

Expanding the Current Definition of Program Quality: Exploring Parents' Notions of What Makes a Good Program

Kyoung Jin Kim¹⁾

Arkansas State University

Abstract

In this article, I explored contemporary realities that pertain to assessing programs, and quality in early childhood education. Parents have ongoing demands for early childhood programs for their children, and they are the decision-makers in selecting programs, so their perceptions of program quality are critical to service providers. The purpose of this study is to listen to the voices of parents as they discussed "how they view a good early childhood program." I conducted interviews with 30 parents who had children aged 3-5 for initial interviews and 10 parents for in-depth interviews in central Illinois in the U.S. Parents had mixed opinions about the process factors and the structural factors of quality. Discussions of quality should focus not only on children's outcomes but also on what parents really want in a program. This article suggests that a system to accommodate the participants' different practices and underlying philosophies and contexts is needed in order to represent the multiple perspectives on program quality.

Keywords : parent, good program, program quality

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ kkim37@gmail.com

Introduction

Research on child care issues has expanded rapidly in the past few years (Ceglowski, 2004). Most research on quality has been conducted by experts who believe that quality can be defined “objectively” (Cryer & Phillipsen, 1997; Kontos & Stevens, 1985) and that universal ideas of quality can be applied to a wide range of programs (Larner & Phillips, 1994). These scholars have tried to define criteria with measurable, quantifiable, and observable variables (Fiene, 1992; Lee, 2003; Liang, 2001). This includes classroom characteristics, such as: teacher/student ratios and space per child; teachers’ characteristics such as education levels, ages, and wages; and center characteristics such as total enrollment, number of daily hours open, and the director’s education, wages, and years of experience (Cryer, 2003). These criteria have been viewed in the literature as the “gold standard” of quality (Lee, 2003), and they may well be important.

Quality is currently defined by the most distal group, namely: members of federal and state agencies, professors, and experts, who are vested with power and authority and have the most influence in the field (Ceglowski, 1998). Those who make policy and quality standards are members of professional groups who are most distant from children’s lives and who do not spend a great deal of time with younger children. Policies and quality standards, however, will necessarily be implemented and interpreted in local practices in different ways.

The prevailing definition of program quality from professionals is important, but it is only one of several perspectives to consider. Since what makes a good program is based on the values of people operating from within a range of different perspectives, it is essential that the interests of all stakeholders are brought within any approach. Local stakeholders who are with children all the time and who work with young children interpret policies and standards in terms of their own practices and experience.

Parents must be viewed as responsible decision-makers who select programs initially and can monitor quality and take action if they are not satisfied (Cryer et al., 2002). Parents have an ongoing demand for early childhood programs for their children, and they are the decision-makers in selecting programs, so their perceptions of program quality are critical to service providers.

As Jun (2006) has argued, parents from various communities should be invited to join

experts in the ongoing process of negotiating definitions of quality. Their viewpoints should be included in the landscape of early childhood education and care (Ceglowski, 2004). After these voices have been included and an inclusive definition of early childhood education program quality has been reached, the researchers in the field can attend to the task of increasing the level of quality in early childhood education programs (Knopf, 2004).

Parents' Perceptions of Quality

Some few research studies were conducted across the country regarding parents' perceptions of quality programs. Liu, Yeung, and Farmer (2001) studied Australian parents to rate the importance of educational settings and teachers' qualifications. Parents thought educationally qualified teachers would provide appropriate home-like atmospheres at school.

Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, and Alldred (2004) interviewed mothers in England to discover mothers' beliefs and values about the important qualities of child care. Middle class White and African-Caribbean women agreed that quality child care would meet both family's needs as well as children's needs.

Mensing, French, Fuller, and Kagan (2000) interviewed seven mothers from different ethnic and educational backgrounds. They reported that trust in the caregiver, transportation, convenience, and cost were the most important requirements in selecting programs.

Jun (2006) conducted research to understand Anglo middle-class parents' and Hispanic working-class parents' perceptions of quality using video-cued focus group interviews. Jun showed that even though both groups shared some similar preferences, the assumptions behind those preferences differed. For example, middle-class parents advocated for a low student/teacher ratio because it would allow each child to get individualized attention from teachers, which parents saw as emotionally and academically beneficial. In contrast, working-class parents valued a low student/teacher ratio because it would prevent accidents due to children's hyperactivity.

