



'A teacher's hug can make you feel better': Listening to U.S. children's voices on high-quality early childhood teaching

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‘A teacher’s hug can make you feel better’: Listening to U.S. children’s voices on high-quality early childhood teaching

Shown to be the single most influential factor in children’s early learning and development experiences, quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) teaching has attracted increasing interest in research and policy globally. Yet almost all definitions of quality ECEC teaching to date reflect only adults’ notions of the features that should define a good early-years professional. The present study captures children’s (four-to-six-year-olds’) voices on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they believe a high-quality ECEC teacher should have. Two major categories emerge from the children’s drawings and narratives, which illustrate children’s perspectives on the quality of their teachers’ role: (1) a teacher who adapts to children’s culture, and (2) a teacher who attends to individual diversity. Findings provide alternative measures of quality ECEC teaching grounded in children’s thoughtful ideas about the ways they believe their teachers can have a positive impact on their school lives.

Keywords: early childhood education and care; high-quality teaching; teachers’ role; research with children; child-empowering research methods; children’s voices

Introduction

Research with children. Reasons why

An increasing number of early childhood researchers are conducting research defined by strengths-based perception and rights-based recognition of children (Perry & Dockett, 2011). Research *with* children aligns with what is called ‘children’s rights discourse.’ This discourse derives from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly from its crucial Article 12, which advocates valuing children’s rationality and understanding (Milstein, 2010). If children are endowed with the right and ability to become active agents in their own social lives, we must recognize their potential as research participants and encourage them to develop this potential (Bolshaw

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2
3 & Josephidou, 2019; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2012). Furthermore, children's experiences
4 and knowledge should not and cannot be interchangeable with those of adults. As
5
6 Malaguzzi (1998) expresses beautifully, 'things about children and for children are only
7
8 learned from children' (p. 51).
9

13 ***Honoring children's voice. Implications for research design***

16 Researchers' choice of methods when involving children in research depend greatly on
17
18 the researchers' images of childhood. In advocating an approach to research *with*
19
20 children that considers children as similar to adults but possessing unique competences
21
22 (as in the present study), researchers must adapt their research techniques (Fargas-
23
24 Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010). The present study aims to be research
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26 *with* and *for* rather than *on* children. The research should thus be child-empowering
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28 rather than opportunity-restricting; participatory, child-sensitive and inclusive (Bolshaw
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30 & Josephidou, 2019; Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller, 2005; Lundy, 2007).
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35 As indicated above, honoring children's worlds and voices (Lipponen, Rajala,
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37 Hilppö & Paananen, 2016) requires refining research methods. The trend among expert
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39 authors is to make techniques meaningful and worthwhile, inspired by a flexible,
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41 playful, open-ended approach. The approach should be arts-based, not literacy-based;
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43 and the methods imaginative, practical and performative, involving use of familiar tools
44
45 and materials (Angell, Alexander & Hunt, 2015; Barton, 2015; Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall
46
47 & Robinson, 2019; Bolshaw & Josephidou, 2019; Einarsdóttir, Dockett & Perry, 2009;
48
49 Kanyal & Cooper, 2010; Lipponen, Rajala, Hilppö & Paananen, 2016; Martin, Buckley
50
51 & Martin, 2018).
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55 The following prerequisites guided our choice of collection and production
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57 techniques in this study:
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- *Interviews as conversations.* Children deserve to be given the opportunity to express themselves freely and to be listened to actively (Einarsdóttir, 2007).
- *An image is worth a thousand words.* Image-based research methods suit contemporary lifestyles in most societies, where people are surrounded by visual stimuli (Bolshaw & Josephidou, 2019).
- *Children's interpretations are not an add-on.* The children's comments accompanying their answers are central to data collection and production (Angell, Alexander & Hunt, 2015; Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2009).

Among the tremendous variety of child-empowering methods currently implemented in research *with* children, the use of drawings stands out because the arts have been regarded as children's early literacies (Robert-Holmes, 2014). In fact, a great deal can be learned about children's perspectives by observing them while they focus on creation and by listening carefully to their narratives (Coates & Coates, 2006). Adapting the terminology of Lipponen, Rajala, Hilppö & Paananen (2016), we call this approach a drawing-elicitation *self-driven* interview.

