

A multi-perspective approach to quality in long day care: Considerations for the National Quality Framework

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Introduction

This presentation draws from an Australian Research Council funded study that is taking a multi-perspective approach to investigate quality in Australian long day care (LDC). Five key points will be discussed in the presentation:

- 1) Since the 1980's investigations into what constitutes quality child care have been dominated by empirical research that locates quality in a positivist paradigm and relies on quantitative research designs.
- 2) Such positivist research has been important. It has led to understandings about key elements that support and sustain quality in children's services, and in turn findings have informed policy, practice, and advocacy work.
- 3) The dominance of positivist empirical research, however, may have narrowed the lens through which we look at and think about quality. Positivist research has led to certain truths about quality childhood education and care (ECEC) that when problematised, provide space to research and consider quality differently.
- 4) A multiperspective approach that draws on positivist and poststructuralist paradigms, and uses quantitative and qualitative research designs, can broaden our conceptual lens and provide different and complementary understandings about quality.
- 5) These understandings can provide insights for policy development in early childhood education and care.

Consideration of multiperspective approaches to quality, and the implications of findings from such approaches for policy, seems timely given the Federal Government's plans to develop a National Quality Framework (NQF) for ECEC settings (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008b). This Framework is to encompass five areas:

- strong quality standards
- a quality rating system

- a streamlining or integrating of licensing, regulation and accreditation arrangements
- workforce strategies
- a National Early Years Learning Framework.

Empirical research on childcare: Where have we wanted to go?

Since the late 1970's empirical research investigating childcare has taken the form of three distinct and overlapping 'waves' (Friedman, Melhuish, & Hill, in press; Melhuish, 2001). The first wave examined the effects of maternal and nonmaternal childcare on children's development. An implicit focus of this research was, according to Scarr (1997) whether childcare was harmful to children. Significantly, research in this period did not give consideration to the quality of either maternal or non-maternal care.

Addressing this limitation, the second wave of childcare research acknowledged the importance of the quality of the childcare setting. Research thus turned to examining what aspects of the child care environment best facilitated developmental outcomes for children, and therefore comprised quality care. A number of assessment tools to measure or assess quality were developed in this period. The most notable observational rating instruments developed in this period, and which have since been revised, were the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R) (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2003) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998). These scales measure the overall level of quality of the classroom environment (Perlman, Zellman, & Vi-Nhuan, 2004). The ECERS-R instrument has 43 items categorised into seven subscales: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language reasoning, activities, interaction, program structure and parents and staffing. Items in each scale are rated on a 7-point scale: 1 (inadequate), 3 (minimal/adequate), 5 (good) and 7 (excellent). The ITERS-R is similar to the ECERS-R in its items and ratings scale.

The third wave of child care research extended the second in acknowledging that factors beyond the quality of child care – particularly the family environment and individual child characteristics and differences – impact on children's development outcomes. This wave of research, therefore, is grounded in an ecological framework. Much research in this wave uses a triad (impact of child care and family and the child) approach to children's developmental outcomes.

Empirical research on child care: Which way have we gone?

Having analysed over 200 peer reviewed articles published between 1980 and 2008, it is clear that empirical research investigating quality child care has been predominantly grounded in a positivist paradigm. Drawing on the features of positivist research as noted by Hatch (2002), this has meant that:

- Quality has and continues to be seen as a tangible construct that can be known.

- Knowledge about quality has been gained through controls and quantitative measures eg., observation ratings scales, correlation studies, experiments, quasi-experiments
- Empirical research has led to facts, theories and predictions about quality child care being purported.
- What we know about quality is distinct from the 'knower'. In other words, empirical research investigating quality child care has been undertaken objectively, separate to the values of the researchers.

Empirical research on child care: Where have we got to?

Where have we got to (I)? Increased understandings about quality childcare

Empirical research into quality child care has led to general understandings (at least in the Western world) as to what constitutes key elements of quality (Myers, 2004; Scarr, 1998; Sims, 2007). Structural indicators or "inputs" (Myers, 2004, p. 15) pertain to a centre's physical environment and are said to provide the foundation for quality. These indicators can be measured quantitatively and are included in regulatory standards. They include: staff qualifications and training, staff:child ratios, group sizes, adequate indoor and outdoor space, and health and safety provisions. The presence of these structural indicators is said to facilitate process indicators of quality. These indicators pertain to the quality of a child's experience and include the presence of stimulating, developmentally appropriate programmes; warm, frequent, responsive interactions between staff and children; and parental involvement.

