Research article

# Investigation of Quality Discourse and Meaning-Making Discourse in Early Childhood Education and Care

## Investigación sobre el discurso de calidad y el discurso de creación de significado en la educación y atención a la primera infancia

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## How to cite the article

**Abstract**
**Introduction:** This article examines the evolving discourses of quality and meaning-making in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), addressing the limitations and strengths of both top-down and bottom-up approaches. **Methods:** The discussion is based on evaluating the arguments in the book "Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care" (Beyond Quality). Literature search was conducted on relative topics to further elaborate and support the discussion. Relative topics includes: ECEC quality, top-down and bottom-up approach, and documentation. **Results:** Quality measurements have been extensively utilized to define and assess childcare standards, often through a top-down system driven by experts and policymakers. Conversely, Beyond Quality advocates for a bottom-up approach through a meaning-making discourse, which emphasizes local decision-making based on pedagogical practices and teacher dialogues. The article challenges both discourses, arguing that neither can independently transform educational systems effectively. The article proposes an

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integration of documentation and empirical quality measures to bridge ECEC quality research and practices. **Discussion:** The present study suggests that a redirection is needed for both ECEC quality research and meaning making to promote an effective ECEC reform with a synthesis research method.

**Keywords:** Beyond quality; Quality measurements; Preschool education; Documentation; Reforms.

**Introducción:** Este artículo examina los discursos en evolución sobre la calidad y la construcción de significado en la Educación y el Cuidado de la Primera Infancia (ECEC), abordando las limitaciones y fortalezas de los enfoques de arriba hacia abajo y de abajo hacia arriba. **Métodos:** La discusión se basa en la evaluación de los argumentos presentados en el libro "*Más allá de la calidad en la educación y el cuidado de la primera infancia*" (*Beyond Quality*). Se realizó una búsqueda de literatura sobre temas relacionados para desarrollar y apoyar la discusión. Los temas relacionados incluyen la calidad en la ECEC, el enfoque de arriba hacia abajo, el enfoque de abajo hacia arriba y la documentación. **Resultados:** Las mediciones de calidad se han utilizado ampliamente para definir y evaluar los estándares de cuidado infantil, a menudo mediante un sistema de arriba hacia abajo impulsado por expertos y formuladores de políticas. Por el contrario, *Beyond Quality* aboga por un enfoque de abajo hacia arriba a través de un discurso de construcción de significado, que enfatiza la toma de decisiones locales basadas en prácticas pedagógicas y diálogos entre docentes. El artículo desafía ambos discursos, argumentando que ninguno de ellos puede transformar los sistemas educativos de manera efectiva de forma independiente. El artículo propone una integración de la documentación y las medidas empíricas de calidad para conectar la investigación y las prácticas de calidad en ECEC. **Discusión:** El presente estudio sugiere que se necesita una redirección tanto para la investigación de la calidad en ECEC como para la construcción de significado, con el fin de promover una reforma efectiva de ECEC mediante un método investigación de sintesis.

**Palabras clave:** Más allá de la calidad; Mediciones de calidad; Educación preescolar; Documentación; Reformas.

## 1. Introduction

Quality measurements have been widely applied in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Numerous studies have focused on how to define and examine quality of childcare (see a review in La Paro at al., 2012;). However, in the last decade, some researchers have pointed out the limitations of the premises of this type of quality discourse (Burchinal, 2018; Dahlberg, et al., 2013; Li & Chen, 2017; Tobin, 2005). They seem to suggest that quality measurements often supported the top-down system, as experts and politicians dominate education and make general standards to apply in local institutions (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the book Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (referring as Beyond Quality below), proposed a new approach, the meaning-making discourse, which seems to support the bottom-up system (Dahlberg et al., 2013). In fact, it advocates that local childcare institutions should make their own decisions based on their pedagogical work and dialogues of teachers. Specifically,

> Meaning-making discourse is very concrete; it is about what is going on in the pedagogical work and other projects of the early childhood institutions, in particular making visible and public what children are actually doing, through various forms of documentation, and about how people entering into dialogue about that work (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 115).

