The quest for quality: Promising innovations for early childhood programs

The word “quest” is defined as a search in order to find or obtain something. When I started reading The Quest for Quality: Promising Innovations for Early Childhood Programs by Patricia M. Wesley and Virginia Buysse (eds., 2012) I was struck by the choice of the word quest in the title, thinking it sounded melodramatic. By the time I finished the book, however, I was in hot pursuit of answers to my own questions that emerged as I read—namely, how does my state (Illinois) fit into this quest for quality? And where do I fit? Wesley and Buysse make clear that the quest for or pursuit of quality in early childhood programs can be difficult and time-consuming. They also make clear that the search can be worthwhile and fruitful, to the extent that it enables provision of the kind of early childhood services I (and the contributors to this book) believe we all want for young children. The editors focus on the early childhood system as a whole rather than the parts, offering what Mitchell (in the introduction to the book) calls a “sweeping view of the forest and its ecology” (p. xiii). Each of the contributing authors, all of whom are well-known education researchers, discusses an early childhood issue or challenge encountered in the quest for quality. Using a wide-angle lens to capture the history and background that form the context for each issue, each author presents a part of the picture. Although the challenges are discussed separately in each chapter, the interdependency of the parts becomes evident.

The authors’ framework of the quest for quality in early childhood comprises four themes:

- developing a consistent definition of program quality, as well as modifying the definition to appropriately reflect the early educational needs of a diverse population;
- equipping practitioners to help every child develop to his or her full potential (including children with learning or behavior difficulties, children with identified disabilities, and children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds);
- integrating the various components of program quality into a single, coherent system, including quality standards, measures, and methods for achieving and supporting quality programming; and
- supporting future innovations in advancing program quality improvement efforts.

Wesley and Buysse structure both the book and their quest for quality in early childhood by examining each theme and offering ways to close perceived gaps in the practice of early care and education.

The early childhood field lacks a universally accepted definition of program quality. If I were to survey a number of individuals in the field, each would most likely propose something different regarding what it means for a program to be “of quality.” Their definitions might include characteristics that range from caregiver-to-child ratio, teacher qualifications, and physical and emotional environment, to the type of curriculum and implementation of that curriculum.

While high program quality is generally accepted as supporting optimal development of children, the measurement, evaluation, and regulation of quality is difficult when definitions of quality are inconsistent. Wesley and Buysse offer two dimensions of program quality for discussion—quality of the curriculum and planning and delivering instruction) and quality of structural aspects of the program, such as the physical environment, caregiver qualifications, and
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When I started reading The Quest for Quality: Promising Innovations for Early Childhood Programs by Patricia M. Wesley and Virginia Buysse (eds., 2012) I was struck by the variety of early care and education from the local program to the national stage, brought this particular reader to the place where it became important to contribute authors across the spectrum of early childhood, permitting the reader an inside look into the development of QRIS and the learning standards, including the expectations, challenges, and contextual factors that have influenced how each is currently being developed and implemented across the nation.

In a discussion that is both simple and profound, The Quest for Quality presents a picture of early childhood in America that is fragmented. Contributing authors lament not only the lack of consistency in defining program quality, but also the absence of a common definition for professional development, from preservice and inservice opportunities to technical assistance. This, Wesley and Buysse submit, contributes to a lack of common vision for the most effective ways of organizing and implementing professional development (p. 11). Similarly, they discuss the impact of having no federal policies that unify and support the development of a comprehensive early childhood system, beginning with local programs and reaching to the development of policy at the highest level.

Three issues related to state and federal policy efforts are emphasized for the field of early childhood to consider for the present and for future development: (1) accountability in the use of federal and state funds, (2) definition of what constitutes quality, and (3) high-quality workforce. Contributing authors Roux and Townly stress the necessity of building up the supports that local programs and states must have to work toward an integrated system of early childhood services, citing the gradual shift from a focus on providing care for children to a focus on supporting children’s growth and development (p. 175). People in the field, I believe, are seeking to better understand the separate, and sometimes seemingly independent parts that make up early care and education.

In that search it is easy to get caught up in the disparate parts rather than see the whole picture. The choice, as expressed powerfully by Wesley and Buysse, is that the field continues down the path “in which we make slow, steady progress to improve what is currently in place, or we move in the direction of innovation to produce more dramatic results and fundamental changes in how we conceptualize and support program quality” (p. 197). Wesley and Buysse submit that this is a defining moment for the early childhood field, and they propose reframing the quest for quality and related discussions in terms of disruptive innovation theory described by Christensen and colleagues (2008).

According to disruptive innovation theory, programs and organizations continually work toward making improvements to the goods and services offered. When improvement meets resistance (from any number of factors), disruptive innovation theory attempts to shift the perspective from one of restraining improvement to one of permitting improvement by viewing the change as a positive force rather than a negative one. Although it has been used primarily in the business context, researchers are beginning to examine this theory in terms of education. Interestingly, the book concludes with this rather brief description of disruptive innovation theory. Just when I thought I had a handle on where the authors were going in this quest for quality, I was surprised by this proposal to reshape the way we think about the challenges in our field of early childhood. I realized that what I had thought would be a dry, although enlightening, summary of the entire book was anything but. Wesley and Buysse close with a challenge to the reader to rethink the disruptive influences and changes that have occurred in education in the past decade, such as the release of From Neurons to Neighborhoods (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) and the evidence-based practice movement. They seem to dare the reader to envision ways that disruptions, or fairly substantial changes, to the field can have a positive impact in the advancement of the field of early childhood rather than seeing changes as something to be feared or avoided.

As the reader, I found myself becoming curious about my own state’s early childhood system, or lack thereof. I realized that, while I had a handle on the pieces of the puzzle in Illinois, such as QRIS ratings, infant/toddler early learning guidelines, and the revision of the state’s early learning and development standards, I was not entirely sure how each piece fit to form the overall picture of early care and education. The Quest for Quality, while highlighting the need to search for quality in early care and education from the local program to the national stage, brought this particular reader to the place where it became important to see the forest of early childhood in my home state rather than simply the “trees” that make up the separate, and sometimes disconnected, parts of early childhood service provision.

References


that emerged as I read—namely, how does my state (Illinois) fit into this quest for quality? And where do I fit? Wesley and Buysse make clear that the quest for or pursuit of quality in early childhood programs can be difficult and time-consuming. In: Early Childhood Research and Practice. 2013; Vol. 15, No. 1.

@article{a3a6710011784dc1db86e56420b9d8c654, title = "A Review of The quest for quality: Promising innovations for early childhood programs", author = "Thomas, (Dawn V)", year = "2013", language = "English (US)",volume = "15", journal = "Early Childhood Research and Practice", issn = "1524-5039", publisher = "Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative", number = "1"; ty - jour; T1 - A Review of The quest for quality; T2 - Early Childhood