Children's expert knowledge on quality of ECEC services. The pivotal role of teachers

Although children participate daily in Early Childhood Education and Care (hereinafter ECEC) services from a very young age (Haney, Russell & Bebell, 2004; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2012), their views are greatly underrepresented in the literature on teaching and learning (Flückiger, Dunn & Stinson, 2018; Heagle, Timmons, Hargreaves & Pelletier, 2017). Despite the clear impact of these experiences on their present and future lives, children's view of the quality of ECEC experiences is an equally

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2
3 unexamined subject in studies worldwide (Farrell, Tayler & Tennent, 2002). Although
4
5 decades old, Katz's (1992) statements on her *bottom-up perspective of the assessment of*
6
7 *quality* are still valid, as the real predictor of an ECEC program's effectiveness is its
8
9 quality as perceived by children on a daily basis.
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12 Although factors related to teachers' quality have been shown to be the single
13
14 predominant variable influencing children's learning and development (OECD, 2005),
15
16 very few studies examine children's views of their teachers' role, and studies that do
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18 focus on older children (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015). In a meta-analysis to
19
20 identify young children's school-related priorities and concerns, Clark (2005) finds the
21
22 role of teachers to be a central theme in children's discourse. In Harcourt and Mazzoni's
23
24 (2012) study of ECEC quality as viewed by Italian children, the teacher became 'the
25
26 primary source of quality of the children's experience in their prior-to-school settings'
27
28 (p. 22). Similarly, our study aims to give children opportunities to advance ECEC
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30 teachers' practice by allowing children to voice opinions so that children remain central
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32 to teachers' professional role.
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39 **Method**

40 41 42 ***Premises***

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45 Following a qualitative phenomenological approach, we perform a study defined by a
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47 culture of listening to and valuing children's opinions (Flückiger, Dunn & Stinson,
48
49 2018). We firmly believe that children, as sources of knowledge, can take part in
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51 determining issues that are important to them. And quality in teaching is of utmost
52
53 importance to children.
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Ethical considerations

As Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry (2009) put it masterfully, ‘engaging children in research is not without challenges or tensions’ (p. 284). We were especially careful in tackling certain issues throughout the research process:

- All children were treated with equal respect and dignity. Conversations with each child were held either in English or Spanish, depending on the child’s native language. The field-work researcher was fluent in both.
- Informed written consent was obtained from both parents and teachers; children’s assent was sought by sharing information with them about the research process and their role within it. Children understood that participation was voluntary and that they were allowed to leave at any moment.
- To protect the children’s identity, we followed a strict confidentiality policy at all stages, from planning the research to communicating the findings.
- Children’s interpretations of their creations became first-order data so that the analysis did not rely only on our perspectives as adult-researchers.

Context of research and participants

The study reported here is part of a broader research project in which Spain and the United States participate. The study builds on the collaborative ties already established between the University of [XXXXX] (southern Spain) and Project Zero at Harvard University due to these institutions’ shared interest in fostering citizenship in childhood. The Spanish and U.S. schools in the study of high-quality ECEC teaching were also participating in the [XXXXX] project (Authors’ names fully redacted 2019) and the

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2
3 *Children are Citizens* project, respectively (Krechevsky, Mardell & Romans, 2014).
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5 The partial study analyzed here focuses on the U.S. children's perspectives.
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7 Participants were 42 four-to-six-year-old children from Washington D.C. attending an
8 inner-city school co-funded by the Archdiocese (Setting 1) and a public charter school
9 on the outskirts of the city (Setting 2). Both schools have a long tradition of serving a
10 very diverse population of families and children.
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15 The data were collected over approximately three months. Five-year-old
16 children's greater participation (see Table 1) may be due, firstly, to the participating
17 Kindergarten teacher's enthusiasm about the research, as she conveyed her excitement
18 to the children and their families; and, secondly, to logistics: the entire month-and-a-
19 half-stay in Setting 1 was spent in the Kindergarten classroom, whereas the time of stay
20 in Setting 2 was divided between the Pre-Kindergarten and the First Grade classrooms.
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29 [Table 1 near here]
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32 33 34 35 ***A talk-and-draw session. Co-producing data with children*** 36

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38 Each child was invited to create two different drawings in response to the following two
39 questions:
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- 42 • What would you do with children if you became a teacher in the future?
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- 44 • What do you like most about your teacher?
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49
50 While engaged in the creative process, children were encouraged to tell the field-work
51 researcher freely about their creations. Special emphasis was placed on the researcher
52 listening actively to the children's interpretations of their drawings in order to obtain
53 good insight into the meaning that each child attributed to his/her productions.
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Dynamics during one-on-one interactions with the children

Familiarization period

One-on-one interactions with children came after a familiarization process (approximately two weeks). By spending time in the classroom, the field-work researcher became familiar to the children and established trust-based relationships with them.

