Using metaphor to illuminate quality in early childhood education
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Abstract

This paper reports on a study in which educators from four early childhood centres used metaphor to discuss their provision of high-quality early childhood education. Qualitative mining of focus group data confirmed 'quality' to be complex, multi-dimensional and value-laden. Findings contribute to understandings of quality in early childhood education through four key themes: 'quality' as a synergetic flow; the facilitative stance and impact of leaders in the enactment of leadership; children as active contributors to quality; and the role of love. Metaphor is shown to be a valuable tool that can highlight tangible and intangible quality contributors, how these contributors link together, and the contextual specificity from which quality in individual early childhood education settings emanates.

Keywords

Quality, Early childhood education, Metaphor, Leadership

Word count

6421

Using metaphor to illuminate quality in early childhood education

> *I have searched and re-searched everywhere and offered 'dance' as the metaphor, and 'dancing' as the image. But I do leave it open to the reader. Because it could very well be that it is zebras, or grids and girdles, or nests, or something else entirely that creates an image in your mind of the interaction between local and connective values (Giamminuti, 2013, p. 321)*
>
> *In short, the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another (Lakoff, 1992, p. 1)*

Introduction

Metaphor is an analogy that compares an object or practice to another construct for explorative, communicative or illustrative purposes (Davies, 2013). Accordingly, a metaphor has both descriptive and explanatory power (Midgley & Trimmer, 2013). The two excerpts presented at the beginning of this paper suggest that this power lies in the capacity of metaphor to be contextually relevant, such that it can convey new understandings in meaningful ways.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has historically been, and continues to be, represented and thought about metaphorically. Froebel coined the term 'kindergarten' (Manning, 2005), literally 'children's garden', to invoke a natural child-centred environment that offered hands on learning experiences through play. More recently, metaphor has been used to name the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whariki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996). Whariki, the Maori word for 'mat', was chosen to evoke an image of curriculum as being woven from 'principles, strands and goals' that produce patterns distinctive to each program's context. More broadly in education research, metaphor has been used as a methodological tool to explore and analyse teachers' practice (Mahlios, Massengill-Shaw, & Barry, 2010), to represent changing teachers' identities over time (Sumsion, 2002; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) and to explore early childhood leaders' perceptions of leadership and management (Argyropoulou & Hatira, 2014). Even policy analysts (Bown, 2009; Elliott, 2006) have utilised metaphors to critique government

approaches to ECEC. This sample of literature is indicative of the utility of metaphor to convey meaning that may otherwise remain hidden or untapped.

Using metaphor as a reflective tool to uncover and explain experience can be particularly useful when seeking to explore and understand "something esoteric, abstract, novel or highly speculative" (Yob, 2003 cited in Mahlios et al., 2010, p. 50). Singh notes that metaphor can facilitate the grasping of an abstract concept by "concretising it" (2010, p. 127). As a contested construct that we consider to be complex, relative and values-driven (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007) 'quality' in ECEC appears amenable to qualitative mining using metaphor as an exploratory and analytic tool.

Few studies, however, have explored ECEC quality in this way. Two notable exceptions are Giamminuti (2013) and Logan and Sumson (2010). Giamminuti's proffering of quality ECEC in Reggio Emilia as a dance stems from her finding that such provision involves multiple interacting components that are selected according to culturally specific values and norms. In their exploration of how six early childhood teacher-directors in Australia conceptualised their provision of quality ECEC, Logan and Sumsion (2010) used a map metaphor to illuminate identified tangible quality contributors (e.g., ratios and qualifications), and water to conceptualise intangible contributors (e.g., relationships, teamwork and professional judgement). Although undertaken in very different contexts both studies highlight the value-laden and cultural specificity of 'quality', and how metaphor can be used as a methodological device to convey and uncover the complexities of quality ECEC.

Building on the work of Giamminuti (2013) and Logan and Sumsion (2010), this paper explores the value of metaphor as a tool to assist educators articulate their understanding and provision of quality in ECEC. Our goal was to consider how metaphor might act as a springboard to new ways in which quality in ECE can be understood and articulated. We do this by exploring how educators in four long day care centres in Australia used metaphor to talk about their provision of high-quality ECEC.

