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Defining Quality in Early Childhood Settings: Experiences from the Field

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Abstract

“The successful education of the child during her/his years of schooling and the participation of that child in society as an adult, depends to a greater degree upon the foundation laid during the early years” (Evans, Myers and Ifield, 2000, p.7). Research indicates that learning is crucial to development whereby knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are developed.

Research from disciplines such as physiology, nutrition, health, sociology, psychology and education provide evidence indicating that the early years are crucial in terms of developing intelligence, personality and social behaviour of children. If children are not provided opportunities to communicate, learn and develop they will not attain the optimal level of development and therefore will not thrive.

It is therefore imperative that people working with young children understand the multifaceted aspects of children’s development within the context in which they grow, think and learn.

Children spend a major part of their day in schools ‘learning’ and in interacting with other children and the adult/s (teacher/s). This implies that the role of the adult and significant others in the children’s life play a crucial role in providing opportunities for optimal development which include an emotionally safe and healthy environment, supportive interactions and relationships, stimulation and time. These are all important and integral aspects of quality in early childhood settings. Furthermore, research conducted in the area of early childhood in the UK and US indicate that the determinants of quality are a stimulating physical environment, staff knowledge and understanding of the curriculum, knowledge of how young children learn, adult skill in supporting children and helping parents to support children’s learning at home. (EPPE project, UK, 1999 to date). Katz, (1991) also indicates similar characteristics of quality.

The quality standards that the Certificate in Education: Early Childhood Education Development (CE:ECED) programme at AKU-IED is based on the High/Scope quality determinants which include a stimulating physical environment, consistent

daily routines catering both to child-initiated and adult-initiated experiences, positive and sustained interactions between the adult and the child and positive relationships between other adults working with and for the children.

This paper will present the findings that have emerged from our observations and work in a variety of early childhood settings as a part of the support we extend to the course participants of the CE:ECED programme and have been derived from our work over a period of four years (2001-2005). The data has been collected through systematic classroom observations including field notes, photographs, videos, children's work and conferencing with teachers and children.

Findings from the data reveal that teachers' perception of their sense of efficacy and capabilities, their understanding of curriculum, prior knowledge of how young children think and develop, the school infrastructure, the parental partnerships, leadership and the administrative and academic organization are some of the major factors that effect quality of teaching and learning in early childhood settings. This paper will define quality in teaching and learning as have emerged from our findings.

Introduction

Concerns for quality has become important in the present day debate in education with concepts such as quality assurance, quality control, quality time, quality supervision, which brings to mind different connotations about quality depending upon one's experiences and specific contexts in which one works. This suggests that quality cannot be easily defined. According to Harvey and Green (1993) "definitions of quality vary that to some extent reflect different perceptions of the individuals and society... there is no single definition of quality" (p. 28).

A similar concept of quality is presented in an Australian Report (1987) cited in Zajda et al (1995), which states that quality is "a relative construct, meaningful only from the perspective of those judging it at the time and against some particular standard or purpose" (p. iii).

Bacchus (1995) argues that the concept of quality is multidimensional with a range of definitions and with differing weight given to its various components by its different actors in the educational process.

Thus it becomes clear that there is no common agreement on a definition of what constitutes quality particularly in the context of education which is not only

a complex field embedded in political, cultural and economic context. But also includes several dimensions such as teacher education, educational programs, schools and schooling, higher education, curriculum and pedagogy. And within each dimension there are several discrete aspects which need to be deliberated when we talk about education. Therefore, defining quality in education in its entirety would not be possible within the scope of this paper.

Despite the arguments presented above 'quality' is an essential concept that must be addressed when considering different aspects of education particularly when considering programme options and for devising systematic evaluation procedures to ensure their effectiveness, excellence and distinctiveness.

One of the arguments that is presented in literature is that since no single definition of quality is possible then an appropriate approach to assess the quality of the education process or program is to construct contextually appropriate observable indicators or criteria which are valued, by those whose needs the institution is seeking to meet. One such set of criteria / framework is presented by Berquist and Armstrong (1986, cited in Bacchus, 1995). They offer seven observable criteria to ensure a 'high quality' academic program which states that the programme should be attractive and should be able to bring people to it; it should be beneficial to the individuals and the community involved in it; it should be congruent ensuring that it does what it says it will do; it should be distinctive in that it responds to the unique characteristics of the institution and is an asset to its people; it is effective and demonstrates this to others; it is functional and provides learners what they need to perform successfully and finally that it is growth-producing and enhances growth in important directions of learning.

