

QUALITY AND LEADERSHIP *in the Early Years*

Research, Theory and Practice

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1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

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2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
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SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Amy Jarrold
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Indexer: Silvia Benvenuto
Marketing manager: Dilhara Attygalle
Cover designer: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in India at Replika Press Pvt Ltd

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First published 2016

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2015941031

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-0647-1
ISBN 978-1-4739-0648-8 (pbk)

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WHY AN INTEREST IN QUALITY?

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, we consider who has an interest in the quality of early years services and why. We look at how the interest in quality early years services spans the globe. This global interest is reflected in how global organisations advocate the importance of early years services and how individual countries look to invest in quality early years services. We consider that, whether contemplating the interest in quality early years as a global issue or a country-level one, the interest in quality will be shaped by views on the role of early years services. We therefore discuss the relationship between quality early years services and child outcomes and parental employment. The role and purpose of early years services will reflect cultural values around children, childhood and family life. We show that it is important to recognise what shapes understandings of quality early years services in order to recognise that there is no one understanding.

Globally, it seems that it is not possible to talk of early years services without prefixing it with the term quality. Quality is a term commonly used by those with an interest in early years services, but why is it that they are so interested in *quality* early years services above and beyond just early years services? At first, you might think, ‘why wouldn’t you want quality?’ and we would agree that this is true; of course we want quality experiences for children, so quality early years environments are going to be a part of this. However, what we hope to trace in this chapter is how the interest in quality influences how it is understood, how it

is defined and what this means in practice. Quality is not just a desirable feature, it is a political tool, a value-laden term that seeks to shape understandings as to the purpose of early years services and what they should look like. In this chapter, we identify who it is that has an interest in the quality of early years services, from the global to the local. We look at why there is an interest in the early years and how reasons for that interest impact on understandings of quality. We frame the discussion in relation to *modern* and *post-structuralist* perspectives of quality to provide a critical framework for the consideration of what quality is (as discussed in the next chapter).

Who Has an Interest in Quality Early Years Services?

When considering who it is that has an interest in the quality of early years services, it is evident that there are a number of stakeholders: children, parents, practitioners, managers, leaders, local government, national government and supranational organisations (Cottle and Alexander, 2012). These stakeholders represent both individuals, such as the individual child, and groups, such as a global organisation or a community group of parents. At both the individual and collective levels, the reasons for an interest will be motivated by different concerns, beliefs and perspectives and these will have a bearing on the understandings of quality. Equally, the different perspectives can often overlap and interplay with one another, in turn having implications for practice. Through this chapter and into the next, we look at understandings of quality from the perspectives of the range of stakeholders involved. Our starting point is a consideration of the global interest in early years services, before going on to consider the national (UK) perspective, with the next chapter focusing on the views of practitioners, parents and children.

Global Interests

Supranational organisations refer to those organisations that transcend international borders, such as the World Bank, the OECD, Unicef and the European Union. Each of these organisations offers advice and guidance to individual countries on a number of policy areas, not just on early years. The last 20 to 30 years have seen a number of supranational organisations promote the idea that individual countries should not only

provide early years services, but should also invest in them to ensure that they are of a high quality. The extent of the advice and guidance varies as does the extent to which national governments have to act on it, but what we are interested in here is the global messages that are being disseminated pertaining to the importance of quality early years services.

As an organisation, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies its mission as being 'to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world' (OECD, no date). It sees itself as providing a forum for countries to share their approach on numerous policy areas, including early years. Whilst this presents a collaborative approach, organisations such as the OECD have a strong influence on global ideas around policy making. The OECD has published three systematic reviews into early years provision that have considered the question of what quality is – the Starting Strong series (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2015). In addition, the OECD has carried out a number of country reviews that provide comprehensive overviews of early years services in the respective countries. Prior to the publication of the first Starting Strong report, the OECD outlined a commitment to improving the access to and quality of early childhood education and care (Bennett, 2006). The reports involved systematic reviews of countries in terms of the delivery of early years services and the policy structures (and investments) that supported these. The reviews were then able to create an understanding of successful features on a range of areas relating to early years services from investment in services to pedagogy (how practitioners work with children) and parental partnerships (Bennett, 2006).