In the following section we outline the context within which the study was undertaken, and the methods used. We then provide an overview of the metaphors chosen by participants to represent quality in their respective settings before moving on to present key themes generated from the data.

Method

Sample and participants

Data presented in this paper are drawn from a study that aimed to identify and explore elements that support and sustain high-quality centre-based long day care in Australia. The study was conducted in 2008-2010, prior to the introduction of Australia's current system of early childhood regulation and quality assurance, the National Quality Framework (NQF) (ACECQA, 2018). While data was collected over a decade ago, our focus on metaphor as a tool to reflect on, understand and articulate quality ECEC renders our findings to be relevant today.

Phase One of the study statistically analysed quantitative quality ratings comprising of data from 74 centres that were rated as high quality in the period 2002-2006 by three measures: the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) administered by the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC, 2005) (the precursor to today's Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, (ACECQA)); the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998); and the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale ratings (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2003) (for more detail see Fenech, Harrison, Press, & Sumsion, J., 2010a; Fenech, Sweller & Harrison, L., 2010b). Phase One analysed the consistency of quality scores across these measures and over time for each service. This analysis revealed that one centre consistently rated highly on all three measures, while a further nine centres consistently rated highly on QIAS and either the ECERS or ITERS scales.

Following ethics approval from Macquarie University (HE27FEB2009-R06312) all ten centres were invited to participate in Phase two of the study. The centre with high ratings on all three measures, and the first five centres with high scores on two measures to respond were included in this second phase of the project. Using respective educator and parent focus groups, this second phase identified and explored the factors that contributed to the six centres' high-quality ratings. This paper draws on data collected from participating educators when they were invited to generate a metaphor that reflected and explained 'quality' as it was practiced at their respective setting. In one centre staff declined this invitation. At another centre, the director nominated a metaphor to be used, however, as ensuing focus group data suggested that the metaphor was not 'owned' by the staff it was not included for analysis. The metaphors from the four remaining centres provide the focus of this paper.

All four case study centres were located in New South Wales, Australia. Two of the centres, referred to in this paper by the pseudonyms Gawell and Elviston, were located in rural areas. The other two centres, referred to by the pseudonyms Milne and Gunyah, were located in metropolitan areas. All four centres were community based not-for-profit centres with Milne

and Gunyah located on university campuses. All centre directors were university qualified early childhood teachers and with the exception of Gawell, had over twenty years' experience in ECEC. Other participating staff had early childhood teaching, diploma or certificate level qualifications, or no early childhood qualifications, and varying years of experience working in the sector. All participants provided written consent to participate in this phase of the study.

Data collection and analysis

Participants were given the flexibility to generate a metaphor using any process they deemed appropriate. Staff at Elviston, Gunyah and Milne generated their respective metaphors during focus group discussions; while at Gawell, staff discussed a metaphor that was included in their centre philosophy. Table 1 provides summary information on the four cases study sites, the number of participants, and the metaphor they identified for their respective centres. Focus groups were held at each case study centre and led by the lead author who adopted a semi-structured approach. Discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Discussion pertaining to each centre's metaphor focussed on the following questions: What is your selected metaphor and why did you choose it? How does your selected metaphor represent your provision of quality? How does the metaphor illustrate how 'quality' is achieved at your centre?

Table 1: Participation in metaphor focus group discussions at each case study site

Case study centre	**Metaphor**	**Participants**
Gawell (rural; licensed for 59 places)	Happy home	Centre director Eight educators
Elviston (rural; licensed for 86 places)	A thriving garden	Centre director Eight educators
Milne (urban, university; licensed for 40 places)	An orchestra	Centre director Eight educators
Gunyah (urban, university; licensed for 51 places)	A tangled bundle of different coloured ribbons, tied together at the centre with a bow	Centre director Two room leaders

Staff at Gawell discussed the metaphor of "a happy home", an image incorporated in their philosophy statement. At Elviston, the director proposed "a thriving garden" to which the

staff agreed. The ensuing discussion with all participating educators developed the garden metaphor into a richer and more complex image than the director had originally envisaged. At Milne "an orchestra" was agreed following a suggestion by one of the centre's untrained educators. Participants at Gunyah began discussing the appropriateness of a nautilus shell but disbanded this possibility in favour of "a tangled bundle of ribbons, tied together at the centre with a bow". Participants from Gawell and Elviston developed images of their determined metaphors prior to an educator focus group (Figures 1 and 2 below) while educators at Gunyah developed an image of their metaphor during one of their focus groups (Figure 3 below).

