Defining quality in early childhood education: parents' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In the Maltese context, the nation-wide roll-out of State kindergarten provision in the mid-70s and the rapid increase in childcare services for under three-year-olds over the last two decades were initiatives driven by efforts to entice women to the labour market. National research to determine short and long-term effects which these services have on children's development and achievements or quality-related studies have yet to be undertaken. This article analyses responses to an open-ended question inviting parents of children in childcare and kindergarten settings, to identify three aspects indicative of 'quality'. Responses were completed by just under 2000 parents. NVivo analyses indicated that parents associate quality with practitioners' characteristics, including the care and love towards children; the relationships and communication between the settings and families; children's happiness, personal development and welfare; and physical characteristics of the setting. Knowing about parents' definitions of quality can strengthen collaboration between families and settings and encourage meaningful engagement to support young children's learning and development.

Introduction

This article presents the views of Maltese parents who were invited to share their perspectives about quality in early childhood services, locally referred to as 'childcare' for under three and 'kindergarten' for three to five-year-olds. This was one aspect of a larger study which also involved practitioners reflecting on quality issues in their interactions with young children. Despite widespread provision and high attendance rates within the non-compulsory early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector (EACEA/Eurydice 2019), to date no study in Malta has investigated the quality of children's learning experiences; neither has there been any national monitoring or research on the short or long-term effects and implications which the early years experiences have on children's development and achievements. This article focuses on parents' interpretations of quality as experienced in Maltese early years settings. Parents were invited to share their views through an open-ended question in order to encourage responses based on their on-going experiences. In ECEC, parents are the most important partners (European

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Commission 2014) and giving them a voice is essential as a means of encouraging or promoting their participation.

Early childhood education in Malta

The introduction of state-funded kindergarten for four-year-olds in 1975, the extension of services for three-year-olds in 1988 and the more recent, on-going and rapid expansion of childcare services for under threes, have all been undertaken to facilitate employment opportunities for parents, predominantly mothers (Sollars 2018). Subsequent government administrations have ensured widespread availability and accessibility in a bid to attract women to the labour market, thus strengthening the economy. To date, providers of ECEC services have stopped short from focusing on young children's needs, the potential benefits of opportunities available, or even reflecting on quality issues.

Compulsory education starts in the year a child turns five. Kindergarten is available for children between the ages of two years nine months and four years nine months. Most services are attached to primary schools. Parents can choose from among free State schools, located in every town and village; Church schools which are managed by different religious Catholic orders and which accept donations; or fee-paying Private schools. Childcare services are available for under three-year-olds. Of the 142 registered settings (Ministry for Education & Employment 2019), 90% are privately-owned and located in a variety of premises, including private houses. Fourteen settings are managed by the State. Free childcare was introduced in April 2014 (Ministry for Education & Employment 2018) for parents who are studying or in employment. Such has been the urgency for ensuring availability that the introduction of services failed to consider, demand or expect to recruit highly and appropriately qualified staff. Currently, an EQF Level 4 award or qualification in early years is the required entry qualification for staff wanting to work in early years settings. Where supply does not meet demand, practitioners are employed whilst in the process of achieving a basic qualification or expected to sit for a trade test after three years in employment (JobsPlus & NCFHE n.d.)

Ensuring availability and accessibility with a view to supporting the economic development through increased work-force contributions has been acknowledged as a 'key driver of government interest in expanding ECEC services' (OECD 2006). However, Rao & Sun (2015), warn that in some countries, rapid scaling of services may have amplified issues related to quality where extending services was the focus without commensurate attention to building a quality infrastructure. Governments have become increasingly aware of the benefits of ECEC for children's development (OECD 2018). Libreau (2019) confirms that one of the driving principles which the European Commission is adopting in ECEC focuses on 'improving accessibility and quality simultaneously'.

Identifying and defining 'quality' in ECEC

Definitions of 'quality', identification of its characteristics and conditions which contribute to achieving it are complex (Al-Khelaifi et al. 2017; European Commission 2014; Farquhar 1990). Whether seen as a construct or as an outcome, defining quality should take into account perspectives of multiple actors and agencies whose notions, positions and agendas are shaped or conditioned by structural and procedural factors, available

infrastructures and governance issues applicable to specific cultural contexts (Moss 1994; Rosenthal 2003). Quality is not achieved through a linear process and the concept of quality cannot have a streamlined definition. However, despite the plethora of variables and interpretations research and policy recommendations concur that high-quality early childhood programmes result in widespread and long-lasting benefits whereas poor services may do more harm than good (Vandenbroeck, Lenaerts, and Beblavý 2018; Eurofound 2015; OECD 2012). Quality early years services have a wide-ranging impact for individuals, parents and society (Vandenbroeck, Lenaerts, and Beblavý 2018).

