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International Teacher Perspectives on Quality in ECE: A Case Study

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Abstract

The goal of early childhood programming is to provide children with high-quality early care and to support educators' understanding and ability to implement high-quality practices on behalf of children and their families. Quality in early childhood care is an ambiguous concept, relative to various social and context-specific factors, making it difficult to define in standardized terms. A classroom teacher's proximity to decisions in the early childhood classroom validates the need for teacher perceptions to be considered in practices regarding high-quality care. This paper presents a comparative case study that sought to explore teacher perspectives of high-quality care from two nations, Finland and the United States, and examined how these perspectives differed or aligned across the influences of culture. Using an interpretivist design for qualitative research methods, preschool and early year teacher participants completed pre-surveys in which they rated various indicators of quality. Survey responses guided semi-structured interviews. Additionally, participants discussed photographs of classroom and school activities that they felt exhibited quality. In vivo and values coding were used to analyze the interview data and generate themes in which teachers described high quality. Generating from both participant groups, the analysis resulted in various themes, such as child-centered classrooms, physical environment,

and highly educated teachers. While language and terminology differed, teachers in Finland and the United States valued similar indicators of high-quality early programs.

Keywords: comparative, high-quality, early years, early childhood

Introduction

High quality early childhood education is recognized as leading to positive outcomes for children as well as economic benefits to society (Nores, Belfield, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2005). However, scholars warn against a universal definition of high-quality early care. Nearly two decades ago, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) recognized the importance of understanding early childhood education as more than predictable and controlled, as implied by the language of quality. Quality continues to be an ambiguous term, including both objective and subjective factors that are relative to values, beliefs, and needs of various stakeholders (Cryer, Tietze, & Wessels, 2002; Barros & Leal, 2015). As a socially constructed concept (Dahlberg et al., 1999), the term quality lacks a definitive conceptualization.

By assuming a cross national investigation of teachers' perceptions, this study aims to situate quality as a culturally and socially interpreted term while exploring possible associations or similarities among teachers' views of high-quality early care. Since measures of quality continue to be used to determine what is important in the early childhood classroom, teachers' perceptions of quality remain essential.

Specifically, the focus of this paper, referred to in Finland as early childhood education and care (ECEC), occurs before children enter primary education, between the ages of one and six. A distinction is made between preschool teachers (teachers of pre-primary children at the age of six) and kindergarten or ECEC teachers (teachers of children between the ages of one and five) (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). In the United States, early childhood education (ECE), most often referred to as preschool, occurs between birth and age five, after which children enter their compulsory education as kindergarteners in primary schools. The vast majority of states offer free voluntary prekindergarten for four-year-old children.

The purpose of this study is to investigate components of high-quality care from the perspectives of teachers representing Finland and the United States. In focusing on teachers' perceptions, teachers become the knowledgeable experts in providing high-quality care. This study begins to describe how cultural and social factors affect and shape perceptions of high-quality care by exploring differences and similarities of teachers' beliefs. The findings of this study begin to provide a valuable understanding of the global construction of quality from the viewpoint of educators as important stakeholders in the early childhood classroom setting.

Research Questions

The following research question guided this study:

(1) How do teacher perceptions of quality compare between early childhood teachers in the United States and Finland?

Within the guiding research question, two sub-questions emerged as:

(2) Which aspects of quality do teachers in the United States and Finland place the most value? and

(3) What role, if any, does culture and society have in teacher perceptions of quality in the United States and Finland?

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

This study seeks to understand teacher perceptions through comparative and socio-cultural perspectives. Comparative education involves utilizing a critical lens to explore educational practices and policies from different countries and cultures (Clarkson, 2009). The increasingly global society in which we live provides impetus for educators, researchers, and practitioners to examine not only relationships with the wider society, but as well to critically reflect on our own educational systems and practices by increasing our knowledge and understanding of systems and practices that differ. Epstein (2017) explains while the field is influenced by many disciplines, the key indicator of comparative education is the desire for an understanding of global education. For this reason, the current study seeks to view comparative education through a socio-cultural lens. Socio-cultural theory is grounded in the work of Lev Vygotsky and suggests that our interactions and experiences become largely influenced by the culture in which we live and interact with others. Specifically, Vygotsky's (1980) sociocultural theory proposes it is the signs and tools in our environment that initiate social contact with others. Thus, learning or internalizing, is initially an external, cultural and social activity that becomes part of the individual. It is through this lens of socio-cultural influences that the current study intends to explore teachers' perceptions of quality care.

