

The Descriptive Quality of Different Early Childhood Centres: A New Zealand Study

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BACKGROUND

Explanation and Rationale

Developmental psychologists researching childcare have focussed on evaluating how well early childhood programmes perform according to child development goals and specific measures such as adult-child ratio. This paper presents a study on early childhood programme quality with an alternative focus. A values-based approach was taken instead of an evaluation one.

In the study the individual and collective “heartbeats” (i.e. philosophies, policies and practices) of early childhood programmes and groups of centres were examined. The primary purpose was to look at the actual essence of centre quality, what made the centres special and distinctive. As Aristotle (Ethics 1.6) explains, there are two kinds of “good”, the first being things which are good in themselves and the second being things which are good as a means of achieving the first kind of good (cited by Kogan, 1986, p. 98). This paper is about the first kind of “good” early education and care. Much literature already exists on the second kind of “good” early education and care.

New Zealand early childhood practitioners, researchers and policy makers often refer to North American research because this is prolific and easy to obtain through a range of professional materials and academic journals. However, can and should New Zealanders try to use overseas research to initiate improvements in early education? New Zealand early childhood programmes are clearly different to those in the United States, as anyone who has visited programmes in both countries would confirm. Generalisation of overseas research data is therefore problematic because of differences in cultural and educational values and socio-political contexts (Holloway, 1991; Melhuish & Moss, 1991).

Another problem is that most of the research has been based on the researcher/expert perspective on programme quality. Driven by self-interest in gaining research funding the research perspective has become virtually inseparable from government/public concern for the identification of easily measurable quality criteria that apply across programmes. However, it should be questioned if the concept of quality should be reduced in this way to a set of universal ‘standards’ defined by the most powerful stakeholders. Criteria such as specifications for group size, adult to child ratios, and staff qualifications levels are standards and do not singularly or collectively equate to quality. The concept of quality is much broader than standards, because quality encompasses perception, experience, perspective, and choice, and researchers and policy-makers need to not lose sight of this.

Spodek (1991) rightly points out that a programme should be judged on how well it is embedded in its cultural context and the extent to which the knowledge taught is consistent with what children need in the present and future. Both the developmental and cultural dimensions of programme quality are important. Ensuring cultural appropriateness should be a critical part of ensuring the developmental appropriateness of programmes for young children (Lee, 1989). However, few researchers have recognised the connection between cultural appropriateness and child development outcomes (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

New Zealand researchers claim that overseas programme models may not be appropriate or successful in the New Zealand context (May, 1992; Pihama, 1993). The development of Te Kohanga Reo for Maori children and Pacific Island language nests as alternatives to the mainstream services of childcare, kindergarten and playcentre has shown that there is a cultural dimension to quality in early childhood education. The strong emergence and growth of these services has shown that there is not one right political or philosophical or cultural road to quality early education. Currently, diversity in early childhood services is considered in policy to be important for different cultural groups and communities (Ministry of Education, 1993; 1994).

Research results have provided educationalists and policy-makers with programmes of action. For example, Clarke-Stewart's (1987) study on centres and family day care homes in Chicago showed that the following qualities predicted good child development:

- A neat, clean, orderly physical setting organised into activity areas and oriented to the child's activity.
- A caregiver whose interactions with the child were responsive, accepting and informative.
- Classmates who were older and more mature and so could set a good example for the child (p. 113).

Programmes of action are different though from establishing the values underpinning early childhood provisions and practices. Quality early education has been examined as a science when it is more than this. It is a cultural as well as a scientific enterprise.

Values are central to being able to adequately answer the question of "what does the concept of 'quality' in early education mean?" The literature tells us little about the distinctiveness of the quality of different types of early childhood centres and the unique combinations of characteristics that makes a centre a good one. Quality is in the eye of the beholder, and the research community to date has shown minuscule interest in the perceptions and views of the people at the grass-roots of early childhood programmes.

In the section of the wider study by Farquhar (1993) reported in this paper, the quality of eleven early childhood centres was examined. The aim was to describe and examine the qualities of centres. Thus it was important that different types of programmes were represented in the study sample. The centre sample comprised of childcare centres, kindergartens, playcentres and kohanga reo. There were numerous individual differences amongst centres within each group as well as between the groups. A full description of the sample and methodology is available in Farquhar (1993).