Language and structure

The goal was to establish horizontal adult-child relationships. Conducting research in the school context can be a double-edged sword, since power structures can encourage children to undertake activities in a way that pleases *the new teacher*.

Spaces

Teachers' collaboration was vital to finding child-friendly but open and accessible meeting places. In Setting 1, one-on-one interactions with Kindergarten children were held in the school auditorium; in Setting 2, the interactions with 1st Grade children took place in their classroom, more specifically, in the library, informally known as the *quiet corner*. Interactions with the Pre-K 4 children, in contrast, occurred during *formal teaching sessions*, free play, or lunch time, making it difficult for the four-year-olds to redirect their attention from the classroom's flow to the research activities.

Time and resources

Conversations with the children were audio-recorded. Voice recordings of interactions with girls lasted on average 36' 6'' and those with boys 28' 6''. Engaging in conversations with young children as they draw takes time. At no point were the

1
2
3 children rushed. Time enabled mutuality to emerge between the researcher and the
4 child, yielding co-produced data of higher quality, although some children felt
5 uncomfortable talking while they were engaged in drawing. These children tended to
6 focus on one activity or the other and thus to spend shorter amounts of time interacting.
7
8 Children were encouraged to choose their resources from the class's materials shelf and
9 were free to select the type of paper and crayons they wished to use during the talk-and-
10 draw session.
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21 *An analytical process grounded in children's voice*

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23 Content analysis was used to organize the textual data derived from the children's
24 interpretations. Audio-recorded conversations with each child were transcribed verbatim
25 and read and reread carefully. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used to
26 support coding and identifying patterns in the data.
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32 The analytical process was informed by a conceptual reference framework
33 developed after conducting a systematic review of high-quality ECEC teaching (the
34 manuscript of this review is currently under peer-review at a prestigious journal on the
35 teaching profession). The framework is composed of the following five dimensions:
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- 42 (1) Essential personal traits for working in the early years
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- 44 (2) Commitment to children and childhood
- 45
- 46 (3) Commitment to the quality of children's learning
- 47
- 48 (4) Commitment to the quality of children's socioemotional development
- 49
- 50 (5) Openness to the community
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59 Initially, we grouped the data into the five broad dimensions of the proposed high-
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1
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3 quality ECEC teaching framework. Subsequently, inspired by the principles of
4
5 grounded theory, we redefined the general dimensions according to the specific key
6
7 themes and categories that emerged during the interpretive analysis (data-driven themes
8
9 and categories). We applied some criteria to ensure validity in the coding system as it
10
11 emerged: exhaustive distribution of content, mutual exclusiveness of categories, and
12
13 triangulation in analyzing the data, among others. Each author first approached the
14
15 material independently. The authors then agreed on the coding system.
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19
20 Given the richness of children's comments on the teacher's image of childhood
21
22 and the teacher's sensitivity towards each child's selfhood, the results reported in this
23
24 paper focus on the parts of the children's accounts related to the second dimension of
25
26 our theoretical framework, *commitment to children and childhood*.
27
28
29

30 **Results**

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32 As Table 2 shows, several key themes and categories emerged from the children's
33
34 positions on ECEC teachers' commitment to childhood itself. Each emergent key theme
35
36 is composed of more specific subtopics or categories, which reflect the variety of
37
38 nuances in children's images of what constitutes a good ECEC teacher.
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43 [Table 2 near here]
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46 Since a significantly higher number of items of empirical evidence related to ECEC
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48 teachers' adaptation to children's culture and attention to individual diversity, our
49
50 reporting of the findings develops these two key themes and their subsequent categories
51
52 in greater depth.
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56 *A teacher who adapts to children's culture*