Quality in Early Childhood

In a generally defined way, quality is considered from structural and process indicators. Structural indicators include the characteristics of a classroom that can be regulated, such as staff qualifications and ratios, licensing policies, and facility and maintenance requirements. Process indicators represent the everyday interactions, experiences, and relationships occurring in an early childhood environment. While structural and process indicators remain distinct, structural indicators do effect certain process indicators; for example, wages and teacher education evidence as structural indicators to influence process indicators (Cassidy et al., 2005).

Quality as a broad concept poses difficulties in providing a universal measure of quality. Quality measurement tools such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), Early

Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revision (ECERS-R), Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS), and the Association for Childhood Educational International's Global Guidelines Assessment evaluate different facets of quality indicators. After reviewing 11 quality measurement tools with the intention of analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each, along with the sustainability of the tools in an international context, Ishmine and Tayler (2014) conclude that among the tools evaluated, many lacked some of the core elements of quality to be considered important. More relevantly, the researchers note that the purpose of quality assessment measures remains critical to support and provide feedback to teachers in developing and planning curriculum and interactions (Cottle & Alexander, 2012; Ishmine & Tayler, 2014). Harrist, Thompson and Norris (2007) evaluated parent and caregiver perspectives on the quality of childcare using formal rating methods, much like Rentzou (2012) demonstrated in comparing researcher and practitioner ratings of quality. Evaluations of quality, as previously mentioned, continue to be subjectively based upon the purposes and priorities of the stakeholder. Woodhead (1998) called for a contextually based approach to examining quality, as "there are many different potential criteria of quality which are closely linked to beliefs about the goals and functions of programmes" (p. 11). A teacher's obvious proximity to decisions regarding the early childhood environment underscores the critical importance of teachers' perceptions of quality in the classroom.

National Contexts

Finland. The early childhood educational systems in Finland and the United States continue to be influenced by the various structures, policies, social and cultural contexts unique to each nation. Education in Finland is viewed as a basic human right for all and is reflected by the nature of a free schooling, even through both vocational and university levels (Kangaslahti, 2013; Havu-Nuutinen & Niikko, 2014; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). Although the Ministry of Education and Culture, oversees Finish education, educational system decisions are made collaboratively between all stakeholders, including policy makers, professionals in the field of education, teachers, parents, and sometimes even students (Kangaslahti, 2013). Municipalities themselves remain responsible for the operating of schools; principals at each school are given the authority to manage individual schools, typically in collaboration with teachers (National Center on Education and the Economy [NCEE], 2015). At the classroom level, teachers demonstrate the freedom to construct the learning environment, choose learning materials, and set the curriculum (Kangaslahti, 2013).

Turunen, Määttä, and Uusiautti (2012) discuss how curriculum is "always part of cultural and political zeitgeist of the society in which it is written; the curricula in early childhood are also tightly connected to national societal goals" (p. 586). At the time of the current study, the *National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care* served as the relevant curriculum document for ECEC in Finland *(in Finland* published in Finnish in 2003 and English in 2005). The purposes of the *National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland* include: to provide equal opportunities for education across the country, to evidence developmental activities, and to introduce uniform principles. Emphasis is placed on the child's well-being, care and health, play, exploration, physical activities, and language

(National Research and Development Center for Welfare and Health, 2005; Havu-Nuutinen & Niikko, 2014). The new *National Core Curriculum for ECEC* was released after study completion. While the new curriculum is considered a standard rather than a guideline, local municipalities continue to maintain authority to develop their own curricula based from the new core curriculum. Kangaslahti (2013) cautions that the Finnish educational system (or any other national system) cannot merely be copied into another cultural context, though it does provide an important example. The Finnish ECEC system is highly dependent on the cultural factors of equality, trust, and responsibility, the high quality of teachers, and the research-based pedagogy of child-centeredness and care.

