



Quality of educational experiences in childcare services: A survey on parents' perceptions in the city of Padova, Italy

Qualità delle esperienze educative nei servizi all'infanzia: Indagine sulle percezioni dei genitori nella città di Padova

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ABSTRACT

In ECEC services, treating quality as negotiated fosters reflective practice among both educators and parents. Parents' participation constitutes an important aspect, as parents and educators are co-responsible for children's development. This exploratory study investigates parents' perceptions of 'quality' in childcare and the educational experiences offered to children. A questionnaire was administered to parents whose children attend nurseries in educational services in the city of Padova (Italy). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse the data. Findings highlight the aspects that parents consider most important in educational experiences, and the aspects to which less value is attached. Notably, parents attached less importance to including documentation, parental participation, and territorial involvement. Based on the results obtained, the wider doctoral project to which this study belongs aims to promote the involvement of parents in reflecting on the quality elements of educational experiences.

Nei servizi per l'infanzia, considerare la qualità come "negoziata" migliora i processi di riflessione sia degli educatori che dei genitori. La partecipazione dei genitori è un aspetto importante, in quanto genitori ed educatori sono corresponsabili nello sviluppo del bambino. Questo studio esplorativo indaga la percezione che i genitori hanno della "qualità" nei servizi all'infanzia e le esperienze educative offerte ai bambini. È stato somministrato un questionario ai genitori di bambini che frequentavano i nidi afferenti al sistema dei servizi educativi della città di Padova. Per l'analisi dei dati, sono stati adottati metodi sia quantitativi che qualitativi. I risultati evidenziano gli aspetti che i genitori ritengono più importanti nelle esperienze educative e gli aspetti a cui si attribuisce minor valore. Tra i risultati, è interessante evidenziare che gli aspetti ritenuti meno importanti da parte dei genitori includono: documentazione, partecipazione genitoriale e coinvolgimento del territorio. Sulla base dei risultati ottenuti, il progetto dottorale cui è riferito questo studio mira a promuovere il coinvolgimento dei genitori nella riflessione sugli elementi di qualità nelle esperienze educative.

KEYWORDS

Family participation, Early Childhood Education and Care, Quality, Educational experiences, Reflexivity
Partecipazione delle famiglie, Servizi socioeducativi per la prima infanzia, Qualità, Esperienze educative, Riflessività, Zerosei

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1. Introduction

The topic of quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is increasingly central in both international and national contexts, reflecting a growing awareness of the importance of the early years of children's lives. This paper explores how parents conceptualize and contribute to the quality of 0–3 childcare services, within the broader European discourse on participatory evaluation in ECEC. It is therefore necessary to reflect on what "quality" means in early childhood services.

Quality is a theme widely discussed in the educational field; in fact, over the past ten years, there has been increased attention and policy initiatives at the European level on issues related to ECEC (early childhood education and care), which have been the subject of several Communications of the European Commission.

In defining the concept of quality, a relevant document is *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (European Commission, 2014). The record recognises three aspects of quality in services, starting from the idea that there isn't only one definition of educational quality. Reference is made to "structural quality", that is, all the regulatory and organisational elements, to "process quality", which includes all the experiences lived by children that influence their growth, to "outcome quality", referring to learning and the development of competences (European Commission, 2014, p. 8).

Discussing the quality of early childhood education services means considering the elements that qualify them as educational contexts and promoting children's well-being and growth (Becchi, et al., 2002). In this regard, it becomes essential to consider the perspectives of the different actors in these services in order to make explicit the values that underpin educational practice.

Because quality is not a fixed or objective concept, it is important to rely on the idea of negotiated quality, which requires sharing aims, values, objectives, and bringing out and comparing different perspectives (Bondioli & Savio, 2010).

1.1 Negotiated and contextual quality

When we refer to quality, it is neither predefined nor standardised, and its validity is intersubjective, contextualised, and related to a specific group and context (Ungaro, et al. 2020). Quality is constituted by relationships, experiences, practices, and reflection on action (Sannipoli, 2021) and encourages the transformation and improvement of educational contexts and practices.

Alongside the concept of quality, it is essential to focus on educational evaluation. Reflecting on educational contexts is the starting point for revealing the images of childhood they convey and the educational cultures expressed through pedagogical choices and intentions; this reflection requires questioning behaviours and practices.