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59 Happiness should always be an intrinsic feature of childhood. Reference adults in
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2
3 children's lives should therefore ensure that children are happy in the two most
4
5 influential contexts of learning and development—family and school.
6
7

8 Sophia¹ (six): 'It's important that children are happy at school.'

9
10
11 When evoking their teachers' most salient attitudes and behaviors, or when imagining
12
13 themselves as teachers, the participating children emphasized experiences at school
14
15 during which they had fun with their friends and teachers.
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19 [Figure 1 near here]
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22
23 Several children referred to a good ECEC teacher as someone with whom they share
24
25 moments of joy (a teacher who reads funny books, a teacher who tickles children, a
26
27 teacher who tells jokes), and personal tastes and hobbies.
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29

30
31 [Figure 2 near here]
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34 Since fun and happiness emerge in children's discourse as prerequisites of learning,
35
36 good ECEC teachers should plan experiences that make learning seem like a
37
38 pleasurable activity for children. Outdoor experiences and involving children's family
39
40 in school- and classroom-level initiatives were specific factors that contributed to the
41
42 participating children's motivation to learn.
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44

45
46 Ava (five): 'Once, during a field trip, we went on a bus and it was so much fun!'
47
48

49
50 Michelle (four): 'If they (the children's families) come to school, we're going to be
51
52 very happy.'
53

54 The children's desire that their teachers *be attuned* to the idiosyncratic culture of
55
56 childhood also calls for implementation of a fantasy-based pedagogy. The children in
57
58 this study mentioned several experiences with their teachers (reading a fairy tale, caring
59
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1
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3 for the class teddy bear, being awarded *an imaginary prize*) that drew on the exuberant
4
5 imagination that characterizes this early stage of life.
6
7

8 Emily (six): 'When we behave well, our teachers let us play with the treasure box.'
9

10
11 One of most striking features of childhood is children's love of play. The participating
12
13 children overwhelmingly identified play as what they liked most about their teachers—
14
15 the adult's active involvement in their free moments of play. In the eyes of the children
16
17 in this study, a good ECEC teacher becomes an equal partner in play.
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22 [Figure 3 near here]
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24
25 [Figure 4 near here]
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28 29 ***A teacher who attends to individual diversity*** 30

31
32 Attention to diversity among children in the classroom starts by acknowledging each
33
34 child's individuality. The children in the study wanted their teachers to know exactly
35
36 what the children's preferences were (one child stated that he preferred cleaning up the
37
38 classroom to sleeping during naptime), to be aware of their emotional states, and to
39
40 realize when their basic needs had to be fulfilled.
41
42

43
44 Researcher: 'When you are sad, does your teacher care about you?'
45

46 Elisa (five): 'Once my mum went to the hospital, and my teacher gave me a hug.'
47
48

49 Liam (five): 'She (his teacher) tells me to get some water and have a rest.'
50
51

52
53 Going a step further in attending to individual diversity involves providing
54
55 individualized support to every child. As Table 2 shows, this is the most empirically-
56
57 grounded category (60 items of evidence). Most of the children stressed expressing
58
59 affection as a defining feature of good ECEC teachers. Such teachers implement a
60

1
2
3 *pedagogy of care* for each child, which helps to heal both physical pain and *ailments*
4
5 that cannot be seen with the eye.
6
7

8
9 Briella (five): ‘Once in Pre-K 4, I fell down, and I hurt my knee so badly... I told
10 my teacher and I felt so much better afterwards.’
11

12
13 [Figure 5 near here]
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15
16 Children also stressed moments when their teachers listened actively to their demands
17 and queries—another type of individualized support. The children participating enjoyed
18 spending time in one-on-one conversations with their teachers, whether having their
19 questions answered, being given instructions to tackle individual assignments
20 successfully, or receiving praise for their achievements.
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30 Elijah (five): ‘What I like most is talking to her about my homework and that she
31 tells me how well I’ve done it.’
32

33
34 A teacher who provides children with individualized support becomes a guide in
35 learning. Some children in this study referred to teachers’ scaffolding as essential to
36 their learning (‘if the teacher doesn’t help the kids, they’re not going to learn anything’),
37 even as guaranteeing success in their future lives. Several children also portrayed
38 episodes in which they and their teacher became a team of learning peers.
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47 Mark (five): ‘If the teacher doesn’t help the kid, when he is a grown-up, he’s not
48 going to be able to get his driving license and he’s going to crash into everyone on
49 the street.’
50