United States. Current United States ECE policy evidences historical roots beginning in the 1960s. Many early childhood programs originated as a response to the War on Poverty initiatives in the mid-1960s and the economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Winter & Kelley, 2008), initially developed to target high-risk, impoverished, and economically and socially disadvantaged children. In 1989, the National Educational Goals 2000 introduced the goal of education as producing an improved workforce, thus highlighting the top-down need for children to be better prepared for school (Winter & Kelley, 2008). Neuman (2015) writes about the current policy goals, including a focus on improving the quality of early childhood programs and providing equitable access to quality programs for supporting children from lower socio-economic areas.

An emerging focus of early childhood programs in the United States is the idea of school readiness, preparing children for formal schooling in kindergarten, resulting in policy makers becoming more fixated on the long-term investment of early care (Brooks & Murray, 2018). DeBruin and Slutzky (2016) explored the early learning standards across the different states in the U.S., noting the variance in standards alignment to age and grade level ranges. Evans (2013) acknowledged the pre-primary approach to school readiness, commonly found in the United States, primarily focuses on child outcomes, standards-based models, and basic academic skills required for school.

Methodology

Design

The study used a comparative case study approach to data collection and analysis. Case studies become useful when a researcher seeks to investigate a particular group of individuals, program or techniques (Lichtman, 2013). This study most aligns with the case study views illustrated by Sharan Merriam and Robert Stake, which assume the constructivist lens of epistemology (Yazan, 2015). Yazan (2015) explains both Merriam and Stake understand reality is constructed, multiple viewpoints exist, and researchers remain interpreters of information; researchers construct their own meaning from the findings, although Merriam also acknowledges the influences of researchers views on the interpretations. Following an interpretivist paradigm in design, the aim is to develop deep, comprehensive understanding of topics through multiple perspectives (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Thanh and Thanh (2015) explain the interpretivist as one that values subjectivity and dismisses universal standards of human behavior and research.

In this study, a rich understanding of quality from two varying cultures and various individuals supports the interpretivist design.

Sample

The inclusion criteria for teacher participants was solely limited to current classroom teachers working in an early childhood setting that taught in Finland. This included kindergarten (ages birth to five) and pre-primary (age six) teachers, and in the United States this included infant, toddler and preschool teachers (ages birth to five). The three teacher participants in Finland represent three different centers, each with varying local contexts, school specific goals and structures. One Finnish teacher participant was from a pre-primary class within a primary school, and the other two teachers interacted with children in kindergartens with children through the age of five years of age. In the United States, both teacher participants were in preschool classrooms with children ages three and four. The two teacher participants from the U.S. were also at the same school. Demographic data on the teachers were not deemed pertinent to the current study and thus not collected from participants; however, each participant was a qualified teacher with a bachelor or master's degree in teaching the specific age group with which they worked.

Procedures

The total number of participants in the study was five: three early years teachers residing in Finland and two preschool teachers in the United States. An exemplary sampling method was used to request participation from individuals at schools and early care centers in Finland connected with a partnering university through a study abroad program during the spring semester of 2016. Before the program began, directors or principals were emailed study permission requests. The final sample of Finnish participants included three early childhood teachers from three different centers, with two of the interviews approved for audio-recording. Exemplary sampling was again used in the United States during the spring semester of 2018 as participants were also sought from a child-care center connected to the university. The center director was contacted and emailed study permission requests, along with the pre-surveys for teachers to complete ahead of time. The two interviews conducted were audio recorded.

