

# Determining quality of early childhood education programmes in Spain: a case study

## Determinación de la calidad de los programas de Educación Infantil en España: un estudio de caso

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### Abstract

This paper presents a case study where a specific protocol for assessing the quality of education programmes for children from newborn to age three was used. The article opens with a statement of the problem and a historical overview of Spanish educational policy which suggest that one of the main purposes of current legislation (LOE, 2006) is to ensure that centres provide high quality educational experiences. The paper goes on to describe the research that has been done in order to develop a protocol designed to assess educational programmes for children from newborn through age three. Finally, the article presents the results of a pilot project in which this protocol was applied in a case study. The information gathered and the conclusions derived from two stakeholders, parents and teachers, over two academic years is analyzed.

*Keywords:* early childhood education, programme, assessment, quality, teacher, parents, case study.

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## Resumen

Se presenta un estudio de caso en el que se desarrolla y aplica un protocolo de evaluación de la calidad de programas educativos para niños y niñas de 0-3 años. El estudio se lleva a cabo en un centro de Educación Infantil trilingüe, durante dos años académicos, y recabando información de los progenitores de los alumnos y de los profesores del centro.

En la primera parte del artículo se describe el contexto de este ciclo educativo teniendo en cuenta su perspectiva histórica y la actual legislación española, que propone que en él se asegure que los centros educativos proponen experiencias educativas de calidad.

A continuación, se aborda pormenorizadamente el proceso llevado a cabo para desarrollar el protocolo de evaluación del programa educativo para este contexto, y se detallan las variables e indicadores, los instrumentos para la recogida de datos y el procedimiento de análisis de datos empleados.

Finalmente, se presentan los resultados de la aplicación de este protocolo. Contando con las limitaciones propias que se derivan de evaluar de calidad de los programas en la etapa de educación infantil, se puede afirmar que los siguientes aspectos son fundamentales para la consecución de programas de calidad para este primer ciclo educativo: la formación de los profesores, su identificación con los métodos pedagógicos, la importancia del clima escolar y la comunicación en el tándem progenitores-equipo docente.

Como conclusión cabe remarcar la estrecha relación y enriquecimiento mutuo entre la formación y práctica docentes y la familia: el fortalecimiento de cauces cada vez más estrechos de comunicación entre ellos es una vía privilegiada para la resolución de conflictos. De esta forma, el equipo docente se siente con autoridad para responder a las demandas de los progenitores y estos, a su vez, se perciben capaces de expresar sus ideas y también apoyar a los profesores.

*Palabras clave:* educación temprana, programa, evaluación, calidad, profesor, padres, estudio de caso.

## Statement of the problem

Preparing infants and toddlers, who begin in education programmes before they are three years old, to succeed in general education classes and to ensure quality practices is a challenging assignment for teachers and local educational authorities in Spain. Programming during the period called the First Stage of Child Education [Primer ciclo de

Educación Infantil], which may begin during the first months of life and finish at age three, has an educational function for children with or without special needs (LOE, 2006).

Despite important discussions in the early childhood education field in Spain which acknowledge the unequivocally educational nature of programmes at this developmental level, concerns still remain about how this mission should be understood and accomplished by educators in practice. On the one hand, teachers have considerable autonomy in the design of educational curricula, although six minimum learning objectives must be implemented (RD 114/2004). By contrast, what this «educational function» or «specific pedagogical proposal» (LOE, 2006, Title I, Article 14.3) means remains un-defined by the National Government. Consequently, educators play a critical role in determining specific content and how minimum objectives are to be adapted to the socioeconomic and cultural context, establishing general methodological criteria and adopting pertinent decisions regarding the assessment process. As a result, a remarkable variety of educational practices and programmes exists in *Educación Infantil* (Aguado, 1993, 1997; Garcia, 1995; Lera, 1996; Rivas, 2004a, Ruiz de Miguel & Garcia, 2004; Zabalza, 2001), without any general consensus.

Another compelling reason for teachers' concerns about the challenge of assessment is that the legislation dictates that quality education for all be offered. The policy describes assessment as an obligatory activity, which guarantees and contributes to quality services (LOE, 2006, Article 140.a), and as a global, continuous and formative activity, which will help those responsible for providing education programmes to guarantee the accomplishment of certain minimum learning objectives. Moreover, not only results, but also information on all the variables in the teaching-learning process is to be included in assessment through the use of observational procedures.

However, significant concerns remain about how to carry out assessment and the definition of quality practices. As Balageur Mestres and Penn (1990, p. 26) said: «Any definition of quality is to an extent transitory; understanding quality and arriving and quality indicators is a dynamic and continuous process of reconciling the emphases of different interest groups». From this point of view, De la Orden (2009, p. 26) defines quality as «the effect of the set of the multiple coherence relations between basic components (internal and external) of the education system or any of its subsystems».

