitioners. Background information about the participants, their roles within their respective settings, the age range and their years of work experience are available in Tables 1–4. Most participants were kindergarten educators and childcare workers in possession of an EQF Level 4 qualification. Other participants included learning support educators working with children with special needs. Three ECEC teachers were awaiting their transfer to a primary school because of their University teaching qualification in early years. There were only six males within the entire group of participants, reflecting the highly gendered workforce. Three males worked in administration and management.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. Various education authorities gave their consent for the visits to settings. A face-to-face meeting was held in each setting with prospective participants. The research to be undertaken and the rationale were explained together with the duration and involvement expected. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Identities of

Table 1. Distribution of participants by setting and sector.

	Participants – 34 KG settings			Participants – 16 Childcare settings	
Sector	State	Church	Private	State	Private
Number of settings	20	10	4	5	11
Number of Participants	275	45	24	35	57
Total number of participants		**344 (79%)**		**92 (21%)**	

Table 2. Participants' roles by setting.

Kindergarten		Childcare	
KGE	241	Childcarers	87
LSE	89	Managers	5
Assistant Heads	8		
Class assistants	2		
ECEC teachers	3		
Carer	1		
Total	**344**		**92**

Table 3. Participants by age and setting.

	Kindergarten Youngest: 18-year-old Oldest: 62-year-old	Childcare Youngest: 18-year-old Oldest: 58-year-old
18–25-year olds	74 (21.5%)	25 (27.2%)
26–35-year olds	93 (27.0%)	23 (25.0%)
36–45-year olds	75 (21.8%)	18 (19.6%)
46–55-year olds	60 (17.4%)	20 (21.7%)
56+ years	42 (12.0%)	6 (6.5%)
Total	344 (100%)	92 (100%)

Table 4. Years of work experience by setting.

	Kindergarten settings		Childcare settings	
Years of work experience	N	%	N	%
Less than 1 year	24	7%	7	7.6%
1–2 years	40	11.6%	35	38%
2.5–3 years	21	6%	10	10.9%
4–5 years	62	18%	11	12%
5.5–6 years	31	9%	6	6.5%
7–9 years	22	6.4%	15	16%
10 – 12 years	30	8.7%	6	6.5%
13–16 years	26	7.6%	-	-
17–19 years	8	2.3%	-	-
20–25 years	20	5.8%	-	-
26–29 years	27	7.8%	-	-
30–34 years	20	5.8%	-	-
35–38 years	7	2%	-	-
40 years or more	5	1.4%	-	-
Missing data	1	0.3%	2	2.2%
Total	344	100%	92	100%

participants or their settings would not be disclosed. Letters of information and consent forms were distributed. Signed consent was retrieved a few days after the information meetings.

Practitioners' responses were analysed through NVivo. Rather than predetermined categories, identical or similar responses provided by participants were grouped, allowing for factors and corresponding frequencies to emerge. Considering the exploratory nature of the study, data analyses were undertaken and are reported for the full sample thus capturing responses from a representative sample of practitioners working in any of the three sectors within childcare or KG. The research did not seek to compare responses from practitioners working in childcare against those working in KG; nor

were responses compared depending on whether participants worked in State, Church or Private settings.

Findings

Practitioners from all settings identified structural and process factors as indicative of quality. Table 5 illustrates the factors and the frequency with which they were referred to by participants. Factors were not mentioned in order of any importance, although within some of the group interviews, the oral recordings clearly suggest that some individuals felt more strongly about certain factors than they did about others.

Considering the number of participants and the freedom to mention or list any factors, the data generated was substantial. Once frequencies of similar/identical references were obtained, individual responses were grouped to make the data manageable. Five broad categories each consisting of a cluster of factors emerged, namely: environmental factors; relationships; practitioner matters; child-oriented factors; and issues associated with policies and praxis (Figures 1–5).

Table 5. Frequency of reference made by practitioners to factors indicative of quality.

Characteristic	Frequency
Physical Environment	79
Resources	68
Safety	58
Carer attitudes and characteristics	45
Hygiene and cleanliness	42
Qualified staff	35
Parents and relationships	35
Relationships with children	35
Senior Management/Co-ordinators	32
A happy, welcoming atmosphere	30
Ratios	30
Child-centered	29
Teamwork among colleagues	25
Professional development	19
Elements of practices/teaching	17
Organisation of setting	16
Activities	16
Awareness of/addressing child development	15
Upkeep and maintenance of setting	14
Number of children	13
In class support	13
Children's happiness, eagerness, enthusiasm	10
Being professional	10
Policies and praxis	9
Offers a range of services	6
Discipline	6
Availability of a framework	5
Reciprocal respect	4
Children's learning	4
Reputation	3
Content	3
Children's engagement	2
Parents' convenience	2
Regular monitoring	2

Figure 1. Environmental factors indicative of quality.