Our analysis of each centre's focus group data was informed by Hatch's (2002) approach to inductive analysis. First, each focus group transcript was read and re-read for data familiarisation. This reading was undertaken within a frame of analysis that was informed by the purpose of this paper, that is, how might metaphor act as a springboard to new ways of understanding and articulating quality in ECEC. From this process we then identified two salient domains of analysis or parameters that informed a closer reading of the data: contributors other than the most common structural and process factors identified in extant ECEC research (Fenech, 2011), and the relationship (if any) between the quality contributors participants identified. From this step data was coded according to emerging categories. In the contributors domain categories included 'leadership', 'the team', and 'the children', while in the relationships domain categories included 'all contributors important' and 'interconnected contributors'. A review of the data within each category led to the identification and exploration of four major themes. These themes are discussed below as provocations.

Findings

Metaphoric representations of quality ECEC

Staff at the four case study centres generated metaphors unique to their respective centre contexts and provision of high-quality ECEC. At Gawell, staff used the metaphor of "a happy home" (Figure 1) as they regarded the centre to be "home away from home" for the children. Consistent with the centre philosophy, staff aimed to provide a "nurturing, home-like environment for its children and families" (Gawell Parent Handbook, p. 4). Staff viewed Gawell as a big, happy, united family where each child was known and felt special. This in turn represented to staff how the centre was high quality. In addition to professional

knowledge and skills, each staff member contributed personal skills and talents (e.g., music, quilt making, gardening, and handiwork) to create a home-like environment geared to meeting each child's development and learning needs. As depicted in Figure 1, hallmarks of a happy home include inclusion and acceptance of diversity; a natural and aesthetically pleasing environment; having fun and time to relax and celebrate together (e.g., birthdays and national events); enabling regular times for all children and staff to come together; and genuinely loving and caring for each other.

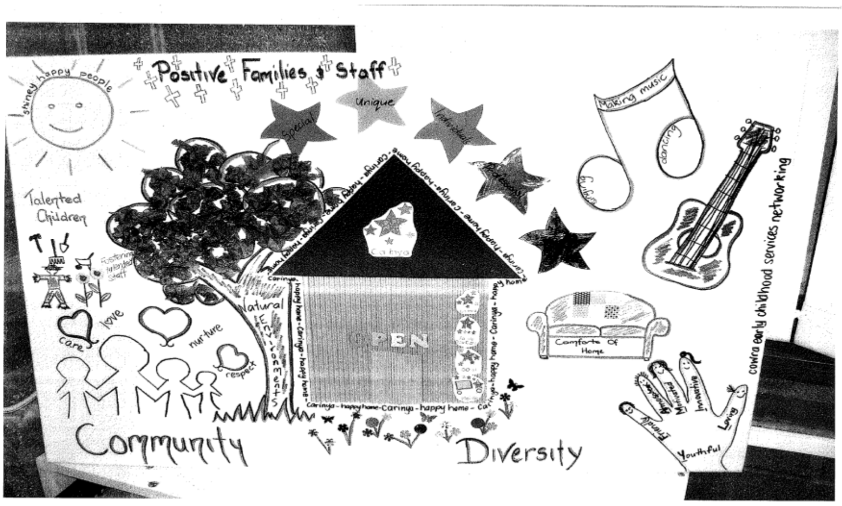

Figure 1: Quality metaphor from Gawell – A happy home (image developed by staff)

At Elviston, staff generated the metaphor of a "thriving, sustainable garden" (Figure 2). The notion of 'thriving' was particularly pertinent, with staff maintaining that a high-quality centre enables children to thrive, not just survive. The aspect of sustainability captured the positive lifelong impact of high-quality ECEC. In the image of the garden, children were akin to seedlings that require nurturing. The role of the educators (the "expert gardeners") was to ensure that children "bloom". As a centre with an established reputation for including children with additional needs, staff regarded some children in need of special care and protection by the gardeners to ensure that all "seedlings" thrived. To achieve this aim, staff utilised: their expertise and engaged in continuing professional development; government provisions (funding, regulations, standards); established networks with allied professionals ("specialist advisors"); and regular staff meetings. They referred to their team ethos and like-mindedness. Participants described government provisions such as the national early childhood curriculum - the Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) - and regulatory standards as "sun and rain". These were considered essential but potentially damaging, requiring professional judgement

in their application and management. It was regarded as critical that all educators were committed to the centre philosophy (the garden's master plan), thus new educators (gardeners) were not employed by the director (the head gardener) unless they adhered to its values. Similarly, parents could only enrol their child if they shared the centre's philosophy.