The interest in early years services by the OECD reflects the dual policy agendas of supporting parental employment and recognising the early years as an important foundation for later lifelong learning. These two rationales for investing in early years services are now characteristic of much early years policy making in many countries. First, the overall supply of early years services will help to ensure that parents who choose to can use early years services to support employment opportunities. This is key to equality agendas as it is primarily about ensuring that women are not hindered in accessing the labour market as a result of family commitments, thus placing them on an equal footing with men. This is not to say that men do not take on family responsibilities, but gender norms still prevail in the managing of work–life balance in many households (Lewis et al., 2008). Equally, we recognise that the provision of early years services is not the only factor in determining access to employment. There will be structural features, such as the cost of care, opening hours, location and so on that will influence the use of services, as well as preferential features, such as opting to stay at home to care for children. Support for parental

employment entwines with the second aspect of investing in early years services: child development. Accepting that early years services support child development, the provision of early years services ensures equality of access to those developmental advantages for all children. Quality is an important feature in both of these agendas. In telling parents that early years services support child development, it acts as a persuasive mechanism for parents to use these services by displacing any concerns they may have about the negative consequences of using them. Demonstrating that there are rigorous checks in place to ensure the highest quality of provision furthers that persuasive agenda and can be seen articulated very clearly in the introduction of inspection regimes (considered further on p. 29). Yet the quality of provision can be in tension with a desire to ensure affordability and we often see this within national policy as governments look to adjust quality requirements in an attempt to make services more affordable.

Further tensions in the dual strands of early years policy are discussed by Moss (2006) in regard to the structure and purpose of early years services. There is a history of some countries developing one set of services to meet the needs of working parents and another set to begin the education journey of young children. In some instances, this has resulted in services being fragmented. This fragmentation not only relates to the purpose of the services, but also other aspects such as funding and qualification requirements. Many countries (including the UK) have now embarked on a journey of aiming to integrate these services. In fact, the OECD advocates the adoption of integrated approaches (Neuman, 2005) and uses the term early childhood education and care (ECEC) to represent how it sees educating and caring for children as being inseparable in understandings and constructions of early years services. As such, care and education are co-located both in relation to the physical provision of services and the philosophical thinking behind services. Mahon and McBride (2009) discuss how the OECD acts as a powerful purveyor of knowledge. Reviews such as the four Starting Strong reports synthesise what is happening in early years services around the world and disseminate knowledge on what they identify as good practice. The construction of knowledge is important as it creates a set of truths around best practice (something that we will return to later). What Mahon and McBride raise is the powerful force of supranational organisations in shaping policy agendas. The degree of influence will obviously vary according to the findings of the particular report, but in the UK Starting Strong has had a formidable influence.

In the UK, the National Childcare Strategy, first introduced in 1998 under the Green Paper Meeting the Childcare Challenge (DfEE, 1998),

has seen moves towards creating a more integrated approach. The Green Paper repeatedly refers to ‘integrated early education and childcare’ services. At times, **‘educare’** has been used as shorthand to represent the notion that early years services are about both education and care. Since 1998, there have been various initiatives to continue the work of integrating care and education: early years and childcare services now being the responsibility of the same Ministry (the Department for Education); the creation of one inspection framework where previously there had been separate care and education inspection regimes; and the development of a single curriculum: the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). These developments in early years policy in England (with other parts of the UK adopting similar patterns, see Selbie et al., 2015 and Wincott, 2004) represent how there have been a number of structural changes to formulate a more integrated approach. However, changes in some structural features only seek to highlight where there are still differences, such as early years education being a free entitlement and childcare being subsidised. Policy developments in the UK have suggested that care and education have not always been regarded as equal in the emphasis of policy. In 2013, concerns were raised that the *More Great Childcare* document (DfE, 2013), published under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, privileged affordability and availability over quality, training and experience (Calder et al., 2013; Neville, 2013; Ransom, 2013). Whilst early years policy looks to present a focus (albeit with a different emphasis) on care and education, we have to ask whether it is possible to have this dual focus and what it means for the delivery of services. The dual focus of early years policy will take on different meanings for each of the stakeholders and even then there will be variation in interpretations, as we discuss in the next chapter – importantly, as a leader, do you see yourself as leading a care service, an education service or an educare service?