How can professionals know that their program is developing satisfactorily and that children are developing what they are supposed to learn? How can educators be helped to establish what best practices are, and how to assess them? What constitutes quality care and educational programming in a Spanish context and how can these principles be implemented by teachers?

In this regard, assessment may play a pivotal role in evaluating programme adequacy in educational terms, and in helping educators improve programme quality.

## **A framework for analysis**

Nowadays, emphasis on improving factors related to quality in early care and education is recognized as a trend in developed countries and a necessity in developing ones (UNESCO, 2005, ECEA EURYDICE, 2009). However, there is considerable debate about how quality is established and maintained in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programmes (Clark & Stroud, 2002; Fontaine, Torre, Grafwallner, & Underhill, 2006; Granell and Fuenmayor, 2000; Luengo, 2000; Lee & Walsh, 2004; Sarancho and Spodek, 2007). Within this complex and dynamic context it is still possible to identify indicators of quality that are of interest to most communities. Different groups of variables are used to define quality indicators. Structural and process variables occupy an important place in the literature (Phillips, 2000): whereas the former refer to static elements (child-adult ratios, group size, and training or in-service teacher preparation), the latter are related to dynamic factors (teachers' attitudes during programme implementation or measures of teaching adequacy). While the former can be regulated by legislation because of their static nature, more complex analysis is needed to identify the latter, depending on research findings and cultural contexts.

In particular, the teachers' role is considered critical to quality in ECE programmes. Studies indicate that the education of ECE teachers affect the quality of ECE programmes (Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Team, 1995). Specifically, it has been hypothesized that better programme quality depends on better-educated teachers. A close relationship between programme quality and teacher training has been noted (Blau, 2000; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford and Howes, 2002; Sarancho and Spodek, 2007), and between quality practices and specific teacher behaviours and characteristics (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000), as teachers are rated as more sensitive in interactions with children and as providing higher quality care than other caregivers (Burchinal et ál., 2002). Moreover, other formal characteristics such as teacher age, and years of experience have been also associated directly (Barnett, 2003; Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001) and indirectly (Phillips et ál., 2000; Rimm-Kauffman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta and LaParo, 2006) with programme quality. Thus, the professional development and assessment of ECE teachers is becoming a critical element (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2000) in providing high-quality ECE programmes.

To sum up, the teaching role associated to quality in child education programs is characterised by their educational qualification, their high academic education and specialized training in early childhood education, their appropriate skills and behaviours to interact with parents, teachers and children.

Existing research suggests that parents make child care decisions based both on what they believe is best for their child, and on more practical considerations such as cost and convenience (Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien & Roy, 2001). With concerns about possible inadequate services, there has been a pressing need to ensure that children and their families receive appropriate care and attention in schools. Consequently, parental satisfaction is used as an index of the quality of care children receive. Furthermore, measurement of parent satisfaction, particularly at pre-primary levels, has the potential to be an important component in evaluating service adequacy because parents are the main responsible of their children, the primary caregivers, and the key to the children's education with the cooperation between schools and families through their participation.

It would be an oversimplification to limit concerns about assessment to establishing quality indicators that might give some specific and useful information for programme assessment. Nevertheless, with this caveat in mind (Lee and Walsh, 2004; Rivas, Sobrino and Peralta, 2005), a focus on single factors designed to improve quality as well as a more systematic approach is vital if useful indicators to help educational authorities know if they are developing quality activities are to be found, and early ECE programmes are to be assessed according to the same criteria. Consequently, it is essential that consistent ways of evaluating programmes be developed and the best structure for ECE programmes be defined.

Hence, given that research into educational programmes for very young children is relatively limited, we designed and implemented a protocol in a case study to assess the quality of a particular educational programme, to assist those who are responsible for providing quality education to children from birth through age three.

## The present study

The purpose of this research was to assess the quality of different aspects of a particular ECE programme developed at a specific centre, in order to evaluate how the role of teachers may provide evidence of quality in ECE programmes and whether parental involvement and satisfaction reflect quality educational practices. The indicators and

variables in the protocol's design were defined in line with this objective. Quality factors which the literature shows to produce high-quality interventions were used to establish the protocol (Rivas, 2008; Rivas, Sobrino and Peralta, 2008). Assessment data came from different stakeholders: parents and teachers<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the evaluation model developed by Perez Juste (2000) was used as a foundation for the assessment protocol.

## Background centre description

The programme assessed is The Trilingual Early Stimulation Programme<sup>3</sup>. The ITC where this programme was developed is a private full-service childcare and educational centre in the Basque Country in north-eastern Spain. The facility provides full-time and part-time care and education of children from four months old to three years of age, generally five days per week for an average of seven and a half hours per day. Both childcare and the educational programme are also offered on Saturday mornings. The centre has been in existence for ten years and serves around fifty, mostly professional families, in middle to upper socioeconomic groups.