This leads to the concept of empowerment evalua-

tion (Fetterman, 2000), aimed at supporting a process of awareness and self-determination in participants and promoting the transformation of contexts. Evaluation thus becomes essential to improving quality by enabling co-participation among stakeholders.

Value is attributed to participatory evaluation that allows teachers and parents to be equally involved and becomes a helpful strategy for initiating reflection on the quality of the project and the educational provision at home and school.

1.2 Parental involvement

Interdependence between educators, parents, and children is the foundation of a culture of relationships based on the participatory exchange between the educators' educational professionalism and the parents' educational experience, both of which are attentive toward the child's participatory and competent activity (Restuccia Saitta & Saitta, 2002). An equitable dialogue between teachers and parents on what is and the educational quality at school and in the family constitutes an essential strategy for effective participation and initiating improvement projects (Bondioli & Savio, 2015).

Participatory evaluation is therefore closely linked to the dissemination of the culture of participation, which emphasises the importance of parents' involvement in children's education. The opportunity for parents to participate in the child's school education promotes learning and growth (Edwards, et al. 2008). Still, it is also "strongly associated with children's later academic success, high school completion, social-emotional development, and adaptation in society" (OECD, 2011, p. 217).

Parent engagement and family support services contribute to children's academic achievement and well-being. Parents provide a fundamental context for supporting children's learning, and their behaviour regarding children's well-being is a mechanism that fosters long-term effects (Reynolds et al., 2022).

Referring to Epstein's (1995, p. 704) types of parental involvement in child-rearing, participation is considered both as a form of communication between the childcare équipe and parents, as well as an opportunity to actively engage parents in decision-making processes within the service that concern children, favouring the expression of their points of view and the possibility of comparison with other families.

At the same time, the concept of participation relates to the pedagogical idea of childhood and, consequently, the valorisation of the child's abilities and competences considered as the protagonist of growth and learning processes (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 2015; Wall & Robinson, 2022).

Recognising the child as competent necessarily leads to the valorisation parental figures, who, together with educators, are co-responsible for the child's education and growth (Epstein, 1995).

2. The study

2.1 Aim and research questions

Starting from the theoretical framework outlined above, this study aims to investigate how parents perceive and define the concept of quality in early childhood education services, with particular attention to the educational experiences provided in nursery settings. This study constitutes the initial phase of a broader three year-long doctoral research project, which focuses on a specific educational service. As a first step, it was deemed essential to conduct a wide-ranging exploration of the broader Padova area (located in the North-East of Italy) in which the service is situated.

Specifically, the research aimed to address the following questions:

- RQ1. What meaning do parents attach to the concept of educational quality?
- RQ2. What value do parents attach to the aspects that characterize the educational experience in early childhood childcare?

2.2 Sample and survey structure

2.2.1. Conceptualization

The questionnaire was structured by highlighting certain aspects that characterize early childhood educational services and, in particular, the elements that influence the design of educational experiences, considered as activities proposed by the educators to the children, spontaneous, playful activities that originate from the children, routine moments that daily constitute significant opportunities for learning and discovery.

The elements considered therein draw on the framework of Id.E.A. 'Idea di Educazione e di Autovallutazione' (Ungaro, et al. 2020), a nursery school quality self-assessment tool as a guide for educators in the evaluation process of their service. This tool is based on fourth-generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), emphasising the formative value of the evaluation process. The intent is to promote a reflective and participatory process and to involve the actors in the co-construction of meanings.

2.2.2. Recruitment

The investigators sought to involve parents of children attending nursery school educational services (0 – 3 years old), assuming they have relevant familiarity and experience regarding the aspects featured in the questionnaire. Three institutions managing early childhood education services in the Padova area helped disseminate the survey by sharing the questionnaire with childcare coordinators, who, in turn, sent it to the parents. Hence, the questionnaire was shared with 33 nurseries, resulting in 328 parents participating in the survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

2.2.3. Questionnaire

The questionnaire, structured using LimeSurvey software, consists of seven sections and 26 questions overall. It was translated into both Italian and English to make it accessible and usable to everyone.

The questionnaire features an open question, multiple-choice questions, one ranking question, and an additional question at the end of the questionnaire. Closed questions are "forced choice" questions (Zammuner, 1998, p. 96). The sections titled "Adult's personal details" and "Child's personal details" feature questions with multiple answers and are structured to gather helpful information concerning the adult's and child's details, which they do in connection with the nursery attended by the child.