European Interests

The European Union (EU) represents another example of an organisation that has acknowledged the dual role of early years services. Initially focused on economic co-operation, the EU is now concerned with the socio-economics of member states. The EU takes on a slightly different role to the OECD as it is able to create law and treaties that individual countries are expected to ratify (or in some cases are able to opt out of). Again, the EU has been influential in terms of early years policy. Where once it focused on the quantity of places (due to its role in supporting parental employment), it is now increasingly focused on the quality of

provision (Campbell-Barr and Nygård, 2014). Arguably, the shift of focus represents a progression in how early years services are framed, the former quantitative exercise being about parental employment, the latter more focused on child development. The shift in emphasis could be taken as evidence that early years policy in the EU (and the UK) may still be evolving. However, whilst the EU has a role in shaping national policy its influence only extends so far, as is evident in differences in how individual countries structure and fund early years services. These differences will be a result of the many different views on the relevance of quality early years provision in different countries.

Why the Interest in Quality Early Years Services?

The investment by national governments into early years services represents a **social investment** strategy. Social investment represents the economic monies spent by governments (and charitable organisations in some instances) to achieve predetermined economic and social goals. We have already outlined the dual aims of early years policy and to some extent they represent the economic and social goals that governments are looking to achieve. Yet we return to the idea of why *quality* early years services and not just early years services. To focus on just the provision of services as a quantitative exercise to increase the number of places available would support the objectives around parental employment, as can be identified in EU policy making historically. However, there is now a clear focus from the EU and other supranational organisations on quality. This focus on quality represents a social investment strategy that is interested in the economic and social advantages that investing in the early years can offer.

The evidence base for the social advantages of quality early years provision draws on psychology-based studies. Psychology has provided a way to understand child development, classifying and normalising what is to be expected of a child (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Initial studies focused on the potential negative impacts of non-maternal care (Fenech, 2011). Historical constructions of maternal care as the best form of care, largely drawing on attachment theories, started to look out of date as mothers began to combine work and family life. Research studies began to consider whether time in childcare could have any negative consequences for children. Studies such as that of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) explored child development

in relation to the hours spent in care. The NICHD study is important as it started the process of establishing that it was not just the time spent in care that was important, but also the quality of care provided. Over time, research studies considering the benefits of early years services were undertaken and evaluated (Fenech, 2011). The research has now developed to a stage where quality early years services are accepted, without question, as offering a sound social investment in child development.

The social advantages interplay with economic ones to create an understanding whereby early years provision is seen as being good socially, it supports children's development, but this is also good economically. The economic advantages of having more people in work and paying taxes can be accepted when considering the relationship to maternal employment that we discussed earlier, but the economic advantages of investing in children need a bit more consideration. Investing in early years services is regarded as an investment in the future, whereby children who do well developmentally will grow up to be successful adults who are less likely to be dependent on the state. In particular, the socio-economic perspective of early years services represents an equality driver, whereby those from disadvantaged backgrounds have the most to gain from good quality early years services, both in relation to their development and in terms of reduced economic spending on them in the future – something widely advocated by both the OECD and the EU.

The socio-economic perspective of early years services can be understood in relation to **human capital theory**. Human capital theory has become a persuasive economic argument for investing in early years services. Framed by notions of a global knowledge economy, investing in one's knowledge and skills is seen to be advantageous at the individual level as those with the most knowledge will arguably get higher economic returns when they enter the labour market, but equally, at a country level, having a knowledgeable workforce will better position a country to compete in global markets in the future. Early developments of human capital theory did not discuss early years services, but more recently economists have increasingly advocated an investment in early years as an investment in the foundations of an individual's lifelong learning (Campbell-Barr, 2012). The economist and Nobel Prize winner James Heckman has played a key role in promoting the socio-economic advantages of early years provision. Heckman's work has indicated that there is more to gain from investments in early years services than from investments in any other stage of education, at any other point in the life course. On the one hand an investment in the young has more to gain as it has more time in which to grow to fruition, but on the other, it is also that 'learning begets learning and skills acquired early on make

later learning easier' (Heckman, 2000: 4). Framed in relation to lifelong learning agendas, early years provision is thus seen to create the foundations for later learning.