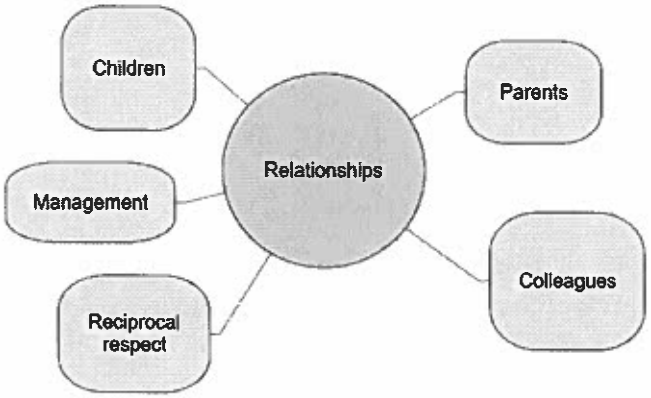

Figure 2. Relationships as an indicator of quality.

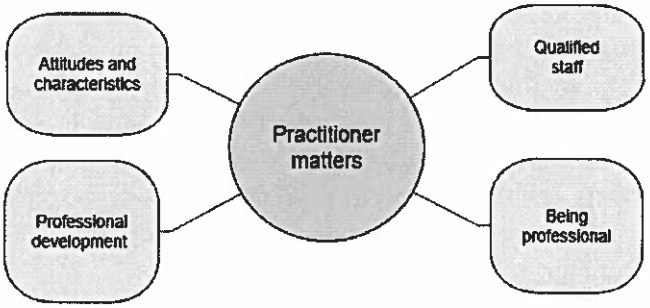

Figure 3. Practitioner-related matters as indicators of quality.

Environmental Factors

The physical environment, resources, safety, hygiene and cleanliness were factors attributed most importance by the practitioners. Reference was made to homely environments, 'for children to feel relaxed' (Private Child Care 6); spacious areas, equipped with a range of age-appropriate resources; welcoming, colourful environments which are safe, 'attractive, appealing and comfortable'. Some practitioners insisted that the setting should be

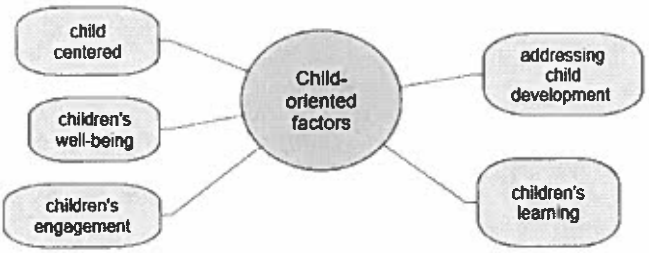

Figure 4. Child-oriented factors as indicators of quality.

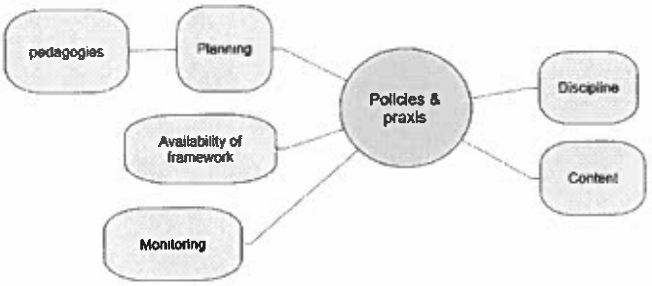

Figure 5. Policies and praxis as indicators of quality.

welcoming for parents too. The wish list in one KG setting included comfortable and child-friendly furniture; an indoor play area; child-friendly kitchens; and a library (KG literacy room).

Having a routine, timetable and set way of working within the setting were seen as indicative of quality. Staff in one childcare setting compared the organisation of their day to that of a kindergarten. Staff explained that they work with predetermined themes for which age-appropriate activities would have been planned. Without considering children's interests or their involvement at the planning stages a pre-determined programme was considered helpful to ensure children become accustomed to a routine.

Human resources were also identified as indicators of quality. Reference was made to the need for in-class support through class assistants, learning support educators and professionals such as speech therapists and specialist teachers who should visit KG classrooms for PE, Drama, Music, and Art. The need for in-class support by mentors especially at the beginning of one's career was also considered:

P1 I think that an inexperienced person cannot be on her own in a setting. There must be someone who is experienced ...