A more recent set of criteria / framework for quality in education is suggested by Colby, 2000 who points out the importance of the quality of learners; the quality of learning environments; the quality of content or curricula; the quality of processes and the quality of outcomes.

Having discussed the importance of quality in education in general and the issues in defining quality the paper will now focus on why quality is important in early childhood and what constitutes quality in early childhood.

Why Quality in Early Childhood

Quality has become the watchword for early childhood especially in the last few decades since research in brain studies has demonstrated that early years

experiences have a decisive influence on the wiring of the brain thus affecting on the nature and extent of childrens' later capacities. Recent neuroscience findings provide additional important evidence about the influence of quality interactions during the first few years on the growth of children's neural pathways. Mustard (2002) clearly states that, "the weight of the evidence shows that the quality of the experiences an infant, toddler and young child is exposed to during the preschool phase of development affects learning capacity in the school system as well as behaviour."

Ramphale (2002 cited in Young, 2002) claims that the stimulation that a child receives in the early years and the development of the child's brain will affect his/her, "...physical and mental health, capacity to learn, and behavior throughout childhood and adult life." The evidence that is emerging in recent years from brain studies points out that the early years are the key to laying the foundations for life long learning.

Early childhood educators point out that investing in quality early childhood programmes is instrumental for the future of any country and its effects are both social as well as economical (Van der Gaag, 1997). Young (2002) argues that besides the economic returns to investing in children being high, early interventions can help children escape poverty. Weikart (1988) adds that the cost-benefit analysis of the High/Scope programme of 15 years showed a positive value to taxpayers.

Several studies (High/Scope, Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [EPPE], Abecedarian, Head Start) indicate how quality early years programmes positively affects children's learning and behaviour. The findings from High/Scope Perry Preschool project reveal that the benefits of attending the programme were present 27 years later. In a longitudinal study of the children attending this programme the effects that were noted were higher social responsibility, higher earnings and economic status, higher educational performance among other benefits (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002). Weikart (1988) stresses on the fact that it is not every early childhood programme that has positive effects on children, rather it is only high quality child development programmes that have positive effects.

Likewise research on the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE, 2004) study reveal that children who attend pre-school have improved cognitive development, and have better social behavior such as independence, concentration, cooperation, conformity and relationships with other children (peer sociability). Findings from the study also reveal that the benefit of pre-school is especially greater for children who are disadvantaged and 'at risk'.

“EPPE shows that one in three children were ‘at risk’ of developing learning difficulties at the start of the pre-school. However, this proportion fell to one to five by the time they started primary school.” (p. 2)

Other projects such as the Abercadian project and the Head start programme mirror similar findings regarding children benefiting from quality programmes. The research findings presented above is valid evidence that the early years are critical in the formation of intelligence, personality, social behaviour and physical development. The fact that cannot be over emphasized is the benefits of quality ECED programme has not only for the child and the family but also over time in terms of the child ability to contribute to society. “If children are to benefit socially and educationally from their early learning experiences, these must be of high quality-second best simply won’t do.” Botham & Scott (n.d.)

What Constitutes Quality in an Early Childhood Programme

There exist several opinions regarding the elements that constitute quality in early childhood programmes. For most early childhood service providers this is determined by the social and cultural context in which they are situated and on the focus of the services they provide. What constitutes quality in one setting may be different in other settings. Myers (2001) cites Ball 1994; Moss and Pence 1995; Scheweinhart 1995; NAEYC 1986; Basili 1994 and they associate elements of quality with effectiveness in early education programmes. They include elements such as:

- presence of sensitive, healthy, knowledgeable, responsible adults who interact in a respectful and supportive manner;
- a curriculum that takes into account a holistic view of children’s development, is stimulating and encourages play, exploration, initiation of activities by the children and caters to individual differences; integrates care and education and fosters self esteem and positive relationship with others
- a safe and clean physical environment which is stimulating and provides sufficient space for children to work and play in.
- a ratio of children to adults that allows for frequent interaction and personal attention
- training of staff on the job and provision of support to continued professional development

- strong leadership
- parental and community participation
- sufficient resources in terms of financial as well as material resources