The dimensions "Context", "Relationship," and "Documentation and observation" are highlighted by several indicators, resulting from items that ask parents to rate their importance on a four-point Likert-type scale ("Not at all," "Not much," "Quite a lot," "Very much"). The alternative "Don't know/do not answer" is also present. For each grouping connected to an indicator, participants are given the opportunity to add further items of relevance using the "Other" option.

The ranking question is placed in a section of its own (out of seven) and ask parents to rank on a 1–10 scale which aspects among the proposed ones they consider to be the most relevant when comparing the quality of educational experiences.

The subsequent "Quality" section features an open-ended question that allows parents to express elements they recognise as representative of the idea of quality in educational services

The 'quality' section presents an open-ended question that allows the elements in which parents recognise the idea of quality, referring to the educational service, namely: "Question No. 14: In your opinion, what are the elements that can contribute to making a childcare centre a good childcare centre, which means a quality educational service?". This question is intended to investigate parents' perceptions, ideas, and, therefore, considerations about what the concept of quality in a childcare service means to them. This open question (Q14) was placed before the closed items to avoid priming by subsequent content.

All recorded answers were included in a single word file, divided among them, and numbered for 328 responses. The answers were then reviewed by the Authors, and a total of 317 answers were therefore used for the analysis.

At the end of the questionnaire, an open question allows parents to add elements they consider essential to what has already been presented.

In this article, we will only report the data analysis and the results obtained referring to open question 14, as they are more useful for research purposes.

3. Data analysis

3.1 Quantitative data analysis

Initially, data were tabulated in a spreadsheet, which was later cleaned. SPSS software was then used for statistical data analysis (as per recommendation by Kulas, et al. 2021; Mastrorilli, et al. 2015). For each item within the relevant dimensions, the following descriptive statistics were calculated: frequency, percentage, mean, mode, and standard deviation. The frequency and mean of the respondents were identified for the ranking scale. Using the SPSS software, it was also possible to:

- analyse comparisons between groups (contingency tables);
- check for significant differences between variables (one-way ANOVA);
- test the presence of possible significant correlations between variables.

During data analysis, the answer 'I do not know/do not answer' was treated as a missing value and was therefore not assigned a numerical value. For data interpretation purposes, missing answers were included in the calculation of frequencies and percentages but not when computing the mean and standard deviation of each item, of each indicator and dimension, nor included in ANOVA.

3.2 Qualitative data analysis

Answers to the open question no. 14 were analysed using the Atlas.ti software for qualitative data analysis (Frieze, 2019). With a bottom-up approach, a codebook was constructed, with a total of four groups and 27 codes. The results obtained with Atlas.ti showed a total of 916 Quotations (coded segments) and 1004 Codes.

Once the thematic analysis was completed, content analysis was conducted to quantify the references and aggregate the themes and sub-themes (Vaismoradi, et al. 2013). Content analysis was carried out through the reports produced by Atlas.ti and subsequently using Excel. A table was constructed for each theme, which shows:

- The name of the theme (CT)
- The sub-theme (CS)
- The number of answers in which the sub-theme is present (Answer N)
- The percentage of answers about the total answers (%)
- The number of references for the individual code (Frequencies (N))
- The percentage relationship between the individual code references and the total theme references (% CS)
- The percentage relationship between the individual code references and the total references (% total)

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative results

4.1.1. Profile of respondents

Results concerning parents' details reveal that most of those who completed the questionnaire are mothers (74.4%), rather than fathers (25.3%). In one case, the questionnaire was completed by a grandmother. In general, most of the respondents are between 36 and 40 years old (45.1%), while few parents are between 26 and 30 (5.2%) and a minority under 25 (1.5%). Notably most mothers are between 36 and 40 years old (47.1%), while fathers are equally distributed between 36 and 40 years old and over 40 (39.8%). Most of the parents are Italian (91.8%); most of those who declared not being Italian citizens (27 out of 328) come from European countries, while only two outliers came from outside Europe: one from Africa and one from South America. Regarding the level of education attained by the parents, most claim to have a university degree (44.8%) and a postgraduate degree (41.5%). A small proportion state that they have a secondary school degree (9.8%) and a high school degree (0.6%). Few (1.2%) indicate that they don't have any educational qualification.

With respect to the request to indicate why parents decided to enrol their child in childcare, almost half of them (46.6%) believe that the main motivation is related to work efforts. One part recognises it as providing the child with new educational stimuli (26.8%) and socialisation opportunities (15.9%), and a minor part believes it is to be accompanied in the child's education (8.8%).