To a lesser extent, the impact of adult-work elements and other centre characteristics has also been investigated. Adult-work indicators found to be important contributors to quality are good wages and work conditions for staff, as well as opportunities for professional development. Strong leadership, ongoing planning and evaluation of centre programmes, a low staff turnover and a not-for-profit status have also been identified as aspects of a childcare setting that support quality.

This knowledge about quality has informed ECEC policy in Australia and internationally. Indeed, Penn and Lloyd (2007) note that policy makers are more receptive to the scientific evidence quantitative studies offer. Currently in Australia, state and national government ECEC policy development make reference to research that is grounded in a positivist paradigm (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008b; NSW Department of Community Services, 2008). Moreover, early childhood advocates have successfully incorporated empirical findings into their campaigns for improved government regulations and ECEC policy (see, for example, NSW Community Child Care Co-operative, 2008).

Where have we got to (II)? Potential blind spots

While not wanting to diminish the value of positivist research and the understandings it has generated about quality ECEC, we maintain that such a dominance of positivist research may have narrowed the lenses through which we look at and think about quality ECEC. Our conceptual understanding of quality may be blinded, and we may have closed off other possibilities – in policy, practice, and research – in which quality might be considered.

Drawing on poststructuralist ideas and the work of Foucault (1980, 1983) current understandings or established ‘truths’ about quality can be said to have been discursively constructed by regimes of truth produced by positivist research. From a poststructuralist perspective, all truths are manifestations of power that privileges and produces particular viewpoints and silences others (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As Cannella (1997) writes, “the truths that are constructed and accepted as legitimate are dependent on the negotiation (or lack of negotiation) of power relationships between various groups of people” (p. 13).

A review of this empirical research has uncovered three well established truths, which when problematised, provide space to research quality differently:

(i) Quality is an objective reality

Quality is presented as a construct that can be known via quantitative measures and statistical analyses. This truth prevails in empirical research despite counterarguments made for at least the past 15 years that quality is a relative concept (Moss, 1994). Preliminary findings from an analysis of empirical research published in peer reviewed articles since 1980 point to the subjective, value laden and changeable nature of ‘quality’. For example,

- While empirical research on quality child care had been undertaken primarily in the United States, research that takes a more critical approach to ‘quality’ as an objective construct has tended to be conducted outside the United States
- Quality research has been intricately tied to the socio-emotional, cognitive and language development of children, and not to social justice or children as ethical beings. Moreover, research assessing the impact of quality ECEC environments on children’s cognitive development has increased substantially since the 1980’s, a finding that may be tied to governments’ embracing of brain research and productivity discourses, both of which frame the early years as a period in which children can and ought to prepare for school.

(ii) Quality is the domain of the sciences/psychologists, not education/teachers

Empirical research about quality childcare has primarily been undertaken by psychologists and published in multidisciplinary journals that privilege quantitative research. The number of articles published in education only journals is at best, one quarter the number of those published in psychology only journals. Research is driven by the researchers’ agenda, with only one of 200-plus articles analysed to date including the perspective of an early childhood teacher.

(iii) Elements that support and sustain quality are those that can be observed and standardized/measured quantitatively

- *A high global score is indicative of high quality*
- *Structural elements are the most important*

Over 40 different measures of quality, or measures of an aspect of quality, have been used in the research analysed to date. ECERS or ECERS-R is the most widely used observation ratings scale. High ECERS/ECERS-R scores are presumed to indicate a high quality ECEC setting. When specific aspects of a setting are measured, research has tended to focus on a centre's structural features, most notably, its staff:child ratios, group sizes, and staff training and qualifications. These structural features have been coined the "iron triangle" of quality (Phillips, 1987).

While observation ratings scales have been used extensively to indicate the level of quality being provided in a particular setting, they capture only the level of quality being provided at a given point in time, and usually within a short time frame of two hours. As Lambert et al (2008) note, this "snapshot" (p. 56) view of quality may not fully capture the quality being provided over time. Moreover, observation ratings scales such as ECERS-R and ITERS do not uncover those features of a centre that contribute to the quality being observed.