Ecological validity was a prime requirement for the study. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory it is not only important to study the interrelationships between the micro-setting of the early childhood centre and other systems, it is imperative to make sure that interpretations of this reflect the reality of the people in the natural setting. The commitment to ecological validity was practised through trying to understand the perspectives of parents, teachers, and centre committees or managers. The researcher involved the participants in defining and examining their own centre's quality instead of defining it for them.

Data was collected using a variety of techniques, including: surveys, participant-observation at centres, observation of committee and parent consultation meetings, teacher interviews, and research organised meetings of parent and staff representatives at the university to discuss and compare views of quality. The results were shared with teachers and their feedback provided a check on the validity of the researcher's interpretations. A multiple-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, was found to be most useful for collecting and bringing together information from a variety of sources.

This paper presents only a small part of the wider study's findings. More detailed information on parent and teacher perspectives, their ratings of centre quality characteristics, their reactions to changes in government requirements for quality, and researcher observations of practises in centres can be found in the full report (Farquhar, 1993).

PORTRAITS OF CENTRE QUALITY

Kindergartens

Brief Background

Kindergartens are the largest early childhood group in New Zealand catering for approximately one-third of all children attending any kind of early education and care programme. The kindergarten movement has the longest history, with the first kindergarten opening in 1898. The early planners of kindergarten set out to provide for children from less well-off families (Barney, 1975). The philanthropic view lessened over the years as parents formed themselves into committees to oversee the running of their kindergartens. Parents' active involvement was not insisted upon and the programmes were run by State trained and paid teachers.

Kindergartens do not charge fees but charge donations which parents are expected to pay to meet any shortfall or provide a top-up on government funding. Most kindergartens provide part-day programmes for children who are usually between three years six months and five years of age.

Uniqueness of Quality

At meetings held at the university for teacher and parent representatives to share their views, members of the kindergarten group displayed much pride in talking about how their service's policy was to employ only fully qualified staff who had completed the two (now three) year tertiary College diploma. It was believed that this policy resulted in greater professionalism in the kindergarten service as compared with other early childhood groups who did not require such a high standard of pre-service education for all staff.

The kindergarten professionals' belief was that their role involved 'teaching', 'supervising' but not 'playing' with children. Kindergarten teachers' survey ratings of the importance of joining children in their play were statistically lower than the ratings of teachers from the other three early childhood groups in the study.

A major threat to the strongly valued professionalism of the kindergarten service was seen to be the proposed new licensing requirement to improve the staff-child ratio from 1:20 to 1:10 when the government had not made the funding available to employ more staff. The teachers were adamant that they did not want to ask parents to help as parents were not trained. For example, one teacher said:

I don't like the way they (the Ministry of Education) said that we had to accept mother-help in kindergartens on a professional level rather than just helping out when teachers could do with the help.

Teacher professionalism seemed to impact on relationships with parents. During the time of this study all centres were required by the Government to carry out consultation with parents for the purpose of preparing a charter document on how they would work towards higher standards of quality. At the kindergartens the committees took responsibility for planning the consultation process and for drafting non-programme sections of the charter such as the description of management policies and an outline of their community's characteristics. The teachers at all four kindergartens had most input on programme practices and stating what was best for children. Most teachers believed they should have the final say and parents should not interfere or show mistrust by disputing what the teachers knew to be best. At one kindergarten (Centre E) the teachers encouraged parents to contribute their views and some changes resulted from parents and teachers sharing their views on matters of importance to the parents. But the teachers supported parents' suggestions and requests only to a point that they themselves wanted to. For example, parents wanted the teachers to stop home-visiting but while the teachers agreed they would no longer carry out home-visits they disagreed that this was not important for them to find out the home situation of any child who was showing problems in the kindergarten setting.

The segregation of children by age into separate groups of older children (attending morning sessions) and younger children (attending afternoon sessions) was seen to be another distinctive feature of kindergarten quality. Kindergarten representatives believed that children educationally benefited most from being with same-age peers and that same-age grouping enabled teachers to focus more specifically on meeting children's specific developmental needs than would otherwise be possible with mixed-age grouping.