The nine staff members at this ITC (100% white female) come from diverse educational backgrounds, with credentials in education and early childhood training, and are fluent in different languages: *Cambridge Certificate in Advanced English* or *Proficiency* in English, degree level in Spanish, and *Euskararen Gaitasun Agiria* (Official Certificate in Basque). The age range of full-time staff is 23 to 33. The length of time of service for staff members ranges from two to nine years. There are two teachers in each classroom, independent of the ages and activities of the children and the staff-child ratio (1:8) suggested in education law.

## Programme description

In line with the trend and expectations of childhood bilingualism during infancy in recent years (McCardle and Hoff, 2006), and specifically in the Basque Country

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<sup>2</sup> The entire protocol for assessing program quality was organized into five major domains, taking into account the three stakeholders included in data collection (children, teachers and parents), information about the physical environment and program documentation. Seven specific variables and a total of two hundred and seventy indicators drawn from the specification of four dimensions in Haizea instrument (Fuentes-Biggi and Fernandez, 1992), suitable for registering information in different languages. However, in order to sharpen the focus and garner an in-depth understanding of the issue, only the results relating to teachers and parents will be considered in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Programa de Estimulación Temprana y Trilingüismo.

(Sierra, 2008; Zalbide & Cenoz, 2008), this programme's curriculum encompasses different areas of development, including physical exercise and motor skills, social and linguistic development, using a teaching methodology characterized as «linguistic submersion»: the children are 'submerged' in an environment where everything that surrounds them leads to the development of three different languages.

The methodology is based on teacher rotation. Each staff member teaches -in Spanish, English or Basque- for twenty minutes in every class, independent of the ages of the children. Language exposure occurs during different routines: arrival and departure, play-times, meals, toileting, and educational activities. The children experience all three languages from different teachers who rotate through their classrooms every day and in the same situations. Furthermore, every class is staffed for every twenty-minute segment by two teachers who speak different languages between themselves. They also have different roles in the classroom: one is the leader, the other the assistant. Therefore, children not only hear different languages during the day, but in the same classroom and at the same time.

The programme curriculum addresses cognitive areas such as science, mathematics, geography and art. The structured academic tasks are designed to expose children to knowledge they are unlikely to learn spontaneously or by discovery, such as the recognition of Velázquez's paintings or the Latin names of all kinds of pine trees, using the same materials for teaching all children independently of their ages, like flashcards (called *bits de inteligencia*). They have or an image or specific vocabulary written on them, in order to associate the words they are saying or seeing with the concepts or objects showed. These tasks involve memorizing the same lists and pictures for all children, responding to questions that have correct answers and practicing routine tasks that can be assessed as right or wrong. Furthermore, they use methodologies like *musical hearing*, *cultural walks* and directed group-play activities.

The programme encourages parental involvement, acknowledging parents as the primary educators of children; the teachers subscribe to the concept of shared educational responsibility. Thus, the teachers work with parents to keep in contact through direct and indirect channels of communication.

Teachers encourage the children's emotional growth and learning in class, and the children's identification of what is desirable, by using a social reward: a sticker for the child's clothes, which may also be placed in the personal diary so that parents can reinforce particular behaviours.

## Research question

The question that shaped the evaluation was to determine how teacher roles contributed to enhanced programme quality by examining the variables related to teacher mission and relationship between quality practices and parental involvement and satisfaction. To accomplish this objective, a specific protocol was designed in this case study (Rivas, 2008).

Information was gathered from two sources –teachers and parents– to garner an in-depth understanding of the meaning of programme quality.

## Variables

Twenty-six specific variables drawn from the specification of seven indicators in the teacher instrument were taken into account (Table I), and five indicators and fifteen variables regarding parents were also included (Table II).

TABLE I. Summary of indicators and variables referring to teachers

Indicators		Variables	Teachers Interview	Observation	Teachers checklist	Parent interview	Scores sheet
Teacher training		Years of experience in the educational system	√				
		Years of experience working in this center	√				
Teacher education	Pre-service qualification	Studies related to education: Master's or Bachelor's degrees, early childhood teacher certification	√				√
		Knowledge of different languages	√	√			√
	In-service or ongoing training	... Related directly to this programme				√	
		... Related indirectly				√	
		... Related to other aspects apart from this programme				√	
Interaction with parents		... Amount of time spent every day	√	√		√	
		... Way of solving parents' concerns	√	√			
		... Type of welcome or reception shown	√	√		√	
Interaction within this programme		... Knowledge of programme basis	√	√			
		... Satisfaction with programme methodology	√	√			
Interaction among teachers		Inside class	√	√	√		√
		Outside class	√	√	√		√
		Type of comments among teachers	√	√	√		√
Class environment		Intensity of activities	√	√	√		
		Flexibility of activities	√	√	√		
		Motivation of activities	√	√	√		
		Children's participation		√	√		
		Attention to children's turns to talk		√	√		
		Behaviors between children and teacher during meals, play, rest or nap periods, and toileting	√	√	√		
Practical experiences		What they assess	√	√			
		What kind of materials and information are used for assessment		√			
		How they assess	√	√			
		How often they assess	√	√			
		How they inform parents about assessment	√	√			