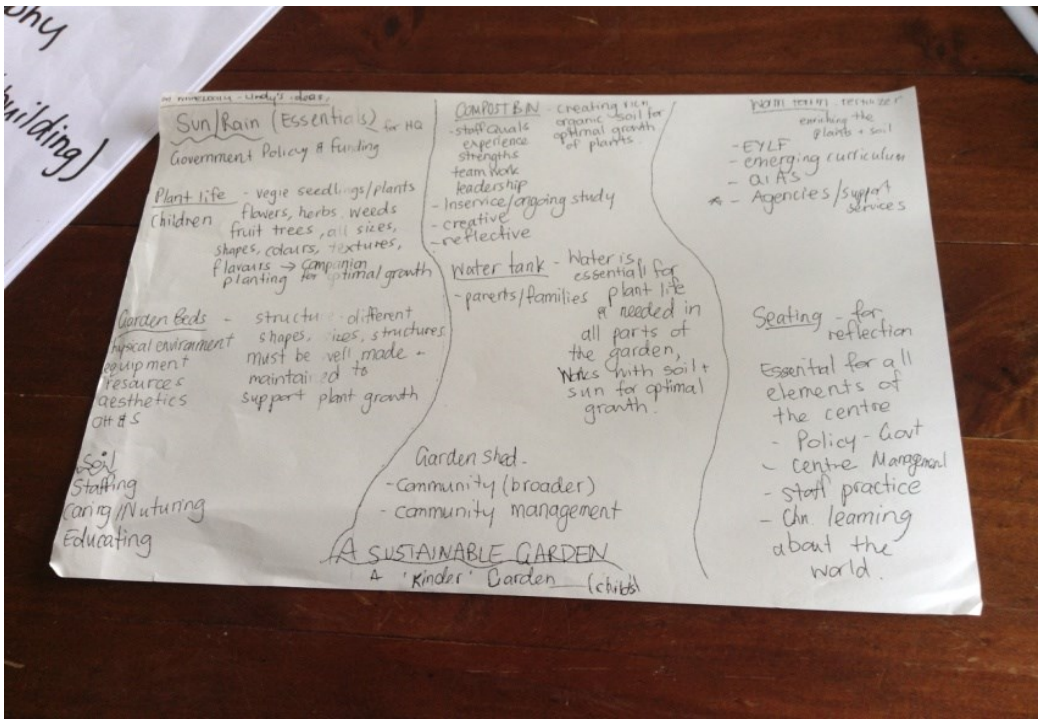

Figure 2: Quality metaphor from Elviston - A thriving, sustainable garden

Staff from Milne represented their provision of quality ECEC using the metaphor of an orchestra. This metaphor reflected the extensive use of music in the centre's curriculum, and the fact that most staff played an instrument and shared a love of music. Staff considered the orchestra to be comprised of the staff, children and families. Combined, all stakeholders were considered to provide a diverse and valuable contribution to quality ECEC. The director and educators had great respect for all orchestra members and encouraged and supported their contributions. The range of music used at the centre and played by educators (the musicians) reflected their embracing of diversity to meet the needs and interests of the children and to ensure that aspects of the centre philosophy (described as the sheet music) such as social justice were fostered. Irrespective of the music being played, staff always "played to the same beat". All members enjoyed and wanted to be a part of the orchestra, thus music was always "played from the heart" and came from a sense of "professional wellbeing". Educators noted that their role in the orchestra required them to practice and continue to develop their knowledge and skills. They were also mindful that, at times, they had to advocate for the music to be high quality, and that sometimes achieving great music involved taking risks.

They held the attitude that all staff musicians must play music "at such a high standard that it gives the audience [e.g., parents, quality assessors, visitors] goosebumps".