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52 [Figure 6 near here]
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54
55

56 **Discussion**

57
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59 Children in this study have been recognized as experts in evaluating the quality of their
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1
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3 teachers' role, since children are the main recipients of teachers' actions and decisions
4
5 on a daily basis. The results first raise awareness of an essential but often overlooked
6
7 part of ECEC teachers' role: ensuring children's happiness. Extensive research shows
8
9 that happy children are better able to get the most out of the learning experiences their
10
11 teachers provide (Ikegami & Agbenyega, 2014). The participating children's images of
12
13 a good ECEC teacher are also of someone with whom they enjoy learning. Broström et
14
15 al. (2015) assert that early years professionals who guide learning processes based on
16
17 humor can make learning more engaging for children.
18
19

20
21 The participating children's accounts also indicate that they value teachers who
22
23 adapt to children's culture, who implement teaching practices that benefit from
24
25 children's imaginative thinking. Eckhoff and Urbach (2008) warn that ignoring
26
27 children's creative needs could prevent children from developing powerful cognitive
28
29 tools to help them in understanding and contributing to an uncertain future. Other
30
31 related studies (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015) highlight the equal importance of the
32
33 teacher's active involvement in children's playful actions and interactions. Children in
34
35 the present study depicted a good ECEC teacher as an equal partner in their moments of
36
37 free play, indicating that they view the teacher's participation in their play as an
38
39 essential element of quality ECEC teaching.
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44 In the eyes of the participating children, a high-quality ECEC teacher is
45
46 responsive to individual differences among children in the classroom. When teachers
47
48 attend to individual diversity, they create a pedagogical context in which children feel
49
50 valued and included (Oliveira-Formosinho & Araújo, 2011). Implementing culturally-
51
52 and developmentally-appropriate teaching practices is equally important. ECEC
53
54 teachers can only help their students when they are aware of each child's personal
55
56 background and natural pace of learning (Klaar & Öhman, 2014; McNally & Slutsky,
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2017). Our findings also recommend implementing a *pedagogy of care* to develop the nurturing teacher-child relationships essential for children at an early age (Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2011).

In addition to this *pedagogy of care*, the participating children's views should encourage early years professionals to establish a *pedagogy of participation* (Pálmadóttir & Einaradóttir, 2015), in which children's perspectives are taken seriously. For children to feel comfortable, valued, and respected when sharing pieces of their lives with their teachers, plenty of time should be devoted to one-on-one conversations (Perry & Dockett, 2011). The individualized support that the children in this study request positions high-quality ECEC teachers as partners in learning (Broström et al., 2015). The participating children described experiences in which they were learning with their teachers. For Delaney (2018), early learning flourishes smoothly when teachers adopt a guiding and supporting role, that is, when they talk, question, and discover together with children.

Conclusion

In an era of accountability and high-stakes testing, both in the U.S. and worldwide, measuring quality in early childhood services means implementing adult-established standards to assess children's readiness for school (as if the early years alone did not make a significant contribution to children's present and future lives). We need urgently to strengthen a research culture that considers children as fully capable of offering valuable insights on the quality of their early learning experiences. Aligned with this positioning, our study contributes to redefining and enriching mainstream notions of quality ECEC teaching by grounding these notions in four-to-six-year-old children's expert views on the quality of the role played by their educators.

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3 1. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve the participating children's identity.
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Table 1. Demographics of the children participating

N=42 children	Setting 1		Setting 2			
	Kindergarten		Pre-K 4		1 st Grade	
Age	5-year-olds n=21		4-year-olds n=9		6-year-olds n=12	
Gender	♀ n=11	♂ n=10	♀ n=7	♂ n=2	♀ n=6	♂ n=6

Or Peer Review Only

Table 2. Popularity of key themes and categories in children's discourse

Key themes	Categories	Examples <i>Children's voice</i>
	Awareness of children's full potential (5)**	'Young kids can do even better than the older ones!'
A teacher who admires children (21)*	High-expectations-based pedagogy (9) The teacher as someone who learns from children (7)	'We have a lot of homework because we are learning a lot of new things, like rocks, water...' 'Kids can say things that are important for the other kids and for the teacher'
A teacher who respects children (32)	Active listening to children (21) Children's right to decide about their learning (11)	'The teacher is listening to the kids. When kids speak, the teacher is silent' 'I would just let them do whatever they want and have whatever they want'
A teacher who adapts to children's culture	Fun and happiness as conditions for learning (37) Fantasy-based pedagogy (21)	'What I like most about her is that she is funny, and she makes us laugh' 'I really want my teacher to read Malala's book'