Data Collection

In order to answer the research questions, data were collected in the form of pre-surveys, interviews, researcher notes and audio-transcriptions, and photo elicitations when available. The setting for each interview varied depending on the availability of space. In Finland, two of the interviews were conducted in a space used by children during the interview (a hallway and a dining and play area). The last interview in Finland was conducted in a classroom kitchen area that children were not using at the time. In the United States, both interviews were conducted in teacher workspaces. The interview lengths also varied depending on time availability and ranged from eight to 45 minutes. Each teacher (representing Finland and U.S.) used their teacher preparation and/or break time to complete the interview. Prior to the interview, teachers completed a pre-survey in which they rated indicators of quality based on the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) Global Guidelines Assessment (GGA). The results of the survey guided the interview questions. The pre-survey also provided space for teachers to

input their own indicators of high quality they felt were not included in the GGA. Semi-structured interviews focused on the indicators rated as most important as well as any additional indicators provided by the participant. In addition, teachers in Finland were given a camera and asked to walk through the center and take pictures of ideas they thought illustrated high-quality. Teachers in the United States had pictures prepared for the interview session.

During the interviews, the first author also jotted down notes to highlight salient points made by interviewees. These notes were added to the transcripts, but were not coded if directly redundant with other codes found in the interviewee's transcription. It is also pertinent to note that only two of the three Finnish interviews were audio recorded. The third interview was documented by note taking. For this reason, the coding of this interview only included values coding, as verbatim quotes cannot be verified. Both interviews conducted with U.S. teachers were audio recorded and research notes were limited to clarifying questions.

Data Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, inductive, open coding was used to eliminate researcher preconceptions and focus on emergent concepts generated within the data (Lin, 2013). To satisfy the purposes of the research, two different coding methods were used in the first cycle coding analysis. Since the primary focus of the research was to understand the teacher perceptions of high-quality early childcare, in vivo coding was utilized to honor each participant's voice and ideas (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This was particularly vital in this study as the researcher only speaks English and participants from Finland spoke English as a second language. The second first cycle coding method applied was a variation of values coding, which is appropriate in studies that wish to convey a participant's values, attitudes and beliefs. (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2009). However, during the values coding process, the decision was made to replace the code of 'belief' to 'practice.' This change was made during a peer and mentor evaluation session, and documented in the auditable decision trail, to provide a more accurate description and richer analysis of the photo elicitation piece of the interview that focused on aspects of the interviewee's current practices that they perceived to display high-quality. Values coding in this study included attitudes (defined as participants' thoughts or feelings about aspects of quality), values (defined as aspects of quality that participants place value), and practices (defined as activities the participants do to promote or show high-quality). After transcribing and coding the interviews (in vivo and values coding), each code was summarized into a short concept and then labeled with one of the emerging themes.

Results

Emergent Themes

Category and theme names from each set of interviews were chosen independent of each other, and then similar categories and themes were merged. Figure 1 below displays the emergent themes generated from the data analysis. Eight themes, as shown in the double-sided arrow, were common between both Finnish and U. S. teachers, while other themes were specific to each country.

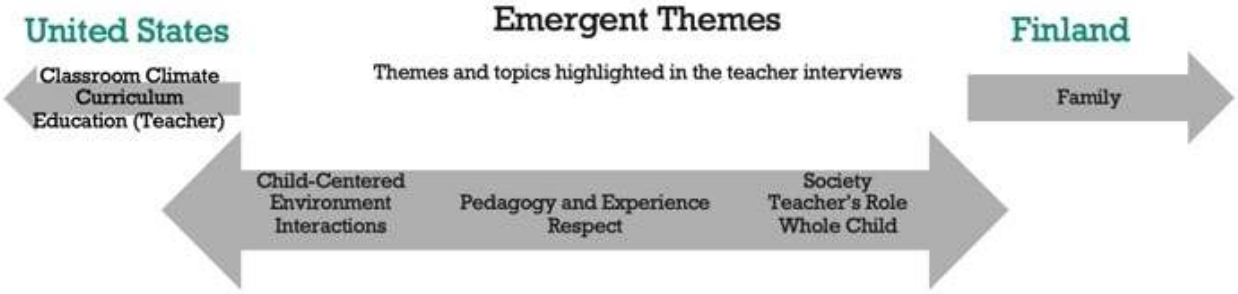

Figure 1. Emergent themes. This figure illustrates the common and country-specific themes developed through data analysis.

