Posing Unique and Urgent Challenges to Understandings of Quality: Elucidations through a Froebelian lens

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a small pilot study undertaken with early years practitioners in Scotland. The Scottish Government is currently implementing its key election promise of almost doubling the entitlement to publicly funded early learning and childcare (ELC) for all three and four-year old and eligible two-year old children. A key message from the Scottish Government during this period has been that quality is at the heart of the expansion initiative (Scottish Government, 2017b). However, quality can be a contested and an ill understood concept (Moss, 2019). This pilot study, therefore, explored the perspectives of practitioners in Scotland regarding what quality in early years provision entails, particularly in this time of change and expansion. The paper will make three key arguments based on the findings from the study. First, that although quality is a much-used term in Scottish ELC settings, understandings of the term can be subjective, yet powerful and can leave practitioners with more questions than answers. Second, we argue that Fröbelian principles could ameliorate some of the issues regarding quality in Scotland, particularly in terms of combatting discrimination. Finally, we argue that those principles must be accompanied by a social justice lens in which prejudice and stereotypes are recognized, named, and unpacked and action for change taken.

Keywords

Quality, Fröbel, Early Learning and Childcare, Neoliberalism

Introduction

The word quality is an often-used term in the Scottish ELC lexicon. It is habitually used to describe an accomplished, effective setting. Accordingly, the word quality is a key concept in ELC. However, there are clearly some limits to understanding what is meant by quality. One of the key challenges is that quality can be ill-defined. As Moss and others argue, "the concept of quality is neither neutral nor objective, but permeated by values and socially constructed" (Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000:103). Therefore, what is understood to be quality to one person may differ greatly to another person. The word quality, therefore, can be a thorny issue, as it can be viewed as subjective and contested.

The subjectivity of quality in ELC has been a key theme in the research literature for decades, (Pence & Moss, 1994; Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; Moss, 2013, 2015, 2019) yet in contemporary policy and practice terms the concept of quality often remains unexamined. For example, in

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2016 the Scottish Government launched its plan for a major expansion of ELC, nearly doubling the provision from 600 hours per child to 1140 hours, by the year 2020. Quality was a key theme in expansion documents. In their various blueprint documents for the expansion the Scottish Government make their aspirations clear that ELC will be high quality, flexible ELC, that is accessible and affordable for families (Scottish Government, 2017b). International research and evidence from the Growing Up in Scotland study suggests that all children, but especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, can benefit from attending ELC (Scottish Government, 2021). However, the same evidence also suggests that if the Scottish Government's ELC offer is to help give children the best start in life and contribute to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, it must be of high quality. The intention is, therefore, that the ELC expansion is fundamentally about improving the early years' experience of our youngest children. Consequently, the main goal for early years practitioners is for their ELC setting to be recognized as a quality setting. Quality is in turn judged by the Care Inspectorate (C.I.), one of the main regulators of ELC settings, who gather their evidence by the use of benchmark "quality indicators" to assess and monitor practice (Scottish Government, 2017a): Quality of Care and Support; Quality of Staffing; Quality of Management and Leadership; and Quality of Environment. After an inspection of the service the C.I. write reports on their findings of quality, (or not quality); these reports are then made public. It can be from this data that many parents select a particular setting for their child. Accordingly, the final report is a further impetus for ELC settings to be recognized as a quality setting by C.I. Another way that the concept of quality is interwoven into Scottish ELC discourse is the claim by the Scottish Government that the quality of ELC settings in Scotland is already high. This claim is based on C.I. data which shows that, in 2017, 91.1% of all settings providing funded ELC achieved C. I. evaluations of good or better on all four themes, while 42.8% of all funded providers achieved evaluations that were very good or excellent across all themes (Care Inspectorate, 2019). By the continuous use of the word quality within policy frameworks and regulatory processes, and subsequently, the mainstream public discourse, the Scottish Government may deem the word quality to be understood and accepted. It is as if the word quality is unquestionable as it is reproduced, and used as an adjective, almost unthinkingly, across the public domain. However, despite the word quality appearing 173 times in the expansion consultation document (Scottish Government, 2016) and the subsequent expansion action plan (Scottish Government, 2017b), it is weakly defined. In the glossary of terms, quality is explained as: "A high quality experience for all children, which complements other early years and educational activity to close the poverty-related attainment gap and recognizes the value of those we entrust to support our children to fulfil their potential" (Scottish Government, 2017b, npn). This lack of definition is problematic as understandings of quality greatly impact on those whom the powerful govern (Moss, 2019).