Explanation for Style of Quality

Amongst the kindergartens there was a high degree of similarity in programme approaches and teachers' beliefs. This was most likely to have been because of the traditions of the kindergarten movement, the fact that all teachers had completed a minimum of two years full-time training (hence ensuring greater uniformity of teachers' values and practices), and the constraints of high child-teacher ratios (which clearly influenced expectations of achievable quality).

The lower valuing of the importance of joining children in their play compared with other early childhood groups was probably influenced by the structural conditions of kindergarten (i.e. adult-child ratio and group size) as well as by the attitudes gained by teachers through their training. Age-group segregation was a means

of helping teachers cope with an unrealistically high number of children in open-plan type buildings that had no facilities for caring for younger children's basic care needs. Age segregation is a practice that has yet to be closely examined and questioned in the kindergarten sector even though it is known that mixed-aged grouping is advantageous for children (Elkind, 1989).

Childcare Centres

Brief Background

Childcare is a name which describes a broad array of centres whose service is primarily targeted at parents in employment. There were some organised crèches from the early 1920s and these became common from the World War Two period onwards as increasing numbers of women took up paid work. In 1960 Government began to regulate standards in childcare services and required all premises used for three or more children to be licensed – either an “A” or “B” grade license depending upon whether the supervisor held a recognised qualification. In 1985 responsibility for the licensing of childcare centres was transferred from the Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education. Today many childcare centres include infants and toddlers and offer a full-day service. In these key respects they differ from kindergartens and playcentres who cater predominantly for older children on a part-day basis.

Uniqueness of Quality

The care dimension was clearly strongest at the childcare centres. Not only were facilities better geared towards meeting the care needs of children in childcare centres, but staff and parents both attributed greater importance to criteria of quality associated with providing care. Representatives from the childcare centres spoke about the family-type atmosphere that was characteristic of a good childcare centre. Such an atmosphere was created through teachers being responsible for a mixed age-range of children from infants through to five-year-olds. Because children usually started childcare at a younger age, stayed for more years, and attended longer hours, the representatives believed that teachers were able to build close relationships with children, parents, and families. For example, a childcare teacher said: “I’ve made friendships with families. That’s something isn’t it? That’s how close you do get. You become part of a family”.

Another distinguishing characteristic of childcare quality was diversity in the forms of teacher training that were accepted and the range of backgrounds that staff came from. In comparing the characteristics of the teachers across the early childhood services, the childcare representatives were correct in identifying variation in staff employment practices as a major difference between themselves and other services. The childcare centre sample had fewer trained teachers, a greater range of qualifications amongst its trained teachers, more variation in levels of achievement in high school education, a wider age-range and greater ethnic diversity amongst its staff. The representatives believed that diversity in staff training and personal backgrounds was important for programme quality because teachers were more likely to bring to their centre a range of personal interests and skills. They also believed that parents and children were more likely to find someone amongst the teachers who they could relate with when teachers were heterogeneous in their characteristics.

The three childcare centres each differed in expectations for the extent and form that parent involvement can and should take. The reasons for differences in expectations seem to come down to views on why parents choose to use their childcare centre, and teachers' expectations and needs for the level of involvement parents were able to give. The stated policy of providing a quality programme at the private centre (Centre H) was that parents had no obligation to be involved. The manager believed that this was a key to parent satisfaction and the reason why parents selected the centre. At a community-run centre (Centre G) parent involvement was believed to be critical for the operation of the centre and for teachers to be supported through feedback by the parents. The parents at this centre felt a strong social obligation to meet the teachers' expectations which they found to take a toll on their time with their children and energy. There was disillusionment amongst teachers as to how committed parents were to supporting them and the centre when the number of teachers was greater than parents at meetings held to write the centre's charter towards the end of the consultation process. The childcare centre in the public institution (Centre I) viewed parent involvement primarily as taking the form of communication, through a home-centre notebook and sharing of information between the teachers and parents about children's experiences and well-being.

A general quality of the childcare service was believed to be its flexibility in catering for different parent needs and values. Representatives felt that the consumer environment meant that parent satisfaction was important and that no one type of childcare centre could suit all parents. They believed that childcare centres provided a distinct quality of service by being open for longer hours and during school holidays, having different types of management, and offering choices in programme philosophies and curriculum goals and structures.