**TABLE II.** Summary of variables and indicators referring to parents

Indicators	Variables	Observation	Teachers Checklist	Parent interview
Parental satisfaction with school staff	Care, welcome and relationship provided to parents		√	√
	Parents' perception about relationship provided to their child	√	√	√
	Positive relationship between parents and principal	√	√	√
Parental satisfaction with physical environment	Organizational support: schedule	√	√	√
	Facilities provided by this ITC with regard to cleanliness, safety, nutrition, equipment and accessibility	√	√	√
Parental satisfaction with the programme	Its educational function	√	√	√
	Its welfare function	√	√	√
Parental involvement in school during activities	Informal transition time	√	√	√
	Communication and interaction between parents and staff	√	√	√
	Attendance at parent meetings	√	√	√
	Time spent in meetings requested by teachers		√	√
	Participation in activities organized by center	√	√	√
	Number of suggestions made by parents to improve services	√	√	√
Parental involvement in school at voluntary events	Collaboration in other activities		√	√
	Participation in School for Parents (I)	√	√	√

## Methodology and design

### Variables sample size

This research was undertaken when the programme had already been established, with a specific number of teachers and parents involved. The research sample

comprises data gathered on 9 teachers (100% of the centre's teaching staff) and 11 parents (30% of the centre's parent staff). The requirement of free participation in the study governed their selection.

The study needed to gather data for the parents of those children that belonged to the research sample, at or near the age of two, who were selected according to two requirements: (1) each child was going to enter the programme and was at least two years old, the age that corresponds to the application baseline of the Haizea instrument (Fuentes-Biggi and Fernandez, 1992), that allowed checking children's maturation between birth and five years of age able in Basque and in Spanish<sup>4</sup>; and (2) each child was going to remain in the same city for the two academic years. As a result, 11 parents accomplished these two criteria, which are the 100% of the sample.

## Design

Different types of research questions were important in the design of the assessment protocol, and different methodologies were essential in order to address the range of programme characteristics. The model followed in this research is primarily a qualitative one, although a quantitative approach was also taken, to gather information about teacher mission.

Forms of triangulation were used in data collection from the two stakeholders (teachers, parents) during the periods for which the study lasted (*programme itself* and *programme process and results*), and with regard to the three instruments used (interview, checklist and observation). All the responses were coded and evaluated separately.

## Instruments

### Teacher and parents interviews

A semi-structured interview was designed for teachers to gather information not collected by other means, and conducted with the nine teachers and the programme

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<sup>(4)</sup> Haizea was exclusively the instrument used to gather information about children, because it took into account the questions set out in this study, the children's ages and the languages spoken in this ITC.

director. The purpose was to learn about three topics: education, behaviour and practical experience (Tables III, IV and V).

**TABLE III.** Teacher education interview: questions

- (a1) Pre-service education: CDE, BA, MBA
- (a2) Languages spoken, official language qualifications
- (a3) Period of studies abroad
- (a4) Specific pre-service training to work here
- (a5) Ongoing training this ITC offers
- (a6) Strengths of this ITC in helping children's development
- (a7) The most valuable factors for teachers in helping children in an ITC

**TABLE IV.** Teacher behaviour interview questions

- (b1) Knowledge of this programme's rationale
- (b2) Role/attitude to this particular teaching style particular
- (b3) Role/perceptions of the evaluation that this ITC carries out
- (b4) Leadership capability
- (b5) Teacher motivation
- (b6) Type of parent-teacher relationship
- (b7) Relationship-collaboration between principal and teachers outside class
- (b8) Opinions about what a high-quality ECE programme is
- (b9) Capacity to solve daily conflicts
- (b11) Regular opportunities for teachers to reflect on/learn from the knowledge and expertise of others
- (b12) Skills needed to manage the method of teaching

**TABLE V.** Teacher practical experience interview questions

- (c1) Intensity of activities
- (c2) Flexibility of activities
- How you would define...
- (c3) ... your supervision/appropriateness for children's ages and abilities?
- (c4) ... your care and how are your opportunities for activity, rest, the development of self-help skills in cleanliness and the children's nutritional needs met?
- (c5) ... what stimulation is given to children to play/learn?
- (c6) ... your motivation in the development of the children's activities?
- (c7) ... your behaviour during meals, play, toileting, and nap periods?
- (c8) ... your promotion of positive relationships and interaction with other children and teachers?
- (c9) ... your encouragement of emotional growth in the children?
- (c10) What do you assess in the children's development?
- (c11) How often do you assess the children's development?
- (c12) How do you inform parents about this assessment?