Taking a broader approach to quality: Current Australian multiperspective research

We believe that a multiperspective approach to quality has the potential to build on and complicate the understandings about quality childcare generated by empirical research. Resisting a binary positioning that devalues positivist research, we propose that a multiple perspective, mixed methods (Greene & Caracelli, 2003) approach to quality, one that embraces positivist and poststructuralist underpinnings, has the potential to lead to richer, and appropriately, deeper understandings of the complex processes and practices that underpin the consistent provision of high quality LDC but which may not have been highlighted by empirical research.

Our current research is a multi-modal investigation of current and proposed structures and processes determining and sustaining quality in Australian centre based child care. Broadly, the four phases of this project are as follows:

1. Analyse existing quantitative data sources – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, the NSW Child Care Choices (CCC) project, and the National Childcare Accreditation Council – to benchmark current levels of quality, nationally and within metropolitan and regional New South Wales;
2. Uncover and describe key elements that contribute to consistently high ratings on standardised observation ratings through in-depth qualitative case studies of six LDC centres identified in phase one to be of high quality;

3. Combine findings from phases one and two to make a strong, multiperspective contribution to current understandings of elements that support and sustain quality in LDC; and
4. Work with critical communities of teachers and academics to explore avenues in which findings can be translated into policy and practice.

What follows are preliminary findings from phase two of the project and considerations for how these findings might inform the development of the Federal Government's National Quality Framework.

Insights from an Australian case study

To refine the research design of phase two, a pilot case study of a reputable high quality LDC centre in Sydney, NSW, was undertaken. This centre has a consistent high quality accreditation profile and ITERS and ECERS-R observations also deemed this centre to be operating at high quality. The centre is licensed for 47 places and caters for children from six weeks to five years. Of the 12 permanent contact staff employed, five are university qualified teachers (two of these have Masters in Education qualifications), four are diploma trained, and one has a Certificate 3 qualification. The centre is not-for-profit and has been operating for 15 years. Four of the current staff (including the director and a team leader) have been at the centre for 14 years. Two other team leaders have been at the centre for five and six years respectively.

Qualitative data was gathered via staff, parent and child focus groups; interviews with the centre director; a three minute video prepared by staff in response to the question 'what is it about your centre that makes it high quality?'; centre documents and policies; and four education videos that explain the centre's philosophy and programs. Data was coded and analysed using the approach outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Adding richness to already identified elements that support quality

Findings from this pilot case study concurred with those of previous empirical positivist research. This pilot centre operated with structural features identified by research as being foundational to quality ECEC: qualified early childhood teachers, robust staff:child ratios, and small group sizes. In relation to current state regulations (NSW Department of Community Services, 2004) the centre significantly exceeds structural requirements for qualifications and ratios. For example, while two teachers are required for 47 children, the pilot centre employs five. The centre also implements the following staff:child ratios: 1:3 for children birth to two years (the Regulation stipulates 1:5); 1:5 for children two to three years (1:8 in the Regulation); and 1:7 for children three to five (1:10 in the Regulation). Data from the pilot also demonstrated that process indicators of quality – warm, positive interactions with children, parental involvement, and a programme that was informed (in part) by a theoretical knowledge of child development – were evident at this centre.

Using a qualitative case study approach that privileged the teachers' voices, however, provided added richness to these findings. First, while positivist research shows a correlation between teacher qualifications and quality, little is said about why this is. Teachers in this case study maintained that university qualified early childhood teachers were essential to quality because of their capacity to draw on theory and critically think and reflect on how they could best facilitate children's learning.

How can you expect things [at a centre where a diploma staff member undertook a field placement] to run as smoothly [as the pilot centre] if they don't have a teacher in there who's been trained to think. And if they don't have the support of diploma staff to help them think, and they just have untrained in the room. And they can be wonderful with the children, but they don't have that added thinking that goes in to it. So it's the thinking that adds to it, that makes it rich and makes it a place where children learn. (Susan, early childhood teacher)

Second, that a teacher was employed in each of the centre's rooms stemmed from a belief that a core number of teachers at the centre facilitates collaboration and reflective practice, aspects also deemed to be essential to high quality. As the following quote suggests, reflective thinking and decision-making are, for these teachers, most effective when undertaken collaboratively with peers:

The collaboration makes it exciting because you have an audience for your thinking. I do think you need an audience for your thinking, for it to flourish, because you can have thoughts alone and you can put it down on paper but that might be where it stops. But if someone's saying that's a great idea, maybe we could do -. There are more possibilities when you share ... And you mightn't like that someone doesn't like it [your idea] but I think that's all part of that grist of coming and going and thinking it through. (Carol, Director)

Third, the presence of structural features that significantly exceed state regulatory requirements is indicative of another key aspect of the centre that supports and sustains high quality: a shared philosophical commitment among management, parents and staff to the best interests of children. While employing a high number of university qualified staff is expensive and challenging, all stakeholders believe that this is essential to quality ECEC. In the first quote below, the centre director acknowledges the commitment of the management committee to employing qualified teachers. In the second a parent states that it is important to her that the centre employs qualified teachers because to her, 'childcare' is education.

We have families [on the management committee]who value qualified staff ... They then provide an understanding to other families that yep, this is how we want quality to be. One parent I can remember at one meeting saying something about if the fees go up then that's five dollars extra a week or something. One parent said 'well, I can't afford that' and another parent said 'well, I've got two children at the centre. If that's how much it costs then that's how much it costs'.

It is important that they [the staff] understand the principles of education because there is this whole thing that it is not just looking after the children, it is actually helping them learn and it may not necessarily be reading, writing, you know, it could be play based learning [general agreement]...From nought is when children are being educated. Not from five when they start school, but before they get to school, everything that happens to them is really important in laying the groundwork for what will happen to them later on. It is an education, not just child minding.

Fourth, for teachers at this centre engaging with children in a warm and responsive manner and facilitating parental involvement are not undertaken as isolated elements that are conducive to quality ECEC. Rather, they are embedded in a broader philosophical approach that promotes respectful, authentic relationships and reciprocal rights and responsibilities between all stakeholders. As the excerpts below illustrate, to the staff, this approach is integral to high quality.

Quality childcare means to me that children and families and staff are a community and that there is an authentic relationship, that everyone is honest with everyone; everyone is honest with each other. If people aren't happy about something then great, say it, don't just not say it. (Carol, Director)

We changed our philosophy to be a shared rights and responsibilities philosophy ... we noticed that families made time for meetings at the schools so we thought well, that's important for us - for families to make time because we have an imperative to meeting with families and we weren't getting anywhere by being polite about it. So those information sessions we hold for the families iron out all of those wrinkles. If you don't want to be told that you need to meet three times - at least a minimum three times a year - then you've got the option not to enrol with us. (Carol, Director)

Fifth, and drawing on the above point, teachers at this centre do not simply implement programmes that are 'developmentally appropriate'. Rather, as the excerpts below suggest, programs are developed from an interplay of the centre's philosophy, social constructivist theory, and an image of children as capable. It is these philosophical and theoretical underpinnings that drive the quality of the centre's programming.

I suppose the major [theory] is that notion about social construction of knowledge and it's all about relationships. That would be the key theory. We do model into that notion feminist theory but not in a big way, more in a way that tries to inform practice in looking at gender and how things are around social justice and equity I suppose. And we do like the notion of Dewey and I particularly like Steiner's notion around aesthetics. So it's quite eclectic but for thinking about children I suppose it's more that notion of that we do learn within a community. So that staff learn within the community, that we learn side by side with children. ... Children have a right to real tasks, not to kiddiewinks program, but the realness of life and that children do have those responsibilities for being members of a community. So

in order to do that then we all need real jobs. We do those real jobs and tasks that don't look at children as if they're lesser than the adults. (Carol, Director)

Extending understandings about what elements support quality

Findings from the pilot case study also highlighted other elements that support quality but which are given less or no attention in quality ECEC research. These elements included:

- Adult work conditions conducive to job satisfaction and staff stability, and that recognise and are commensurate with the professional expertise of staff eg., generous salary and employee conditions; freedom to work autonomously; caring and collegial learning community; encouragement of ongoing professional development
- Not-for-profit status
- Distributed and pedagogical leadership and mentoring of staff
- Time to invest in each individual child and family, to programme, to think and reflect; for the children, time to spend in intensive play, alone and with others
- Trust and good risk eg., staff able to be vulnerable in their reflections; children are trusted with authentic materials such as real spades
- Valuing of all staff, including the cook, the administrative assistant, and untrained staff

Collectively, findings from this pilot case study highlight that elements that support quality in LDC extend beyond those that are conducive to quantitative analysis and which are privileged in positivist research. Rather than a linear progression from structural to process features, quality for these staff is “*like a tangle of ribbons. It is complex, made up of intersecting and multiple strands, all of which are equally important*” (Lina, early childhood teacher). Such ‘strands’, it would seem, require uncovering by both quantitative and qualitative research.