At Gunyah, quality ECEC was conceptualised as children learning in an environment of authentic relationships grounded in an ethos of mutual rights and responsibilities. The metaphor developed by staff − a tangled bundle of different coloured ribbons, tied together at the centre with a bow (Figure 3) − focused on elements at their centre that worked together to enable such provision. Each of the ribbons represented a contributor to quality, for example: a shared philosophy, high numbers of staff to children, highly qualified staff (more than required by regulation), and a learning community in which staff regularly used theory to reflect on practice. Each staff member, child and parent also constituted a ribbon. The ribbons intersected at the point of the centre philosophy, emphasising the centre's values as a focal point for all centre practices and decisions. The knot from the centre bow represented the centre director, who in ethical and supportive ways, ensured that the ribbons are not "linear" or "disparate" but rather interconnected through the centre's philosophy.

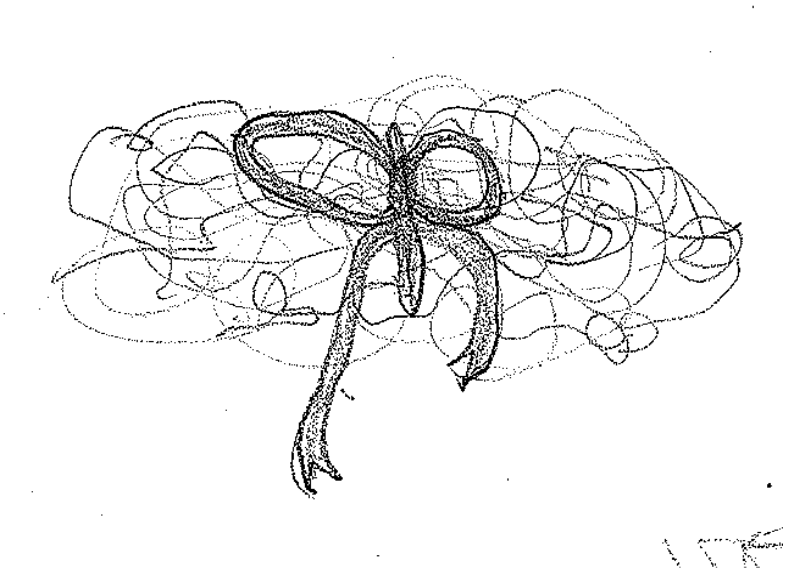

Figure 3: Quality metaphor from Gunyah - A tangled bundle of different coloured ribbons, tied together at the centre with a bow

Like the metaphors used in Giamminuti (2013) and Logan and Sumsion (2010) the four images generated by participants, captured fluid, subjective and value-laden depictions of quality. Emphases on characteristics such as a happy home-like environment, a sustainable and thriving environment, diversity, harmony and belonging reflected each centre's

philosophy and the educators' skills, interests and values. Additionally, the metaphors presented quality as multi-dimensional, comprising a complex interplay of tangible and intangible contributors.

Provocations about 'quality' ECEC

In this section we provide four provocations about high quality ECEC that we derived from our analysis of each centre's metaphor data. These focus on: 'quality' as a synergetic flow; the facilitative stance and impact of the leader; the recognition of children's contributions; and the role of love. Each provocation is first raised through the presentation of relevant data. The discussion that ensues reflects conversations and debates that the research team engaged in when considering implications for practice and policy.

1. 'Quality' as a synergetic flow

At each centre, staff noted that their provision of high-quality ECEC was the product of many individual contributors working together synergistically. Conversely, participants considered that if contributing factors operated independently of each other quality would diminish. At Milne, for example, Evelyn commented that "Each individual part (of the orchestra) is fantastic. But bring it all together, conducted together, then it just creates this rich amazing thing", to which Susan added "If you took one element out, it kind of starts shrinking". Similarly, Margaret from Gawell commented that "All the elements make it a happy home". At Gunyah, the research team presented staff with a draft visual representation of the bundle of ribbons metaphor raised at a previous focus group. In this draft, the ribbons did not intersect. This feature was immediately noticed by staff who maintained that they should be "all tangled up". The Elviston director's comment that irrespective of qualifications and experience, educators applying for a position at the centre would not be employed if they were not committed to the centre philosophy, is another example of the importance of quality contributors interconnecting rather than operating independently.