Explanation for Style of Quality

At the time of this study there was a local shortage of early childhood education trained people available and willing to work in childcare. For example, the community childcare centre advertised for three weeks in the daily newspaper and received only a handful of replies, none of which were from applicants with an early childhood education qualification. The childcare representatives however viewed problems with the recruitment of ‘qualified’ staff as advantageous for the quality of their service because they were able to search more widely for staff they considered suitable. In childcare higher value was placed on the quality of the person and what that person would bring to their centre and their relationships with children and adults compared with the value placed on that person holding a recognised early childhood education qualification.

The childcare service had a more ‘consumer’ or serving parents’ approach to defining quality compared with the other early childhood groups. Childcare was about meeting parents’ needs for support with both the care and education of their child.

Playcentres

Brief Background

Nationally playcentre is the third largest early childhood service in terms of the total number of children enrolled. Historically playcentres were more popular than childcare centres but they have experienced a decline in enrolments due to the continuing increase in numbers of mothers entering the labour force. Playcentres have always been run on a parent cooperative basis. In the 1940s parents organised themselves to provide for their own children as an alternative to the kindergarten system. A key ingredient of the style of playcentre operation was that parents were encouraged to learn about child development and care through courses and many were further encouraged to train to become centre supervisors. The playcentre movement has always valued its autonomy and resisted losing its voluntary basis through employing professional staff or accepting greater government financial support. Today their funding has become more equitable with kindergartens but the parent co-op nature of the service has survived. Playcentres currently operate on a part-day basis for children over 2 ½ years and for younger children if their parent stays.

Uniqueness of Quality

A quote from a parent representative sums up the key determinant of playcentre quality: “playcentre is only as good as its parents”. The playcentre people felt strongly about the role of parents in running playcentre and the existence of playcentre for parents as much as for their children.

The successful operation of playcentres was believed to be helped by training courses offered within the playcentre movement exclusively for parents involved with playcentre. All parents enrolling their children at a playcentre undertook an introduction to playcentre course and were offered to take further optional courses which led to a regional playcentre supervisor's certificate or a national qualification. Through engaging in playcentre training, parents were taught and learnt the ‘playcentre way’ and this underlined the core of quality assurance and consistency in the operation and programming in playcentres by the parent volunteers.

Playcentres and kohanga reo were the only early childhood services in this study where parent education stood out as a unique characteristic of service quality. However, in playcentre the emphasis in training was more on the parent’s own learning than at the kohanga reo where training was more about how parents could support their children and reinforce what they had learnt at the kohanga reo.

Playcentre was a parent and child centered service. Valuing of the role of parents in children's learning was evident in the significantly higher rating of importance given to the goal of parent education in contrast with the ratings of parents from other early childhood groups. Another interesting comparison in values between early childhood groups was the statistically lower rating of importance given by playcentre supervisors to the goal of promoting children's independence from parents. Implicit in defining the quality of playcentre then is the belief that children and parents should be together in children's education, rather than the service being set up to allow parents to use it for childcare and leave the teaching to teachers.

Explanation for Style of Quality

Differences between playcentres in their perspectives on quality did not emerge in the results. Yet the playcentres were in different locations (urban and rural), one had a trained kindergarten teacher as the person-in charge which was unusual but then she was also a parent. One playcentre was housed in an old run-down building and the other in a purpose-built relatively new building. Observational data on the programmes suggested that the main differences between the playcentres were in the use of and amount of space, and the influence of this on children's behaviour and the atmosphere. These differences were due to the much poorer physical conditions of one playcentre in comparison with the other. The beliefs about what made a good-quality programme were the same across playcentres and parent participants.

Te Kohanga Reo

Brief Background

The English equivalent of "kohanga" is "nest" and "reo" is language. The first kohanga reo opened in April of 1982 and by the end of that year 30 more had opened. By 1990 the number had risen to 612 kohanga. Nga Kohanga Reo originated out of a need expressed by many Maori people for control of their own children's education. Also, statistics showed that less than one percent of Maori children under the age of five years could speak their native language (Benton, 1979). The primary objective of the movement is the preservation and enhancement of Maori language and culture. The kohanga are similar to childcare centres in being operated from a variety of types of buildings and offering choices of full and part-day care for children from birth through to school starting age.