No one believes that the motivation is linked to the possibility of expanding the parents' relational network.

Among parents, some believe that the motivations are to be found in all those proposed.

4.1.2. Children's profile

Regarding children demographics, most respondents' children are boys (53.4%); the remainder are girls (46.3%).

Most of the children of respondents are between 25 and 36 months old (61.4%) and a sizeable share are between 13 and 24 months old (34.5%). Children between 7 and 12 months are a minority (3.4%) as children between 3 and 6 months (0.9%).

We wanted to understand whether the children attending the educational services have siblings and, consequently, whether the parents responding to the questionnaire have already had experience in other educational services. So, from the results, we observe that almost half of the children have no siblings (49.4%), while a part also has a brother/sister (38.7%) or more (11.9%).

For the most part, in the case of only one brother/sister and for more than one brother/sister, the children's siblings are older.

Regarding the children's presence at the childcare, most of the children have been attending the nursery

for 6 – 12 months (47.9%), and a good number have been attending for more than 12 months (36.3%).

These constitute valuable data to complete the questionnaire since it is assumed that the parents were able to experience the nursery context and consequently form an idea and consideration regarding the concept of quality.

4.1.3. Dimensions and indicators

With respect to the dimensions, the highest mean relating to the general responses is recorded for the 'context' dimension (3.74), followed by the 'relationships' dimension (3.63), and finally by the 'observations and documentation' dimension (3.57).

Regarding the 'context' dimension, the indicators show mean values that do not differ excessively between each other (3.74 total mean), indicating that parents recognise the proposed items 'materials,' 'spaces,' 'time,' 'activities' in a similar way as quality elements for educational experiences.

The 'relationships' dimension shows a significant difference between the indicators 'educator-child relationship' (3.88 mean) and 'relationships between children' (3.76 mean), which find a high level of agreement among parents in recognising them as necessary, and the indicators 'parental participation' (3.47) and 'territorial involvement' (3.41), which show lower mean values, reflecting a minor consideration by parents of their importance for the quality of the educational experiences.

Regarding the 'documentation and observation' dimension, there is a difference between the mean values of the 'documentation' (3.48 mean) and 'observation' (3.66) indicators, which suggests that parents recognise documentation as a less critical aspect of ensuring the quality of educational experiences than observation.

4.1.4. Ranking scale

Parents were also asked to rank from 1 to 10 the importance of the indicators explored in the closed questions, particularly from the three sections 'context,' 'relationships,' 'documentation, and observation' (Table 1).

The results align with what was analysed when comparing the mean values of the indicators for the dimensions. The data show the percentages and the mean of parents who recognised three dimensions 'educator-child relationship' (80%), 'type of educational activities and experiences proposed' (72%); 'relationship between children' (47%) as main aspects for guarantee the quality of educational experiences.

At the same time, among the aspects proposed, a majority of parents, in percentage terms, indicate the following as the last three dimensions in terms of importance concerning educational quality: 'openness to the territory' (76%); 'documentation of experiences' (64%); 'parents' participation' (58%). Once again, the ranking scale confirms the data derived from the mean indicator values in the dimensions (Table2).

4.1.5. Results of some Items

Based on research interests, we introduce some of the results obtained from the parents' answers about the items proposed within the questionnaire.

In particular, we focus on the aspects that parents consider most relevant to educational quality and, at the same time, they value less. We report some of the results that are useful for future reflections in the research process (Table 1).

		<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Not much</i>	<i>Quite a lot</i>	<i>Very much</i>	<i>I don't know</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>SD</i>
Experiences promote the child's discovery and curiosity	%	0	0	9.8	89.6	0.6	3.90	Very much	0.299
Experiences promote the child's autonomy	%	0	0.3	9.8	89.3	0.6	3.90	Very much	0.317
The educator promotes a caring, welcoming and listening relationship with each child	%	0	0	5.2	93.6	1.2	3.95	Very much	0.224
The child is considered and recognised as the protagonist and developer of his/her own knowledge	%	4	1.2	15.2	82	1.5	3.82	Very much	0.417
The childcare shares with families the educational planning and the objectives and observations that guide the design of educational experiences	%	0.3	3.7	26.2	69.2	0.6	3.65	Very much	0.565
Parents are involved in some educational experiences at the childcare, enhancing their resources and skills	%	2.1	9.2	41.2	46.3	1.2	3.33	Very much	0.736

Table 1. Results of some Items.