Parents' perspectives on quality in ECEC

Several studies have acknowledged parents as key stakeholders whose perspectives offer valid contributions towards defining quality. Findings and conclusions depend on the design of the study, research instruments used and characteristics of the participants. For example, when invited to rate attributes within curricular areas, characteristics of practitioners and pedagogical approaches, 500 Jordanian parents of kindergarten children attributed importance to the social domain, empathic practitioners and hands-on practices respectively (Abu Taleb 2013). More than 800 Taiwanese parents rated health and safety as the most important category of seven given domains (Jang, Moore, and Lin 2014). Nineteen low-income American parents rated developmentally appropriate interactions and practices to support social-emotional development as extremely or very important (Cleveland, Susman-Stillman, and Halle 2013). Three hundred Greek parents gave more importance to children's well-being and the overall caring dimension, where love and safety were paramount (Rentzou 2013). In another Greek study using ECERSPQ, over 500 parents attributed the highest scores to 'promoting acceptance of diversity' and 'greeting/departing'. The researchers concluded that *parents' assessment of quality was higher than ratings assigned by trained observers* (Grammatikopoulos et al. 2014). Similar conclusions were drawn in another Greek study (Rentzou and Sakellariou 2013) and in research with Chinese parents, (Ying Hu, Zhou, and Li 2017) where parental background and expectations about their children's academic achievements influenced perceptions of quality. Overestimating quality was attributed to structural factors, closely associated to observable evidence. Less discrepancy was evident between the ratings of parents and trained observers on process factors. Such results highlight the 'relative' definition of quality and the importance of considering multiple perspectives.

In a South Australian study, parent ratings of aspects of their four-year-old children's cognitive development were found to be reliable and relatively consistent when compared with those of teachers (Krieg and Curtis 2017). Researchers concluded that parents can make a unique and important contribution to an improved understanding of the benefits of quality provision. This conclusion echoes the findings of an Italian study where parents demonstrated awareness of a multi-faceted perspective of quality (Scopelliti and Musatti 2013). In addition to concerns about children's education and care, parents expressed their need for improved relationships with practitioners and other parents.

Parents can offer an outside-inside-perspective (Katz 1993, 1999) but in situations where there is a strong power differential between parents and settings (Einarsdottir and Jónsdóttir 2019), they need to be provided with ways of sharing their funds of

knowledge to ensure they are informed, involved and engaged (Lopez, Kreider, and Caspe 2004/5).

The current study sought to establish which factors are identified by parents as indicative of quality in Maltese childcare and kindergarten settings within a context where quality is gradually edging its way onto the early years agenda.

Methodology

Parents whose children were attending any of the 16 childcare or 34 kindergarten settings which had accepted to participate in the research were invited to take part by responding to a purposely designed questionnaire. The settings were distributed across Malta and Gozo and included State, Church and Private settings, thus ensuring that parents using all forms of provision available were represented.

Together with the questionnaire, parents received an information letter which introduced the researcher, explained the purpose of the research and provided instructions about the questionnaire's completion. Documents were drawn up in English and Maltese. Practitioners determined the number of documents required in English or Maltese according to what was appropriate for the families of children in their class/ group. Questionnaires were distributed to parents by practitioners via the children.

The questionnaire was organised into three sections. Items in Section A sought information about the respondents and their reasons for using early years settings. Section B consisted of 37 items to which parents were invited to tick a yes/no/don't know response. These items consisted of statements indicating parents' perceived relationship with the practitioners and knowledge about the setting. The third section included open-ended items. Of relevance to this article are the responses given by parents' when asked to list three aspects which, in their opinion indicated that the setting which their son/daughter frequented offered quality service.

NVivo was used to analyse the responses to open-ended questions. Analysis of the individual responses resulted in 23 factors emerging as indicative of quality with variations in the frequency with which they were referred to. These 23 factors were subsequently grouped according to affinity and to facilitate the interpretation of the data.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The researcher was never in direct contact with parents and had no access to respondents' identity at any stage of the study. Parents were instructed to refrain from signing or identifying themselves. Completed questionnaires were collected by the settings or sent directly to the researcher by post or electronically.