Nevertheless, the limitation of bottom-up system is that it often underestimates the decision-making process of a central office or of the policy makers, and it tends to ignore the impact of individual institutions' biases on policy making. These limitations might also apply to the meaning-making approach.

Hence, this article aims to challenge both quality discourse and meaning-making discourse as neither top-down nor bottom-up can be effective in transforming educational systems on their own (Fullan, 1994). It is important for any ECEC reform to reflect and bridge between these two approaches. As John Dewey (1930) highlighted in Democracy and Education that any new direction is a redirection, instead of replacing top-down approach with bottom-up or vice versa, it is important to suggest possible redirections for both discourses, by discussing the concerns and solutions of both perspectives. In the following paragraphs, the quality discourse is examined and challenged. Then, recent developments of quality discourse are presented and accordingly the meaning-making discourse is challenged. At the end, the tools of both perspectives are reviewed, and a new collaboration is suggested.

## 2. Methods

The arguments presented in the book Beyond Quality was evaluated and discussed through a systematic and critical analysis of the text. The analysis involved a close reading of the text, identifying the central arguments, and comparing these with the themes emerging from other ECEC quality literature. A comprehensive literature search was undertaken to identify ECEC quality reports and practices in various countries, scolarly discussions and theories that provide additional perspectives. Moreover, empirical evidence on the topics discussed in *Beyond Quality* and in ECEC quality measurements was included to analize the arguments on quality research. The literature search was conducted using academic databases such as, ERIC, APA PsycInfo, Google Scholar. Key search terms included "ECEC quality," "top-down approach in education," "bottom-up approach in education," and "documentation in early childhood education." The selected literature was critically examined to draw connections between the findings of these studies and the arguments presented in Beyond Quality. This approach allowed for a nuanced discussion of how the book's propositions align with, challenge, or extend current understandings in the field of ECEC. The review also considered the broader implications of these arguments for practice, policy, and further research in early childhood education.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. C*hallenge the quality discourse and its top-down approach.*

The main concerns of quality discourse researchers are about educational policies, scientific debates, social stereotypes, and youth development in a very broad sense (e.g., Downer et al., 2011; NICHD, 2002; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Such research inspires educational reforms and serve the policy makers to design changes and make decisions for local institutions. The criticisms towards quality discourse seems to be originated on the concerns towards top-down approach. As Fullan (1994) observed, most of top-down reforms failed because they neglected

the importance of the locals' skills, commitment, motivation, and understanding of the matter; researchers who criticize quality discourse share the same concern (Berkovich, 2011). According to Dahlberg and colleagues, quality of childcare is more of a philosophical question than a pedagogical one: "what seems to underlie 'the problem with quality' is a sense and an unease that what has been approached as an essentially technical issue of expert knowledge and measurement may, in fact, be a philosophical issue of value and dispute" (2013, p.6). It is argued here that the perspective of measuring the quality runs a risk of underestimating the impact of local value on childcare institutions. As a result, the criticism of these researchers on quality discourse originates on their concerns of failing to motivate the locals and gain their commitment.

Empirical studies of quality discourse often generalize one definition or standard of quality to all ECEC institutions, based on the request of policy makers or national standards (e.g., NICHD, 2002; Goelman et al., 2006). For example, the National Institution of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) of the United States conducted numerous research in ECEC (NICHD, 2005) and developed a childcare quality measure named Observational Record of the Caregiving Environment (ORCE) which has been applied in many countries. In 2002, NICHD introduced their research stating "Increasingly, as nations move to raise educational standards for children's performance in school (National Education Goals Panel, 1997), experiences in child-care settings are looked to as sources of variability in children's readiness for school (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Because the debate about the effects of childcare on school readiness has implications for social and educational policy, clarification of the nature and extent of childcare as a source of variability in children's developmental status is a pressing scientific concern" (p 134). This readiness for school refers to children's development of various skills before entering elementary schools (NICHD, 2002). It is evident that school readiness and educational policies are main concerns when defining the role of childcare on child development. Nevertheless, school readiness is not the only standard or definition to view ECEC from the local point of views. For example, Reggio Emilia approach in Italy and in Stockholm stress on the importance of the process of learning and open discussions in ECEC instead of school readiness (Dahlberg et al., 2013). For them, focus on school readiness assumes that childhood is a preparatory or marginal stage, a transitional phase that a human goes through without any intrinsic value in it, seen only as a necessary passage to an age of discernment and conscience. This assumption underestimates childhood and is blind to its values and meanings, equally important as those of any other stage of life (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