Among the indicators to monitor quality in ECCD Myers (2001) discusses the number of children per teacher/caregiver; teacher qualification; physical environment; and curriculum and interaction as indicators affecting quality. He states that in many countries it is assumed that fewer children per teacher is preferable as this allows the adult to give individual attention to the child, this in turn is presumed to promote better learning. Like wise if teachers are highly qualified they provide better attention to children. The physical environment based on amount of available space for children, the safety precautions, availability of clean drinking water and facilities for sanitation is a quality indicator. He claims that the best indicator of quality is the curriculum, especially the quality of interaction between the adult and children as well as the variety and types of opportunities and activities that children are offered and the way groups are structured; as well as whether the activities are child initiated or adult initiated will effect quality.

Research on quality programmes in early childhood confirm the importance of the above mentioned indicators and reveal that quality settings are ones where the staff are highly qualified, where there are warm and interactive relationships between the adult and children, where educational and social development are seen to be complementary and of equal importance and where there is effective pedagogy with a balance between teaching and providing opportunities for provisions for children to learn and where children's thinking is extended in the process (EPPE, 2004).

The indicators of quality that have been discussed in the preceding paragraphs clearly indicate that there are not only many commonalities across the views presented by different early childhood educators mentioned above but also imply that all views place children's development, care and education at the centre of all thinking, provisions and actions.

Having discussed the importance of quality in education in general and early childhood in particular, the paper will now describe what we mean by early childhood settings, what some of the connotations attached to early childhood are and how quality is defined in early childhood settings in our context.

Early Childhood Settings

In this paper we describe early childhood settings as educational programs provided in formal environments such as schools (pre and early primary) for children of ages 3 – 8 years. This definition of educational settings stems from our work with teachers teaching this age group. In our work in varying setting we have come across several connotations in early childhood such as ECCD, ECD, ECED and ECE, while the beneficiaries are always the same-the young child and his/her family, the focus of the programme/services will be different. For example ECCD focuses on early childhood care and development, ECD connotes early childhood development, ECED emphasizes on education and development while ECE focuses on early childhood education.

In Pakistan there are several service providers focusing on different aspects of early childhood education. The public sector has focused on formalizing early childhood education. As a result ‘katchi’ classes have been established in schools as a first step for achieving the ‘Education for All’ goal which emphasizes the expansion of early childhood care and educational programmes. Since Pakistan is a signatory of the World Declaration on Education for All it has reaffirmed its commitment to achieving expansion and improvement of the quality of comprehensive early childhood care and education specially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

The private sector too is active in providing services to enhance the quality of early childhood in Pakistan by improving the quality of classroom teachers and their practices. One such programme that the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) offers is the Certificate in Education: Early Childhood Education and Development (CE: ECED) Programme which is a six month field based programme which aims at developing participants’ understanding of early childhood education and development within their indigenous contexts and enhancing the quality of children’s learning through implementing active learning. In the CE: ECED programme the development component signifies care, health and nutrition and parental partnerships within the parameters of the National Early Childhood Curriculum and policies of schools it serves.

The programme draws on the High/Scope approach which is in line with the National Framework on Early Childhood Education by the Ministry of Education. This curriculum framework calls for implementing active learning in the classrooms where children construct their own knowledge and understanding by “acting on objects and interacting with people, ideas and events...” (Hohmann

and Weikart, 2002, p.17) and from activities they plan and carry out themselves (Weikart, 1988). The National Curriculum states, “Children are actively learning when they are given opportunities to handle materials” (p.11). Learning areas or goshas are introduced in the classroom. These include areas such as Language area, Home or Domestic play area, Mathematics area, Block/Construction area, Music and Movement and Artistic Development area and Science area. This approach uses both small and large group activities and at the heart of this approach is the plan do review which places greater responsibility upon children for planning and executing their own activities (Curtis, 1998). In the process of planning and executing their own activities, children feel powerful and confident about their views. which is a necessary precursor for their future learning.

Quality as Defined by us in the CE: ECED Programme at AKU-IED

The quality standards that the CE: ECED programme adheres to is based on the Programme Implementation Profile Summary Score Sheet developed by High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. And is aligned with the quality elements described by Myers (2001), NAEYC (1986) and Curtis (1995). The elements include a stimulating physical environment, consistent daily routines; developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, positive and sustained interactions between the adult and the child and positive relationships between the adults working with and for the children. However, based on our work over a period of four years in a range of school settings embedded in a variety of social and cultural context, we have observed that there are several other important factors that affect the quality of teaching and learning in the early childhood setting which are discussed in the following section on ‘Findings’.

