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Introduction: Reconceptualizing Quality Early Care and Education with Equity at the Center

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Reconceptualizing Quality Early Care and Education with Equity at the Center

Mark Nagasawa and Cristina Medellin-Paz

THERE CAN BE NO QUALITY IN ECE WITHOUT RESPECTING EDUCATORS

Issue 51 of the Bank Street *Occasional Papers Series* is a response to Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence’s 25-year interrogation of the concept of quality in early childhood education (ECE) (Dahlberg et al., 1999, 2013, 2023). Their groundbreaking work has called early childhood educators to question deeply held assumptions about the universality of childhood and how these shape the standardization of practices in early childhood settings around the world. They have argued that the homogenization of ECE practices is a *factory-ization* of early childhood that undermines cultural pluralism and the field’s equity aspirations. This raises an imperative to explore ideas and practices that go “beyond quality,” particularly through what Dahlberg and colleagues have called the “ethics of an encounter.” In essence, these ethical encounters are instances where early childhood educators practice democracy, including navigating conflicts, thereby creating equity-centered change through their *small*, day-to-day interactions and meaning-making with others (Dahlberg et al., 2013). However, while quality is typically conceived of as existing primarily in classrooms, the authors in Issue 51 remind us that the small world of ECE exists within oppressive systems imbued with intersecting racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, and that, therefore, a *beyond quality praxis* requires nurturing and supporting educators through partnerships (recognizing that resilience is social), developing political commitments and orientations through relationships, and mobilizing these relationships for collective action towards liberatory alternatives.

The idea for this issue, which is a part of a broader project to identify and analyze promising, equity-committed early childhood policies and practices, emerged over the past few years. In the meetings and conversations we had with other researchers, policymakers, and educators, a general theme emerged—a dissatisfaction with how ideas about early childhood program quality are being operationalized. This reminded us of questions raised by Dahlberg and colleagues (2013):

- Who has been involved in the process of defining quality? Who has not?
- Might there be multiple perspectives or understandings of the idea?
- What is the context in which the idea has been formed?

Reflecting on these questions inspired us to submit a proposal to the Spencer Foundation to support a research conference, which although funded, was interrupted by the COVID-19 tragedy.¹ In light of the pandemic, we reconceptualized a more inclusive and wide-ranging mobilization, spread across seven meetings in 2022-23 (six online, one in person). We drew upon professional networks to engage 125 early childhood teachers and administrators, state and local early childhood policymakers, program officers from philanthropic foundations, graduate students, and early childhood researchers from across the United States in action-oriented dialogue about:

- How does an equity lens change how quality is defined, documented, and supported, and who must be involved in these decisions?
- What does genuine partnership between educators, policymakers, and researchers mean?
- How can “we” (this group, as well as others) advance an equity-centered ECE quality agenda?

¹ Spencer Foundation #202200120.

Those meetings resulted in an agenda focused on:

1. illuminating systemic barriers and opportunities to equity (deeply structured oppressions in ECE administrative systems and how they are expressed and resisted in practice);
2. investigating ECE constituencies' voice and participation in policy decisions that concern them;
3. documenting and analyzing existing equity efforts vis-à-vis dominant definitions of quality; and
4. drawing upon multi-positional knowledge and expertise to advocate for equity-committed approaches (“We are more powerful together”).

This issue is a first step toward this agenda by valuing and amplifying “beyond quality” stories, which are foundational to building critical movements in ECE (Dahlberg et al., 2023, p. 10). Before introducing contributors to this issue, it is important to reflect on the concept of quality and why it needs to be reconsidered.

DECONSTRUCTING QUALITY

As a preschool teacher, you know that the work you do impacts children’s whole lives. High-quality early learning leads to many positive outcomes in life, including increased educational attainment, healthier lifestyles, and more successful careers. – *Defining and Recognizing High-Quality Early Learning Programs: NAEYC’S 10 Accreditation Standards* (2019)

There was a time where neither of us would have thought twice about this statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). It outlines some of the *whys* for many early childhood educators: why persist through the long hours, low pay, and lack of respect? However, NAEYC’s statement places the weight of righting *social* injustices squarely on the backs of early childhood educators, when systemic problems require systemic solutions. That means involving everyone at all *layers* of systems, from classrooms to legislatures and everywhere in between, in striving together to impact children’s lives (Urban, 2014). But what does *quality* in ECE mean?