Regarding the 'activity' indicator in the 'context' dimension, it can be observed that the highest mean is recorded in the aspects emphasising the importance of proposing experiences that encourage discovery and curiosity, and stimulate autonomy.

For the 'educator-child relationship' indicator, within the 'relationships' dimension, all the indicators find strong agreement among parents, who recognise the aspects proposed fundamental to educational quality.

In particular, the most relevant finding is the recognition of the importance of building meaningful relationships between educator and child, while also acknowledging the child's active role in experiences and discovery.

Regarding the dimension 'parents' participation', although the most significant number of parents regard it as an essential aspect, lower values are recorded.

It appears that parents value participation primarily as a form of shared decision-making regarding planning and methodology. On the other hand, the idea of participation as active involvement of parents, the valorisation of parents' own resources, or creating dialogue and confrontation among parents, are aspects that parents consider less relevant to educational quality.

4.1.6. ANOVA

In the data analysis, we used ANOVA to test whether the variance between the groups is due to the different modes of the factors determining the groups. For the analysis we consider a critical $\alpha = .05$.

Based on the most relevant aspects of the survey, we report some notable differences between some categories with respect to specific items.

Panel A: Descriptives				
Attendance length at child-care (months)	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	
< 6 months	19	2.79	1.084	
6–12 months	155	3.35	.652	
> 12 months	118	3.29	.775	
> 24 months	32	3.72	.457	
Total	324	3.33	.734	
Panel B: ANOVA				
<i>Source</i>	<i>F(df1, df2)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>η</i> ²	<i>ω</i> ²
Between groups	6.980 (3, 320)	< .001	.061	.053

Table 2. Participation—parents [SQ002]: descriptives and one-way ANOVA by attendance length (months).

Table 2 shows that parents' ratings of participation differed by attendance length, $F(3, 320) = 6.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .061$, $\omega^2 = .053$ (SQ002); although overall evaluations were positive ($M = 3.33/4$), families in the earliest group (< 6 months; $M = 2.79$) rated participation substantially lower than families with > 24 months ($M = 3.72$).

Panel A: Descriptives				
Attendance length at child-care (months)	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	
< 6 months	18	2.83	.857	
6–12 months	154	3.35	.691	
> 12 months	118	3.39	.704	
> 24 months	33	3.70	.529	
Total	323	3.37	.708	
Panel B: ANOVA				
Source	<i>F(df1, df2)</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2 (= ηp^2)	ω^2
Between groups	6.143 (3,319)	< .001	.055	.046

Table 3. Participation—parents [SQ003]: descriptives and one-way ANOVA by attendance length (months).

According to Table 3, a consistent pattern emerged for the second participation item, $F(3, 319) = 6.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .055$, $\omega^2 = .046$ (SQ003), with ratings rising from < 6 months ($M = 2.83$) to > 24 months ($M = 3.70$).

Although parental participation is not considered a very important aspect overall, parents whose children have been attending childcare for longer recognise the possibility of valorising family resources as an essential aspect, particularly when compared with parents of children who have been attending the nursery for less than 6 months (Table 2).

This difference may reflect that more experienced parents have had opportunities to engage with participation practices, or perhaps recognise its potential, unlike other parents who have not yet formed a strong opinion.

Similarly, parents of children attending the nursery for the longest time also recognise the value of dialogue and confrontation between families as an important quality aspect, in contrast to parents who have only recently begun to experience the daily routine of the educational service (Table 3).

Taken together, these effects are small-to-moderate in variance explained ($\eta^2 = .06$; $\omega^2 = .05$) yet practically meaningful on a four-point scale, suggesting that greater exposure to the service is associated with stronger valuation of co-education.

4.2 Qualitative results

The codebook for the qualitative analysis of open question n. 14 presents four main themes: 'context,' 'training, planning, documentation,' 'relationships,' and 'technical and organizational aspects,' each of which is characterized by sub-themes.

The thematic and content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) shows that, in response to the open-ended regarding the topic 'context,' most parents refer to the type of activity proposal designed for children to promote overall development and to foster new learning (98 references, corresponding to 9.8% of the total number of references).

In addition, many parents recognise the adequacy, use and variability of available spaces as a quality element (70 references), along with the possibility of using outdoor spaces during different times of the year (58 references).