To have the multiple elements at work and aspire to the high quality described in this paper, however, requires teachers at the pilot centre to engage in an active and ongoing resistance to prevailing truths about ‘quality child care’. For example, these teachers rejected the notion that high ECERS-R and ITERS scores, and a high accreditation profile, equate with high quality. Criticisms were, amongst others, that the tools devalued the complexity of quality early childhood education and the capabilities of teachers and children:

That (ECERS-R and ITERS) really harks back to that traditional notion of teaching that you deify the product whereas for us the process is so much more important ... they have a very simple image of children and the complexity of the materials that you should provide (Lina, early childhood teacher)

There's hardly anything about what is really important (in accreditation). Yes, have we evaluated our philosophy, not what are the elements of the philosophy. Is

it there? Can you tick that? Whereas the stuff we think and do is untickable. ... So accreditation tries to make cohesive something that is in every area, in every setting, totally different. So if we've got this staffing, if we've got this ratios, then what we do is totally different to another centre who has minimal ratios, minimal qualified staff yet they can get high quality and so can we. (Carol, Director)

In addition, and after much reflection, teachers at this centre deliberately stopped using commonly used terms such as 'child care' and 'service'. From their perspectives, terms such as these diminished the value of children, early childhood teachers, and early childhood education, and undermine what constitutes high quality education and care. These teachers therefore also engage in an active and ongoing production of alternative truths (Foucault, 1983; Foucault in Gordon, 1980). For example, they refer to their centre as a 'school' rather than a 'service', and focus on 'lifelong learning' rather than 'preparation for school'. In these ways, we would suggest that engaging in resistance to simplistic, technical constructions of quality is another crucial element that supports and sustains high quality ECEC.

Considerations for the National Quality Framework

Interestingly, when investigating elements that support quality ECEC, much empirical research focuses on what is provided at and what is happening within particular settings. We propose that government policy also has a large bearing on the level of quality being provided and as such, needs to be considered as a significant contributor, or detractor, of high quality. It is in this light that we consider how findings to date from the case study phase of our project might be used to inform the development of the Federal Government's NQF so that this policy serves to substantially support high quality ECEC.

Broadly, findings to date point to the need for a robust NQF that aspires to high quality and is underpinned by substantial public investment. In discussing a possible five-tiered system of accreditation the Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Ms Maxine McKew, noted that only a very small number of centres would be rated as a centre of excellence (Hudson, 2008). Findings from the pilot case study suggest that this centre would be one of those few. This possible scenario raises the question of why policy would accept that such centres be the exception, not the norm, of LDC. Greater investment is needed to support centres to provide the high quality described in the pilot centre, so that centres of excellence are the norm for children. As the Starting Strong II Report (OECD, 2006) states, a key element of "successful ECEC policy [is] ... substantial public investment in services and in the infrastructure" (p. 4). Currently, however, Australia ranks 13th out of 14 OECD countries on ECEC expenditure, spending only approximately 0.4% of its gross domestic product on ECEC (OECD, 2006). The notion of "affordable quality" in the NQF Discussion paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008b, pp. See for example, pp. 5,7,15, & 38) may well compromise the elements that support high quality as outlined in this paper. In keeping with the pilot case study findings, 'affordable high quality' appears to be more in keeping with the best interests of children, and thus ought to provide the platform for the NQF. Mindful of the need for all stakeholders – staff, parents and management – to support a vision for high quality,

without such policy and fiscal support, it will be difficult for staff in many ECEC settings to provide elements that support and sustain high quality.

Other considerations pertain to the specific areas of the NQF:

Workforce strategies

To support and sustain high quality, the NQF needs to be intricately linked to policies that address current workforce issues: teacher shortages, high staff turnover, and the low status of ECEC and early childhood teachers. Significantly, the pilot case study centre was characterised by qualified teachers and other early childhood trained staff, parental trust in and respect for the expertise of these staff, extremely low staff turnover rates, above award wages, good working conditions and a culture of professional development, support and collaboration. The proposed National Early Years Workforce Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008b), due for release at the end of 2008, must incorporate strategies designed to build a more professionalised, stable and well respected and remunerated workforce so that again, staff features of the pilot centre are atypical.