The word quality is so frequently used in ECE that it is often assumed to refer to an objective, universally agreed-upon set of ideas and practices. However, as is usually the case, the realities are more complex. At one level of complication, quality can be placed into four categories: *structural*, *global*, *process*, and *positional* (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002). Notions of structural quality see their expression in policies defining requirements like group/class sizes, adult/child ratios, and staff qualifications/levels of experience. Global quality refers to classroom and programmatic set up, such as materials, organization, and scheduling. These have been measured by states’ child care program licensors using compliance checklists and by Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) quality assurance specialists using ubiquitous environmental rating scales (ERS), such as the *Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale* (ITERS) or Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms et al., 1988; Harms & Clifford, 1989; Harms et al., 1990). Ideas of process quality, which are gaining prominence, focus on the *qualities* of adult-child and peer-to-peer interaction, such as what is measured with age-specific versions of the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS) (Pianta et al., 2008). The final category, which tends to be the least-considered aspect of quality, can be thought of as positional because it involves considering children’s, parents’, and teachers’ differing perspectives on quality programming (for notable examples see Barbarin et al., 2006; da Silva & Wise, 2006; Hallam et al., 2009; Tobin, 2005a; 2005b). Considering deeper aspects of positionality (race, culture, language, disability, and social class), as this issue’s contributors do, opens up numerous dimensions of complexity that must be encountered and reflected upon as a part of pursuing equity goals.

Why [Re]Considering Quality is Important

Quality in ECE, across all of these various definitions, as NAEYC (2019) points out, has great importance to public policy, local practice, and children’s life chances, for there is sound research linking ECE

program quality with both short-term outcomes in elementary school (for instance, social, language/communication and cognition/executive functioning), and longer-term indicators of (modestly) improved life chances, such as high school graduation rates and increased earnings (Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984; Burchinal et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2001; Niles et al., 2006; Helburn et al., 1995; Heckman, 2008; McCoy et al., 2017; Perlman et al., 2016). This, in combination with emerging evidence about young children’s neurodevelopmental sensitivities, women’s shifting workforce participation, and pluralization of national demographics, has contributed to organized advocacy linking high-quality ECE, school readiness, and broader education reforms (Olson, 2005; Child Trends, 2016; National Education Goals Panel, 1991).

This advocacy has led to efforts to “scale up” ECE program quality through what are called Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) (Tout et al., 2009). By 2017, all but one US state had either established or was working towards a QRIS, with an estimated annual national outlay of \$456,316,208—a crude calculation because the state of the available data is poor (Quality Compendium, 2021, 2024). While the amount of funding being directed towards QRIS is small compared to overall spending on ECE in the US (between \$29 and \$31.3 billion in 2016), it is a substantial amount that is likely to grow as public funding for ECE begins to increase toward projections of what is needed for “high-quality” ECE. This is estimated at \$140 billion per year (Allen & Backes, 2018, pp. 6-30; White House, 2021). What is key for this discussion is that QRIS implementation is variable across states (Tout et al., 2009) but shares an underlying theory of change that measuring, incentivizing (for example, through enhanced child care subsidy rates), supporting, and publicizing quality will lead to overall improvement in levels of quality driven by parental choice. This should ultimately lead to the kinds of promising *school readiness*-oriented child outcomes seen in earlier studies. While logical, is this change theory sound?

A Dangerous Road

There are several interrelated considerations about this logic. First, there are the underlying assumptions about ECE as a product to be consumed, with quality driven by consumers’ choices (Dahlberg et al., 2013, 2023). Related to this are questions about the commitment to incorporating the realities of social and cultural pluralism: children’s, families’, and educators’ lived realities within the intersections of race, culture, language, class, gender, and dis/ability. Dahlberg and colleagues ask, “[Can] the concept and practice of quality welcome and include context and values, subjectivity and multiple perspectives, complexity and uncertainty, participation and argumentation? And if so, how?” In the absence of answers to these, they conclude that pursuing quality is a “dangerous road” (2013, p. xiii).

Their questions are particularly salient, given the convergence of four trends in the US and potentially in other national contexts. First, young children are increasingly cared for outside of their homes (Child Trends, 2016). Second, the US is undergoing considerable cultural and linguistic pluralization (Pew Research Center, 2015). Third, prevailing ways of measuring quality in ECE fail to account for inclusive, racially and linguistically affirming practices that could help interrupt racial- and disability-related disproportionalities in preschool expulsion (Office of Civil Rights, 2014; Zeng et al., 2021). And finally, there is growing recognition of systemic obligations to support teachers’ holistic well-being (Dearani, this issue; Gallagher & Roberts, 2022; McDevitt & Sween, this issue; Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020; Rodriguez, this issue).