There also emerges a concern among parents for the creation of an environment that is welcoming and familiar, and which stimulates the child (29 references).

In some cases, parents focus on the type and variety of materials provided (24 references) and the importance of timetables and routines (12 references). At the same time, a minority of parents emphasise the importance of promoting autonomy (3.8% CS) and consolidating routines (1.3% CS).

The central aspect that emerged concerning the quality of childcare is to be found within the theme of 'training, planning, documentation.' Numerous responses from parents emphasise the importance they attach to the educators' qualification, competence, and professionalism, with 184 references deriving from 182 answers (57.4%) out of the total.

This aspect is interesting because it isn't explicitly included among the indicators in the closed questions, and yet many parents identify it as key factor in ensuring educational quality.

The answers don't emphasise the relationship between educator and child, but specify that the essential element is to be found in the educator's expertise and training. The planning and therefore the educational and methodological choices of the service are also considered as a relevant aspect for educational quality (19.5% CS).

Interestingly, as in the responses to the closed questions, documentation of children's activities is not widely recognised by parents as a key aspect, with only eight references.

Regarding the theme of 'relations', it can be observed that the aspect most recognised by parents as an element that fosters educational quality is the relationship between families and services. This is viewed as a relationship based on dialogue, communication, and sharing regarding the child's development and growth, aimed at building an educational partnership.

However, parental participation, understood as active involvement in the daily life and activities of the nursery, is mentioned by only 12 out of 317 respondents, who stress the need to feel involved in the educational service during certain specific activities.

Additionally, few parents identify the value of being supported in their parenting role, for example through advice and dialogue with the educators, particularly during key developmental stages or in response to specific needs.

It emerges from the answers that parents recognise the quality of a nursery school when the needs of the individual child are recognised, respected, and welcomed. The child is made the protagonist of their knowledge and discoveries while respecting their personality (19.2%).

In this direction, the relationship between educator and child takes on value, considered by the parents as a welcoming, caring relationship that stimulates the child while respecting the singularity of each one.

Finally, territorial involvement, understood as the possibility of making the most of external resources present in the area, constitutes an element of quality identified by only three parents.

One issue that emerged from the analysis of the

answers to the open question concerns the technical and organisational aspects of the service, in particular relating to the internal organisation (61.5% CS) with reference to the numerical relationship between educator and child, contracts of educational team, the presence of an internal refectory, and the number of groups and children.

5. Discussion

The results of the survey provide insight into how parents conceptualise *educational quality* in early childhood services (RQ1). For most parents, quality is closely associated with the type of educational activities provided to children, the professionalism of educators, and the quality of the relationship between child and educator.

In particular, parents appreciate that the activities proposed by educators are designed with an educational purpose in mind, aimed at stimulating children's learning, development, and discovery. Both the open-ended and closed responses confirm this view, emphasising how significant these activities are in fostering children's curiosity and growth. This aligns with existing literature, in fact studies in the pedagogical and educational fields, with reference to early childhood education services, recognise multiple elements that contribute to promoting children's growth. The experiences concern both the autonomous and spontaneous discoveries that arise from the children and the experiences proposed and thought out by the educators that enhance the children's interests and stimulate their thoughts (Bondioli & Savio, 2018; Melhuish et al., 2015; Ungaro et al., 2020).

At the same time, the fundamental role of the educator in children's development is recognised, with parents emphasising the importance of an educator who is attentive and responsive to each child's individuality, supporting their overall growth.

Some parents explicitly refer to the value of children being listened to and understood, to make each child feel recognised and supported in their individual journey.

This reflects the literature that emphasises the significance of high-quality adult-child interactions, which are crucial in stimulating and supporting learning, making it a positive and meaningful experience (Fisher, 2016; Lundy, 2007; National Commission for the Integrated System of Education 0–6, 2022).

Educators' professionalism, training, and competence are also strongly recognised as essential to ensuring quality, further reinforcing the parents' vision of quality as dependent on the educators' ability to design and implement valuable experiences.

In relation to RQ2, the study clarifies which specific components of the educational experience are most appreciated and considered valuable by parents.

Indeed, from both the closed and open answers emerges how the parents value the types of activities that are proposed to the children by the educators, and in particular the importance is emphasised that these activities are designed to promote children's development, learning and discovery, and that they stimulate them to new knowledge.

This is highlighted by the results of the closed an-

swers in which 72% of parents identify educational activities as one of the top three dimensions that guarantee quality.