(79)		(Malala Yousafzai). I also want to fly like her'
	The teacher as a partner in children's play (21)	'Even the teachers climbed the hill!'
A teacher who attends to individual diversity (73)	Acknowledgment of each child's individuality (13) Individualized provision of support (60)	'I like when my teachers explain something to me in English, because I'm not good at speaking Spanish yet'

* Evidence assigned to the key theme

** Evidence assigned to the category

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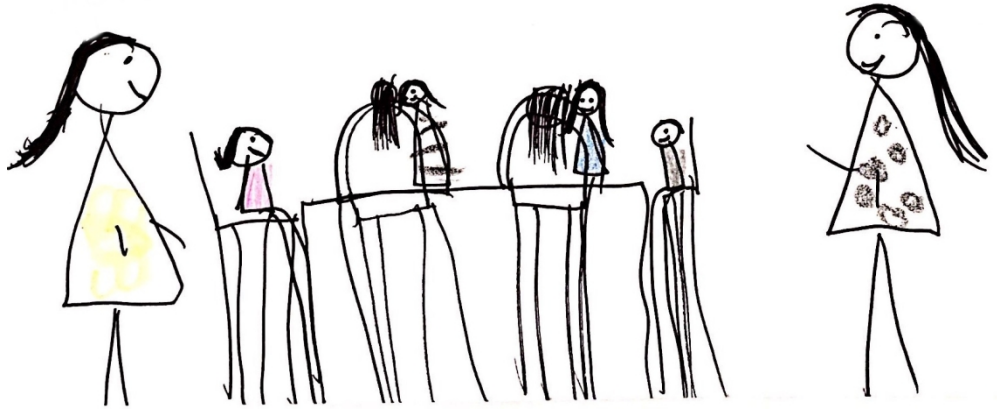


Figure 1. Emma (six): 'We're having a popcorn party.'
624x259mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Figure 2. Isabella (five): 'I'm having fun with my teacher. We're watching the Emoji movie.'

631x264mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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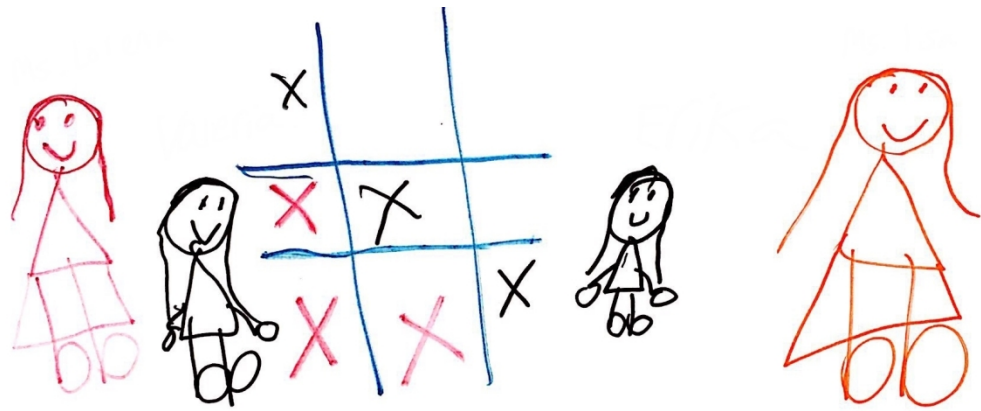


Figure 3. Mia (six): 'What I like most is playing tic-tac-toe with my teachers and my friends.'

598x258mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Figure 4. Madison (five): 'I'm playing with my teacher outside on the playground.'

494x479mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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Figure 5. Ada (four): 'I'm taking care of this kid who is sick. The other kids are taking their naps.'

544x361mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Figure 6. Benjamin (five): 'We've taken the LEGOs out of the closet and all the boxes are on the carpet. My teacher is helping me to build a huge tower.'

799x475mm (72 x 72 DPI)