Three studies show divergent perspectives on quality programs among stakeholders. Mooney and Munton's (1998) study involved 89 participants. The most frequently mentioned themes were affordability and accessibility of day care, continuity of care, flexibility, training

and qualifications of day care workers, working conditions for day-care professionals, the social status of child care in the relevant culture, education and curriculum, parents and providers working in partnership, and assessing and enhancing quality. This research also revealed a variety of opinions across different stakeholders. Accessibility and affordability were identified as important factors by most groups. There was less consensus, however, within and between groups regarding the need for training, parent/caregiver partnerships, and meeting children's needs.

Ceglowski (2004) studied the quality of child care in Minnesota to define the indicators of quality child care from a variety of Minnesota stakeholder perspectives and to develop a state of the art research design that would utilize existing data and measures of quality child care based on interview data gathered from various stakeholders. Communicating with parents, professionalism, and a caring stable provider were named by parents. They also indicated that culturally responsive care, accreditation, and safety and nutrition were important factors for high-quality child care programs.

Harrist, Thompson, and Norris (2007) examined multiple stakeholders' perspectives regarding the definition of quality child care and how child care can be improved, using focus groups. The focus groups were owners/directors, parents, teachers, policy makers, and social service providers. The results revealed that the following were consistently discussed across all participants: (a) communication and rapport, (b) caregiver practices, (c) staff characteristics, (d) finances and resources, (e) visibility and involvement, and (f) professionalism. Although there were six main commonalities across stakeholders, there were quite a number of differences found. Parents considered caregiver practices as important. Teachers focused on teachers' nurturing attitudes and implementation of appropriate curricula. Policy makers and social service providers highlighted the importance of staff characteristics and visibility and parent involvement.

The majority of researches have focused on the structural and process features of programs that have been identified by researchers as significant components of quality (Harrist, Thompson, & Norris, 2007). They used a standardized measure of quality to see a relationship between structural and process quality. They asked parents to assess the degree to which parents valued specific aspects of child care, mostly using ECERS (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997). Parents were not asked specifically how they would define quality which might differ from

researchers' views. In this research, I attempted to include diverse perspectives and obtain a wide range of views on good programs.

Methods

Participants

I conducted initial interviews with 30 parents in central Illinois. I considered parents' demographic variables such as ethnicity, program affiliation, education, socio-economic level, and number of children as well as program types. All parent participants had children in one of four different types of programs: public schools, private schools, university laboratory schools, and non-profit schools. I included these four kinds of programs in the study because they represented basic models of early childhood programs in which most children were enrolled.

Table 1. *Demographics for Initial Parent Interviews*

Variables	Public (N=5)	Private (N=5)	University (N=8)	Non-profit (N=12)
Ethnicity				
European American	3	5	6	9
Others	2	0	2	3
Highest Education Level				
Associate's Degree	2	0	1	2
Bachelor's Degree	1	1	2	4
Master's or Higher	2	4	5	6
Annual Family Income				
Low	2	0	3	2
Middle	1	2	4	7
High	0	3	1	3

Table 2. *Demographics for In-depth Parent Interviews*

Variables	Public (N=2)	Private (N=1)	University (N=3)	Non-profit (N=4)
Ethnicity				
European American	1	1	2	3
Others	1	0	1	1
Highest Education Level				
Associate's Degree	0	0	0	0
Bachelor's Degree	0	0	0	1
Master's or Higher	2	1	3	3
Annual Family Income				
Low	1	0	1	0
Middle	1	0	1	3
High	0	1	1	1

In the town where this research was conducted, there were two At-Risk programs and three Head Start sites. Since it is a University town, there were three university-affiliated preschools. Most non-profit preschools were operated by churches. For-profit centers, franchises, and privately owned programs were included in the private preschool category. Interview participants were dominated by university-lab and non-profit preschool parents; their response rate for agreeing to an interview was higher than the other three groups.

From those 30 initial interviews, I selected 10 parents for in-depth interviews. I considered participants' levels of experience based on the first interviews.