Of the 4186 questionnaires distributed, 1975 (47.2%) were returned: 20% ($N = 399$) came from parents whose children were in childcare settings and 80% ($N = 1576$) were from parents whose children were at kindergarten. Responses were overwhelmingly completed by mothers (82%; $N = 1627$); 7% ($N = 136$) were completed by fathers; 0.6% ($N = 11$) were legal guardians and 10.2% ($N = 201$) gave no response. Completed questionnaires reflected the widespread or limited availability of different types of settings: 63% ($N = 1242$) of responses came from parents using State services; 14% ($N = 278$) were respondents whose children were in Church KG and 23% ($N = 449$) were respondents who had children in Private settings.

Prior to the start of the study, ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. Letters of information and the request to conduct the research were submitted to the necessary authorities before schools were visited. There were no conflicts of interest at any stage.

Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the 23 factors which emerged from the NVivo analyses of the individual responses and the frequency with which they were referred to.

These individual factors identified by parents as being indicative of quality were organised around themes leading to five broad factors, namely:

(1) Setting-related factors;
(2) Child-related factors;
(3) Practitioner and administrator factors;
(4) Relationships and communication with families; and
(5) Policies and praxis

Setting-related factors

In identifying factors indicative of quality, the highest number of references were made to characteristics pertaining to the setting (Table 2).

Parents identified bright, airy, welcoming, colourful and joyful environments as hallmarks of quality. They appreciated large outdoor spaces or play areas where children do not have to spend the entire day within a room or indoors. Clean, modern, well-

Table 1. Factors indicative of quality as identified by parents.

Factors indicative of quality	Frequency
Characteristics of practitioners and administrators	565
Relationships with and communication between settings and parents/ families	557
Children's happiness, enthusiasm & eagerness	531
Characteristics of setting	459
Children's improvement and learning	452
Variety of activities	440
Hygiene	268
Children's welfare and well-being	226
Policies	176
Care and love shown to children by carers	165
Pedagogy	164
Behaviour and discipline	162
Academic achievement of children	159
Resources	155
Safety	126
Children's socialisation, esteem, independence	97
Size of setting	38
Ratios	35
Recommendations and reputation of setting	30
Play	20
Support for parents	15
Negative comments	6
Fee finance issues	2

Table 2. Setting-related factors.

Factor indicative of quality	Frequency
Characteristics of setting	459
Variety of activities	440
Hygiene	268
Resources	155
Safety	126
Size of setting	38
Ratios	35
TOTAL	1521

equipped classrooms of adequate size were also referred to. Besides the actual building, resources or space, other characteristics of the settings acknowledged by parents as indicative of quality included the layout, its organisation and the multicultural composition of the setting where this was embraced. In contrast, some parents associated quality with 'small school premises' as this contributed to a 'family atmosphere', where children knew everyone. Where there were a small number of children enrolled, there was 'no overcrowding'. Since there were 'not many children in a group', 'individual attention' was easier to achieve.

Settings which sought to be updated regularly, especially in offering state of the art resources and which were organised in their structures, policies and routines were acknowledged as offering good quality.

Activities experienced by children contribute to quality. Parents referred to the 'variety of activities' including 'new experiences'. Reference was made to activities which are 'interactive', contribute to 'children's creativity', are 'well-structured', 'address children's development' and are 'age appropriate'. In addition to 'messy' activities, several reported about outdoor activities which encourage 'engagement with nature', 'educational activities' and 'outings'. One participant reported, 'days seem to be packed with interesting activities'. Another described a quality activity: 'they take children out in patches of soil and tress and they look for snails, leaves – a nice experience for children'.

Structural factors were given more importance over process factors because they are more visible, thus easier to identify (Ying Hu, Zhou, and Li 2017).

Child-related factors

Five quality-related factors which focused on the child were identified by parents (Table 3).

Children's happiness, enthusiasm and eagerness to attend the setting was considered a key quality indicator, followed by children's improvement, learning and development as a result of the time they spent at the setting.

Table 3. Child-related factors.

Factor indicative of quality	Frequency
Children's happiness, enthusiasm and eagerness	531
Children's improvement and learning	452
Children's welfare and well-being	226
Academic achievement	159
Children's socialisation, esteem, independence	97
TOTAL	1465

> My son was given a sense of belonging at the childcare centre. Actually, he goes in very happy each morning. He feels he owns the school!

> She gets very involved in activities and speaks about them at length at home.

> The teacher immediately made my daughter feel welcome and my daughter always comes very happy after school.

> My son enjoys going to school. Therefore, I imagine the service offered is good.

Parents are cognizant of their children's development and they become aware of the activities and learning which is on-going. Parents attribute such progress and development in their children to good quality services. Many reported how their children use language and vocabulary which they were not exposed to at home suggesting improvements in children's speech and knowledge. They also reported their children's gains in self-confidence, learning new skills and acquiring new knowledge.