Findings

The findings have emerged from our observations and work in a variety of early childhood settings as a part of the support we extend to the course participants of the CE: ECED programme and have been derived from our work over a period of four years (2001-2005). The data has been collected through systematic classroom observations including field notes, photographs, CPs reflective journal, videos, children’s work and conferencing with teachers and children. The data was mainly analyzed using the Programme Implementation Profile Summary Score Sheet.

Although we are discussing the determinants that affect the quality of teaching and learning under discrete headings, we are mindful that each of these headings is an important concept in itself, inextricably interlinked with each other. For the purpose of this paper we have clustered the determinants of quality under four major headings which include teachers, leaders, parents and facilities.

Teachers

Teachers' Understanding of Child Development, Curriculum and Pedagogy

Early childhood thinkers and educators view children as rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent (Maloguzzi cited in Riley 2003). Children are considered active negotiators in their own learning as well as partners in co-construction of knowledge.

Early childhood educators and thinkers further describe children as “learners engaging actively with the world, who are born well equipped to interrogate the world (Riley, 2003; p. 15-16). Donaldson (1993) believes that children are highly active and efficient learners, competent inquirers, and eager to understand.

However, our observations of teachers working with children reveal that they often underestimate children’s potential and do not take into account children’s natural urge to question and observe. They perceive children as incapable of thinking sensibly and logically. As a result they disregard and discourage children’s views about the world and this is reflected in the way they teach. One such example is presented in vignette 1.

Classroom Vignette 1

In a classrooms of children aged 3-4 years a teacher was teaching geometrical shapes to children:



A girl asks: “Aunty¹ has Allah made any shapes?”

Teacher: (does not respond)

Girl: “has He made any shapes?”

¹ Children in some school address the teacher as Aunty.

Teacher: "Asma, repeat the names of the shapes- square, circle, triangle"

Girl: Square, circle, triangle"

ECED facilitator to the girl: "Have you seen any shapes created by Allah?"

Girl: (thinks for a moment and says) 'Yes, stars, moon, and sun'.

ECED facilitator: "what is the shape of the moon?"

Girl: (gestures by pointing to the circle drawn on the board).

Her thinking could not be further probed as the teacher had announced 'tidy up time'.

As a result the curricula followed is limited to teaching alphabets and numbers and the pedagogy used is linear and mainly aimed at mastery of alphabet and numbers.

The three main conditions presented in literature i.e. "careful planning and development of the child's experience, 'sensitive and appropriate interventions by the educators' and 'the nurturing of an eagerness to learn' (DES 1990 cited in Rodger, 1994, p. 14) is found to be lacking.

In schools in Pakistan teachers display a minimal understanding of curriculum and pedagogy and this stems from teachers own limited experience of teaching and learning in a traditional teacher directed approach. These prior experiences and understandings become so ingrained in their practice that it is not easy for them to deconstruct their already espoused theories about teaching and learning and reconstruct understandings needed for the holistic development of children.

Teachers are unaware of the existence of a curriculum in early childhood as is reflected in their responses at the CE: ECED selection interview when they are asked what constitutes the ECE curriculum in Pakistan. Most teachers are unsure of what a curriculum is and the purposes it serves. A few say they have heard about it but have little understanding of what it contains or the way it is used. The teachers who have heard about it are generally the ones who hold leadership positions in their respective schools (they are either heads or ECE/D Learning Area coordinators). Majority of the teachers admit that they follow a syllabus and plan themes or topics decided and given to them by their management. However, they are unsure of the reasons for the choice of the themes and topics they teach. They are also unsure about the links between the themes they teach and how it links with children's learning in the different domains of development, its continuity; progression; relationship to the interest and daily experience of the children.

The majority of private schools follow their own syllabus that generally includes teaching of numbers, the alphabet, names of animals, vegetables, fruits etc.

At the onset of the field work the facilitators will often observe teachers teaching in a linear and isolated fashion, often one letter of the alphabet per day. The teacher will write the letter on the board and get children to repeat the letter several times. A few teachers will allow children to name objects which begin with the letter. This done, the children will then be provided a worksheet and will be asked to practice tracing the letter several times and then to colour the pictures of objects beginning with the letter that is drawn on the worksheet. For most teachers the completion of the given syllabus within a specified time frame takes a central role. As a result the daily routines are structured and followed rigidly within the school timetable putting 'academic pressure on children' as is evident in classroom vignette 2.