Common Emergent Themes

Environment. The environment theme was the largest with multiple sub-categories. Each of the Finnish teachers commented on the importance of a flexible and adaptable environment based on children's interests. Teachers described the physical environment and materials as needing to be "inspiring," "clean," "secure," and "interesting," as well as to "motivate" and have "space." As co-constructors of the environment, the children's needs and interests drive the room arrangement and materials presented. As it will be discussed later, part of a teacher's role is actively listening to children, which includes creating spaces with and for children that will engage them, lead to social interactions, and promote their well-being. The teachers from the United States highlighted predictable expectations and routines as important to the environment, and further described the physical environment itself as promoting independence. Critically, the physical environment promotes children's ability to flexibly move items about the classroom; children access resources without asking for a teacher's assistance.

Interactions. Child-child and teacher-child interactions were included in the final interviews. One interviewee noted that teacher-child interactions are the "basis for everything." This is supported by other statements that teachers should "not be absent" but rather be present in their interactions with young children. One-on-one time with children is valued, despite difficulties of large classes. Child-child interactions are supported by teachers that facilitate problem solving when needed. One U.S. teacher emphasized the value of nurturing teacher-child interactions in creating a foundation for later learning.

Pedagogy and experience. During the final interviews, participants were asked about what influenced their decision-making regarding high quality care; respondents identified education and experience. The teachers described their multiple education degrees and years of experience working with children, including the years to achieve their degrees. The term pedagogy was chosen as an emerging theme rather than education or studies, because it better captures the essence of how the teachers described their educational experiences. One interviewee elaborated that teachers should continually research, update their knowledge and apply new pedagogical knowledge to their teaching. Part of this included communicating with colleagues and sharing ideas, which was included in this emergent theme.

Child-centered. Child-centeredness was a theme for both teachers from the U.S. and Finland. Although the term was not specifically used when discussing children, the theme was woven into aspects of the teacher's role and the environment. For example, interviewees in Finland described that teachers should "look after the child's benefit" and that the "child is in the center" of the environment. In Finland, the teachers viewed child-centeredness as the ability of children to make their own choices and make decisions about the classroom and their own learning. One interviewee stated that children "are to be the adults" in planning and creating an environment for themselves. Furthermore, the furniture and materials should be child sized and appropriate for the children's age and development. In the teacher interviews (U.S.), child-centeredness focused on the importance of listening to children's interests in order to guide activities and support learning topics. Using a project approach, one class in the U.S. chose to explore airplanes by testing paper airplanes, dramatizing plane rides, and learning about the various roles of airline employees. Moreover, one of the teachers representing the U.S. explained "quality education doesn't necessarily mean that…teachers have to own every moment." The teacher goes on to explain that unstructured movement, play or outside time is important for children to experience.

Respect. While following the codes for child-centered, the word respect was repeated time and again. It became evident that a distinction would need to be made between statements that focused on applications of child-centeredness (a teacher following children's interests in planning activities, or children's abilities to make choices about what they want to do, as described above) and statements about valuing children's input and their contributions to the classroom. For example, one of the teachers in the U.S. explains that children's attempts at learning, prior knowledge and feelings should be respected. The teacher discussed how children are competent enough to make choices about who they do and do not want to hug, or how they want to be greeted in the morning. In the same sense, the Finnish interviewees valued children's agency, and commented that children should be trusted.

The whole child. The emergence of the whole child was developed particularly as a subset of many of the other themes such as the teacher's role, child-centered and the environment. As the interviewees representing Finland discussed aspects of quality that were easily coded into the theme of environment, the participants also explored the ideas of supporting the child's entire well-being with areas for rest and food, cleanliness and safety. The terms "nurture" and "well-being" and "emotion" were mentioned in discussing the teacher's interactions with children, and that "the care has always been more important than the education of the teaching aspect of early childhood education." The child's emotional development and holistic well-being were discussed as being more important than academic knowledge and teaching. The interviewees from the U.S. discussed supporting the whole child in ways such as role-playing conflict resolution, using job charts to help children feel ownership, and making sure children have moments that are just pure and happy.