This study, therefore, explored meanings of quality in ELC settings, the impact of understandings of quality and questioned how the work of early years pioneer, Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) could help define quality in the Scottish context.

Literature Review

Quality in the Scottish policy context

In their "Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare: Action Plan," the Scottish Government places excessive emphasis on the word "quality" (Scottish Government, 2017b). After the consultation period the Scottish Government laid out its action plan, setting out its four guiding principles, which included flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and top of their list was quality. Under the heading "quality," it is stated: "the expansion will ensure a high-quality experience for all children, which complements other early years and educational activity to close the attainment gap, and recognizes the value of those we entrust to give our children the best start in life" (Scottish Government, 2017b:3). The word "entrust" is interesting here, as it may suggest that the practitioners' pedagogical values are not constrained by performativity demands, as "entrusting" suggests a certain freedom in the educational endeavors of practitioners. However, the Scottish Government has been especially alert to the difficulties caused by poverty, which they believe has impacted on young children's attainment. In particular, it has been suggested that children in communities described as deprived do less well than children in affluent areas— resulting in what is coined the "attainment gap" (Scottish Government, 2021). As a consequence, the current educational landscape is being both privatized and militarized as practitioners embark on a rapacious quest to "close the achievement gap" (Scottish Government, 2018). In the service of closing the achievement gap, children are being assessed through a narrow lens, to consume knowledge, and may be, subsequently, inculcated with capitalist values of conformity and consumption, damaging competition and disdain from collective efforts and educational benefits (Author, et al, 2021). Therefore, practitioners may not perceive themselves "entrusted," but, rather pressured to meet demands, as they assess and monitor young children's experiences. If children are being assessed through a narrow lens and inculcated with capitalist values of conformity and consumption, can this be considered quality in terms of experiences for young children, and for practitioners "entrusted" to fulfil their role. It is argued that, "Quality is a positivist concept that serves the interests of managerialism, an essential component of a neoliberal world" (Moss, 2019:41). The social understandings of what neoliberalism means will undoubtedly differ from scholar to scholar/ scholar to policy maker / practitioner to practitioner, in a similar vein to quality, the concept tends to mean different things to different people. However, overall, the term neoliberalism is often used in a pejorative sense, as a ruthless and corporate driven concept. Braedley & Luxton (2010) argue, neoliberalism perpetuates inequitable practices, to insidious depths, which involve power, powerlessness and hegemony. Reading Braedley and Luxton (2010) compels us to face the contradictions of neoliberalism, which is evoked frequently, however its roots, philosophical acceptance and importance are seldom questioned, as contesting neoliberalism is said to be a daunting challenge.

The document goes on to express specific aspects of quality, which offer a bit more information on what quality might mean. For example, in "A High-Quality Workforce," the text following reiterates this by including: "the single most important driver of quality of a child's ELC experience is a high-quality workforce" (Scottish Government, 2017b: 6). Once again, there is an acknowledgement here of the value of the practitioners and their Continued Professional Development (CPD). Additionally, a further quality heading relates to the ELC environment, "High Quality

Physical Environments," which is described as: "...flexible in offering choices and carefully selected resources which capture interest to create moments which spark children's play" (Scottish Government, 2017b: 20-21). It is here, we find the Scottish Government acknowledging the value of play as a critical medium for learning. Finally, a third heading contains, "Clear Quality Standards and Robust Self-Evaluation and Quality Assurance Regimes" which explains rigorous inspection procedures (Scottish Government, 2017b: 21 -22). Notably, in keeping with hegemonic discourses regarding quality ELC, the Scottish Government returns here to the accountability and datafication of ELC settings through the inspection processes.

In 2020, the national practice guidance for early years in Scotland: *Realising the Ambition: Being Me* was published (Education Scotland, 2020). This document was created to support the expansion, and includes a section, "Ensuring Quality Through Critically Reflective Practice," under the heading the author(s) write: "Research has shown that high quality early years provision promotes children's development and, in the longer term, enhances their educational and life changes...However, poor quality services have a detrimental effect on children's development...quality...remains paramount" (Education Scotland, 2020:81). This statement can be closely aligned to earlier documentation produced by the Scottish Government (2017b). The author(s) of *Realising the Ambition*, then go on to ask "What does high quality practice look like?" The answer directs us back to circular definitions, suggesting we reflect on previously published documents: "A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare: Action Plan" (2017b), and to the "Health and Social Care Standards" (Scottish Government, 2017a) and the "Care Inspectorate ELC Quality Framework" (Care Inspectorate, 2019).