This third set of issues also connects to evidence that the widespread use of the ERS and CLASS measures rests upon an emerging, slippery knowledge base, making their widespread use in QRIS problematic. Evidence to date suggests that no single measure of quality has shown consistent or strong associations with children’s developmental and learning outcomes, and yet policy decisions are being made based upon information they provide (Burchinal et al., 2010; Burchinal et al., 2011; Burchinal, 2018; Gordon et al., 2015; Gordon & Peng, 2020; Guerrero-Rosada et al., 2021; Zaslow et al., 2011). That

there are serious concerns with these measurements is not to say that measurement is automatically bad, for there are important efforts such as the *Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale* (Curenton et al., 2020), *Classroom Assessment of Supports for Emergent Bilingual Acquisition* (Figueras-Daniel & Li, 2021), the *Inclusive Classroom Profile* (Soukakou, 2012), and a planned 2026 revision of the ECERS (Teachers College Press, 2024). More important than *what* measures to use is *how* any resulting data is used and who is involved in making these curricular and policy decisions.

Going beyond quality includes moving away from narrow definitions based upon crude measurements that can contribute to early childhood educators feeling judged and undervalued (Sloan, 2022). Going beyond also means resisting binary, good-versus-bad thinking (e.g., that positional quality is good and process quality is bad; pedagogical documentation is good, measurement is bad). It means seeking to combine many forms of information from various perspectives on quality: What is important to children, family members, community leaders, educators, administrators, and policymakers? Where are the spaces for negotiating these perspectives? If they do not exist, how do we create them? (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss, 2007; Nagasawa & Swadener, 2015). These are real-world, everyday discussions and debates between colleagues, teachers and children, teachers and administrators, educators and parents—and it is hoped, with policymakers—that are central to democratic, equity-focused decision-making about ECE.

THE CONTRIBUTORS' BEYOND QUALITY STORIES

Reconsidering quality in ECE raises some large, complicated issues, so much so that knowing what to do can feel overwhelming. While our colleagues cannot take on all of these issues, they do provide hopeful examples of the type of equity-committed meaning-making Dahlberg et al. (2023) argue are central to going beyond quality. Our collection begins with Helen Frazier's "Learning Stories as Assessment for Liberation," which draws upon a year's worth of classroom experimentation to illustrate an alternative to "industrial authentic assessment systems" (e.g., Teaching Strategies GOLD, Work Sampling System), which are "very rarely meaningful to teachers and [are] often so flawed as to be useless to policymakers" (this issue). This narrative approach to assessment is relational, pedagogical, focused on making teaching and learning visible (both reflective and communicative), and draws upon early childhood educators' capacities and aspirations for the children they teach.

In the second essay, "Be A Tree: Reconceptualizing Early Education through the Roots and Fruits Methodology of Teaching and Learning," Virginia Dearani reflects on her school's attempts to create a "post-human" school. By this, she means a place that seeks to recontextualize humans as a part of nature, rather than separate from it. She describes how Roots and Fruits sought to foster deep connections between younger and older people at the school, their histories, and the land (for related work, see *Occasional Paper Series #48: "Learning Within Socio-Political Landscapes: (Re)Imagining Children's Geographies," #49: "Indigenous Pedagogies: Land, Water, and Kinship," and #50: "Learning With Treescapes in Environmentally Endangered Times"*).

Themes raised by Dearani are extended in "Stories from Three Native Hawaiian Alaka'i About the Education of Young Children" by Charis-Ann F. Sole, M. Nālani Mattox-Primacio, and Shin Ae Han. This contribution draws upon mo'olelo (stories) from alaka'i wahine (women leaders) who are educator-administrators in Native Hawaiian early learning settings. Their piece highlights that "context and values, subjectivity and multiple perspectives" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. xiii) are not abstract words but instead are central to transforming early childhood programs from colonizing institutions into liberatory, culturally, and linguistically sustaining ones (see OPS #49).

Soyoung Park, Sunmin Lee, Nnenna Odim, and Jennifer Keys Adair take up the often-problematic

relationship between dominant ideas of quality and control in their partnership approach to supporting professional learning in their paper, “Dynamic Innovation for Young Children.” At its core this work involves university-based researchers joining with their colleagues in a school district to “counter the push towards conformity” (this issue) with a focus on noticing children’s capacities—akin to the examples shared by Frazier and Dearani in their essays. While seemingly small, this practice is an act of resistance to top-down, dehumanizing systems, leading to the discovery of children’s and teachers’ intertwined agency.

In “I Want to Say the Right Thing: Toward Translingual Literacy Practices Through Early Care Educator and University Researcher Partnerships,” Angie Zapata, Mary Adu-Gyamfi, and Adrianna Ybarra González build upon the preceding articles’ illustrations of what can happen within the ethics of an encounter (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Terms like coaching and mentoring have become increasingly popular in ECE, but their inter-subjective aspects are rarely discussed. Zapata, Adu-Gyamfi, and Ybarra González provide useful insights into how teachers develop appreciation for the richness of translingual literacies, “the ways people shuttle across languages and language varieties, utilize hybrid language practices, and are multilingual” (this issue), through snowballing—a kind of dynamic exchange that allows partners to accomplish more together than they could alone (Vygotsky, 1978).