Teacher's role. Both the Finnish and U.S. interviewees shared a variety of roles that are vital for educators. The teacher's role was described by a Finnish interviewee as "the very heart of this work comes from…the ethic and values that we have as being the…adults that raise the children

here;" the role encompasses the teacher's attitude, interactions, education and knowledge, listening skills and flexibility. The teachers from Finland discussed practices such as setting up the environment with the children, focusing on the "care and the nurture," facilitating problem solving and social skills with children, listening actively and being present with them, and applying knowledge of pedagogy to the selection of classroom materials and adapting to the needs of children. The Finnish participants believed teachers do not merely attain knowledge of early childhood education; rather, they possess the years of experience and understanding of how to use the E.C. knowledge in the classroom. Teachers should be able to provide engaging materials and spend time with children in one-on-one sessions. Another role of the teacher involves planning and incorporating cross-curricular activities that meet the needs and interests of all children. The interviewees from the U.S. mentioned roles such as modeling positive language, helping children to feel good about coming to school, guiding social and emotional learning, multitasking, using teachable moments effectively, and, "always being proactive," to ensure that children know the expectations and can begin to self-regulate.

Society. The theme of society, not initially seen as a direct indicator of quality, emerged as the participants spoke about how society views teaching. In terms of providing high-quality care, it is inferred that the teachers valued their autonomy in the classroom, even though society may not. While asking about cultural influences, one of the interviewees in Finland responded by describing the contrast between what teachers experience of the complexities of teaching and how she perceived society to view teaching. This participant mentioned that teachers are underappreciated and people outside of education do not know what it is like, stating, "they don't actually know what we do here." Similarly, interviewees in the United States recognized teachers do not often receive credit for the work they do, but believe teachers remain critical to the lives and development of children. A participant from the U.S. said, "We're trying to squeeze childhood into everything else we're doing today." In order to promote high-quality care, it is critical for educators to be valued and respected to demonstrate the freedom and autonomy to make decisions on behalf of the children in their classrooms.

Finland Generated Theme

Family. Emerging solely from the Finnish interviews were discussions of families and parents. The emergent theme remains simply as "Family" because the more specific topics of involvement, engagement, and parental role did not align with all the statements and codes regarding families. Teachers spoke slightly of the teacher's role in meeting with families and valuing their input, but the focus was more on the child's needs and not the family's. Two of the Finnish interviewees alluded to the fact that parents are sometimes "not interested in all those things" such as the day-to-day activities and goals, or that parents are busy and don't need to be bothered about all the details and specifics. Communication with families about their child's main goals and planning for learning is a sign of quality mentioned in the interviews.

U. S. Generated Themes

Education. Regarding teacher qualifications, the interviewees from the U.S. primarily focused on the need to develop highly educated individuals working with children. For the participants

representing the U.S., highly educated also meant teachers were life-long learners participating in continuing education and professional growth opportunities. Both interviewees mentioned an article they recently read in order to keep themselves abreast of relevant research and current ideas in early childhood education. Some continuing education opportunities teachers mentioned included webinars, classes, and conferences.

Classroom climate. One of the sub-categories of the Environment evolved as a unique theme: Classroom Climate. This theme generated from statements reported by teachers from the United States. In quality programs, it is critical for children to feel a sense of belonging. Employing teacher encouragement, identifying clear and consistent expectations, implementing activities promoting classroom families, and assigning class tasks supporting children's empowerment and group membership frames classroom climate to develop children's positive self-images.

Feelings of safety, in the sense of risk-taking, were grouped with this theme because the teachers explained that if children, "do not feel safe, they are not willing to take chances and learning is a lot of taking chances." On the contrary, when "a child feels belonging and feels calm and safe, they are able to grow from there."