Despite initially offering a circular definition, *Realising the Ambition* does deviate from other documents in that it eventually goes some way to defining quality (Education Scotland, 2020). For example, under the heading "Quality settings have a clear, shared, vision" – this is explained as: "The vision should be based on the unique needs of your children and families in your setting. Developing a vision that is co-created... with children and families" (Education Scotland, 2020: 82). It is in dialogue with *Realising the Ambition* that we make a preliminary case for connecting the work of Friedrich Fröbel, whose work holds as true today as it did in the nineteenth century. For example, Froebel placed emphasis on the "unique child" and the critical importance of "the child as part of a family and community" (Tovey, 2020), resonating with *Realising the Ambition*'s call for a shared vision with children and families. A further heading is added: "Quality settings have practitioners with an understanding of child development and how young children learn," it is emphasized that, "...children learn best when engaged in meaningful first-hand experiences...and a recognition that young children learn through play" (Education Scotland, 2020:82). Encapsulated here is Fröbel's value of first-hand experiences and, of course, that children learn through play. Another heading: "Quality settings have...rich adult-child interactions" is followed by an explanation, that the adult attunes to the child, supporting them and challenging them. Here Fröbel's concept of freedom with guidance can be understood, as the practitioner responds, sensitively and "observes, supports and extends" children's learning (Bruce, Louis & McCall, 2014). This responsiveness cannot be objectified and reduced to discrete formulaic

characteristics. For Fröbel freedom with guidance emerges from democratic notions of tolerance, conviviality and respect (Liebschner, 1992). Under the heading: "Practitioners in high quality provision" *Realising the Ambition* writes of promoting "child-initiated experiences and...captialise on children's interests and motivation" (Education Scotland, 2020:83). Here Fröbel's concept of child-centeredness can be understood. Finally, *Realising the Ambition* adds: "Quality settings understand...the importance of curriculum and pedagogy." It is here that Fröbel's participatory pedagogical approach is laid bare. It is clear that the national guidance for early years in Scotland, identifies core components of quality, and that these can easily be connected to the main principles, pedagogy and environment of Friedrich Fröbel, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Fröbelian principles in the Scottish context

Frobelian principles and practices are influential in Scottish early years (Author, 2020). An Independent Review of the Scottish ELC revealed that there are many Fröbelian trained early years practitioners in Scotland, and that through those practitioners, the implementation of Fröbelian philosophy has profoundly influenced the practice in ELC (Siraj & Kingston, 2015). In addition, the national practice guidance for early years in Scotland, has dedicated significant text to Fröbelian work (Education Scotland, 2020). These accounts suggest that Fröbelian ideas can be connected to ideas of quality.

From the previously discussed national guidance, ideas of social justice can be associated with concepts of quality, for example, quality is associated with living in "communities that are inclusive," that diverse cultures are "celebrated," and that everyone must "learn to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and live free from discrimination" (Education Scotland, 2020:37). Broadly speaking, when Fröbel created his principles, he did not use the term "social justice," however he was committed to the education of all, rich and poor alike, and indeed he saw in education the key to the improving social conditions (Liebschner, 1992). He challenged ageism, arguing: "let every stage be that stage," he viewed childhood as a period in its own right, childhood as part of life, and not simply as a preparation for adulthood (Bruce, 2021). Another of his fundamental principles was that of the "uniqueness" of each and every child, which is more likely than not to have included ideas of race and gender. Fröbel was also an antagonist for social change, he argued that "women and children are the most oppressed and neglected of all...they have not been fully recognized in their dignity as parts of human society" (Fröbel in Allen, 1982: 319). He was ridiculed by his peers for this view; and for his activism in bringing women into the workplace he is named a feminist by Fröbelian authors (Ulrich, 1935; Allen, 1982; Manning, 2005). Furthermore, he challenged the class system, working with children who were considered "affluent" he encouraged "less affluent" children to join in the play.