Classroom Vignette 2

During small group time, a group of children aged 4 were given a task to color a template of a tortoise made by the teacher, and later to add to the picture, a sun, sand, stones and eggs. A boy picked up a yellow crayon and started drawing the sun while the girl sitting besides him chose an orange color to draw the sun.

Boy: "the sun is yellow and not orange"

Girl: (continues drawing the sun using the orange color and tells the boy) "I have seen an orange and a red sun".

The boy uncertain about his own understanding reports to the teacher: "Saima is making an orange sun" and very emphatically states, "but the sun is yellow".

Girl confidently replies: "but the sun is different".

Before she could even verbalize her complete thoughts, the teacher very casually says: 'Saima draw the sun yellow. Hurry up and finish your work'.

The above vignette reflects teacher's limited understanding of what constitutes an early childhood curriculum and the pedagogy involved in addressing it, as well as the principles that it should be based on, the nature of learning experiences and opportunities and fields of knowledge and dispositions that are worth while for young children's holistic development.

The pre requisite skills and abilities, taking an interest; being involved; persisting with difficulty; communicating with others; and taking responsibilities, the main aspects of early years curriculum and pedagogy (Carr, 2001, cited in Riley, 2003) are found lacking.

As a result of embarking on the CE: ECED programme we have observed that when teachers are provided on the job intensive classroom support through coaching and modeling not only is a positive shift noticeable in teacher's thinking and practice but more importantly they are able to try out the same strategies with more confidence. In the case of the teacher mentioned in vignette 1 when we modeled adult child interaction involving open ended questions to extend children's thinking – she reported “Today I took the risk of asking children to name some of the colors they know.... I was surprised to learn that they knew almost all the colors I was to teach them in this month... now I don't know what I will teach in the next two weeks... can you tell me ... what I should do now, my children have covered everything and are ahead of the other sections.” Two very important factors affecting quality in teaching and learning have surfaced in this teacher's quote which was commonly observed among other teachers as well, this is their uncertainty and inadequacy in dealing with the given curriculum and in extending children's learning and teacher's own perception of their sense of efficacy and capabilities.

Teacher's Perceptions of their Sense of Efficacy & Capabilities

This is a critical issue that has direct implications on teacher's beliefs about how children will learn, the opportunities and experiences they will provide, the learning context or environment they will set up, and the relationships they will have with the children, their colleagues, parents and heads.

Many teachers, despite having high academic qualifications—Masters degrees in some cases—and many years of teaching experience, have been observed to have a sense of inadequacy and demonstrate incapability in thinking for themselves, making decision and in taking initiatives appropriate to children's needs and abilities. The teachers in our context were also seen to demonstrate a sense of dependency both on the school management, and their colleagues in superior positions and during the programme on the facilitators (mentors). This could stem from the fact that most schools in Pakistan have an authoritarian style of leadership and as such do not empower teachers to make decisions. However, by being encouraged to ‘take risks’ in an environment where all are learning and sharing experiences during the ECED sessions and trying out different ‘innovations’ in their respective classrooms, the teachers were seen to become open minded and confident in sharing their inadequacies by putting their

· The practice followed in this school was to teach one particular topic over a period of three weeks. In this case the teacher would teach the names of colours over a period of one month.

practice under scrutiny of others. This in turn motivated teachers to improve their practice which in turn raised their self esteem and perceptions of themselves and their efficacies. As is evident in the following teachers' reflections:

Yesterday, I enjoyed musical instrument preparing session because it was a low cost, no cost material. These materials are available; we just need to be creative. (Teachers' Reflection, July 2, 2004)

Yesterday, the sessions on English Language was very interesting, in particular, the Phonic method was really good. The activity that was done, I can do that in my class too. Through this children become active themselves and are able to develop their speaking and reading skills. The more we give children chances the more they themselves will try to make sentences. (Teachers' Reflection, July 7, 2004).

