

Multiple Perspectives on Quality - Partnership on Quality Evaluation and Professional Development in Early Childhood Institutions

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Introduction

The last decade has seen some important developments in preschool education in Portugal. In 1996, the Ministry of Education launched the Programme for the Expansion and Development of Preschool Education (Ministry of Education [ME], 1996) and in 1997, the Pre-school Education Bill (ME, 1997) was published. These led to the enlargement and expansion of the pre-school network and operationalised both the social and educational components involved in the process - the childcare component extending support to families and the pedagogical component centred on the educational development of children.

After a period of expansion, a second objective emerged, related to the improvement of quality in the provision of pre-school services. Although there was an increase in the professional qualifications required to be a pre-school teacher in Portugal, there still remained a number of limitations in staff training for early childhood education, especially in the private sector.

Responding to this need for better training, the Ministry of Education promoted the Portuguese adaptation of the EEL Project - Effective Early Learning Project (Pascal *et al.*, 1996), with the purpose of evaluating and monitoring curricular development in early childhood education and helping professionals with instruments for quality evaluation.

Using this framework, a group of practitioners and researchers developed a research project consisting of a process of quality evaluation. Each class/school developed a process of quality evaluation and defined an educative plan of action. The evaluation process allowed for the integration of some essential perspectives, since it was done in partnership - it included the perspectives of parents, professionals and children. This paper presents a synthesis of the reflection produced by the research group about the quality evaluation process and the impact of that process, as perceived by the team, on professional and institutional development.

Note:

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Conceptual Framework

The EEL Project is a program that aims to develop the quality of early childhood education settings and consequently make children's learning more effective. The Project's main principles include (1) the idea that the quality of each school is evaluated by the way it is perceived by educators, parents and children and (2) that participation in the quality evaluation process encourages participant responsibility towards the process of change and quality improvement.

The conceptual framework for quality development in preschool education involves three aspects: context, process and results (Pascal and Bertram, 1996). All of which are interrelated and important for quality early childhood care. These will be discussed in more detail under Methodological Principles below.

Participants

The adaptation of the EEL framework to the Portuguese situation was done through several case studies conducted in different geographical areas in the country. This paper presents some of the results from the case studies that took place in six early childhood classes, three belonging to the public pre-school education network, and another three to the private pre-school education network in the same geographical area.

The authors of this paper were the participants of the research team that developed these six cases study. They had previous training on the EEL framework and most of them participated and collaborated with the School of Education (ESES) in the initial training of early childhood educators. For the purpose of the project, they formed a group that included six early childhood educators responsible for the six classes, one pedagogical coordinator, one special education teacher, and two supervisors of the School of Education that acted as external supporters.

Methodological Principles

The process of evaluation and quality improvement, as described in the Portuguese version of the EEL manual (ME, 2001), has four phases: Evaluation, Planning, Improvement and Reflection. However, the constraints of the initial period for developing this project - February to June of 2006 - meant that only the first two phases of the process, Evaluation and Planning, could be studied. Particular attention was paid to the instruments used in this process, and the team reflected on their potentialities. The process of documenting quality included document analysis, interviews, questionnaires and observations adapted from the Portuguese version of the EEL Manual (ME, 2001) and addressed ten quality dimensions. They also included the perspectives of all partners - children, parents, educators and external advisors.

The *context* involves ten domains of quality - the main purposes and objectives; learning experiences; teaching strategies; planning, evaluation and documentation; staff; space; relations; equal opportunities; parents and community participation; monitoring and quality evaluation.

Process is evaluated by two scales, adapted from instruments initially created by Laevers for the *Experiential Education Project* (Laevers and Van Sanden, 1997):

- *The Child Involvement Scale* (Laevers, 1994; Pascal *et al.*, 1996) measures the level of involvement of children's activities. It is based on the notion that when there is a deep level of learning (Laevers, 1993), children show 'involvement signs' that include concentration, energy, creativity, persistence and satisfaction. Children's involvement can be scored in a scale of 1 to 5. There is evidence that involvement is an indicator of the effectiveness of the learning experience.

- *The Adult Engagement Scale* (Laevers, 1994; Pascal *et al.*, 1996) intends to observe the educator 'style', that is, to describe the personal qualities that indicate the capacity to motivate and take account of the child's learning process (Laevers, 1991). This scale was previously used in Portuguese contexts and was familiar to most participants (Luís, 1998; Luís *et al.*, 2004). The scale is centred around three distinct categories that define the quality of interaction: *sensitivity* - capacity to recognise and to respect the feelings and emotional well-being of the child; *stimulation* - focuses on introducing and presenting a learning experience and the capacity to stimulate thinking or children's communication; and *autonomy* - the degree of freedom given to children to choose activities, to try by themselves, to judge the products of their own activity, to negotiate and to solve problems and conflicts.