Data Collection

I conducted the interviews in the spring of 2008. I obtained contact information-including addresses, phone numbers, web addresses, and program descriptions-from a range of sources,

including Google and the Yellow Pages, referrals from other teachers and parents, and my own working experience as a University supervisor. By telephone, e-mail, or visits, I contacted the principals or directors of 23 local programs, i.e., two At-Risk programs, three Head Start sites, eight private preschools, three university-affiliated preschools, and seven non-profit programs — to explain the research project and to ask whether they were interested in the project. I attempted to interview a comparable number of parents from each program type. However, the majority of parent volunteers had children in non-profit programs. I interviewed at least one participant from each program type. Selecting the parents for second interviews was a sensitive task, as not all participants were equally good informants. Selection criteria were demographics, program affiliation, a willingness to share additional insights about their experiences, and strong opinions about what makes a good program.

Interview

Initial interviews lasted forty-five minutes to one hour. The purposes of the initial interviews were (a) to understand better regarding their previous experiences and current program satisfaction, (b) to explore parents' definitions of a good teacher, and (c) to understand their definitions of what makes a good program and the reasons for good-program indicators' importance. The interview questions covered previous experience and current program satisfaction, how participants viewed a "good teacher" and a "good program."

In-depth interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The purposes of the in-depth interviews were to explore more deeply the following: (a) parents' values and beliefs regarding early childhood education, (b) their concerns about what makes a program good, and (c) parents' voices regarding program quality. Other questions were asked, as needed, to probe more deeply into a topic or to get more details.

During interviews, building trusting relationships with participants is important. I considered it important to assure the participants that my study did not seek to evaluate their current programs, but to discover and understand their perspectives. To build rapport with participants, I briefly explained my background and why I became interested in this topic. They showed strong interest in my research and most of them participated very actively.

Data Analysis

After interviews were completed, findings from the interview results were summarized. My procedure followed Creswell's (2002) suggestions. I organized and documented data by transcribing and sorting or arranging it, and then read through the data "to obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning" (p. 191). I did purposeful sampling for the interviews and involved participants from diverse backgrounds and with diverse perspectives. To further establish credibility, I did member checks by frequently sharing what I had learned with interviewees and by referring to interviewees' first interview responses when conducting the second set of interviews.

Results

In this section, I first present results followed by program selection, what makes a good teacher, and what makes a good program, then I describe each program parents' responses further. I also describe their responses regarding a better program later. Note that due to the small number of participants, I do not generalize their responses to represent all the parents.

Program Selection

When parents select a program, they must first think about what values and expectations they have. Parents also have to consider many factors, including affordability, availability, and accessibility. Within their specific contexts, parents try to locate the best possible choice for their child. Sometimes selection of a program is a negotiation between parents' values and their socioeconomic condition, or is based on an individual child's characteristics. The selection may compromise on quality (Mooney & Munton, 1998).

When parents select a program, they usually had received many recommendations from others and those recommendations later influenced actual decision-making. Reputation along with these referrals are very influential in selecting a program, but parents' final decisions often depend on perceiving a match between their values and their child's characteristics on

the one hand, and what they observe in a program while on a site visit on the other.

Parents first looked at structural factors, based on recommendations and their first site visit. Such factors are more easily observable than process factors. Satisfied with structural factors, they began to think about children's experience in the classroom which is related to process factors.

What Makes a Good Teacher

In parents' definitions of a good program, teachers occupied the central position. Parents viewed teachers as playing a critical role in children's development and, indeed, in their lives. Eighteen parents believed that caring and attention-aspects of mothering-were fundamental qualifications of teachers working with young children.

I want my child's teacher to be warm, welcoming, inviting, nurturing, showing affection and giving hugs, saying "I love you" to my child. She needs to be very patient and be attentive to my child's comments. (P2)

Fourteen parents thought teachers who had previous working experience and an early childhood education degree would be likely to provide high-quality instruction.

I like a teacher who has previous teaching experience with this age group. Having at least a bachelor's degree is showing how they well trained. I think it helps them to learn and have a broader scope of knowledge of children's development and learning. (P11)

Parents said that teachers with a teacher education background are knowledgeable about children's development. They are better prepared than teachers without this background.

Highly educated parents wanted their teachers to have at least a bachelor's degree, or even a master's degree. Public school parents believed that a special education degree was needed.

Sixteen parents thought a good teacher interacts effectively and clearly with children and parents. They also wanted to know about not only children's developmental benchmarks, but also about their daily lives in their schools. Willingness to communicate openly with parents was a key aspect for parents. Five parents addressed their dissatisfaction about

communication with teachers.