However, Heckman has cautioned policy makers in the interpretations that they make when formulating an understanding of value from early years services. Investments in early years services should reflect an investment in all forms of knowledge, but the concern is that what is increasingly being valued are cognitive skills, and other skills become hidden or not considered important (see Heckman, 2000). When looking at definitions of human capital theory from supranational organisations, it is evident that they identify with notions of a broad range of knowledge and skills, but the extent to which this translates into national policy is questionable:

Human capital is defined by the OECD as the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being. (Keely, 2008: 29)

Human Capital, understood broadly in terms of skills, both cognitive and noncognitive, as well as capabilities, such as health or social functioning, is one of the foremost determinants of welfare. (Freidman and Sturdy, 2011: 51)

It is important to recognise that investments in human capital are framed by understandings of a global knowledge economy, whereby knowledge is regarded as key to economic competitiveness. The economic focus on human capital means that there is an interest in the economic savings that can be made for both the individual and society through investing in early years services. Influential studies on human capital and early years provision include the Perry Preschool Programme (High Scope), the Abecedarian and the Chicago Child Parent Centres. Famously, they have created a perception that for every one dollar invested, seven can be saved (Campbell-Barr, 2012). However, they have been criticised due to their small sample sizes, for the early years interventions being targeted at specific sections of the population rather than being universal, and with the studies based in America there are questions as to their applicability in other contexts (Campbell-Barr, 2012; Penn, 2010).

More recently, the UK has developed a longitudinal research project on the benefits of early years services: the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project. Following more than 3000 children from the age of 3 years, it has tracked their developmental and academic attainment. The project considered children's attendance (and non-attendance)

at various pre-school environments to explore associations between features of practice and child outcomes. In 2014, findings were published on the GCSE results of those in the study, demonstrating lasting effects of quality pre-school on maths and English grades (Sammons et al., 2014). Whilst a value-for-money assessment was not an original objective of the study, a sub-study (Catton et al., 2014) conducted an economic analysis of the savings that could be made to the Exchequer. The economic analysis estimated that there was a benefit of around £26,000 for individuals and £36,000 for households, resulting in a benefit of approximately £16,000 per household for the Exchequer. When comparing high and low levels of quality, a difference of around £12,000 for individuals was identified (Sylva et al., 2014: 19–20). The economic benefits are based on GCSE performance and predicted individual incomes, so the authors (Catton et al., 2014) do note caution in interpreting the findings.

Hegemonic Views of Early Years Services

We do not question the notion that quality early years services offer value, but what we would query is how that sense of value is determined. Whilst we welcome the investment in early years services by governments and the support from supranational organisations to focus on the quality of provision, we have concerns around the hegemonic view of early years services in terms of the assumptions of quality and effective leadership that underpin the activity. What the examples of the OECD and the EU represent is not only a global interest in the quality of early years services, but also the concept of a set of shared understandings around early years services and how they might be led. A hegemonic approach (whereby there is one global view of early years services) neglects to consider the local in the provision of early years services. By the local we are not just thinking about national governments, rather we are also thinking about the process by which national governments interpret global views on early years services and how these are then disseminated to and implemented by local practitioners. In other words, what does all of the above mean for a nursery in a city such as Plymouth or a rural location such as Dartmoor?

Whilst there is a filtering process whereby national governments will make sense of supranational ideas and local practitioners will make sense of national policy, it is worth reflecting on the privileging of developed (western) countries' perspectives. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) consider, it is Anglo-American ideas that are heard across the world, whilst Penn (2010) refers to the Global South and Carter Dillon (2013) to the Euro-centric. The concern is that whilst there is a global interest in early years

services, the knowledge production around quality is not shaped equally by all areas of the world. Often, those countries that are still developing their early years provision are encouraged to adopt approaches that have been demonstrated to 'work' in other countries. However, if we take the example of early years services providing the foundations for lifelong learning in regard to human capital theory, is the knowledge that is required in the UK going to be the same as that required in a country such as the Gambia? Carter Dillon (2013) talks of observing an early years class in the Gambia where children were learning phonics underpinned by English approaches, including using references such as T-T-T-Tennis that may not be culturally appropriate. Penn (2010) also discusses the cultural sensitivities of organisations, such as the World Bank developing a human capital calculator for countries to predict the rate of return of investing in the early years. Where is there a consideration of things such as race and class or other inequalities such as child mortality?

De Sousa Santos is a sociology professor who has questioned the influence of supranational organisations and whether there is in fact a need to think about globalisation in the plural (globalisations) in order to recognise that one global view might be misplaced. It is not just that the supranational can be misplaced in the local, but also that it is likely that it is the local context that will give rise to the solutions needed as a society (Dalea and Robertson, 2004). Applying this to human capital perspectives of early years services questions the relevance (or even the possibility) of having a one-size-fits-all approach, as seems to be evident in the thinking of supranational organisations. Consider this just in regard to men and women, particularly in countries where gender equality is underdeveloped: will men and women require the same skill set to secure their future economic success? Further, there is the question of what the influence of supranational organisations hides, of what is not seen and acknowledged in approaches to early years services.

