Moving Towards Holistic Early Childhood Education Quality in the UAE: What, Why, How?

This paper aims to contribute to the broader discussion around the *what*, the *why*, and the *how* of holistic quality in early childhood education. The literature on early childhood education and development informs our understanding and offers insights into developing high-quality, holistic early childhood education, particularly within the UAE context. In examining these issues, we explain how a motivated, sustainable, and high-quality workforce is essential to achieving child development goals.

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The *Why* of Quality Early Childhood Education

Quality imperatives within early childhood learning and development continue to shape contemporary policies and practices in this field. At the heart of the quality debate is a focus on holistic early childhood development, which means that academic achievement is inseparable from other developmental domains (Santos et al., 2008). Holistic child development encompasses policies and practices that nurture children's physical, intellectual, language, emotional, cognitive, and social abilities, along with health and wellbeing (Barros et al., 2010; UNESCO, 2014).

The 2010 UNESCO World ECE Conference in Moscow highlighted this vision by proposing the Holistic Early Childhood Development Index (HECDI). The conference concluded with the Moscow Framework for Action and Cooperation: Harnessing the Wealth of Nations, a plan that led UNESCO to convene a working group to develop an instrument for tracking progress towards Education For All (EFA) goals, with a focus on quality and the holistic aspects of ECCE (UNESCO, 2014, p. 12). Through the HECDI, UNESCO aims to help countries monitor key indicators within this holistic framework, such as health, nutrition, education, social protection, poverty, and parental support. Complementary to these national frameworks are the efforts of educators working directly with children; our study, therefore, examines educators' perspectives and experiences in promoting quality learning programs that support children's holistic development.

Educators play a critical role in implementing quality agendas in early childhood education; however, not all educators of young children possess the expertise and resources necessary to support holistic child development (Chen & Wolf, 2021). Moreover, teachers' voices are often marginalized in discussions and policymaking on quality early childhood education, limiting their influence on program design (Gozali et al., 2017). Factors influencing children's development and wellbeing include a stable curriculum, quality play-based pedagogy, supportive learning environments, teacher quality and satisfaction, and parental engagement (Anderson & Sayre, 2016). However, when teachers lack a voice, have limited expertise in child development, or are not equipped with child-friendly pedagogies, the holistic growth and wellbeing of children can be adversely affected (Dahlberg et al., 1999; UNESCO, 2014).

Early Childhood Education Experience in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates' Centennial Vision 2071 places high priority on education, economic growth, government development, and social cohesion (MoE/GoV, 2023, p. 3). Central to this vision is the development of human capital, where early childhood education and the wellbeing of children aged 0 to 8 years hold particular significance. Federal agencies, including the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Community Development, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Health and Prevention, all contribute to child protection and welfare initiatives.

The UAE's early childhood education landscape comprises both state and private kindergartens, primary schools, preschools, nurseries/daycares, and home care settings, each with unique structures and practices that reflect linguistic and sociocultural dimensions. In state kindergartens, the curriculum includes bilingual development in Arabic and English through co-teaching by native speakers of both languages (Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2012). At the primary level, Arabic or English instruction is used depending on the subject: Arabic for Civics, Islamic studies, and Arabic language, and English for Mathematics, Science, and English, while other subjects are taught in Arabic (Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2011). Teachers in the UAE come from a diverse array of educational, linguistic, ethnic, and

cultural backgrounds, including Emiratis and expatriates from various parts of the Middle East, English-speaking countries, and South Asia (Dillon, 2019). Private institutions operate under their own programs, plus, language and curriculum guidelines aligned with state requirements in subjects like Arabic, UAE social studies, UAE moral education, and Islamic studies (when relevant) (Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge, n.d.).

The early 2000s marked a shift in kindergartens from traditional didactic approaches toward a more holistic view of child development, integrating cultural and social-emotional dimensions (Al-Momani et al., 2008; Coughlin et al., 2009). By 2010, there was a concerted push towards a "whole child" philosophy, recognizing play in children's learning and emphasizing national values, traditions, and family involvement (ADEC, 2010; MOE, 2018). However, challenges persist in kindergarten and primary education, including classroom management issues, time constraints, documentation, teacher beliefs, and access to outdoor learning opportunities (Dillon & Gallagher, 2019; Baker, 2015; Al-Momani et al., 2008). At the parental level, increased understanding of play and child-led learning, along with parental interaction with schools, are ongoing needs (Al-Qinneh & Abu-Ayyash, 2020).

The *What* of Quality

Focusing on holistic quality in early childhood education is grounded in the belief that quality assurance improves educators' capabilities to deliver pedagogies that promote comprehensive developmental outcomes for all children (Barros et al., 2010). In essence, quality practices aim to elevate standards, expectations, and consistency in teaching practices across various educational settings (Chen & Wolf, 2021). However, definitions of quality early childhood education vary widely depending on economic, sociocultural, political, psychological, and developmental priorities. Here, we define quality early childhood education as child-centered approaches that respect children's rights and promote holistic learning and development. According to Litjens (2013), quality in early childhood education encompasses systems, activities, and environmental characteristics that support children's learning, wellbeing, and growth.

Process quality, encompassing curriculum, pedagogical practices, teacher characteristics, teacher-child interactions, and community participation, plays a key role in fostering holistic development (Litjens, 2013; Pianta et al., 2005). By engaging with materials available in the learning environment, children exercise agency and explore diverse interactions. Thus, the dual emphasis on process and structural quality helps ensure children's health, wellbeing, safety, and optimal development (Chen & Wolf, 2021).

Structural quality, in turn, involves aspects like learning spaces, program design, and teacher qualifications, reflecting the cultural, demographic, and economic contexts in which early childhood programs operate (Chen & Wolf, 2021). A unified approach that harmonizes both process and structural quality dimensions is essential for fostering an inclusive early childhood framework. Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory provides a foundation for understanding this relationship, positing that education processes are inseparable from sociocultural structures (Vygotsky, 1978; Roth, 2002).

The *How* of Quality

Achieving quality in early childhood education must begin with cultivating a high-quality, motivated, and respected early childhood workforce. Research shows that a well-supported, sustainable workforce enhances service delivery to children and families, which reaffirms the UAE's need to invest in

attracting, retaining, and developing early childhood educators (Hargreaves, 2001). Efforts to improve educator quality should be supported by systemic measures—funding, policy, and regulatory frameworks that advocate for the advancement of educators through policy advice and best practices. Creating meaningful opportunities for ongoing professional learning is essential to fulfilling educators' professional needs and supporting their growth.

Enhancing data collection and analysis on workforce trends can provide critical insights into educator needs, guiding policy changes and reform efforts to increase workforce stability and diversity. Promoting a diverse workforce also supports inclusive, culturally responsive practices that benefit children across the UAE, which can be supported by leadership development to create a culture of positive change. To effect positive change, mentoring, mental health support, and well-being programs become essential tools for educators working in complex, multifaceted roles as teachers, caregivers, and guides.

Conclusion

The UAE stands at a pivotal moment for advancing early childhood education quality. By exploring the what, why, and how of early childhood education quality, we emphasize the importance of raising public awareness of the contributions of early childhood educators to child development and learning. Early childhood education is a sophisticated field that demands a multi-faceted approach, integrating the efforts of families, schools, government, and NGOs. A national quality framework for assessing early childhood provisions and establishing an independent evaluation body would help ensure consistent, high-quality practices across the UAE.

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