Another example comes from positive psychology, whose research is against school readiness as well. Positive psychology argues that the aim of education is leading young children to thrive and flourish in life (Seligman, 2011). Hence, the priority of schools needs to lie on the wellbeing and mental health of students instead of performance on the exams. Many schools around the world have accepted and applied the theory of positive psychology and agree that human flourishing is more important than school readiness (e.g., Seligman et al., 2009; Sandseter & Seland,2018). Hence, if researchers studied what the schools value or what the local communities value in ECEC, they would not focus only on school readiness. Moreover, the inconsistency between the values of policy makers or scientists and the local childcare institutes might be the reason why the top-down education reform often fails in practice.

Few studies consider the perspective of parents, children, caregivers, and local community in defining factors of quality ECEC. For example, previous quality measures have focused on space and furnishing at school, language development of children, materials and diversity of activity, caregiver-child interactions, program structure in general (Harms et al., 2003; Pianta et al., 2008). On the other hand, children's perspectives on ECEC showed different factors to

be investigated. Children of Malaysia stressed on the importance of peace building in kindergartens (Boon et al., 2019). Danish children focused on peer recognition and challenging the rules (Koch, 2018). Recently, Gunnestad and colleagues (2022) conducted a cross-culture ECEC research regarding convergence and divergence in value systems of 13 countries: they found that local communities valued different factors that related to quality ECEC (Gunnestad et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important for research of quality measures to clarify the context of the quality childcare before quantifying it. Otherwise, this type of research decontextualizes children and ECEC and neglects social and cultural values (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

Another issue is that researchers might not agree on the effectiveness of certain measurements because they fail to replicate the results of other studies due to the context differences. Empirical studies have supported this hypothesis, when researchers were not in agreement on whether structural and process quality had significant effect on children's wellbeing, learning, and development (Slot, 2018). Burchinal (2018) reviewed studies that related ECEC quality with child outcomes and found that the results were inconsistent and modest: problems might lie on the limit of the construct of child outcomes and limit of the measurements. Again, the quality discourse revealed another limitation of a top-down education reform which is ignoring the practice: it leads to low efficiency of the reform. In fact, studies have argued that policy makers can struggle to provide concrete strategies and they create resistance in local institutions (La Paul, 2012; Berkovich, 2011). Accordingly, more research is needed to define a new construct of good childcare, relevant to preschools, children, families, and local community.

Furthermore, the methodology of empirical studies of child development underestimated the underlining power of reflection and exploration. "Instead of concrete descriptions and reflections on children's doings and thinking, on their hypotheses and theories of the world, we easily end up with simple mappings of children's lives, general classifications of the child of the kind that say 'children of such and such an age are like that'. The maps, the classifications and the ready-made categories end up replacing the richness of children's lived lives and the inescapable complexity of concrete experience" (Dahlberg, et al., 2013, p 39). By neglecting the unique experiences of children and caregivers when applying quality discourse findings to creating policies and rules regarding ECEC, policy makers and childcare institutions are at risk of limiting the potentials of children to few categories and normalizing them. In fact, "in general, quality is now seen to be composed of both "structural features" such as group size and adult/child ratios as well as "process features" which are aspects of the actual experiences and interactions children have in childcare centers. A robust body of research, based in the United States, drawn from large-scale, multi-state studies has identified a number of the structural and process factors that contribute to quality childcare and the impact of quality on young children" (Goelman et al., 2006, p.281). In other words, they consider a generalized situation from a national level to define what quality education means and create quality standards for all childcare institutions.