We feel that the influence of supranational organisations has been important for raising the profile of early years services. However, rather than seeking a hegemonic approach to quality and the leading of that quality in early years services, we believe that there is strength to be drawn in the differences that occur between countries and even early years providers within countries. Global discussions are good as they open up alternative ways of looking at things (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) and allow us to see other possibilities. As Penn (2011b) has argued, international perspectives can limit parochialism and help to ascertain why it is that there is a particular approach or understanding. The process of looking at something different is what helps to develop our own practice, whether that is in terms of national policy or in individual settings; without difference we

may become complacent with our own parochialism and thereby run the risk of becoming irrelevant and out of touch very quickly.

Cultural Interpretations of Early Years Services

In recognition of the importance of global variations, it is evident that definitions of quality early years services need to reflect cultural values around the intended goals for investing in early years services (often developmental) of different countries (Rosenthal, 2003). National quality assessment tools are often about assessing quality with regards to the desired, culturally determined goals and expectations of early years services (Moyle et al., 2002). Thus, whilst supranational organisations will seek to offer advice and guidance on early years policy, that advice and guidance will interplay with cultural values and socio-political philosophies. Some of the features will be shaped by socio-cultural views on children, childhood and families. For example, the change in understandings of women's role, whereby increasingly women combine paid employment with family life in many countries, has informed a shift in views around early years services (albeit that policy often still assumes nuclear families headed by a male). Cultural understandings also interplay with the socio-economics of a country – are there sufficient funds to invest in early years services? Are there particular economic difficulties (such as child poverty or serious national deficit) that a country is looking to address? All of these considerations will interact with the history of a country and events that have taken place. There are therefore a number of interweaving factors that will combine to create a common set of desirable outcomes and these outcomes will shape understandings of quality (Penn, 2011b). Each country will therefore have a set of ideas about the role of early years services, albeit one that will have a global turn.

The social, economic, political and cultural features of a country will also interplay with theoretical developments. As Rosenthal (2003) has outlined, often understandings of goals and outcomes in the early years are shaped by ideas of child development and developmentally appropriate practice. Psychological theories of child development have been influential in shaping not only understandings of children and childhood, but also the services that are provided for them. The influence of child development theories within the equality agendas that have been outlined in relation to the social investment justification for investing in early years services put forward by supranational organisations is evident. There is an underpinning philosophy that all children should be at a predetermined stage at any one point in their lives (Rosenthal, 2003). Poverty and

social disadvantage are thus regarded as problematic as some children have not reached the culturally prescribed stages and need additional support to bring them into line with their peers. Investment in early years services therefore becomes about investing in children in order to limit differences in children's development, irrespective of their socio-economic status, thereby creating a stable forward trajectory that can be used for economic planning.

Regarding early years as a social investment strategy says a lot about how a society values its children. Under human capital theory, children are valued on the basis of what they will become – educated and economically active adults. Childhood therefore becomes a path to adulthood rather than an important stage in its own right. There are also implications for practice as quality practice is shaped by what it takes for a child to do well and how to get them there. In England, doing well is defined as being ready to take on the challenges of school and to achieve high academic success and this is clearly seen in the debates on school readiness. Numerous studies have explored how practitioners feel burdened by top-down bureaucratic expectations of measuring and assessing children's development (Adams et al., 2004; Coleyshaw et al., 2012; Cottle and Alexander, 2012). So if practitioners feel pressured over expectations around child development and policy makers do not recognise the importance of childhood as a current state rather than just a path to adulthood, why assess children's development? The appeal of developmental stages is that there is a sense that they can be reduced to a set of pre-determined criteria – a set of measures. These measures can be used to assess the quality of provision in relation to the desired outcomes. Measures are important as they are seen as a set of objective and reliable features that can be assessed in order to determine both outcomes and quality, but this is not to say that they are not problematic.

Modernist Approaches to Quality

Modernity reflects a period in history, but also a way of thinking that emerged at the time and which has had a lasting legacy (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Although there are disputes as to when modernity started – the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth century (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) – modernity reflects the privileging of a rational, objective, empirical (scientific) view of the world. The focus is on creating a knowable world, grounded in scientific evidence. Bernstein (1996) discusses the development of statistics in history; statistics enabled the ability to count those who do not fit the norm and to look at ways of 'fixing' them.