Uniqueness of Quality

Essentially the differences in quality between the kohanga reo and other early childhood groups were cultural. As the chairperson of one kohanga explained: "the name kohanga reo indicates that it is different from other preschools because it is a language nest. The names for the other preschools depict they are for other activities because they already have language - a foundation in English". Quality in Te Kohanga Reo meant a programme in which the teaching of Maori language and Maori values, beliefs and traditions were the foundation.

To achieve this, people most preferred for employment in the kohanga were Maori and could communicate in their native language. The style of teaching (including child behaviour management), the degree of adult-imposed programme structure, and the nature of activities provided for children received strong criticism from some parents who had expected staff to have a similar knowledge of child development and work with children in ways similar to teachers at other early childhood centres. The direct teaching approach was criticised by some parents who saw this as not following a wider philosophy within early childhood education of children learning through play, but teaching in this way was viewed as necessary by teachers at the kohanga reo to ensure that children learnt what they needed to learn.

The relaxed home-like, one-big-family atmosphere of the kohanga reo, where parents, siblings and other family members were regarded and treated as much a part of the centre as the children enrolled was a defining characteristic of the kohanga reo. This characteristic was believed by kohanga reo to be especially important for themselves or for other parents who felt culturally and/or socially isolated. At the time of this study, only four percent of the population in the Otago region was Maori.

Under the umbrella of the kohanga reo whanau parents were learning Maori language and culture alongside their children to support their children's learning. And the concept of whanau embraced giving parents opportunities to be involved in the running (e.g. cooking) and administration of the service not so much to benefit the kohanga reo but to benefit parents with new skills and experience (for personal development and future employment)

Explanation for Style of Quality

Kohanga parents and teachers placed an emphasis on 'people' as the key determinant of quality rather than on policies, building and equipment. People were believed to be the best source for communicating and passing on the Maori language, culture, and values.

The two kohanga were very different in location (one rural and the other urban), housing (one in a hall alongside a Marae and the second in an inner-city house), stability of teachers (one kohanga had recently experienced a change in staff), the characteristics of the families using the kohanga (employed workers and tertiary students at one kohanga and at the other there was a mixture of unemployed and manual rural workers), and financial support (one was well-supported by a tertiary institution and the other was running on a shoe-string budget). These differences did not seem to matter. Quality was defined in the same ways. The cultural dimension especially was what made the kohanga unique from other early childhood groups of centres in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been difficult to report the descriptive quality of early childhood centres without using a million words. Even so, no matter how many words are used they will never do justice to the richly detailed and complex essence of programme quality. In this study, validity was of paramount importance. To capture and describe quality it was vital to refer closely and constantly to the participants' perspectives views and values. Only the most prominent characteristics of quality for the early childhood groups were able to be reported within the space of this paper.

Each of the four early childhood groups provided 'quality' in distinctive ways. These ways were influenced by past practices and traditions, the purpose of their service and the needs of the parents served, the style of centre management, and the extent of public support and funding. Te Kohanga Reo people saw their service as culturally unique and based on a philosophy of early language and cultural teaching for children within an extended family environment. Kindergarten, childcare and playcentre people saw their services as differing in quality for philosophical reasons such as views on staff training and teacher-parent relationships.

A general finding - and this will be of interest to readers who view quality as a set of universal measurable criteria and not as existing in the eye of the beholder – was that the research-based indicators believed in policy to be the best measures of quality (e.g., staff training and adult-child ratio) were not of paramount importance in practice for quality to parents, staff, and centre managers. This raises an issue of whether those who are least directly involved in but hold the most power through political or expert positions should be defining quality for those directly involved in early childhood services.

More research attention should be given to what quality means and the shape quality takes in practice from the perspectives of those most directly involved in and affected by early childhood services. Metaphorically, the horse (quality from the eye of the beholder, primarily participants within services) should be put before the cart (evaluation and measurement of quality according to criteria predefined by government bureaucrats and experts) instead of the other way around. More interest in the teachers' perspectives could reduce suspicion of researchers by teachers and lead to greater collaboration in developing the quality of their work (Takanishi, 1981). Further more interest in the parents' (and their children's) perspectives could greatly enrich and take the literature on early childhood quality in more fruitful and socially-grounded directions.

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