Fröbel's principles were not easy to interpret, as his writings could be complicated, resulting in the meaning becoming lost (Wasmuth, 2020). However, that said, over time Fröbelian principles have been re-written, most recently Fröbelian, Helen Tovey, updated Fröbelian principles for the Fröbel Trust. After an historical – contemporary analysis, and with a keenness to remain true to the essence of Fröbelian principles, Tovey concluded his principles to be: "Freedom with Guidance,"

"Unity, Connectedness and Community," "Engaging with Nature," "Learning through Self-Activity and Reflection," "The Central Importance of Play," "Creativity and the Power of Symbols" and "Knowledgeable and Nurturing Educators" (Tovey, 2020: npn).

In the following sections we move our preliminary argument about Frobelian principles and quality in Scottish ELC into dialogue with the data from the project. First, however, we summarize the project methodology.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this pilot study were early years practitioners or leaders / managers of settings, based in three ELC settings in Scotland. The settings were chosen based on their high scores on recent inspection reports, indicating that regulatory bodies considered the settings to be of high quality. A review was carried out on all of the joint Education Scotland and Care Inspectorate inspection reports conducted within ELC settings available through the Education Scotland website between November 2016 and December 2018. This time frame was chosen as it is the period between the dissemination of the Scottish Government's Blueprint for Expansion (2017b) and the published, publicly available inspection reports available at the time of the review in Spring 2019. 170 reports were reviewed and five high-scoring settings were contacted about participation in the research. Three of those settings responded favorably and the pilot study was conducted within those.

Between the three settings, 11 participants in total took part in the project. This included seven practitioners and four leaders / managers. In each of the three settings at least one member of the leadership/ management team and one practitioner were interviewed in-depth and shared their views. While specific demographic information was not collected from participants on how they self-identify, the researchers identified that all participants presented as women and white.

Methods

This qualitative pilot study was situated within an interpretive research paradigm, and used an informal, ethnographic interview approach. All practitioners / leaders / managers within each setting were invited to share their thoughts and ideas as the researchers spent time with them throughout the day. An initial opening question was utilized which aimed to open up a conversation about the participants' understanding of the concept of quality. After this opening question, no specific predetermined interview schedule was used, however an "aide memoire" with loose topics and areas of interest was compiled to be referred to should the conversation become stilted (McCann & Clarke, 2005). The interviews generally flowed organically without the need for this prompt. The informal, conversational interview approach facilitated a richer picture than a structured interview might have, particularly regarding participants' experience and understanding of the phenomena of quality in their own terms which would then be useful in designing larger studies with more structured interviews and questionnaires (Denzin, 1989).

Initial Opening Question:

- What does the concept "quality" mean to you and would you choose to work with the concept of quality?

Aide memoir areas of interest:

- The participants' perception of children's experiences of quality within their setting.
- The participants' understanding of what regulators mean by quality.
- How the participant defines quality in their own words.

The interviews were conducted within the participants' familiar settings such as nursery playrooms and nursery gardens. Participants were offered the choice of speaking privately with researchers, however most chose to participate in discussions whilst they worked. This was beneficial for both the researchers and the staff as the immersion in the environment prompted lots of discussion. Opportunities were given to all of the practitioners to share their views without the presence of management to ensure they were not being overly guided by their managers' thoughts. All of the interviews were recorded on a voice recorder following consent from each participant in compliance with BERA ethical guidelines. The discussions were subsequently transcribed in preparation for analysis.

Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis process involved a reading and re-reading of the transcripts in their entirety. This was a reflexive process intended to gain a preliminary sense of the interviews as a whole in relation to the concept of quality (Agar, 1980). Following this, we employed a three-step thematic analysis (e.g. King and Horrocks 2010). The first step involved reading the transcripts and assigning descriptive codes to lines of text using single words and phrases. Next, descriptive codes were grouped together which appeared to share a common meaning and an interpretative code was created to capture the essence of that group. Finally, through an analysis of the interpretative codes, key themes were identified.

Ethical considerations

The research project was conducted in accordance with the BERA ethical guidelines. Before attending the settings, consent was obtained from the relevant Director of Children and Families. Because this research was largely conducted in public, we are aware that participants may have self-censored. We have been careful in our findings section to remove any identifying information when direct quotes from participants are being used. This was a small, exploratory pilot project. Children themselves were not consulted about quality at this stage, nor were parents/families/care givers. We therefore present the findings as a starting point for dialogue and further research rather than as a definitive account of what quality means in the Scottish ELC context.