Within Anglo-American cultures, understandings of appropriate stages of development are shaped by middle-class norms as to 'normal' development (see Rosenthal, 2003). In the case of early years provision, children are assessed against normal rates of child development and the fixing becomes about looking at quality in relation to settings that can achieve the desired outcomes. But then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – as particular features are identified as being good for child development, there are attempts to reinforce them. Developmental norms become about prescription, rather than description (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). If X will lead to Y, more evidence is collated to support this rather than to stop and question the evidence. For example, the qualifications of those working in the early years will have an influence on the quality of provision, but if you stop to think about this in more detail, what is it about the qualifications that makes the difference – writing essays, learning about theory, reflecting on practice or being dedicated to study?

In favouring scientific rationality, assessments of quality become a quantitative exercise, whereby quality and child outcomes are reduced to a set of measures in order to consider any correlations. Early years provision becomes a site for producing predetermined (educational) outcomes through the application of technical practices (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Quantitative approaches are favoured as they are regarded as objective and reliable (Campbell-Barr et al., 2011). In particular, if we return to the studies that informed human capital perspectives on early years services (pp. 17–18), we can see how they are symbolic of what is often regarded as the gold standard of research. They are quantitative and use randomised controlled trials (Hodkinson, 2004). Such approaches are upheld in research as being both rigorous and reliable. The data provides a view of 'what works' in policy making (Ball, 2008).

Mathers et al. (2012) suggest that assessments of quality can be understood in relation to process and **structural quality**, whilst also acknowledging that these have a relationship to child outcomes. **Process quality** is about the child's experience (e.g. interactions with staff), whilst structural quality is about features such as group size and ratios. The former is accepted as being harder to assess than the latter as it requires in-depth observation and skilled analysis that looks widely rather than narrowly at the evidence. In a modernist world, observations are reduced to measurable indicators that are simpler to apply and offer comparative study and the opportunity to chart progression. Mathers et al. (2012) discuss the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), which is a global quality assessment tool that is widely used in research. Trained observers assess quality by considering a series of aspects about the early years practice being observed. Each aspect has a seven-point scale with

a statement against each point. If the observer agrees with the first statement, they move on to the next; if they agree again, they move on until they reach a point where they feel they cannot move up the scale any further, thus providing the score. These scores can then be used to look for relationships with child outcomes, for example.

One difficulty with the modernist approach is that it can start to hide the original problem. Society is looking to combat social inequalities to improve the life chances of children, but this means that children have become a project to get 'right'. Children reflect wider social problems with childhood being the period of time when society needs to get things 'right' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Modernist approaches or quantifiable indicators not only enable society to identify those children who need additional support, they also allow us to track whether the support is working. Practice becomes technocratic as practitioners internalise knowledge of quality and enact what they believe is good for children (Urban, 2008), partly because research is reduced to measures and assessment and this is what guides practice, but also because power dynamics privilege the knowledge that reflects the 'right' outcomes.

Through the construction of an evidence base, a series of discourses are formed that shape understandings of quality. Discourses represent a way of viewing, thinking and speaking about the social world and seek to normalise behaviour (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Discourses conceal assumptions and render political objectives and ideologies invisible as dominant ideas become the taken-for-granted way of thinking (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). For example, quality is often considered in relation to staffing, the involvement of parents, group size, interactions, the nature of the premises, health and safety, the curriculum and so on as these are often features in both research and quality assessments (see Melhuish, 2004). However, consider these features of quality as a discursive construction and questions arise as to why these features have been privileged over others. Is it just that such features uphold the desired (normative) way of thinking about the world? In considering understandings of quality in relation to discourse, it highlights that there is a power dynamic in the process of which discourses become dominant over others, thereby privileging some knowledge over other knowledge. Policy makers will privilege particular ways of thinking about the world and can use research to support their ideologies (Urban, 2008). Modernist approaches come with their own cultural values and principles. Through considering them as discursive constructs, it is possible to analyse how they reflect what it is that a particular culture has constructed as being important. If we return to the example of ECERS, the revised version of the scale (ECERS-R) was used by Sylva et al. (2004) in the EPPE study. The scale was supplemented

during the course of the longitudinal project by the development of ECERS-E (Sylva et al., 2010) to encompass additional assessments for Literacy, Maths, Science and Environments and Diversity. In incorporating these assessments and in considering the recent value-for-money assessments that we discussed earlier, it tells us a great deal about the cultural values around what are deemed to be important features of early years practice.