I want to hear about my child on a daily basis. Not only informal conversation; sometimes verbalizing children's development with some benchmarks is needed. (P27)

What Makes a Good Program

Parents' program selection criteria offered insight into how they define a good program. I also explicitly asked parents for their definitions. Overall, parents discussed a mix of structural quality and process quality features as follows: (a) teacher-related factors, (b) classroom environment and atmosphere, (c) curriculum, and (d) parent partnership.

Teachers' attitude and values. Twenty-five parents thought teachers' attitudes directly influence children in the classroom, so parents wanted teachers to be positive and to act as a good role model in the classroom. Parents said that that how a teacher runs the classroom reflected her attitude. Encouraging, accepting, as well as challenging students were attitudes that parents wanted from their teacher.

Although beliefs and values are themselves invisible, they were perceived to become visible in a teacher's attitude and approach. Twenty-two parents wanted teachers to bring a positive attitude into their classroom and to provide meaningful activities that were in the children's best interests.

I think it ties into teachers' attitude. It has to be firm but loving, fair and consistent, excited about working with children. But if teachers are not caring and loving, not really working to teach children in a positive way, then it does not matter how attractive the building is.
(P5)

Most parents chose their program based on their values and the match. Not being able to see these beliefs and values, parents intuited them based on teachers' interactions and children's engagement.

Ratio and health/safety. The effects of class size and the teacher/student ratio have been

supported by research findings that lower teacher/student ratios have a positive correlation with classroom quality (Textor, 1998). According to Jun's (2006), middle-class parents value a small class with a low teacher/student ratio where teachers have control over the students.

Parents believed that if there were more than one teacher in the classroom, children would benefit from work with other adults. If there were too many children, parents thought it might be easy for teachers to get overwhelmed and lose control over the classroom. In case of a conflict, parents also believed that the presence of fewer children would allow teachers to use the situation as an opportunity for education, rather than forcing them to choose a quick and easy way to solve the problem for their own convenience.

The more individual attention children can get, and the more they learn. It won't be chaotic. If more teachers are available, then children get enough attention. Having many children is unfair for the teacher. Fewer children can less burden teachers. It makes teaching easier. (P 23)

A related reason for the concern about teacher/student ratio is parents' concern for safety. In fact, parents who were concerned about a high teacher/student ratio believed that it might make it difficult for teachers to pay close attention to all the children in a class, and that this difficulty might eventually result in a chaotic classroom that would exceed the teachers' control. Sixteen parents expressing this concern reasoned that teachers could not keep their eyes on all children in a crowded classroom.

Of course, the program should be secure. My child can feel comfortable being there. There should be no harm or dangerous objects that can be reached by a child. I want my teacher to really keep an eye on this. (P13)

They believed that the teacher's role was to pay attention to all children in order to prevent potential dangers and to keep them safe.

Physical facility. Fourteen parents wanted an attractive physical facility with enough space for their child. They believed that if a classroom was too small, then children would feel crowded in it. Parents were concerned that such crowding might contribute to children's

behavioral issues. Parents also wanted programs to have a bright, clean, welcoming atmosphere.

I want a classroom that is clean. Having enough space for the children is good since they do not need to be crowded. A rich environment will support children's development. The classroom is organized, well stocked, and appropriate environment. (P14)

Having sufficient materials and resources for children and adequate equipment on the playground was also considered important.

Curriculum. A good program was expected to provide meaningful learning experiences for young children, particularly in learning routines and manners, acquiring social skills, and preparing for academic instruction. Parents wanted a program curriculum to be age- and developmentally appropriate. Diversity, hands-on activities, and children's independent learning were also addressed by thirteen parents. Public school and private school parents emphasized academic preparation, whereas University lab schools and non-profit schools stressed socialization. Private school parents were more concerned about individual learning; whereas non-profit school parents focused on hands-on activities, child-centeredness, and learning through play.

Parent partnership. Graue (1993) argued that parents should play an active role in their children's education and maintain close relationships with teachers. Twelve parents wanted to be involved in their child's program and to get to know their children's friends and other families in the program through their involvement.

I think informal talks which take place during school events [that] the school put on is quite important to feel what's going on. I want to know what's going on in my child's life and I want to be involved. (P 22)

Parents specifically wanted to have the same kind of discipline used at home and at school. Parents wanted to learn some tactics that they could use and that worked with children, especially when a child had a problem.