Participants from Elviston, Milne and Gunyah, however, held different perspectives on whether each of their identified quality contributors played an equal role in their provision of high-quality ECEC. At Elviston, in response to the researcher's question as to whether being "expert" gardeners implied that staff contributed most to their provision of quality ECEC, Natalie maintained that "You couldn't say that one's more important than the other. You need the parents and the family, you need the children and you need us, because we're all equally important". In contrast, staff at Milne believed that the staff team was most critical to high

quality ECEC. In support of this view, Susan the director (conductor of the orchestra) commented "always at the end (of a concert) when the conductor takes a bow it's with the orchestra. I could stand and wave but if I don't have brilliant musicians I'm just waving my hands around". Both teacher-participants from Gunyah considered that their director's leadership was the most critical contributor:

> "as to whether something is more important that another, I would have to say that for me (the director) is so crucial … the crucial leadership that the boss, as it were, the visionary nature of (the director's) leadership is … the most important thing … I actually don't think the other ribbons make any sense without (the director's) vision and leadership".

Questions of whether some quality contributors are more important than others, and whether all quality contributors need to be simultaneously operating at a high-level are particularly pertinent to regulatory frameworks designed to assess centres' provision of quality. In Australia today, the NQF (ACECQA, 2018) provides an overall quality rating for ECEC settings against national quality standards. The standards comprise of seven quality areas: Educational program and practice; Children's health and safety; Physical environment; Staffing arrangements; Relationships with Children; Collaborative partnerships with families and communities; and Governance and leadership. Centres are given a rating for each quality area, which are then used to determine the overall quality rating. A summary of how this overall rating is determined is outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: National Quality Standard Ratings (ACECQA, 2018)

Quality rating	**Minimum criteria for services to receive this rating**
Significant improvement required	Service is deemed to pose an "unacceptable" risk to children's safety, health and wellbeing.
Working toward meeting National Quality Standard	At least one quality area is rated as Working toward meeting National Quality Standard.

Meeting National Quality Standard	All seven quality areas are rated as Meeting National Quality Standard, or the service has a mix of Meeting and Exceeding ratings.
Exceeding National Quality Standard	At least four of the seven quality areas are rated as Exceeding. Two of the four Exceeding ratings must be for quality areas 1 (Educational Program & Practice), 5 (Relationships with Children), 6 (Collaborative Partnerships) or 7 (Governance and Leadership).

While the rating system requires all quality areas to be at least at the benchmark standard for centres to be rated at the Meeting NQS level, an Exceeding NQS rating (which arguably equates to a high quality service) only requires centres to be operating above the benchmark in four of the seven quality areas (Educational program and practice; Relationships with children; Collaborative partnerships; and Governance and leadership). The areas of Children's health and safety; Physical environment; and Staffing arrangements only need to be 'met'. Through the metaphors presented in this paper, staff emphasised the interconnectedness of contributors to quality at work in their respective centres. The data also highlighted both the number and calibre of educators as being critical to high-quality ECEC. Our findings indicate that there is scope to consider whether such differentiation between quality areas is sufficiently rigorous for a rating of Exceeding NQS to be obtained.

2. The facilitative stance and impact of leaders in the enactment of leadership

In contrast to the prominence of these three directors in their respective centre's metaphors was the reticence of the directors to nominate or draw attention to their leadership as quality contributors. The director at Elviston stressed that although she was the head gardener, the master plan for the garden was developed in consultation with all gardeners, whose contributions she valued. In response to a staff member at Gunyah pointing to the director's vision as a quality contributor the director responded, "But it wouldn't mean a thing without these other ribbons". Similarly, the 'conductor' at Milne noted, "there's that knowing that nothing exists without the musicians and how grateful that you are as a conductor that everyone is playing their part when they're supposed to".

In these three high quality centres the opportunity to assume leadership roles was distributed throughout the team. Being one of the gardeners at Elviston, for example, did not preclude staff members from exercising leadership by establishing companion planting and microclimates in the garden, just as orchestra members at Milne were given scope to try different "tunes". In these centres, the directors appeared to both take the lead and be part of the team.