Modernist approaches to assessing quality help to inform our understandings of quality, but it is important to be aware of what is falling between the gaps of the measurements (what detail might be missing) and who it is that determines what is measured. If we return to the idea of hegemonic ways of thinking about early years services, we can in fact see that there are some collective assumptions about children and child development that are guiding the development of services. They are presented as a series of truths – for example, if quality early years services are provided, children will go on to be successful adults. Whilst we do not dispute the positive differences that early years services can make in children's lives, we would like to suggest that human capital theory and research such as EPPE is just one way of thinking about quality.

Post-structuralist Approaches to Quality

Post-structuralism allows us to question the supposed certainty and objectivity that have been presented by modern approaches. Post-structuralism is often used interchangeably with post-modernism, but post-modernism tends to be used as an umbrella term for a number of theories that developed in response to a dissatisfaction with modernist approaches. Our focus on post-structuralism is intentional as it emphasises the notion of deconstructing the supposed certainty of the knowledge that is presented to us. Post-structuralist approaches challenge the construction that there is absolute knowledge (Pound, 2011) – it deconstructs what is believed to be a given reality, asking questions of knowledge and commonly held truths in order to problematise how (in this instance) quality has been constructed. If you view modernity as a series of building blocks that enable us to build up quality early years provision, post-structuralism is the idea that there is more than one way to connect the building blocks. As a leader, you are able to take different building blocks and use them to construct a version of quality that is meaningful to your context. You might have particular features that you want to use to create a firm foundation on which to place your other building blocks or you might feel that your building blocks change their construction for each group of children that you

work with. Post-structuralism encourages you to think not only about how you want to construct your building blocks, but also to think about why.

If we return to the idea of discourse, post-structuralist approaches enable us to deconstruct the supposed truth of the dominant ways of thinking about early years practice. We have already considered that there is a power dynamic involved in the discursive production of quality. In investing in early years services, governments will work hard to secure their investment and construct a correct way of thinking about early years provision (Osgood, 2006). As MacNaughton (2005) has outlined, there are some deeply ingrained ways of thinking about early years practice and their familiarity can make them feel right. For example, in Chapter 5 we explore some of the ways early years services are described, such as ‘child centred’, and suggest that the common use of such terminology means that there is often no attempt to think about where the terminology has come from or what it really means. Post-structuralist approaches ask us to be aware of the power dynamics involved in constructing such terminology, but also to deconstruct them. As outlined at the start of this chapter, quality is frequently used as a prefix to early years, but rarely is there a consideration of what has shaped and informed understandings of quality. In taking apart the building blocks, it is possible to consider what has fallen between the gaps of the discursive production of early years services, but also how it is that they have been put together.



Reflection Point

Consider why it is that you feel early years services are important. Is it about care, education or educare? Can you identify where these ideas have come from: who or what has shaped them? Do you identify with the policy objectives of supranational organisations or national governments, or is there something about your local context that you feel is important?

In the next chapter, we continue to look at the construction of discursive truths around the quality of early years services, but we do so critically. Building on the idea of post-modernism, we will present some of the cracks that are present in understandings of quality, whilst also looking at how research on practitioners, parents and children can provide us with alternative ways of thinking about quality in the early years.

Chapter Summary

- Quality early years provision is a global issue.
 - Quality early years provision supports parental employment and child development.
 - Understandings of quality are shaped by how the purpose of early years services is constructed.
 - Understandings of the purpose of early years services have been shaped by child development and human capital theories that are largely derived from the developed world.
 - Quality needs to account for the local.
 - Post-structuralism asks who has constructed the knowledge on quality early years services and why.
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Further Reading

Heckman, J. (2000) *Invest in the Very Young*. Chicago, IL: Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies. Available at: www.montanakidscount.com/fileaccess/getfile/20.pdf (accessed 15 October 2015)

This is a short paper that provides an overview of the economic debates around the provision of early years services.

Urban, M. (2008) 'Dealing with uncertainty: challenges and possibilities for the early childhood profession', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16 (2): 135–52.

This article explores much of what we have outlined in this chapter regarding dominant discourses and how they become ingrained in understandings of early years services, particularly in regard to what it means to be a professional working in the early years. This reading is therefore helpful in developing your thinking for this and later chapters.