Research on quality measurements also struggles to provide concrete suggestions on how to apply the measurements in schools. Often, in quality discourse research trained professionals rate the structural and process qualities of daily activities in childcare institutions (e.g., La Paro et al., 2014), and they neglect to explore and reflect with the children and the caregivers during the learning experience and how their learning and interacting process develops. Thus, researchers struggle to provide concrete suggestions on how teachers could benefit from these measurements in organizing daily activities. As it is demonstrated in the literature review (La Paro et al., 2012), the suggestions of quality measurement research are often too generalized to be implement in policies. The top-down perspective, by neglecting the process of learning and perspectives of children and teachers, fails to support the practice in ECEC and instead

create gaps between theory and practice (Debora et al., 2017).

## 3.2. *Challenge meaning-making discourse and its bottom-up perspective.*

Meaning-making discourse provides valuable lessons for quality research; however, it cannot fully replace it. From the view of the meaning-making theory, quality education means "constructing and deepening understanding of the early childhood institution and its projects, in particular the pedagogical work—to make meaning of what is going on (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p.112)". Based on this definition, childcare institutions should make educational decisions based on their own pedagogical work: in other words, the meaning-making approach results in a bottom-up approach. Let's take the example of a typical bottom-up reform conducted in California: "some argued that the data system should leave evaluation criteria open-ended so that sites could track their progress along dimensions sites defined for themselves according to their own goals and strategies. Several site directors reported that they planned to use such flexibility to involve neighborhood leaders and school staff in designing their evaluations to help build broad investment in implementing the evaluation. " (Honig, 2004, p.542). It can be observed that a bottom-up reform supports the meaning-making of schools by engaging in open-dialogue and allowing the local institutions to make their own decisions.

Many studies have revealed the challenges of bottom-up reforms, and these studies can inspire meaning-making approaches to reflect and transform (Honig, 2004; Kawai et al., 2014; Petko et al. 2015; Tikkanen et al., 2020). Using the previous example, Honig (2004) observed several limitations in the California reform. For example, some cities used open-up rules which allowed local institutions to define their own educational goals: and this was seen by some institutions as an extra workload on their educational task, because it was believed that it should have been the responsibility of the policy makers. They complained that they could have benefitted from some formal guidelines, as long as it was allowed to challenge them when not necessary. Moreover, the policy makers struggled to provide the resources to the different cities. Based on the bottom-up approach, in fact, the materials needed vary among sites, hence the fundings vary. However, some sites considered it unfair that others got more resources only because they wrote about it. Furthermore, the policy makers of the bottom-up reform struggled in using the resources to either further the implementation of the reform in the experimenting sites or involving more sites to this reform. Both tasks were very important, but both required a lot of resources, and policy makers struggled to decide on the priority. Dahlberg et al. (2013) highlighted that the meaning-making approach would require very demanding public conditions where prejudices, self-interest, unacknowledged assumptions, and distorted and limited visions could be challenged and confronted by childcare institutions using a dialogic approach. However, it can be observed in the experiment of the bottom-up reform in California that these public conditions were very difficult to achieve (Honig, 2004). In conclusion, the implementation of meaning-making approach can also result in similar dilemmas where educational policies struggle to meet the different needs of each institution and the childcare institutions struggle to keep on all the tasks that they are required to be responsible.

In the meaning-making approach, the decision-making process of governmental institutions and policy makers in ECEC are not discussed. It is not clear what the roles of policy makers and central offices are, and if there is any need at all for central guidance at State level. On the other hand, studies on education that have observed school reforms both from a bottom-up and a top-down approach suggest that schools need a central office to see the big pictures, integrate differences, implement policies, and sustain efforts for educational change (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Kawai et al., 2014). School leaders who preferred a top-down approach after

experimenting a bottom-up reform indicated that there was a need to provide framework for rules and standards, and make decisions on what to provide for children (Honig, 2004); they pointed at the time consuming process of decision-making; they also raised issues on finance distribution, as resources were distributed unequally among schools, following the reported needs of schools' principals. In short, by not attentioning the process of how to reach agreements among the many stakeholders involved, meaning-making discourse fails to address the decision-making process in ECEC, the responsibility of policy makers, and the needs for rules and standards.