P2 I agree

P1 ... who has been there a while not someone green with someone who has never been

P2 ... Greener

P1 When I started I was qualified, but totally clueless! Totally clueless! And with me I had an assistant who had been here ten years. I mean, she showed me the road; she showed me the way things go, you know. If I was put in this classroom on my own it would have

been a different story. I see for myself. And I, *I* used to think I was good but still I think you need like a mentor, you know someone who's been there.

(Independent school KG 2)

Group size and adult to staff ratios were further contributors to quality. One kindergarten practitioner mentioned how being solely responsible for 18 four-year-old children left her struggling to offer individual attention. In another setting, the lack of individual attention arising from a disregard for established ratios was also discussed.

P1 Something which I believe is important both for the children and the carers who are with them, is adhering to the ratios. When you have a situation where you are over the ratio, the carer cannot give as much attention to every boy and girl she has with her ...

P2 We work more with individuals here (referring to the current setting)

P1 ... when you have a setting which observes the ratio, you have the opportunity to focus on every child ... To me, this is very important ...

Because if you observe the established ratio, you are going to have time ... to care, to look after them physically, you have time to do activities, children are also gaining more, and you can therefore see more progress in children.

P2 You even have time to speak to them

P1 ... you speak to them ... Yes, you are going to have more interaction ... More interaction ... because you have time for everything ... that is the main thing for me ...

P3 ... the interaction can't be the same if you have many children ... you would hardly have time to speak to them

P2 When I was at another childcare, it was like being in a factory ... I had told them, "it feels as though I'm on a production line"

P3 To change diapers, for example, it's as though you're on a production line

P2 ... he's just an object. The child is an object, which he's not. That can never be. But that's how I used to work elsewhere. Here it's different. Even with the children, it's evident ... they come to hug you, they love you more, because you have time to be with them ...

P1 You can also see the individual needs of each child

(Practitioners in State Child Care 1)

These findings echo conclusions by Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) where class size and adult to child ratios shaped children's experiences and learning processes differently.

The nature, range and type of activities conducted within settings were all considered essential. Age-appropriate, attractive, entertaining interactive activities were referred to. One childcare manager argued that:

> The activities being prepared should be meaningful; they (referring to carers/practitioners) should know what they are tackling with the specific activities and that they are age-appropriate for that particular group. ... they give children space to explore the environment ... to play together ... give children the freedom to choose what to play with or what

> activities they'd like to do ... even how they accomplish certain activities. That they allow leeway, the freedom for children to express themselves and develop.
>
> (Manager in a State Childcare 5)

Relationships

The second category of factors to be mentioned referred to relationships. Relationships with children and parents earned an identical number of mentions. Relationships among colleagues and with the management and administrative staff – managers in childcare and Heads and Assistant Heads of school in Kindergarten – were also acknowledged.

Practitioners expressed the need to develop a good relationship with children, where children are shown affection, care and respect.

> The children have to feel loved, have to feel like individuals and that they are being given individual attention ... otherwise it's useless claiming you have a lovely atmosphere and then the child carer is frustrated, if I can say so – if I can use that word- and she is, you know, at it all the time, and children can't move or do anything

(State Childcare 2)

'Come[ing] down to the children's level', and the 'behaviour/attitudes' of the practitioners towards children were identified as indicative of quality. One practitioner summarised this as 'professional love' (Page 2018).

> For me I think it would be the teachers empathising with the children, the children feeling loved, ... it's their first experience maybe being out of their home, their second home, the childcare setting ... professional love

(Independent School KG 1)

Another practitioner spoke as a parent arguing that her expectation is that staff would look after her daughter in the same way a mother would.

> My primary requirement would be that who is taking care of my child - I'm talking from a parent's point of view, now, from a mother's point of view – who is taking care of my child is doing it ... the way I'm not going to be able to look after her, they can look after her themselves

(State Childcare 2)

The relationship with parents and the nature of the communication between parents and staff were considered important. The need for an 'open' relationship with parents, where there is 'trust' and 'mutual respect' was referred to as was the welcoming attitude meted out to parents.

P1 she'd indicate ... it's like if you're talking to her and she wants to dismiss you ...