Professional Development of Teachers

Teachers are largely responsible for many elements of quality that have been mentioned above. Therefore the professional development of teachers should be of serious concern not only in curriculum training but also in leadership and empowering roles. Sadly, in Pakistan the general perception is that anyone can teach young children. The status of early childhood teachers and the salary he/she receives is lesser than that at any other level of teaching. This in turn does not attract creative and committed people into the profession which in turn adversely affects quality in early childhood classrooms. Our experience of working with preschools shows that schools that provide on the job professional development opportunities for their teachers which include co-planning, reflection, team teaching, observing each others practice and providing feedback and reflection demonstrate better practice. For e.g. there were instances when the CPs from CE: ECED after graduation were seen as a resource for the school to conduct professional development sessions for other ECED teachers. In contrast to this practice teachers who are left alone to fend for themselves tend to feel isolated. In the government schools we find that support mechanisms for teachers are lacking as a result teachers feel 'alone' and complain that they do not have any support either from teacher colleagues or from the administration. A course participant from a government school stated, "*Agar aap log yeh support programme ke baad nahi deingey to main yeh sab kaam bachon sey karwana chod dongi phir mujhey na kehna ke teaching ek moral act hai.*" (Saturday Seminar,

November 2005) During the CE: ECED programme they have reported that they look forward to the weekly visits by the facilitators and the Saturday seminars as they feel 'supported'. Besides providing intensive classroom support through modeling, coaching, mentoring and pre and post lesson conferencing, the CE: ECED programme also engages teachers in on going reflections on their actions. The following quote taken from a teachers' reflective journal exemplifies this stance.

I just want to share my view that as a teacher I didn't want to give much time to my children regarding the preparation of activities and all the time I wanted to be a traditional teacher. But now I realize that I should find out different ways of teaching and should give more time to my children. (Teachers' Reflection, July 8, 2004)

In order to continue teachers' professional development the CE: ECED programme continues to provide 'follow up support' even after the completion of the programme. This 'follow up support' includes a monthly visit to the CPs classroom by the facilitator and group meetings at AKU-IED where CPs share the challenges they face and/identify strategies to address collectively those areas.

Leaders

School Leadership

The school leadership is instrumental in determining the quality of teaching and learning. Schools where the head teacher understands how children grow and develop and are aware of child development will have policies that are developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive and which keep the child at the center of all decisions. Very often because the head teachers may not have any background in early childhood they may not understand why certain things pertaining to the child is important. An example of this is regarding the notion of play. Initially, the early childhood team had to struggle to advocate the role of play in children's learning and the benefits that are derived if a child is allowed to explore and play in contrast to very formal teaching in the early childhood

· During the CE: ECED programme CPs are required to keep reflective journals throughout the six months of the programme. Written feedback and discussions between the course facilitators and CPs takes place on a weekly basis.

setting. The heads thought that play was a waste of time and that the time could be utilized in more formal teaching. Another example that demonstrate the heads' limited understanding of child development is reflected in the teachers quote:

In yesterday's session I liked various activities for e.g. shadow puppet ets. Regarding physical education, I would like to say that I found It challenging as in our school, we have a limited number of staff members thus we do not have a physical training (P.T) period and do not take the children out of class. Our headmistress also tells us to keep the children in class due to fewer staff members. (Teachers' Reflection, July 1, 2004)

The above quote reflects the scenario in many schools in Pakistan where children's basic developmental needs are not kept in the forefront due to administrative constraints. In this case the childrens' need to engage in out door activity and their physical development is overlooked. In order to advocate developmentally appropriate practices in the early years as a part of the CE: ECED programme the head teachers are invited to participate in workshops for heads where they are acquainted with how young children learn and develop and the need to have developmentally appropriate policies and practices in the school.

Parents

Parental Participation

Parental participation in their children's learning plays a vital role in the education of the young child. Findings from the EPPE study (2004) reveal that the 'Home Learning Environment' influences attainment at age 3 as well as at the start of primary school. Parental involvement in activities such as reading to the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, playing with letters and numbers, painting and drawing etc positively influence attainment and also has positive effects on children's cognitive progress. Based on these findings preschool settings are recommended to encourage parental participation and to employ active parenting strategies as these can, "...help to promote young children's cognitive progress as well as positive social/ behavioural outcomes" (p.25). In our experience majority of schools in Pakistan do not capitalize on the parent's as people who are knowledgeable of their children and their development. In many schools we have observed that parents are discouraged to come to school and to

engage in any kind of communication with teachers. If at all they are allowed in the school, it is only at specific times and for specific purposes.