Woodrow and Busch (2008) and Hard and Jónsdóttir (2013) argue that the prevalence of the traditional male authoritarian model of leadership hinders a strong leadership identity in ECEC. This perception may, in part, account for the directors' reticence to identify their leadership as a key quality contributor. Nevertheless, the directors' reluctance to identify themselves as central to quality is accompanied by their explicit acknowledgement of the role of staff in ensuring that the settings operate at high quality. The directors' outward focus on their teams, and the recognition by staff of the role their director played, underscores the importance of the facilitative role of leadership in quality ECEC. The emphasis that these directors placed on the contribution of their teams is consistent with other studies that have highlighted the effectiveness of distributed leadership in early childhood services (Heikka, Waniganayake, & Hujala, 2013; Nupponen, 2006; Press, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006) and research that illuminates the director's role in supporting staff agency (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014).

Despite the reluctance of directors themselves to assert their leadership role, the metaphors (orchestra conductor, head gardener, central ribbon) highlight the importance of directors as facilitators to the achievement of quality in ECEC. Researchers in both Australia (Hard, Press, & Gibson, 2013; Sims et al., 2015) and overseas (for example, Argyropoulou & Hatira, 2014) have expressed concerns about a lack of leadership preparedness in ECEC settings, a lack that is often linked to staff's reluctance to envisage themselves as future leaders (Press, 2012). While concerns have been expressed that traditional models of leadership may be alienating to a predominantly female early childhood workforce, metaphor can open up possibilities to describe and position leadership for quality in ECEC in ways that affirm both the positive impact of those in leadership positions and the collective impact of staff and other stakeholders.

3. Children as contributors to high quality ECEC

The metaphors also illuminated different positionings of children in the provision of quality ECEC. Gawell's metaphor represented a 'happy home' *for* the children attending. In this representation, children are beneficiaries of quality ECEC. In contrast, the metaphors generated by staff at the other case study centres highlighted children as active participants in establishing a quality ECEC setting. At Elviston, some children were given the responsibility of nurturing other 'plants' through companion planting (placing compatible plants beside each other to support each other's growth) and establishing microclimates. Microclimates were described as mini protective environments where the needs of certain plants (e.g., delicate plants that required shade) were catered for by placing them next to other plants that would create the climate the plant required (e.g., a tall bush that would provide shade to shelter the more delicate plant). Staff applied this analogy to the children, for example, by referring to older and more "outgoing" children as peer supports to younger children developing in confidence, and to children with additional needs.

At Milne and Gunyah all children, irrespective of age or capabilities, were viewed vital contributors to each centre's quality. At Gunyah each child was represented in the staff's chosen metaphor as a ribbon that intersected with all other quality contributors. Thus, the centre's philosophy of mutual rights and responsibilities was one enacted by all children through acts such as putting books away after they had finished reading, and enabling ongoing engagement in long term projects without interference (for example, by not knocking over a block construction that a group of children were working on over several days). At Milne, children were regarded as members of the orchestra, contributing to the centre through their own personalities, talents and interests as well as through acts of kindness and support for one another, such as assisting with feeding and tying another child's shoelace.

The metaphors elicited in this study highlight a spectrum of possibilities from which staff may view children and the role children can subsequently play in high-quality ECEC. Viewing children as active participatory citizens (Smith, 2007) in meaningful relationships with others is reflected in, and facilitated by, centre practices that open possibilities for children to contribute to the quality of ECEC. For example, enrolment practices that facilitate the development of children's relationships with each other (e.g., through enrolling children on consecutive days); and pedagogical practices that support children's participation in their own learning and in supporting the wellbeing and development of those around them (e.g., family grouping; opportunities for children to care for and teach others).

4. Love as a contributor to high quality ECEC

Three metaphors suggested that love was an important contributor to high-quality ECEC. Being a conductor at Milne, for example, involved "making sure that the children and the people around me are feeling filled up and loved" (Milne director). A teacher at Milne, Rochene, observed that throughout the orchestra "there is love amongst child, teacher and parent". Reflecting on the role celebrations play in Gawell's happy home, Daniel commented that "it's just an absolute privilege to see the children, just their faces glow when they see it's a birthday or something. It just makes the children inside feel so warm, so loved". At Elviston, Julie noted that "love and care" are essential for the plants' nutrition and growth, and that in addition to their knowledge and skills as professional gardeners, "watering the garden with our love" is essential.