Findings

Defining quality: a ubiquitous, powerful, but blurry concept for Scottish practitioners

Upon our initial analysis of the data it became clear that across all of the settings, the concept of quality was consistently considered a "big issue." While senior-level staff focused more heavily on the sector as a whole and practitioners focused more on daily practice, their responses demonstrated that quality was a highly impactful concept in ELC and heavily integrated into the daily lexicon of each setting. For example, participants regularly used quality as an adjective attached to everyday vocabulary, for example "*quality environment*." One Deputy Head Teacher encapsulated this at the beginning of our conversation, stating:

"We do work with the concept of quality yes, yes, quality of our observations, quality of our planning, quality of communication. It's the bread and butter of your role, in quality of interactions. We use that word all the time." (Deputy Head Teacher, Primary School with nursery class).

As this quote illustrates, quality was seen by participants as ubiquitous and perhaps even unquestionable. For example, one Senior Early Years Officer explained that quality should influence everything:

> *"Of course! [laughs] do I need to elaborate? Why would you not choose to work with the concept of quality? Quality should influence everything; the environment, our relationships, our pedagogy, our experiences…these things should all be quality."*
>
> (Senior Early Years Officer, Nursery).

As these examples both illustrate, participants consistently expressed a general feeling that quality as a concept is crucial for providing the best experiences and opportunities for children's learning. Each of the research settings appeared to embed this notion throughout their service. For example, most participants discussed the "expectation" of quality from colleagues, parents, children and the wider sector.

Such pervasiveness of the concept of quality and the almost endless attribution of the term to every aspect of early education justifies our research concern and demonstrates the importance of understanding the meanings behind the concept of quality in practice in Scotland. Indeed, over the course of the interviews many participants did begin to unpack and critique the concept of quality. One respondent, for example, argued as the conversation came to a close for quality to be defined within participatory processes of co-construction. Another argued that:

"*Homogenized systems are a concern. Quality cannot be standardized and made the same. A 'one-size- fits-all' cannot work as it has to be understood as specifically related to the people and the community it serves…quality may underpin education and early learning – but it is unique to different spaces and places"* (Nursery owner).

This feeling that quality was subjective and contextualized was echoed by another participant, who asked:

"Who says who is right or wrong? You can't define quality without understanding what is 'good', but 'good' is dependent upon the people you are engaging with…therefore quality cannot be standardized across the whole country." (Head Teacher, Primary School)

As these quotes illustrate, by the end of our conversations, participants tended to shift from their initial stance that quality was obvious, clear, and an essential component of ensuring best practice and the best possible experiences for children. The process of being asked to clarify their ideas and share with a researcher perhaps disrupted the taken-for-granted nature of what quality actually meant.

However, quality remained difficult for participants to specifically define. Many participants moved in and out of ethereal and intangible understandings of quality, and were unable to produce certainty or definitive answers which clearly define quality for them. This suggests that although there is something participants understand as quality, it is amorphous and has blurry edges.

Quality "at risk" in the rapidly changing policy landscape

Participants were often more comfortable discussing how they "do" quality rather than trying to define it. Notably, many participants specifically saw quality as being at risk because of the rapidly changing policy landscape in Scottish early years. In particular, staffing was raised as central aspect of "doing" quality in every setting but also as being at risk. As one participant described, staffing was essential to their vision of quality.

> *"Deeply committed, deeply engaged, and engaging staff who are interested in pursuing their own education, at all different levels. I have maturity in my staff, and experience in my staff, and I have numbers of staff. We are working at a far better ratio than the Care Inspectorate expect. That is fundamental in early years settings. I would plough money into [staffing] in early years settings"*
>
> (Nursery Owner)

As this participant demonstrates, thoughts on doing "quality" through staffing ranged from the need for qualifications as well as structural issues such as staff ratios and consistent, sustainable staffing. Leaders and managers also spoke about the characteristics that might make someone a quality member of staff, with the desire to learn and grow being a key concern. It was important to them that practitioners could take on the values and practice expected or needed for high-quality provision. Additionally, leaders and managers felt that staff should be deeply committed and loving, providing a home-like environment that is responsive to children. Staffing could also be a risk to quality, however. While leaders and managers claimed to value staff members with different strengths and capabilities, some had a very low tipping point for staff deemed "not quality." Participants shared that there are occasions when *"people just need to go"* to raise the quality of the team and that one or two "bad apples" could bring down the quality of an entire ELC setting.