Results and *learning effectiveness* can be analyzed by the impact on children's development, adult development and institutional development.

Instruments

Each class/school assembled a portfolio with the collected data, and each educator wrote down her personal reflections about the process and methodology. The potentialities and areas for improvement were underlined. This portfolio was discussed among the team (research group and external advisors) and an Action Plan was implemented based on the previous evaluation.

The results presented in this paper refer only to the content analysis of the portfolios.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The analysis will focus on (1) the reflection made throughout the process by the early childhood educators who participated in the project; (2) a synthesis of this reflection and; (3) the potentialities of a quality evaluation process developed in partnership.

The ten quality dimensions of the EEL project provided a structure that was considered adequate and pertinent for context analysis - through observational analysis. This facilitated the group reflection process and the development of an action plan.

Documenting parents' perspectives was important and contributed to a more objective and global evaluation. Parents were capable of expressing opinions about different quality dimensions. The view of these participants revealed some critical points that were not always obvious to the educator, but also confirmed the positive aspects of on-going strategies.

The teachers' portfolios also focused on documenting children's perspectives. This was done through child interviews and observation of daily activities and of their involvement in daily activities. All educators agreed that interviewing children was an important tool. This strategy stimulated reflection about children and the way they viewed the organization and the activities they developed. It gave them an active voice and promoted involvement and active participation.

Educators enhanced the relevancy and adequacy of the children's affirmations, ideas, critiques and suggestions, contained in children's answers:

"It gave information on what the children thought and changes they wanted to see in their setting. An example is the increasing disinterest in the table games. They considered the purchase of more difficult games and even were positive about the amount of games that we should buy in order to make that area more appealing."
(Educator C in Luís *et al.*, 2006)

Educators considered that the information collected was useful for the improvement of quality, by identifying and/or confirming some critical points and, consequently, helping to define and/or adjust future action:

"The effect of the interview and observation of children was immediate - these opinions were determinant. It was impossible to be indifferent to them, an immediate readjustment was made. Sometimes I feel that 'the view of the children' gets diluted and mixed with 'my view' and this exercise is necessary" (Educator B in Luís *et al.*, 2006)

As said before, educators considered the child interviews and observations useful to promote reflection on the dynamics of the preschool, and consequent involvement and

quality improvement. In fact, the success of the interviews indicates that if adequacy and quality of children's education is a goal to be reached, the active participation of those in the process is not only possible but also indispensable:

"There was an increasing need to listen to children and involve them in the educative action, not as mere receivers of the adult 'curriculum' and ideas but as active, critical and constructive agents of one common project (...); it is a priority to promote children's active participation in the organisation of the educational settings, in the projects, planning and evaluation that takes place in preschool." (Educator D in Luís *et al.*, 2006)

Referring to adult observation, feedback given to educators after observing adult engagement was considered positive and facilitated self-reflection on pedagogical attitudes. The three dimensions - sensibility, stimulation and autonomy - were considered important. This Scale was considered difficult to apply, requiring a trained external observer. An open and trusting environment that created confidence was also considered essential for peer exposure.

Final Considerations

In Portugal, there are many early childhood educators that work alone and do not have enough support for team working. That contributes to a sense of 'loneliness' for some in their educational practice. The importance of building a network of early childhood educators - that would provide support and sharing of experiences was identified as an important factor for professional development.

Observing children's involvement made a significant contribution to a deeper knowledge of children's learning processes and permitted the analysis of children's learning experiences. Observing children also made evident the need to use/ construct instruments that may assess the process of learning and that do not exclusively focus on results or average comparisons.

Documenting children's perspectives was considered crucial. In Portugal, as in other countries, a new understanding of childhood and children is emerging under the influence of the sociology of childhood (Sarmiento, 2004), but this knowledge is not yet disseminated enough among specialists, practitioners and society in general. This paradigm includes the ideas that "*children are social actors, participating in constructing and determining their own lives, but also the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live, and contributing to learning as agents building on experiential knowledge. In short, they have agency.*" (Dahlberg, *et al.*, 1999: 49).

To implement an evaluation and a quality development process, it is indispensable to establish a partnership between institutional leaders, the educational community and early childhood educators. There is also a need for specific in-service training.

Finally, these case studies showed that promoting a process of quality evaluation and development through adoption of the EEL framework, and creating the conditions for its implementation at a national level would be perceived, as a positive action for professional and institutional development in early childhood education.

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