Parents believe they can work together on how the child struggles and faces challenges. We need to find ways that we can help children better, or how to deal with conflict in a productive way. We come up with suggestions by being aware of good ways of dealing with our children. (P16)

Most parents expressed satisfaction with the level of parent involvement at their current programs. Still, they believed that access to more parenting education resources or materials regarding current educational theories would be useful. First-time parents in particular addressed the need to have parenting resources or information about children's development.

Teacher education. Parents believed that if the teacher had completed a teacher education program, preferably through a major in early childhood education or child development, she could provide a more meaningful learning experience, because she would have a better idea of how to effectively interact with both children and parents, would better understand children's developmental levels, and would be aware of useful tactics that could be used in the classroom.

I think the teacher's educational background is important in order to provide high quality service. Someone who has education and training knows better than someone who is taking care of children, like the difference between babysitting and teaching, it's a big difference. I think children benefit from that training. (P16)

In this section, I present parents' responses by program types more specifically.

Public School Parents

There were two groups of public schools, At-Risk and Head Start. There were two groups of parents that used At-Risk programs, one whose members had at-risk families and another whose members had children with special developmental needs. Low-income At-Risk parents chose their programs due to their free tuition and transportation services. Middle class parents chose the same programs for the availability of resources and the many specialists working with their children.

Since public school teachers had to work and deal with behavior or developmental issues more than other programs' teachers did, parents put a particularly high value on teacher education, interpreting it as a sign that teachers knew how to deal with problems and were generally knowledgeable.

A good teacher loves children and has a bachelor's degree. Having at least a bachelor's degree is showing how they are well trained. I think it helps them to learn and have a broader scope of knowledge of children's development and learning. (P1)

At-Risk parents wanted their child to be supervised. They were generally concerned about discipline, and wanted experienced teachers who knew how to deal with that issue. At-Risk parents expressing this concern reasoned that teachers could not keep their eyes on all children in a crowded classroom. Yet they believed that the teacher's role was to pay attention to all children in order to prevent potential dangers and to keep them safe.

At-Risk parents had stronger opinions about having a strong partnership with teachers. They saw themselves as trying to build a supportive relationship with teachers in order to work as a team. These parents believed in the importance of teachers and parents feeling comfortable with each other and being able to trust each other.

Another public program was Head Start. Its' eligibility is determined by family income. Transportation, free tuition, and the availability of half day and full day classrooms were the main reasons parents chose Head Start. Head Start parents considered that their program provided emotional support to children who might not get it at home, so that they put great value in children's being comfortable in the classroom. Since students had not had many learning opportunities at home, parents stressed kindergarten readiness, too.

I want my child to learn all letters and numbers at school since I do not have time to work on these for my child at home. I want my child to be better prepared for kindergarten. (P 4)

In relation to parent partnerships, Head Start parents specifically wanted to have the same kind of discipline used at home and at school. They wanted to learn some tactics that they could use and that worked with children. However, since many parents are working or having night shifts, being involved in their children's school activities was not easy.

Private School Parents

Private preschool programs range widely in terms of size, enrollment, and budget. Parents wanted a program to be clean, safe, and have adequate materials perhaps because of the high tuition they paid. They focus on individualized and academic-focused learning. They saw the classroom arrangement and organization as important contributors to individual learning. Some private preschools received state subsidies, and served some portion of low-income families. These programs are more focused on social-emotional development.

Having a low teacher/student ratio, one more adult in the classroom, and a small class size are environment-related indicators that private school parents stressed. They believed that if there was more than one teacher in the classroom, children would benefit from working with other adults. For parents, ratio mattered because they believed it related to the teacher's discipline in dealing with behavior problems. If there were too many children, parents thought it might be easy for teachers to become overwhelmed and lose control over the classroom.

Private school parents wanted an attractive physical facility with enough space for their child. They believed that if a classroom was too small, then children would feel crowded in it. Parents were concerned that such crowding might contribute to children's behavioral issues.

University Lab School Parents

Lab school parents were highly educated. Their income was bimodal, probably because many were graduate students and thus temporarily poor. They believed that an important goal of a lab school is continuous research on state-of-the-art practices. They prioritized the advanced methods they expected would follow from that research.