One particular perceived risk to staffing, and therefore to quality, was the early years expansion and subsequent rapid growth of the workforce. There was a consistent finding across leaders and managers that the rollout for the expanded hours, in terms of service models and staffing proposals, was radically at odds with their individual understandings of quality. Two major concerns surrounded staffing, quality, and the expansion. Firstly, the respondents believed there were going to be lower standards for employing new staff; there was a concern for the quality of a *"fast-produced"* workforce. Specifically mentioned were concerns over *"young"* people coming in from school who were early in their journey, and the effect this could have on quality of children's experiences, as in many cases young practitioners would be relied upon to be a "key person" for up to 10 children. The participants' second major concern was that

they believed they would lose quality staff through poor management, especially at the local authority level. One setting estimated they would lose 90% of their staff because of unwanted terms and conditions of new contracts being forced onto existing staff. This led to what leaders saw as a potential two-pronged problem developing as settings will be experiencing considerable changes in staffing and new, untrained staff while simultaneously leaving fewer experienced role models to demonstrate high standards of quality practice. Finally, concern was expressed about the quality of family life in the wake of the expansion; families might find their purpose in life removed if their child began attending nursery full time and might turn to sitting at home drinking or doing drugs.

Discussion: Frobelian principles, quality, and social justice

Accordingly, after confronting the literature on quality directly, and from examining the findings from the data we acknowledged the term quality is used ubiquitously, it has no clear definition that is reciprocated by all, it appears to depend on one's vantage point. Throughout our research we found countless disagreements, tensions and contradictions (Pence & Moss, 1994; Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; Moss, 2013, 2015, 2019). However, after an examination of the Independent Review of ELC (Siraj & Kingston, 2015), the national practice guidance for early years in Scotland (Education Scotland, 2020) and, subsequently, exposing the major premises on which they rest, e.g., high quality trained practitioners enrich the ELC setting; that children are active constructors / producers of their own lives; the value of play and first-hand experiences; and the critical role of the child as part of a family and community (Education Scotland, 2020). We then made connections to Fröbelian principles, which carry with them advantages of clarity. In the space available here it is impossible to do justice to Fröbelian principles, however what has been flagged are the principles that connect with the national guidance (Education, 2020). Consider again the work of Tovey, who argues Fröbelian principles offer both substance and complexity, that is: "freedom with guidance," "unity, connectedness and community," "engaging with nature," "learning through self-activity," "the central importance of play," "creativity and the power of symbols" and "knowledge and nurturing educators" (Tovey, 2020:3). What Tovey (2020) offers here is an opportunity for objective neutrality, where practitioners, regulators and policy makers tease out, these liberating and philosophical principles, resulting in a benchmark for quality. First and foremost, what Fröbel demanded was maximum freedom for the child. In order to enable this freedom, was the highly skilled practitioner who facilitated children's "freedom" with adult "guidance." "Freedom with guidance" defined means that adults do not make assumptions about what children need to know, but children and practitioners are co-constructors of knowledge. The process of understanding /reconceptualizing is through observation. Bruce (2021) reminds us constantly that "Fröbel's approach...was interactionist neither laissez-faire nor using the transmission model of instruction" (Bruce, 2021:66). When the practitioner takes their cue from the child's own relationship with the world, e.g., by learning through self-activity, whether it is through play, or another rich experience, e.g., cooking, the child has their own way of revealing themselves to the sensitive, supportive practitioner. Importantly, for Fröbel, "play was not located in discourses of outcomes or accountability" (Flannery Quinn, 2017:29). Play gave adults an insight into the child's world, if

the practitioner had "intentions" for the play, insight would be lost. One of the respondents, somewhat, tacitly affirmed that in her view, a high-quality setting responds to the community it serves, Fröbel would have agreed to that statement, due to the uniqueness of children and adults, combined with an acknowledgement of the distinctive ways and customs of each setting, he stressed that no two settings could be the same, as all settings should be different, if they are answering to the uniqueness of the child and their family. The setting fits the child and their family, rather than the other way around. This acknowledgement of the differences of each ELC setting was commonly expressed by our respondents. However, for Fröbel, fundamentally, the main philosophical ideas that underpin the setting should remain. Fröbel, celebrated difference and uniqueness, he would have rejected neoliberal ideas of inequitable practices, which involve power, powerlessness and hegemony. In today's climate of closing the "attainment gap," quality in education should not be focused on capital production, rather children should be viewed through a Fröbelian lens, where children's instincts prompt them to explore their world, and sensitive, attuned practitioners support children's interests and learning. In short, what Fröbelian principles offer is educational equity.