While meaning-making approach ensures the contextualization of education, it overlooks the need to ensure minimum requirements for ECEC at a universal level. Based on previous studies, even in highly developed countries, many childcare services struggle to meet the basic needs of children to learn and play. A report from the Netherlands (total sample size was 200) found that 86% of childcare institutions struggle the most with providing quality activities (Vermeer et al., 2008). Moreover, around 50% of the institutions struggles with providing well organized space, qualified furnishing, and structured programs (e.g., have enough time for children to rest in between activities). Similarly, by comparing CLASS measurements in five different countries, (China, United States, Finland, Germany, and Chile), Hu and colleagues (2016) found that all caregivers scored below 3 in a 1-7 scale in providing instructional support. Since instructional support of caregivers is a very important aspect for promoting social-emotional development and achievements (Pianta & Hamre, 2009), these results show concerning situations of ECEC in even the most developed countries. It can be concluded that ECEC needs general framework and minimum requirements as much as they need to make meaning of ECEC.

Finally, quantification and child assessment could support pedagogical activities and documentation. However, even for authors who do not intend to reject quantification, some arguments make it hard to see the advantages of quality discourse or child development: especially when the argument is that they are intended to normalize children, manipulate them, and categorize them. Dahlberg and colleagues (2013) argue that "the child becomes an object of normalization, via the child-centred pedagogy that has grown out from developmental psychology, with developmental assessments acting as a technology of normalisation determining how children should be. In these processes power enters through the creation of a type of hierarchy among children according to whether or not they have reached a specific stage, and achieving the norm and preventing or correcting deviations from the norm takes over the pedagogical practice. Such classificatory practices can be seen as a form of manipulation through which the child is given both a social and a personal identity" (p.37).

There is a need to engage in a dialogue for meaning-making discourse to also see quality discourse from a different perspective. If one does not forget that results are not meant to reduce the complexity of educational systems and especially of the dynamics at stake in such symbolic spaces, then scientific data are just this: they provide valuable information to caregivers. Empirical research is required to include random samples and diverse population to bypass biases and provide information applicable to as many settings as possible. Even when the results of ECEC studies or specific policies were not suitable for daily pedagogical work, they would provide an opportunity to reflect on their uniqueness, challenge them, and document them. In this direction, Sabol and colleagues (2021) used developmental research to support the capacity of children to meaning-making and proposed to introduce it in early childhood education. The authors argued that there would be no need to split documentation and scientific research in child development and stressed that documentation could be a methodology of research in ECEC. In conclusion, quality discourse can support and cooperate

with meaning-making discourse in ECEC through dialogue and inclusion.

### 3.2. *Documentation as a method to bridge quality measures with meaning-making.*

The meaning-making discourse uses pedagogical documentation as a tool to make the learning process of children and the educating and caring process of adults visible for reflection, discussion, and exploration. Documentation is important to be considered and applied in the ECEC research and cooperated with quality measures to understand the ECEC quality and its effect. On the other hand, quality measures are based on empirical evidence and careful validation in various context, they can provide structure and hypotheses valuable for members of childcare institutions and support documentation. Therefore, there is an opportunity for an intertwining of documentation methods and quality measures in the future ECEC reforms. Documentation in the context of ECEC is an important evaluation tool invented by the Reggio Emilia Approach community. In documentation, teachers observe, listen, record, remember, and rewrite an educational project that involves meaning-making processes of children and adults. In a project, children as a group often encounter a phenomenon, make hypotheses, work together, and create understanding of this phenomenon (Massimelli et al., 2022). Teachers observe and listen to this process of learning, and with their own consideration of how to make this process visible and with their subjectivity of deciding what is worth recording, they document this process. This is how documentation creates important data for further analyses, reflections, and communication on quality of education. This communication is important for teachers, parents, and children to look back at what happened and understand the value of that learning process (Sandseter & Seland,2018). In other words, the fundamental principle of documentation is to hand the responsibility of researching and reforming ECEC from professionals to all the stakeholders of childcare.