A parents' interview was also designed for this study: six questions about parental satisfaction and eight related to parental involvement.

### **Teacher checklists**

The measurement and assessment of practical experience, which includes *teacher behaviour* and *interaction between children and teachers*, were collected using two different checklists. The development of these two checklists was based on the NAEYC accreditation criteria for relationships (<http://www.naeyc.org/accreditation/standards/>), and the Perez Juste model (1995).

Information on *teacher behaviour* in diverse circumstances (mealtimes, rest periods, cleaning, delivery at arrival and departure, play-times and education programme exercises) was gathered with the first checklist. A specific scale was designed using different benchmarks (very poor, bad, inadequate, barely adequate, good, very good, and excellent), depending on specific criteria.

The second checklist measured *interaction between children and teacher*. Information collected with this checklist included positive comments from teachers and children, the teachers' outward appearance, constructive remarks among teachers and helpful teacher attitudes. The core elements recognized as necessary for positive child development in ECE programmes (Cryer, 1999) were taken into account. All these aspects were to be checked in five different situations: cleaning, rest periods, flashcard activities, gross motor activities and children's welcome on arrival.

### **Observation**

The observational process was useful in the corroboration of information gathered with other instruments, such as the interviews and checklists. Observation was systematic, guided, controlled and rigorously planned to guarantee accuracy in data collection. Particular instances related to the establishment and maintenance of ongoing, two-way communication were selected for further observation, specifically teachers' attitudes to the programme, interactions between teachers and parents, and interaction among teachers. Observation of each of these interactions lasted around twenty minutes, at different times of the day. Observation was direct but non-participant. Finally, observation took place in the normal programme setting.

### **Data collection**

The research process was characterised by flexibility, linearity and uninterrupted continuity. Parent and teacher scores were collected during the academic years 1999-00 and 2000-01. Data collection was completed by a main researcher at three different stages (first stage, from April to June, 2000, second stage from September to April, 2001; and third stage from April to June, 2001), avoiding the problems

often associated with comparing information gathered by different observers. During the first stage, the teachers and settings were observed and a checklist was employed in the second stage, the information through the both checklists was completed, parents and teachers were interviewed and the observational process continued to corroborate the information. In the third stage, the information was analyzed and the analysis focused on how to create a proposal for decision-making to improve this program, as well as on how to inform the centre's principal about the results.

The Department of Education at the University of Navarra (Spain) was contacted by the principal of this centre who requested that an assessment of the centre be carried out. Once the consent of the principal and the Department of Education was given, teachers in the centre were informed of the study. To avoid the common constraints that lead to a focus on easily observable aspects of programme, attributable to the brevity of on-site visits, the quality data was collected in an uninterrupted way over two academic years. A trained observer, one of authors of the present study, visited classrooms independently and completed other observational measures during the week (class size and number of adults). She was not involved in programme activities, although she was engaged in the life and routines of the ITC. Teachers were observed continually during toileting, meals, play and afternoon activities from Tuesday to Friday in 1999-00 and 2000-01.

### **Teacher and parent interviews**

Teacher information was gathered using an interview -conducted at the end of the second year- and two checklists, and corroborated by observation.

Special efforts were made to carry out interviews with parents. All were willing to participate in the study; the interviews were conducted at the end of first year. Depending on parent availability, follow-up interviews were also scheduled. Eleven 25 to 35-minute interviews were recorded and transcribed; the transcriptions were analyzed for recurring themes, using a qualitative research approach.

The principal of the centre, that continuously monitored progress and intervened in a supportive or corrective manner when seemed necessary, and talked to parents in case of children's problems, was interviewed to identify structural features and procedures, and to check the accuracy of the data previously collected. However, her information was included as part of the teacher interview in order to avoid bias, the results of teacher interviews were not checked against the principal's.

## Checklists

Two different teacher checklists were employed. Both checklists -regarding teacher behaviour and measuring interaction between children and teacher- were used twice: in the middle of the first and second years. To minimize observer effects on behaviour, teacher information was not collected and recorded in their presence.

## Results

The results are summarized below, and the strengths and weaknesses of this ECE programme underlined, according the two research questions, and following the structure of the variables described in the Tables I and II.

### Quality practices and teachers role

#### Teachers training and education

The strengths and weakness of the programme derive primarily from excellent teacher qualification in terms of prior teacher training and qualifications in pre-service and ongoing education (Table VI), aspect that coincides with the most effective preschool teachers, that have at least a four-year college degree and specialized training (Barnett, 2003).

TABLE VI. Teacher training and pre-service education

	Scores		Indicators	
	+	-	teacher training	teacher education
Teacher training/pre-service qualification	√		√	
Teacher education in in-service or ongoing qualification	√			√
Initial formation/information of the teachers with regard to the programme's method of teaching		√		√
Initial formation/information of the teachers in the programme's theoretical basis		√		√
Knowledge of programme's basis		√		

According to the interview information and the principal's report, the nine teachers had more than the minimum legal educational qualifications, knowledge, and professional commitment requirements necessary to teach in an ITC in Spain.