The final two essays in this collection take up the critically under-considered issue of where early childhood educators’ well-being fits within quality. Seung Eun McDevitt and Louella Sween, in “Pour Into the Teachers: Learning From Immigrant Women of Color Through Conversations on ‘Quality’ in Urban Early Education,” quote their colleague, Esther, who says, “We talk about quality . . . quality care for the kids . . . What about the teachers? Before you can get that, you have to get quality into them. Because they’re the ones who are going to make this happen.” Teachers, rather than any particular assessment, lie at the heart of quality.

This disregard for teachers’ well-being in systematized quality is no accident, since the field is overwhelmingly woman-identifying, with a long history of brutally coerced caring for *other people’s children* by Black, Indigenous, Latina, and other Women of Color (Delpit, 1995; Lloyd et al., 2021). These realities shaped Vanessa Rodriguez’s facilitation of “radical refuges,” designed by and for Black and Latina early childhood educators, which she describes in “The Radical Refuge: Reconceptualizing Teacher Quality Liberated From the Historical Commodification of Latina and Black Women in Early Childhood Education,” which punctuates this collection.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Our colleagues in this issue have taken on some of the deepest issues affecting ECE in the US and elsewhere: educators as intellectuals and cultural workers, resisting the forces of capitalism, misogyny, racism, assimilation, and linguicide. By sharing their stories, they offer hopeful examples of possibility that we believe are suggestive of the many unrecognized acts of creative resistance happening in schools, classrooms, and communities across the globe. However, this is a *hypothesis* that needs to be tested *and*, so, there is much work to do in terms of finding, illuminating, and connecting these efforts.

Moving forward, we believe this work must rest upon partnerships among researchers, educators, children, parents, family members, and community alaka’i (leaders). Once again, Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence (2013, 2023) offer constructive guidance for this project, which involves:

- Deepening understanding of ECE institutions by contextualizing them and unearthing differing positional perspectives on their objectives and purposes;
- Striving to create transformative ECE institutions by struggling and debating across these positional perspectives to seek shared meaning, some degree of agreement, about the whats,

whys, and so-whats of ECE (i.e., the connections between cherished practices and equitable results for children, families, communities, educators, and society);

- Drawing contextualized illustrations of this praxis, in all of its messiness and complexities; and
- Teaching others about and inviting them into these praxes.

Importantly, our colleagues in this issue have suggested that this occurs within local-national-global frameworks and systems—what Dahlberg and colleagues (2013) call “frameworks of normalization.” Their concept helps clarify connections between guidance documents issued by organizations like the NAEYC, state early learning standards, health and safety reviews, QRIS ratings, top-down research, and what Helen Frazier calls “industrial authentic assessment systems” (this issue). Each of these things has a rationale but, when viewed together, bring us back to the questions that initiated this project:

- Who has been involved in the process of defining quality? Who has not?
- Might there be multiple perspectives or understandings of the idea?
- What is the context in which the idea has been formed? (Dahlberg et al., 2013)

When addressing these questions, we strongly urge that the educator-child-family-community-researcher partnerships we advocate for attend to how the small (interpersonal and local) interacts with the big (societal and political)—a focus on what Mathias Urban (2014) has called “competent systems.” In essence, his argument is that a hyper-focus on individual teachers’ competence distracts from the ways systems need to be supporting teachers themselves. Such support involves reciprocity between people, within institutions, and throughout administrative networks—all of which are nested within socio-cultural-political contexts. While this might seem very abstract, each of this issue’s authors is enacting this idea.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Earlier in the global COVID-19 pandemic, there was a rising chorus calling for reimagining education (*Occasional Paper Series #46: “The Pandemic as a Portal: On Transformative Ruptures and Possible Futures for Education;”* International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). In a widely circulated piece, Arundhati Roy (2020) reminded us that,

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (para. 48-49)

Amidst 2024’s return to *normal*, it may feel like this portal has closed, but our colleagues show us that it remains open.

We are More Powerful Together

At the beginning of our essay, we said that this issue is one result of a series of gatherings held in 2022 and 2023. Another result of those conversations were three guiding metaphors: the portal, the hive, and the constellation. As Roy (2020) explains, the portal is the gateway to a new world. Our hopeful stance is that one barrier to crossing through the portal is our lack of imagination—not because imaginative examples do not exist, but because we may not know that alternatives exist. Inspired by Dahlberg and colleagues’ (2013) challenge of cross-positional debate and dreaming, it became clear that these meetings were hives of creative snowballing, generating new ideas and perspectives (Zapata et al., this issue). Finally, constellations remind us that people find patterns of meaning in complexity. We

believe that the tasks moving forward are to keep drawing upon hive energy; keep striving to create constellations of related ideas, actions, and people; and keep helping each other develop the hope and courage to cross through the portal.

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