During the CE: ECED programme, the course participants are encouraged to work closely with parents. CPs are asked to organize at least one parent orientation/parental meeting to acquaint parents with the pedagogy used for engaging children in active learning in the course of the four months field work. Many schools hesitate to do so. However, many schools do have a very effective parental involvement programme where parents are regularly invited for sessions which address some aspect of child development and share strategies of working with children, child care etc..

In at least two schools that we have worked with parents are invited to be part of the library period and to come to school on a weekly basis and read with their child and to help the child choose their library books. Another school sends out a 'menu of activities' schedule that parents can participate in during school hours. This includes coming in to help out in the reading class, to facilitate other curricular and co curricular activities, talking to children regarding their professions etc.

In addition inviting grand parents to talk about the past and the changes they have seen. We have found that schools that encourage parental participation have parents who are more involved in their children's learning and children who are active and engaged in learning. For example children who are read to regularly at home have been seen to demonstrate a comparatively well developed vocabulary and are seen to have some knowledge of how language works. We have observed such children to actively engage in co-constructing stories and developing these into books with their language teachers.

Facilities

Resources and Facilities

The High/Scope approach emphasizes the importance of the physical environment and the use of provisions for effective teaching and learning. According to this philosophy the space in the classroom should be arranged so as to provide opportunities for active learning to take place. The spaces should be inviting to children and it should incorporate specific places for children to carry out different activities in the pace and time set by them.

Materials provided should be plentiful and well labeled. The organization of the learning environment and the provisions allocated has positive effects on children in that it engages children in active learning and allows children to take initiative (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002).

In majority of the schools that we work with there is limited classroom space in relation to the class size and a minimal amount of provisions available. Teachers of the CE: ECED programme are therefore encouraged to use a variety of low cost materials developed from their local environments.

While literature supports the fact that ideally smaller group sizes and a fewer children per adult are the hallmark of quality programmes (Schweinhart, 1997) we find the reality in our settings very different with class sizes that can be anywhere between 40:1 and even 60:1 and limited spaces available.

In such settings our findings reveal that the teacher becomes instrumental in determining the learning that will accrue. Much depends on how the teacher uses the learning spaces effectively and how he/she groups the children for optimal learning to take place.

In addition, the tasks planned, the rules negotiated with the children prior to group activities and the degree to which children are given responsibility and held accountable for their actions is at large a determining factor.

In some of the schools where we have worked despite the limited available spaces and a larger class sizes (1:35 in this case) the teachers have planned and organized their classrooms so effectively that children have engaged in a much more sustained manner in learning. This confirms what Bottini and Grossman (2005) state that the manner in which the classroom is organized can greatly affect the way in which children grow and learn.

Conclusion

The discussion above provides evidence that there are certain essential elements which constitute a framework for quality in early childhood settings. These include knowledge about teaching, knowledge about learning and knowledge about knowledge.

Some of the quality determinants that have emerged from our findings and is supported by literature state that in order to achieve quality in early childhood settings the following is required:

- Teachers with an understanding of child development, how young children learn, an understanding of early childhood curriculum and developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive pedagogy.
- Teachers who perceive themselves as efficient and capable.
- Sustained intensive classroom support including coaching and modelling.
- Teacher's continued on-job professional development.
- Parents as partners in policy decisions as well as in their children's learning.
- Leadership that views early childhood as an important stage in it self and recognizes the importance of early childhood education and development.
- School infrastructure including facilities and resources (both human as well financial).
- A ratio of children to adult that is appropriate to optimize children's learning and to carry out meaningful interaction.

The above mentioned quality determinants pinpoint the importance of the adult working with children, their beliefs of children and themselves, their own knowledge base and continued professional development and their need for support from the leadership and parents and the facilities they are provided in order to support children to optimize learning and develop to their utmost potential.

If we believe that learning is a social act where children learn together with others we need to ensure that children are supported well and the teacher who is closely associated with children are also supported well.

For us the above mentioned quality determinants have implications at two levels: for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in early childhood settings and for evaluation and design of early childhood teacher education programmes..

If quality is to be achieved in early childhood settings the above mentioned quality determinants need to be present. In addition, these quality determinants can be used as a framework to guide programme design to monitor and evaluate early childhood settings and design teacher education programmes in early childhood in Pakistan.

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