P2 Even the way they welcome you in the morning ... whether it's outside the door or whether you're allowed to enter the setting ....or even whether you have to wait outside when you come to collect your daughter ... you're not allowed to go in for her so that you can see for yourself what your daughter is doing ... to me, that makes a difference

P3 Put on a smile you know, at least ... not show a grumpy face ... you'd think she's like this with me, let alone how she behaves when she's with the children ...

(State KG 2)

One KG practitioner reflected with great enthusiasm on the relationships she had fostered with parents during her initial year of practice.

> I had an, 'amazing' is an understatement, amazing relationship with the parents. They all, everyone could see my work, and I explained every day, I used to spend - I'm not joking, and it's because I wanted to, and the other teachers were like, "you're crazy, you're crazy." - I used to spend like half an hour, three quarters of an hour, chatting after school with the parents. But I, I never, I didn't used to mind ... I understood it was their first child, they were concerned ... And I gave them that time, and in fact at the end of the year, I had these parents writing me letters, 'thank you for understanding my child' ... 'for giving me time to explain myself' ... and I really appreciated it, but that's me. Other teachers would be like ... 'I need to go home'. So it all depends ... on the teacher. ... I think they needed it, you know, 'cos even some parents, for example, they're more insecure ... and they're scared, you don't know the teacher, so at first, for them to build a bit of confidence, you know, with the teacher and what not, I think it's good to speak to the parents

(State KG 7)

When discussing relationships with colleagues and staff working within management and administration, collegiality, teamwork and team building were mentioned as indicators of quality. Practitioners insisted that since they relied on the support of management, the latter require a thorough understanding of early childhood education and an understanding of the work practitioners do with the children (Church KG 5).

> Our superiors should be as informed and even more than us about early childhood education so that when we need support, they can help and guide us to give the best service.

(State KG 12)

> As an employee you need to have back up from the administration as well because, with all due respect, parents don't understand completely, the approach we take sometimes with the children. ... if you don't have an understanding Head or Co-Ordinator, you're a bit ... you're lost.

(Independent KG School 2)

Practitioner matters

There were a low number of references to practitioner-related matters as indicators of quality in settings. Attitudes, personal characteristics, being qualified and professional were factors associated with practitioners. Reference was made to staff who are reliable, responsible, mature, patient, understanding, dedicated, full of ideas. Participants in one church school argued that it is necessary to have 'Well-trained professionals ... employment of qualified staff: up to pre-set standard in both professional education and training'. Within one state school, a KG practitioner expressed her concern that not everybody might be suitable to work with young children despite a qualification:

> ... that they know how to work with young children because not everyone is cut out to be with them ... even though they have followed the programme [of studies] still there are some who ... sometimes I tell myself 'even though she is doing the course, I don't think she really knows how to deal with children', so not everyone is suitable ...

(State KG 17)

A practitioner felt strongly about the lack of professional discretion allowed in her practice. In her opinion, having to follow and do activities with children imposed by higher authorities disregarded professional authority. She interpreted this as a disservice to quality.

P There should be staff who do what they *should* be doing with the age group they are working with ... rather than have a situation where everyone does the same thing blindly, without clear aims.

Res What do you mean? Everyone working in an identical manner without aims.

P Ideally, we avoid doing things which we do because we have to, ... because everybody must do. Personally, that signals lack of quality of a service, because if we are doing things simply because we are given things to do, but not because we think that they should be done, we are not offering quality.

(Church KG 3)

Several respondents saw the need for frequent, regular training and upskilling to improve their practices. These perspectives resonate with international literature related to professional development which is an efficient and effective way of raising the quality of practices which impact children's learning and development (Hakim and Dalli 2018; Miller, Dalli, and Urban 2012).

Child-oriented factors

Having settings which are 'child-centred', focused on children's learning and well-being; where activities encourage children's engagement and address their development were all considered factors contributing to quality. Staff in one setting agreed that practitioners 'need to adapt to the children's needs and not the other way round' (State KG 13); in another setting, staff emphasised the need for individual attention in light of 'children with difficult family backgrounds; children with special needs ... difficult cases' (State KG 11). Children's happiness and enthusiasm at the setting were also seen as quality indicators. One practitioner argued that:

> A child is happy, he would learn. So that is my main concern ... And early years are crucial, 'cos you either make or break a child

(Independent KG 1)

When reference was made to child development, practitioners spoke about the need to address specific skills, tackle weaknesses through early intervention and achieving milestones.

Policies and praxis

Frameworks, guidelines, curricula and written policies were among the issues practitioners expect to have in place reflecting quality services. Reference was made to written policy documents, specific curricula for numeracy and literacy and having a 'tailored programme'.