One weak aspect of the current programme should be noted. Seven of the nine teachers showed a lack of knowledge about the basis of the programme; that is, ignorance of the objectives for which the programme was designed and the rationale for using the particular teaching style. Although their pre-service educational training was excellent, two of the nine teachers did not have a general or detailed knowledge of the programme's basis, and seven of the nine knew nothing of the programme's specific teaching style.

The preparation and knowledge of the teaching staff was corroborated in the observation process: all teachers had the necessary levels of competence in the languages through which they taught and interacted with the children (Table VII).

TABLE VII. Information about staff training and in-service preparation

n°	Age	Preparation and training					Years of experience
		BA and Degree	Minimum credential	Language*		Other training	
1	23		√	E			3
2	33	√	√	E	B		3
3	25		√	E		#	6
4	27	√	√	E		# +	9
5	31	√	√			S # +	9
6	22		√		B		2
7	26		√		B		2
8	32	√	√	E		# +	8
9	33		√			#	5

KEY

E English language official certificate  
+ Master's

B Basque language official certificate  
# Period of studies abroad

S Spanish language degree

The teaching staff demonstrated that the training they had received prepared them to provide children with different opportunities for their development, to communicate with the children, families and other teachers, as the NAEYC standards require (Table VII).

In order to assess in-service or ongoing teacher education, behaviour with parents, parental involvement and satisfaction, a checklist based on the Pérez Juste model of assessment was drawn up using a number of variables.

### **Interaction with parents**

Interviews showed that teachers engaged in practices designed to foster strong reciprocal relationships with families from the first contact, which were maintained over time. According to the results, all parents mentioned that programme staff provided all necessary support and information. The School for Parents that this ITC has established serves to engage with families, to learn from their knowledge of their child's interests. Furthermore, teachers inform parents about the programme's curriculum formally and informally before the programme starts. This information usually includes the procedures used for assessment and for gathering family input, as the NAEYC standards recommend.

### **Interaction with this programme**

The intense schedule and high-level teacher involvement in the realization of activities were described by teachers as the best methodology for developing the children's capabilities. The teachers provided the variety of activities to children that the programme set out, specifically the use of flashcards, an approach which all the teachers mentioned in the interviews as the best way of stimulating and improving the children's capacity to learn.

### **Interaction among teachers**

Positive relationships and valuable collaboration among principal and staff in the classroom and a capacity to solve daily conflicts was remarked on by all, and noted by the observer. The observer confirmed that teachers and principal established and maintained regular two-way communication during meals and daily outdoor activities. In addition, when difficulties did arise, teachers brought the information about the problem to other teachers in order to resolve the situation.

Frequent helpful teacher attitudes and constructive remarks were noted in the classroom, especially in cleaning situations and at the children's delivery. The empathetic appearance of all teachers was noted in different situations (especially at naptime and when the children were welcomed), although teacher attitude was not so positive in gross motor activities. Good attitude was detected in general, and positive teacher appearance during naptime should be emphasized.

**TABLE VIII.** Score sheet of the occurrence of four indicators (comments among teachers, empathetic appearance, constructive remarks and helpful attitudes) in five different situations for nine teachers on two different occasions

Heading: F: First assessment S: Second assessment  minimum: 0 times maximum: 9 times Ø: Not available	Positive comments between children-teacher		Empathetic appearance in teachers		Constructive remarks among teachers		Helpful attitude among teachers	
	f	s	f	s	f	s	f	s
Situation 1: Cleaning	9	8	8	7	3	5	9	7
2: Rest/nap periods	Z	Ø	9	9	0	0	1	3
3: Flashcard activities	8	7	6	7	0	0	7	6
4: Gross motor activities	7	7	5	6	0	0	7	7
5: Children's welcome	9	9	9	9	5	6	9	9

### Class environment

Between good and very good teacher attitude and behaviour with children in class were identified in different situations according to the checklist information. Good behaviour was shown by teachers during meal time (average = 5.11, on a scale between 1 and 7), rest time (5.66), cleaning (5.77) and programme exercises (5.77); while a very good attitude was reflected by teachers during children's delivery (6.33) and play time (6.22) (Table IX). Furthermore, positive relationships and collaboration among principal and staff were noted outside class.