Within the indicator 'materials,' parents recognise the importance of the experiences 'favoring the child's discovery and curiosity.' This aspect is also found in the open-ended answers, from which the parents focus on the children's learning and the possibility of stimulating them, fostering their overall growth.

Also, it emerges that parents consider the caring and listening relationship between the child and the educator as an essential aspect; recognising it as a relationship that allows the personalities of each child to be enhanced.

Some parents stress the importance of valuing the individual child's needs and personality to accompany them in their growth by making them the protagonist of their own development.

By contrast, parental participation in the life of the service receives less attention. Parents' considerations focus mainly on the quality of communication between parents and educators. Many parents emphasise the importance of transparency and trust between the family and the educators, aimed at communicating and sharing the child's growth and development.

At the same time, less value is attributed to the possibility of parents being active participants in childcare, being involved in activities, proposals, or projects that see them as actors and present with the children and educators.

This consideration emerges from both the responses to the closed question and the responses to the open question: in the ranking scale 58% of the parents recognise parental participation as one of the last three aspects in order of importance for educational quality. Furthermore, the item concerning the enhancement of parental resources records the lowest mean within the dimension 'parents' participation', indicating the fact that parents don't recognise the possibility of being involved in the service as a dominant aspect. This also emerges from the parents' answers to the open question, as only 12 parents report the possibility of active involvement as a quality aspect.

So, this indicates a lack of consideration for the active participation and involvement of families in the life of childcare together with children.

The concept of co-education, where families and educators share responsibility and agency, seems to be under-recognised in parental perceptions. At the same time the literature underline as the participation of parents in the life of the educational service and the relationship established between parent and educator also constitutes a precious element in the growth of the child and in guaranteeing their well-being, as well as in enhancing the value of families and their educational role (Barger, et al. 2019; Reynolds et al., 2022).

This gap between the central role attributed to educators and the limited recognition of families' potential contribution highlights a passive view of parental involvement. The findings call for a rethinking of how participation is promoted and perceived within early childhood services.

While current practices clearly support children's learning and development through professional educational design and strong relational care, there is a need to create contexts that foster shared educational responsibility and active parent engagement. Creating these conditions can help reposition families as co-educators and valuable contributors to the quality of early learning environments.

This awareness provides a starting point: the research will proceed with the creation of spaces that favour the direct involvement of parents, promoting a shared vision of educational quality and enhancing their role as co-protagonists, together with educators and children in the life of the service. Through participatory research in childcare centre in Padova, parents will be involved in focus groups to reflect on and discuss the quality of educational experiences. The goal is to involve them in the co-construction of a self-assessment tool, fostering shared responsibility and promoting a more inclusive vision of educational quality.

6. Conclusions

This research, while offering an interesting perspective on the concept of quality in educational services, has some limitations that it is important to acknowledge. A limitation of the research concerns the specificity of the sample involved, since the study was conducted in a defined territorial context, with parents whose children participate in early childhood education services. The results may therefore not be generalisable to families who do not access educational contexts and who do but have different organisational or cultural characteristics.

Furthermore, qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions, but through a digital format. This modality may have limited the depth and detail of the responses compared to in-depth interviews, which could allow for greater depth.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes meaningfully to the discourse on early childhood education by amplifying the parental voice, offering an analysis of their perceptions of quality, and proposing concrete pathways toward more participatory and inclusive practices. Its findings invite educational institutions, policymakers, and researchers to rethink quality not as a fixed standard, but as a co-constructed, dynamic process rooted in relationships, shared responsibility, and mutual recognition.

The study makes a contribution to the educational field in that it foregrounds the parents' perspective through which to understand and evaluate the concept of quality in early childhood services. This enhances a more comprehensive and democratic understanding of quality that reflects the voices of those directly involved in the care and development of children.

Furthermore, the results shown can make a direct contribution to the improvement of early childhood education services, especially in terms of promoting relational quality and rethinking the participation of families. They make it possible to initiate reflection with respect to possible practices aimed at bridging

the gap between educators and families, helping to co-construct a shared and participatory definition of quality.

Thus, this study contributes to the discourse on early childhood education by amplifying the voice of parents, offering a solid analysis of their perception of quality. Its findings invite educational institutions, policymakers and researchers to rethink quality not as a fixed standard, but as a co-constructed and dynamic process based on relationships and shared responsibility.

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