I think the function of a lab school is research about children's development and learning. I also wanted to receive some research articles or resources from my teachers. (P13)

In terms of curriculum, they considered social-emotional development and creativity important, but did not stress cognitive development or kindergarten readiness. They wanted the curriculum to be age and developmentally appropriate. Diversity, hands-on activities, and

children's independent learning were valued. They advocated exploratory learning, focusing on children's creativity and investigation. They tended to emphasize diversity, reflecting the fact that University lab schools had many international children.

Even though there were many highly educated parents, they did not consider teachers' education important. Rather, they thought openness and teaching experiences were more important. That did not mean that parents did not care about teachers' educational background. Rather, they looked for teacher's attitude first, then considered education.

Non-profit School Parents

They chose non-profit programs because of their flexibility, lack of stress on academic readiness, and focus on children's social-emotional development. They valued hands-on activities, child-centeredness, and learning through play. They saw freedom to choose among activities as ensuring children's active engagement. Their classrooms were relaxed and flexible.

I think especially at non-profit daycare center's children look happy, they love to go to the program. They seem more engaged in the classroom, [and] the teacher looks happy. I favor non-profit [centers] since they are more happy-looking, very energetic with hands-on activities. You can really tell in their faces. You will know if they really do not like being there. (P21)

Parents viewed teachers as playing a critical role in children's development and, indeed, in their lives. The teacher's attitude was believed to directly influence children. Non-profit parents believed that caring and attention-aspects of mothering-were fundamental qualifications of teachers working with young children.

Non-profit parents wanted to be involved in their child's program and to get to know their children's friends and other families in the program through their involvement. Compared to other school parents, non-profit school parents actively participated, especially those who were not employed or who had part-time jobs.

Toward Better Early Childhood Programs

Parents acknowledged that compared to the work they do, teachers' salaries were low and the benefits were not good. Eight parents worried about the effect on teachers' qualifications, saying that the poor compensation would result in good teachers moving to another profession or field while poor teachers stayed, this result was consistent with Harrist et al., (2008).

I am really concerned about teachers' lower salary and benefits. It does not attract highly educated teachers to work. I am worried too much if good teachers will leave their job, then less qualified teachers will replace the positions. I think if they give better pay and benefits, they'll have more qualified teachers retained. (P11)

In addition, if a teacher's salary is the only family income, the situation becomes worse. Receiving lower salaries made it more difficult for teachers to maintain positive attitudes.

If teachers have to work to make money and to stay there for that money, it would be very hard. I think teachers' attitudes matter, but in order to have a good attitude, it must be affordable to work there. This is not extra money for the family. You cannot expect that good educated persons work for a small amount of money. (P26)

For parents, not only a teacher's educational background, but continuing their education is critical for teachers to acquire new knowledge and attain better skills. A good and continuing education can help teachers provide more meaningful learning environments as well as maintain positive attitudes toward children. Due to the lack of funding, parents worried that teachers lack opportunities for continuing education.

I asked parents what they need to do to make programs better. Parents mentioned the following: (1) balanced development, (2) the critical role of the director, and (3) working collaboratively with parents and teachers.

Parents wanted their children to have opportunities to learn and explore on their own. Controversy emerged over the issue of academic and social aspects of education. All parents said they wanted their children to have experiences that addressed all parts of their development. They wanted balance and a program that addressed the whole child.

The teacher is responsible to think about the content of the curriculum. Also the teacher has to think about social needs of children. Parents want children to have a happy and positive experience through this period. (P28)

They wanted children to learn some basic skills or knowledge, not through worksheets but through natural learning environments. They saw having proper structure helping children.

As in Harrit, Thompson, and Norris's (2008) research, parents pointed out the importance of the director's role in creating program quality. Parents considered directors to be the heart of a program, and thus to indicate its stability and strength.

The director oversees the program. The director has a spirit and it helps make teachers succeed. The director should be a good model to teachers, especially how to communicate openly with parents. The director is a mediator in the program among staff and parents. (P19)

They perceived a director's duties to include teacher supervision, attentiveness to parents' concerns, and general problem-solving. The director should have a vision for early childhood education and be a listener when parents express their problems and concerns.

Seven parents expressed the belief that active parent participation or involvement was critical to understanding a child's program and a teacher's educational values and attitude. They saw themselves as trying to build a supportive relationship with teachers in order to work as a team.