Practitioners' planning was considered vital. Some practitioners suggested that 'failing to plan is planning to fail' (State KG 14). Elsewhere, practitioners referred to the quality of teaching arguing that 'the extent to which one tries to be creative with the available resources, the limited resources and the limited training' (State KG 4) is indicative of quality.

Discussion and conclusions

Participant responses reflect the complexity of defining 'quality'. Practitioners drew on their personal experiences; described familiar settings and environments; reflected on challenges and rewarding moments; referred to families, children, and colleagues they met on a daily basis in order to identify factors which impinge on the quality of services offered. Structural factors were frequently mentioned. Availability or lack of certain amenities or standards impact quality. Structural features 'are important preconditions for process quality' (Slot 2018, 8) and direct policy intervention should address some of the shortcomings described in settings. Factors associated with the affective domain, including characteristics of practitioners, love and care for children were also common responses. Practitioners' relationships with the children in their care are necessary for optimal provision (Brebner et al. 2015; Drugli and Undheim 2012) and contribute to links between the micro and mesosystems (Bronfenbrenner 2005).

Practitioners made fewer references to pedagogical practices or their own professional development. The curriculum, the content of the programme offered children and the impact on children's overall achievements were hardly mentioned. Few participants acknowledged, articulated, reflected on or shared an awareness of the impact their professional or pedagogical knowledge and competences, have on the quality of the learning experiences. The absence of such factors is of concern in light of earlier research. Burchinal (2018) advocates for a focus on the content of instruction and teaching practices, as well as the extent to which teachers actively scaffold learning opportunities as measures reflecting quality. Manning, Wong, Fleming & Garvis's (2019) meta-analytic review on the correlation between teacher qualifications and the quality of ECEC environments concludes that higher teacher education and qualifications are significantly correlated with higher quality ECEC environments including the programme structure. NAEYC (2009) guidelines for ECE quality consider teacher knowledge and their abilities to take decisions as vital for educational effectiveness.

The genuine concern about basic structural requirements, including suitable premises, adequate resources and adherence to standards, especially in relation to ratios and group sizes is justified. But structural factors alone do not determine quality; they impinge on process quality (Melhuish and Gardiner 2019). There is a symbiotic relationship between structural and process factors and practitioners need to see themselves and their actions as the link between the two. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides further

support for this argument. The process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) implies that as a result of their own professional development and building on their life and work experiences through the assistance of structural factors, the bidirectional relationships between practitioners, parents, managers, policymakers can impact contexts, practices and cultural perspectives over time.

Practitioners are critical to quality as their competences or lack of them are crucial determinants of quality (Sheridan, Williams, and Garvis 2020). Practitioners should see themselves as agents of change, taking responsibility and control of the dynamic components related to the process aspects which impact children's learning and development. Warm relationships and the caring and love necessary for working with children are reflected in the engaging nature of the learning opportunities which address children's needs and interests. Practitioners offer quality experiences through professional knowledge, skills, insights, reflections and understanding of child development; by acknowledging children's agency in their own learning process, thus considering them to be capable and agentic learners; by engaging with families and establishing solid relationships which are mutually informative and supportive and where potential concerns can be highlighted and addressed; by being supported to act professionally and by having the freedom to make professional choices and apply their knowledge for the benefit of children they are working with.

Of course, this study has its limitations. Having one researcher meet and conduct many interviews and focus group discussions ensured a degree of uniformity in the way data were collected. The methodology was chosen to ensure practitioners would voice their perspectives. However, observational data would have yielded information associated to the teaching-learning process and pedagogical choices. Moreover, defining and understanding quality requires time and opportunities for practitioners to critically examine their roles, reflect on their professional education and consider how their practices and decisions impact children's learning and development, thus discerning pedagogical quality (Sheridan 2009).

Practitioners' voices about their struggles and challenges to offer quality services deserve recognition and assistance. Bidirectional relationships between practitioners positioned within the mesosystem and the education authorities and policymakers located in the exosystem are tenuous rather than 'proximal processes' seen as 'engines of development' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007). As a profession, well-trained and highly-education early years educators should be the driving force capable of bringing about change to the culture, attitudes and ideologies within the macrosystem. Practitioners need to be supported in a systemic manner by all entities and personnel responsible for service provision. Future research could focus on the definitions and understanding of quality from the perspective of managers, leaders and policymakers leading to a shared and informed vision about quality. Research and theory could thus inform policy with a view to transforming and improving provision, raising the quality of practitioners' professional development and strengthening quality in early years services.

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