These excerpts suggest that love is an intangible though nonetheless potent quality contributor. Consistent with the complex, multidimensional perspective of quality, love in the examples provided interconnects with leadership responsibilities; staff personal traits, motivation and sense of satisfaction in their work; and the building and sustaining of warm, supportive relationships between children, parents and staff. Yet, 'love' is not used in contemporary early childhood policy documents. For example, Australia's Early Years Learning Framework promotes children feeling "safe, secure and supported" and having "a strong sense of wellbeing". These outcomes are linked to "warm nurturing relationships" with educators who show "genuine affection, understanding and respect for all children" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 21, 30). The Framework shies away from statements about 'feeling loved' or 'loving relationships', yet this appeared the essence of what staff from participating high-quality centres offered and wanted for children and for each other.

Elfer (2013) argues that early years policy needs to give "more serious attention to the emotional dimensions of nursery organisation and practice" (p. 1). Such an approach would not only attend to the central role of love in young children's development (Leach & Trevarthen, 2012), but would also acknowledge educators' emotional investment in their practice. Page (2014) has suggested that "effective carers working with young children are likely to allow *love* to contribute towards their definition of caring" (p. 125), a sentiment echoed by Osgood (2010) who noted that nursery managers' and staff's most common description of their professional traits was "caring, loving, compassionate" (p. 127).

In the present study, the theme of love and care emerged when educators were asked about their quality practices. The importance of love in pedagogy, and in early years practice in particular, may appear to be on the margins of official discussions of quality, but it is increasingly recognised (see for example, the recent work of Yin, Loreman, Majid, Alias, 2019 in refining a Dispositions towards Loving Pedagogy (DTLP) scale). The findings suggest that policy reform and dominant discourses of professionalism as noted by Osgood, may be out-of-synch with the subjective experiences of educators. Together, they highlight a need to re-examine the place of love in conceptualisations of quality ECEC.

Concluding thoughts

While based on data collected over a decade ago and prior to the introduction of the NQF, this study highlights the utility of metaphor as a tool for educators to collaboratively reflect on and articulate their provision of quality ECEC, using language familiar and meaningful to them, irrespective of the system of regulation and quality assurance they are accountable to. Metaphor enabled participants to make visible the subjective, cultural and context specificity of their centre's approach to quality. Participants appeared to find using language grounded in a meaningful metaphor professionally stimulating, and valued thinking and talking about 'quality' in a way that did not have to demonstrate the meeting of externally set criteria. The director at Milne, for example, at the conclusion of their focus group, commented that the discussion had "been a powerful thing … When you (the staff) talk and talk at such a deep level it just reminds me why I'm still here too… It was worth getting here early for".

It was not the metaphor itself but what meaning staff gave to the metaphor that was of most value (Lakoff, 1992). Accordingly, metaphor has the potential to complement regulatory quality measures and act as a conduit through staff and stakeholders such as assessors, parents, allied professionals and researchers, might better understand the complex tangible and intangible contributors to quality.

In this study, metaphor was used by participants as a reflective tool at the end of the data collection process. Hence, metaphor was used to showcase what they already understood as their provision of quality ECEC, what contributed to it, and how these contributors worked together. We surmise that possibly, had metaphor been introduced at the start of the study as a reflective device, it may have helped uncover hitherto unidentified contributors to quality. Moreover, no data from any of the four case study centres suggested that using metaphor prompted participants to think differently about their practice. As such we did not find evidence to support the ideas that thinking metaphorically informs and shapes one's thinking

about reality, or that metaphors can prompt changed thinking and give new meaning to one's experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This finding may be attributable to the fact that participants were all practicing at externally rated high quality centres, were generally experienced educators, and were highly reflective in the way they spoke about and practiced quality at their respective settings. In other words, participants had strong understandings about what they were doing and why. Future research could explore the value of using metaphor with educators of variable experience practising in centres of variable standards of quality.

As a value-laden, multidimensional construct quality ECEC warrants multiple avenues through which it can be considered, talked about and assessed. Metaphor presents as a valuable medium for these purposes. It has the potential to highlight tangible and intangible quality contributors, how these contributors link together, and the cultural specificity from which quality in individual ECEC settings emanates.

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