I think we need to have open dialogue about how we can support teachers and children. Also, having a team partnership is important. More opportunity to communicate, then more ideas can be shared. Instead of waiting for a teacher's contact, if a parent has a question or concern, the parent has to make contact and talk about their concern right away. Trying to find out solutions with teacher is needed. (P14)

Parents considered themselves to be experts at home, but teachers to be experts at school. Since a child's behavior sometimes differed in these two environments, having the same agenda in discipline was particularly important to parents. In order to have strong partnerships, open communication, trusting the good intentions of one another, and trying to hear each

others' thoughts and opinions are needed. Without understanding each others' views, the discrepancies cannot be reduced.

Parents wanted to be able to express their opinions and concerns in a public way. Parent surveys are one of the ways that parents can express their opinions and evaluate program quality. Half of the programs associated with the participants in this study conducted a parent survey once or twice a year as an opportunity for parents to express their opinions. Parents liked having parent surveys, but they wondered how their programs used the results and if they would make actual changes based on them. A parent board committee was also described as a way of representing parents' voices in a program. Some parents wondered, however, whether the agenda they handled made any significant changes in the program.

I am very actively participating in the classroom. But I do not want to be on a board right now because I am not sure if it really changes anything. They only worked for fund-raising or teacher appreciation day. But I do not think it is that meaningful. I want them to talk about school policy. (P20)

The members of the parent board committee and especially the parent representative need to hear what parents' needs are and what parents want to change in the program.

When parents thought about whether a program was good or not, they had to rely on children's reactions to the program or teachers' comments about how their children were doing in the classroom. In addition, in terms of children's development levels, which were one of the parents' main concerns, they needed to wait until a parent-teacher conference to discuss this. Even though parents were the "consumers" of the program, sometimes they were reluctant to express their concerns since parents felt as though they were impinging on teachers' boundaries.

Another problem is that once parents felt that their child was doing okay in a program, they would stop thinking about the program or what should be done. Even though they had certain expectations and purposes for sending their children to the program, if they thought that there was no critical problem such as danger or safety, they felt comfortable with the program.

If parents do not express their opinions, teachers and directors may not know what parents want and expect from the program. More time to understand teachers' values and philosophies as well as share their own philosophy and discipline at home is critical to have

shared goals. Parents' comments in interviews show that they believe programs can be improved.

Parents did not care much about whether a program was accredited or not — most were not even familiar with the term “accreditation” and those who did care were not familiar with the process of becoming accredited. Interestingly, two parents who previously had worked as preschool teachers did not consider “accreditation” as important. They thought if the program was accredited, it meant that the program met minimum standards. They did see accreditation as guaranteeing a high quality program. As long as their child was happy, whether the program was accredited or not was meaningless. Parents wanted the program to be responsive to their needs and values and to be willing to make changes.

Parents ultimately discussed some specific ideas regarding the current system of early childhood education in the U.S. Some parents discussed community values and based on them, voiced some disagreements with policy makers.

Parents have different ideas about early schooling. It is very important to meet parents' expectations. Good teachers and programs want what is best for children. Politicians make rules, based on a business mindset, not an education mindset. Making connections is an example of wanting to know what's going on. (P7)

There are many stakeholders in the early childhood education setting. Among them, the community has a cultural value, representing shared values regarding teaching and learning. Parents need to know whether generally accepted criteria are covered by these values or not.

Conclusion and Implication

On certain issues, parents easily reached agreement, while discussions of other issues revealed controversies and tensions. I include both the agreement and controversies that surfaced during the interviews because understanding where people agree and where they have conflict provides a window through which the complexities and multiplicities of discourses of a good program can be understood.

When parents selected a program, they thought about their values and expectations. In addition to aspects of structural and process quality, availability and affordability were

generally critical for parents. The selection sometimes may compromise on quality. Given their specific contexts, parents try to locate the best possible choice for their child. Their reasons for selecting a program and their sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction help reveal how parents view a good program.

Parents had similar views of what made a “good teacher” and a “good program.” Their perceptions of a good program were interrelated and mingled. Parents had mixed opinions about process factors and structural factors. The reasons for selecting a program and for being satisfied with it were more related to structure factors. Once they had selected a program, their main concerns would switch to process quality including their children’s experiences and the teacher’s behavior.