**TABLE IX.** Score sheet of teacher attitude and behaviour with children in class

TEACHER	MEALTIME	REST	CLEANING	DELIVERY ARRIVAL/ DEPARTURE	PLAY TIME	PROGRAMME EXERCISES
Nº 1	5	6	5	6	7	6
Nº 2	5	6	5	7	7	5
Nº 3	4	5	5	6	5	5
Nº 4	6	6	7	6	7	7
Nº 5	7	7	7	7	7	7
TEACHER	MEALTIME	REST	CLEANING	DELIVERY ARRIVAL/ DEPARTURE	PLAY TIME	PROGRAMME EXERCISES
Nº 6	5	5	5	7	6	5
Nº 7	4	5	5	6	5	5
Nº 8	5	6	6	6	5	5
Nº 9	5	5	7	6	7	7
Average	5.11	5.66	5.77	6.33	6.22	5.77

Key: 1: very poor 2: bad 3: inadequate 4: barely adequate 5: good 6: very good 7: excellent

The data also indicates that a very good attitude was perceived in teachers during the departure time (average: 6.33) (Table IX).

### Practical experience and assessment

An inadequate consideration of the assessment principle was detected during observation. Some contradictions exist between what was said in the programme's documentation and what was collected, categorized and reported by teachers. Although the teachers said that the educational nature (in the sense of «didactic orientation») of pre-kindergarten was important to them, they did not take educational factors into account in their assessment process.

It should not overlook that separation between care (childminding) and education is something artificial in this period. Given the increasing number of centres and of teachers' autonomy in designing their own curriculum, a serious effort must be made to understand what constitutes the best curricula for children and what activities should be included, trying to balance education and care and not to neglect care for promoting pre-didactic skills.

They used the personal diary every day to inform parents about the children's participation in activities. While all teachers acknowledged that filling the diary and maintaining the programme methodology involved a considerable amount of work, they also expressed their enthusiasm for using this procedure.

## Parental involvement and satisfaction

The excellent *modus operandi* at the ITC in involving parents was highlighted by all members of staff, who mentioned that assessment facilitated information exchange between parents and teachers every day through the personal diary and in time spent at the children's arrival and departure. The results of the observation process and interviews showed that although most of the parents or babysitters usually arrived at the school at the same time, the amount of contact-time between teachers and parents was around ten minutes per family. Furthermore, the observer noted that the teachers were also encouraged by the principal to maintain family involvement, as the NAEYC standards consider desirable (Bredenkamp and Copple, 1997). As the interviews revealed, the quality, quantity and frequency of use of the regular ongoing, two-way communication channels established by the ITC, both directly (formal meetings and conversations during children's delivery) and indirectly (using the *personal diary* or calling) were a valuable aspect for all parents. They felt wholly involved in the education of their children.

Parents were very satisfied with the programme, the teachers and the facilities (Table X).

TABLE X. Results of parental satisfaction gathered in the interview

(1) How parents come to select this particular ECE programme	7 of 11 parents: good references of care provided by teachers 2 of 11: good references of care provided by teachers and proximity to the parents' workplace 1 of 11: friendship with a teacher 1 of 11: another child already enrolled in this ITC
2) Satisfaction with the way of promoting values, beliefs, virtues and emerging skills in children	9 of 11: excellent, emphasizing obedience, generosity, good manners and civic-mindedness 2 of 11: excellent, emphasizing beliefs and virtues
(3) Satisfaction with this particular programme approach	6 of 11 underlined the trilingual teaching and coherence with their beliefs They did not underline the stimulation of intellectual capacities 11 noted the most important aspect was the excellent health, safety and care service', more than this particular educational programme approach
(4) Satisfaction with the way of looking after children	All 11 parents emphasized the excellent way of looking after children in a warm personal atmosphere and a service suitable for children's needs
(5) Satisfaction with the way of attending to parents	All 11 parents mentioned the excellent availability, capacity for accepting suggestions, the warm atmosphere
(6) Satisfaction with facilities (garden, dining room, and classrooms)	All 11 parents noted all facilities were appropriate

## Conclusion and next steps

This paper has endeavoured to address some of the main issues concerning quality in ECE programmes in Spain, focusing on teacher and parent variables, to enable the monitoring of progress and allow educators to refine and improve their programmes over time. Central to the discussion is the need to assess programmes and the lack of protocols that would help professionals to meet this obligatory requirement. Consequently, a protocol to assess ECE programmes has been proposed and applied. It should be noted that this proposal may have a general application in any cultural setting where conditions similar to this study exist: multilingual, governmentally or legally imposed requirements, general parental support, and adequately trained pre-kindergarten teachers.

This assessment detected strengths that are closely related to how teacher instructional practices were provided and the satisfaction and involvement of parents.

- This case study corroborates what literature mentions about *the professional training of teachers* is a crucial component of quality, perhaps the most significant and influential factor in the determination of programme quality, and one of the most valuable predictors of quality even where there is an erroneous basis rationale, an incorrect educational approach, inappropriate scheduling or a lack of materials (Rivas, 2004b). Moreover, the good results concerning teacher training obtained in this study may explain the positive development outcomes that these children experience (Rivas, Sobrino and Peralta, 2008), which confirms existing conclusions in the literature (Howes, 1997), although other variables like the structural characteristics of this ITC (lower child-caregiver ratios) and the provision of additional on-the-job training and supervision of 2 teachers per class could have influenced the results.
- Unanimous teacher satisfaction with the method of teaching should be underlined as a result of this investigation. It is possible that these positive feelings allowed the teachers to feel more confident and comfortable in their role as teachers, and therefore they felt secure in establishing and maintaining good relationships with parents, lending support to what the literature says (Wilcox-Herzog, 2003).