Children's well-being was considered another hallmark of quality. Parents reported how each child is respected, welcomed, treated as an individual, allowed and encouraged to develop at his/her own pace. Practitioners know the children well.

> Something which I find astounding is that the practitioners know every individual child.

> The concern about education is not simply a matter of learning but in the development of children's character.

> They understand the needs of every boy and girl.

> There is no preferential treatment.

> They are very receptive and willing to co-operate, with the best interest of the child in mind.

Children's personal and social development are further indicators of quality provision. Parents reckoned that quality services are those which contributed to the child becoming independent; where children are cut off from the family routines or ties; overcome shyness and gain confidence even as they mingle with other children their age; where children learn to share or collaborate when they work/play in a group, and even empathise with and care for others.

Some parents associated the quality of their children's early years setting to academic work and achievements. Most KG settings are attached to primary school facilities and the introduction of the non-compulsory kindergarten services has been seen by many as an extension of formal school. Some of the parents' conclusions about quality as explained through academic expectations are somewhat far-fetched.

> At the beginning of school year, parents are given the syllabus week by week and this enables us to reinforce learning at home.

> Good preparation for the school years.

> Parents are given the opportunity to understand ways how Math, English and Maltese are being taught.

> She has shown me that she has learnt new things such as counting, shapes, colours and songs.

> My son has made great improvement in spoken English which he learns from school.

High focus on academics.

My daughter has learnt the letters and numbers.

Changing such a mindset requires a gradual, cultural shift but other responses given by parents in defining quality, do suggest that this shift has started and broader experiences in early years are associated with quality matters.

Characteristics attributed to practitioners and administrators

One of the structural factors identified in the literature as indicative of good quality relates to practitioners' qualifications and training (Vandell and Wolfe 2000). In addition to qualifications, in the current study parents identified several other characteristics that they expect practitioners to possess (Table 4).

Parents believe that staff should be 'friendly and understanding', 'warm and caring', 'patient and kind'; 'have academic knowledge', are 'trained' and 'qualified'; have 'experience'; are 'committed', 'dedicated', 'organised', 'professional', 'hardworking', 'welcoming, friendly and accessible'; get along well with all children and are capable of addressing children's needs. Some parents indicated that they expect certain attitudes and behaviours to be extended towards them too rather than solely reserved to practitioners' interactions with children. These parents referred to staff who is 'always ready to listen to what you have to say', and to the 'smile which all those employed at the setting, wear on their face daily', suggesting the need for practitioners to have a positive attitude and disposition towards their work, the children and their families.

Several parents identified practitioners' 'love and care' towards their children as indicative of high quality. They expect carers to have a 'warm and caring attitude', where 'all children are treated with motherly affection and care'. In an environment where 'all children are observed and taken care of', parents note that 'there is a genuine care' for children and practitioners 'love children as though they were their own'.

Relationships and communication with families

Parents attributed great importance to the relationships, communication and information they receive from their children's settings ($N = 557$). Some reported that feedback is 'regular' or 'continuous'; others stated that feedback is provided on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Parents reported a variety of ways in which practitioners contact and communicate with families. Teachers write notes; there are informative meetings organised for parents; where necessary, telephone calls are made. Technology is also utilised, photos are uploaded, thus providing for efficient means of communication.

We often find information about what has been done and what will be done on ilearn (school management system).

Table 4. Practitioner and administrator factors.

Factor indicative of quality	Frequency
Characteristics of practitioners and administrators	565
Care and love shown to children by carers	165
TOTAL	730

Really appreciate the weekly update email the teacher sends.

Parents were appreciative of the promptness and thoroughness with which staff communicate with them.

The carer has an eye for detail and informs me regularly of the child's progress and improvement.

When a problem arose, I was always informed.

Teacher is easily available to talk to and discuss any queries. Emails are always replied to in a short time.

There is a lot of support (the carers go out of their way to make sure your child is ok, they keep in touch when the child is ill, they give advice when there are issues, etc.)

Acknowledgement was also given to the presence and support of the manager/childcare centre co-ordinator or other members of staff.

The assistant Heads of school do their utmost to help you deal with a problem.

The attitude of the assistant head is a welcoming one and makes you feel comfortable.

Help was given many times by the teacher and ancillary staff.

The Headmaster is like a friend to the students and parents.

Some parents also gain reassurance and find support for their own challenges and needs.

Where necessary, the practitioners and administration co-operate with me.