Depending on parents’ values and beliefs, their views of a good program differed. Parents wanted their children to have opportunities to learn and explore on their own. Controversy emerged over the issue of academic and social aspects of education. All parents said they wanted their children to have experiences that addressed all parts of their development. They wanted balance and a program that addressed the whole child.

In parents’ definitions of good programs, teachers occupied the central position. To achieve a good program, parents thought teachers should have a good attitude toward learning and working with younger children, have a background in teacher education, and a willingness to engage in continued professional development. The key requirement was the ability to be a good communicator with both children and parents.

Even though parents strongly emphasized the teacher’s role and attitude, these factors are not emphasized in the current evaluations. Parents were most concerned about the intangible and invisible parts of teaching, which are not easily observable and measurable.

Parents talked about how they were able to evaluate and express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction about their child’s program in surveys distributed by the program. They did not, however, report having a chance to discuss their original expectations and how the program met them. They were able to report whether they were satisfied with their program, but they were not given the opportunity to talk about what makes a good program. As crucial stakeholders, parents did not play active roles in the programs. Discussions of quality should focus not only on children’s outcomes but also on what parents really want in a program.

As Lee (2003) mentioned, obtaining accreditation or a favorable evaluation may not allow

the stakeholders to reflect upon what they are doing and how they can move beyond their current philosophies and pedagogical practices. Standards developed in a certain time and place may not be appropriate in other contexts without deep reflections upon the underlying values and meanings and may require substantial adaptations. The insiders or local stakeholders should know where they are doing well, where they need to improve, and how they can improve by themselves. Through these deliberate discussions, the participants can come up with the most appropriate evaluation method that will be more meaningful and useful.

References

- Ceglowski, D. (1998). *Inside a Head Start center*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ceglowski, D. (2004). How stakeholder groups define quality in child care. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 32(2), 101-111.
- Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cryer, D., Tietze, W., & Wessels, H. (2002). Parents' perceptions of their children's child care: A cross-national comparison. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17, 259-277.
- Cryer, D., & Burchinal, M. (1997). Parents as child care consumers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, 35-58.
- Cryer, D., & Phillipsen, M. (1997). Parents as child care consumers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, 35-58.
- Duncan, S., Edwards, R., Reynolds, T., & Alldred, P. (2004). Mothers and child care: Policies, values and theories. *Children & Society*, 18, 254-265.
- Fiene, R. (1992, June). *Measuring child care quality*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Child Day Care Health: Science, Prevention and Practice, Atlanta, GA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED349092)
- Graue, M. E. (1993). *Ready for what? Constructing meaning of readiness for kindergarten*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Harrist, A. W., Thompson, S. D., & Norris, D. J. (2007). Defining quality child care: Multiple

- stakeholder perspectives. *Early Education and Development*, 18(2), 305-336.
- Jun, H-J. (2006). *Parents' conceptions of quality in early childhood education: A comparative study of middle-class Anglo and immigrant Mexican parents*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University.
- Knopf, H. T. (2004). *African American mothers' perceptions of quality childcare*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida.
- Kontos, S., & Stevens, R. (1985). High quality child care: Does your center measure up? *Young Children*, 40(2), 5-9.
- Larner, M., & Phillips, D. (1994). Defining and valuing quality as a parent. In P. Moss & A. Pence (Eds.), *Valuing quality in early childhood services: New approaches to defining quality* (pp. 43-60). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Liang, P-M. (2001). *Parents' perceived quality of and satisfaction with early childhood programs: A study of Taiwanese parents who have a child enrolled in kindergarten*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Penn State University.
- Liu, W. P., Yeung, A. S., & Farmer, S. (2001). What do parents want from day care services? Perspectives from Australia. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 16, 385-393.
- Lee, J-H. (2003). *The quest for quality: Evaluation and early childhood programs*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Mensing, J. F., French, D., Fuller, B., & Kagan, S. L. (2000). Child care selection under welfare reform: How mothers balance work requirements and parenting. *Early Education and Development*, 11, 573-595.
- Mooney, A., & Munton, A. (1998). Quality in early childhood services: Parent, provider, and policy perspectives. *Children and Society*, 12, 101-112.
- Textor, M. (1998). International perspectives on quality child care. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 25, 167-171.