- Another strength to be mentioned was the excellent parent-teacher relationships observed in this case study. These results corroborates what the literature says about the effective relationships between teachers and families and quality practices, a key -if not definitive- component of quality care (Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog, 1997). This effective relationship, evaluated positively by both teachers and parents in this case study, was influenced by the following facets:
  - The length of service time for staff ranged from two to nine years, that supposes that the majority are professionally prepared teachers (Barnett, 2003), with no detectable differences between the bachelor and the below bachelor degrees in this case study, although lack of experience in the case of some teachers should be noted. Consequently, it seems important to combine two factors for obtaining high quality service: education and training of staff and sufficient experience in the field. Nevertheless, all teachers had excellent relationships with parents and other teachers. New teachers need to ask parents to provide them with information about the children. Parents may contribute by maintaining contact with teachers, in order to understand better their children's behaviour in the classroom. Special attention needs to be paid in ECE teacher preparation to reinforce the positive attitudes and values that teachers experience during training and the teaching process.
  - Satisfaction with the service provided in this school may be justified by the fact that it meets the parent's highest expectations. The centre staff was interested in providing the best childhood education and highest quality care, and the parents valued care factors as the most important. This viewpoint corroborates what Mitchell, Cooperstein and Lerner (1992) reported: they found that parents' view of quality was centred on ensuring their children's health and safety and positive interaction with teachers. At the same time, parents had an excellent understanding of the teacher-child interaction that was provided in this school. Data results verify that adult-child interaction was valued by all teachers, and was underlined by parents as excellent and a reason for parental satisfaction, although parents did not underline their satisfaction for the convenient flexi time schedule. 4) Another strength that may be stressed is the excellent forms of communication designed to respond to the needs of parents and teachers. Facilitating ongoing interaction with parents may result in parents reinforcing the school's objectives at home through, for

example, the personal diary this school has introduced. Especially at the early childhood stage, the teacher is a key person in the communication of knowledge of child development and rearing practices, although teachers must be trained to carry out this task. As Clifford and Gallagher noted: «high quality pre-kindergarten programmes do not develop by accident or coincidence» (2001, p. 5).

The present study is best understood as an exploratory approach. Several limitations related to this programme assessment should be noted (Rivas, Sobrino and Peralta, 2008):

- Difficulty in variables determination related to the effects of preschool teacher qualifications on education quality, due to some programme effects are more readily identifiable than the factors which contributed to the results.
- Causal uncertainty between quality and indicators that is, the determination of whether the observed gains are due to this programme's effects or participation in other activities. Our findings would be more compelling had we been able to incorporate other key factors and more complete child care quality related measures such as caregivers' sensitivity, responsiveness or childrearing attitudes.
- The third limitation is about knowledge of the mechanism through which estimated effects are manifested in this ECE programme.
- The fourth limitation refers to the results are limited to certain domains of behaviour in this case study and to particular sub-group related to the trilingüism, and with an intense didactic orientation program. Furthermore, due to the participation is based on the high motivation of parents and school staff, causal relationships are strictly not inferable.
- The fifth limitation refers to the small sample that was not randomly selected, and less than ideal sample size.

In working toward a more comprehensive study, results from this study could be incorporated in subsequent investigation to further refine an understanding of the fit between quality teachers' role and satisfaction. The insights of this case study provide valuable information to help begin to address some of these challenges and identify promising evaluation practices. Further research would include larger number of families to generalize results. Evaluation plays an important role in helping teachers

to understand whether these indicators have relation with quality. Consequently, more efficient instruments would be necessary. Finally, future findings would be more compelling if the relationships between quality practices and teachers role or parental satisfaction incorporate other key factors, as more complete teacher quality related measures, or ways of strengthening family school collaboration.

In conclusion, the relationship between how teacher educational practices are provided and parental satisfaction and involvement is very close, and its effects are enriching. The initiatives described in this article suggest that strengthening forms of communication among teachers and parents is an excellent way to solve problems and to maintain good relationships because teachers are enabled to respond and adapt to parents' demands, while parents are able to express concerns and support the teachers' appropriate ideas and initiatives. As a consequence, the importance of the role of teacher in informing parents about the children's behaviour and abilities and helping them put their expectations about the children in perspective should be reinforced and valued in any protocol assessment for determining quality. At the same time, structural supports available to help parents accomplish their goals as the primary educators of their children should also be safeguarded.

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