If I have difficulties, I can easily speak to the kindergarten assistant and in a professional way, she helps me to overcome the difficulties.

School is like a family. Everyone is willing to help.

The carers and all the staff show a lot of empathy and care towards me. I am an 'old' mum and need advice all the time. They explain patiently and help me out.

Carers who always welcome us and our daughter with a smile; a smile which appeals to the children and reassures the parent before s/he leaves for their day's work.

I feel comfortable discussing social issues with the carers and Head.

Parents appreciate their direct involvement and participation. They are also keen to receive news and updates about their children's behaviour, progress, improvements and participation in activities. 'Teachers work with parents and truly believe that parents are an essential part of the child's education'.

Polices and praxis

Policies and praxis adopted by settings were also seen as indicators of quality (Table 5).
    Among the policies referred to, nutrition-related matters and recommendations about food allowed within settings were frequently cited. Other policies included the 'settling-in policy', the nature and frequency of communication and information-sharing with parents, such as having a monthly document with advice and information; policies

Table 5. Factors associated to policies and praxis.

Factors indicative of quality	Frequency
Policies	176
Pedagogy	164
Behaviour and discipline	162
Play	20
TOTAL	522

about drop-off and collecting children. Behaviour and discipline policies applied to children and staff were also cited by parents as another indicator of quality.

Factors identifying pedagogical matters focused on 'learning through play', 'multi-sensory approach', 'hands-on activities', 'show and tell to prepare children for public speaking'. References to play-related policies and pedagogies included having a balance between 'structured play and learning time', creative play, outdoor play. Other policy-related factors were associated with 'routine', preparation for formal school, even by 'getting children to be seated for a certain amount of time', having a mix of phonics and play; and children's exposure to numbers, letters and shapes.

Discussion and conclusions

In this study, parents were not provided with rating scales or predetermined notions of quality. Yet, factors which emerged were similar to those identified by parents in other cultural contexts using different instruments (Abu Taleb 2013; Rentzou 2013). These results also demonstrated insights that consider quality as being multi-faceted (Scopelliti and Musatti 2013).

Parents showed an appreciation for the services provided. Most importance was attributed to what is tangible and observable – predominantly physical and structural factors – implying that first impressions count. Children's comfort, happiness and well-being are of paramount importance for their parents. Positive emotions and well-being can be fostered by the attitudes and personal characteristics of the practitioners and staff but strengthened through the relationships established with the children and extended to their families.

When parents define quality through what is observable, they need to be supported to question and understand what goes on within settings when their child is spending time with educators and other children. This is crucial considering the short and long-term effects on children's pre-academic achievements arising from interactions with trained and qualified staff (Sylva et al. 2004). Several parents admitted they are comfortable to share their insights and concerns with staff. This is encouraging as children do better when their parents are actively involved in their education (Borgonovi and Montt 2012; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Emerson et al. 2012). Yet parents need to develop a deeper understanding about the value of engaging relationships and rich interactions which are fundamental to quality experiences and opportunities for learning and development. In other words, they need to be aware of the interaction between structural and process factors as well as acknowledge their contribution to children's quality experiences.

Children's early years experiences are built on relationships, which develop through trust and openness. Relationships are strengthened when participants respect and value each other (Hostettler Schärer 2018) and assume all parties have a worthwhile

contribution. Relationships of trust, existing between infants and their primary caregivers at home, are extended gradually to out-of-home care.

The development of parents' relationships with early years staff is as important as that of the children. At a time when very young children experience the transition from home to early years settings, dialogue, reflection and planned action are necessary to address individual needs and move away from 'unidirectional adaptation discourse' (Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2017) ensuring that each child receives quality care and education. However, where parents are invited to make their voices heard, they may require reassurances and support to overcome the power imbalance (Sims-Schouten 2016) especially if practitioners' and parents' perspectives differ. If parents are indeed welcomed, their engagement and contributions must be acknowledged and incorporated towards a seamless transition for themselves and on behalf of their children.

The open-ended responses to defining quality provided by parents in this study have shown their broad understanding of quality matters. One challenging methodological consideration required finding the balance between collecting large amounts of narrative data and presenting it coherently, in a manner which captures the salient aspects raised by participants and does justice to their replies. Collapsing individual responses into broader categories may be interpreted as a limitation of the research with the potential subjectivity or bias of interpretation and organisation of responses. However, working with open-ended data undoubtedly offers useful insights for practitioners, administrators and policy makers to ensure that parents' voice is strengthened, and their perspectives are incorporated in shaping quality early years provision.

Disclosure statement

Funding

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