Curriculum. Another theme that emerged from the interviewees in the United States included the need for teachers in high-quality programs to provide children with a variety of activities to support learning. While the children's interests may guide the activities, it is the responsibility of the teacher to plan a variety of experiences that support a child across all learning domains. As one of the U.S. interviewees explained, "children need to be given a variety of experiences…'cause there are all different type learners. They learn in different ways, so we need to give them opportunities to experience things differently." The teachers from the U.S. stressed that not one single approach works best for all children. Thus, the theme of curriculum is not an indicator of using a pre-packaged curriculum model, but rather, facilitating a variety of daily learning experiences across all domains, not forgetting the gross motor domain, experiences that are meaningful to children and their different learning styles. Moreover, one interviewee emphasized play as the essential avenue for children's learning. The teacher stated, "they have to have the building blocks before they can learn to read. And that's all, running, jumping, playing, talking, singing. It's got nothing to do with worksheets…"

Conclusions

This study focuses on comparing teachers' perceptions of high-quality early care among teachers in Finland and the United States, seeking to gain insight to the cultural or societal distinctions. As a comparative case study, this research did not aim to generalize teacher perceptions across all of Finland or the United States, but rather to provide a voice to the teachers who are often rigidly judged according to the high-quality standards that they provide. In a statement combining perspectives of six experienced early educators from Africa, India, Europe and the United States, Jalongo et al. (2004) explore an earlier version of ACEI's Global Guidelines for the Education and Care of Young Children and provide insight that supports the notion of similarities existing in our global view of high-quality early care. In much the same way, this study purports that evaluations of high-quality are not systematic across societies and nations,

but this study also values the multiple perspectives that comparative education research can highlight.

In addressing the first research question, the analysis of interview data suggests that there are similarities between how Finnish and U. S. teachers view high quality care. The attitude of each interviewee was that of excitement, passion, and respect for providing children with the best possible care. Common emergent themes included child-centeredness, interactions (focused on teacher-child interactions), the teacher's role in the classroom, pedagogy and experience of the teacher, respect for children, societal influences, respecting the child, and supporting the whole child. The second research question is addressed in highlighting the differences that existed in terminology used and emphasis on which indicators may be more important to quality. For example, in the Finnish data, two teachers spoke of the need for a flexible environment, one that responds to the needs and the interests of the children. In the interviews with teachers from the U.S., the theme of environment focuses on the physical set up and promotion of independence. Both the teachers from the U.S. and Finland stressed the importance of putting the children first, whether that means supporting their interests in the curriculum or trusting that they can make competent choices.

The last research question regarded the influences of teacher perceptions. When asked about possible influences regarding their ideas, both groups of participating teachers described education and experience as influencing their beliefs associated with high quality care and, similarly, both groups recognized and made statements describing the value of childhood. According to one teacher, "we're trying to squeeze childhood into everything else we're doing." Society and our way of life seem to be pushing childhood away, primarily by individuals outside the field and decision makers that "don't actually know what we do." The teachers felt that the early childhood profession warrants respect and appreciation adequate to justify their making decisions about their classrooms and the children they nurture.

Limitations

Qualitatively, a small-scale case study as demonstrated here, has its limitations. Teachers were purposively selected as exemplar teachers and because of their connections to university programs. Both nations represented are developed, White-European nations and may already represent quality standards that are similar. Language was another limitation, as the researcher did not know Finnish. Although the Finnish teachers spoke English well, it is probable that some concepts and ideas were made ambiguous in translation. It is important to also note the role of the researcher in data coding. While in vivo and values coding were selected to enhance the participant's ideas and values, the researcher ultimately made the final decisions about the emerging themes, and as such, themes are regarded in terms of the researchers' own vocabulary. Furthermore, the emergent themes do not contain an exhaustive list of participant values of high-quality. A lack of an emergent theme, for example, the theme of Families discussed only by Finnish teachers, is not meant to implied as devalued by teachers from the United States.

Future Research

This study provides a vital initial step in honoring teacher knowledge and expertise of high-quality program standards. Teachers from Finland and the U.S. recognized their own education, experiences and ideas about pedagogy influence what they valued in the classroom. An important feature of future research would be an analysis of the content of teacher preparation programs in both nations. This would aim to enhance knowledge of cultural and societal influences mentioned by both groups of teachers. Since experience was also stated as an influence, it is recommended that future studies on high-quality early care in education employ a sampling method to include a variety of teacher experience levels.

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