Adoption of Frobelian principles does not automatically ensure a socially just nor an equitable lens on quality. For example, Frobelians enthusiastically contributed to colonial projects in New Zealand and elsewhere (Read, 2018; Author, 2020). In New Zealand, infant schools shaped by Frobelian approaches were established in part to address the supposed "moral wilderness" (May, 2015) of indigenous Maori culture, a view that demonstrates that Fröbelian principles have, in some form, been twinned in the past with white European supremacist views. In contemporary times, the UK early years field is grappling in real time with race, racism and other forms of discrimination that affect children, families and practitioners (e.g. Tapestry Online Learning Journal, 2021). As these examples illustrate, if social justice is to be part of the vision for quality, Frobelian principles must be twinned with a process of naming and unpacking prejudices and their implications, and taking action to recognize and remedy injustice.

Our findings did indeed demonstrate examples of how participants reproduced stereotypes and discriminatory discourses while speaking of "just knowing" what quality is. For example, there was ageism in the way young people coming in from school were automatically assumed to be low-quality staff (e.g. Chasteen, Horhota and Crumley-Branyon, 2020). Similarly, participants reproduced discourses about the need for deep commitment, love and responsiveness that, while widely accepted as necessary in early childhood practice (Page, 2018), are strongly gendered (Oksala, 2015). The bulk of this caring profession falls onto women's shoulders, as Scotland's early years workforce is 98% female (Scottish Government, 2019); early years is seen as a natural fit for women because of stereotypes about innate maternal instincts (Darling, 2017). Participants also expressed deficit views, condescension and potentially classism about families (e.g. Inglis *et al.*, 2019), some of whom, presumably being unemployed, were assumed to use the expanded nursery hours to sit at home and turn to drinking and drugs. Finally, there is a silence from the participants about diversity. The Scottish early years workforce, along with being over-representative of women due to gender stereotyping, is also under-representative in terms of attracting and retaining people from ethnic minority

backgrounds and disabled people (Scottish Government, 2019). In our research project, there was no mention from participants about the benefits to quality when settings attract and—crucially—support and retain under-represented staff, nor the varied life experiences and therefore richness those staff could bring to the provision as part of their vision for quality. The amorphous and subjective nature of how participants describe quality, if left unexamined, could therefore in fact serve to replicate discriminatory "folk" beliefs that perpetuate inequalities. Fröbelian principles go some way toward ameliorating problems with quality, but cannot do so on their own.

Conclusion

Ultimately, ideas of quality in ELC are difficult to discern precisely and are therefore, not at all explicit. Policy makers write of quality, but do not define it. A consensus does not exist. Our data revealed that practitioners find themselves concerned about the many contradictions of the various iterations of the word. Such concerns, it would seem, are unavoidable. Quality is not easily defined, despite being a well-used word in the ELC lexicon. As regulators measure, assess and monitor ELC settings using quality indicators it is necessary to provide a definition, or at the very least a benchmark for understanding what is quality in ELC settings. Of critical importance, practitioners, regulators and policy makers must interrogate subjectivities, and challenge assumptions regarding the term. It could be that definitions of quality may be counteractive to understandings, and therefore, we suggest a benchmark may be more useful.

The respondents brought fresh perspectives to bear on old questions and raised new questions. For example, the practitioners expressed that with the implementation of the 1140 hours, ELC was being used as a vehicle primarily to generate and promote the value of a capitalist society, they argued that ideas of quality could be connected to neoliberal ideas. Neoliberal ideas, lie in direct opposition to Fröbelian principles. We have suggested the principles of Friedrich Fröbel could guide practitioners, regulators and policy makers in understandings of quality. Indeed, many Scottish ELC settings already implement Fröbelian principles, with very positive results (Siraj & Kingston, 2015). The overall aim of practitioners, regulators and policy makers, after all, is to offer our children the richest experiences possible in their young years.

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