Strong quality standards

The pilot case study clearly had strong structural standards in place, that is, standards that facilitated high quality and were seen to be in the best interests of children. These standards pertained to staff: child ratios, staff qualifications, and group sizes. It appears incumbent on the Labor government to introduce national standards that are similarly robust if policy is to support normative high quality.

Based on the findings of this case study, it would appear that other contributors of high quality, such as pedagogical leadership, respectful, authentic relationships, and an ethic of reciprocal rights and responsibilities should not, or indeed cannot, be simplified into quantitative standards. Rather, the structural standards noted earlier could be supplemented by a set of principles for which staff are given opportunities to demonstrate within the context of their individual centre.

It also needs to be noted that the NQF Discussion Paper included a proposal to have integrated standards for all ECEC settings: long day care/preschool, family day care, and out of school hours care. While acknowledging the value of each service type, findings from both empirical research and the pilot case study suggest that standards need to be specific to each service type. Given the integral role university qualified teachers play in the provision of high quality ECEC, as described in this paper, standards need to reflect and support LDC and preschools as sites of specialist professional teaching practice.

A quality rating system

Findings from the pilot case study support, at least in the short-medium term when there are seemingly few 'centres of excellence', the introduction of a tiered rating system that acknowledges the provision of high quality ECEC. Such acknowledgement could be tied

to 'benefits' such as reduced spot checks and longer licensing periods that reflect a trust in teachers at these settings.

For high quality centres, findings also indicate that the accreditation process needs to move away from an audit approach to quality. In the pilot case study, many elements noted by teachers as being integral to the provision of high quality could not be observed. Indeed, on providing researchers with a three minute video taken by teachers of quality at their centre, Lina, an early childhood teacher commented, "*You won't be able to understand this. We'll have to sit down and talk about it*". Rather than a technical, tick the box approach to quality, high quality centres need scope to dialogue with validators from the Accreditation Council, to explain what they do and why. In this way, teacher expertise is acknowledged and practices are not 'dumbed down' to the lowest common denominator (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007).

A streamlining or integrating of licensing, regulation and accreditation arrangements

Teachers in this high quality centre spoke of the complex interplay of equally important elements that support high quality. Indeed, one teacher (Lina) commented that she found it difficult to take accreditation seriously because it did not take into account staff:child ratios, teacher qualifications and group sizes. For her, it was inconceivable that a centre could be rated as high quality yet not have a teacher on staff and be adhering to minimum ratios. The interconnection between structural, process and other quality variables lends support for the integration of licensing, regulation and accreditation arrangements.

In addition, staff spoke of the importance of having time to develop meaningful relationships, to programme and to individually and collaboratively reflect on their practice. Having one regulatory body to be accountable to has the potential to minimise time spent on what is currently perceived to be burdensome paperwork for two sets of requirements that duplicate in a number of areas (Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2006).

A National Early Years Learning Framework

The recently released draft National Early Years Learning Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008a) reflects the vision and values integral to high quality at the pilot case study centre. Embodied in the Framework is an acknowledgement of the importance of reciprocal rights and responsibilities, respect for children, community, and lifelong learning.

On this latter point, it is hoped that in keeping with the draft Framework and the findings of this case study that the NQF shift its current emphasis on the year prior to school. While the Discussion Paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008b) acknowledges that "children learn from birth" (p. 1), this view is not reflected in specific policies, such as the provision of "universal access to preschool for all children in the year before formal schooling" (p. 3). An emphasis on four year olds compromises the best interests of all children and the right of children, irrespective of their age, to access an early childhood

teacher. Such an emphasis also risks a technical approach to early childhood education, in which numeracy and literacy are privileged over other learning domains and the approach to lifelong learning that was demonstrated at the pilot centre potentially compromised.

Conclusion

Taking a multiperspective approach to quality ECEC that draws on both positivist and poststructuralist paradigms and quantitative and qualitative methodologies has the potential to provide richer and more nuanced understandings of the elements that support and sustain quality in LDC than that provided by positivist empirical research. These understandings uphold ECEC as a specialist professional field that necessitates expert professional practice if it is to be of high quality. Early childhood teachers require federal ECEC policy to consider, promote and facilitate such understandings.

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