ECEC research can benefit from the participatory nature of documentation to motivate the professionals to share and reflect on the results stemming from the research with all the members of childcare institutions (Reggio Children & Harvard Project Zero, 2011). The inventors of InCLASS measure (Downer et al., 2011) supported a need for this collaboration when they advocated that, "the inCLASS observations could produce behavioral profiles of children that guide teachers' decisions about when and how to adjust their daily interactions to meet children's individualized needs … while attempting to balance efficiency, feasibility, and psychometric rigor, future efforts need to examine the extent to which observations must be conducted by independent, trained professionals (as was the case in the current study), or could be completed by teachers themselves." (Downer et al., p.15-p.16). Basically, the authors pointed out that this measure should serve as a tool for teachers to reflect and explore on their own approach to ECEC. This idea of supporting teachers' reflection and exploration is in line with the documentation of Reggio Emilia approach (Reggio Children & Harvard Project Zero, 2011). Moreover, Downer and colleagues (2011) were concerned whether teachers could independently apply the InCLASS quality measure and how ECEC research could balance efficiency, feasibility, and psychometric rigor. This concern can be reduced by mixing quality measures with documentation, because teachers can make sense of how to benefit from the quality measures and what should be their proper use.

Documentation can support ECEC research also by providing more accurate operationalized constructs to be measured, and by offering insights for the interpretation of the corresponding results. For example, previous research defined quality of child-caregiver interaction, in terms of positive regard, cognitive stimulation, closeness, etc (NICHD, 2002). However, caregiver-child interaction is not just caregivers' positive response and display of closeness; it is a complex dynamic between children's and caregivers' personality, cognition, experience, and behavioural patterns, just like any other relations. Using positive responses and closeness to

define child-caregiver interaction is an oversimplification of these complex social dynamics. A synergy with documentation could enrich the understanding and complexity of this dynamic and provide more accurate operational definition. In fact, the relation child- caregivers is to be seen in the wider system of dynamics in school setting, thus also in relationship with the peers (Koch, 2018). Nevertheless, the peer-culture has often been neglected or simplified in quality measurements (NICHD, 2005; Pianta et al., 2008). The reason might be what Dahlberg and colleagues (2013) indicated as the object of childcare. The authors argue that childcare institutions are often "to provide a substitute home reproducing, as closely as possible, the model of maternal care. This is sought either through individualized forms of care (for example, family day carers or nannies); or through the organization of early childhood institutions and the structuring of relationships between children and staff in these institutions, with importance attached to high ratios of staff to children and the need for close and intimate relationships between staff and children" (Dahlberg, 2013, p.65). This might be a specific feature stemming out of British-American cultures, because of "their strong ideological commitment to maternal care, their high valuation of individuality and their ambivalence to more collective relationships and ways of working" (New, 1993). This limitation can be overcome by observing documentation of the daily activities of children. It would be more obvious in documentation than in the national studies that the quality of ECEC is related to children's interactions with teachers, peers, and even materials at schools. This idea provides a new insight in quality measures.

Quality measures are valuable resources for ECEC institutions if used properly. The most popular ECEC quality measurements can be categorized into global quality instruments and process quality instruments. Global measures include measures such as the Infant/toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R; Harms et al., 2003) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R; e.g., Harms et al., 2003). According to these measures, high-quality education is defined by scoring five big domains: space and furnishing, language, activity, interaction, and program structure. The process measures include the Observational Record of the Caregiving Environment (ORCE; NICHD,2002), the Classroom Observational System (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008) and the individualized Classroom Observational System (inCLASS; Downer et al., 2011). They include domains such as child/caregiver interaction (e.g., caregiver expressing positive affect & positive physical contact), peer interaction (e.g., peer assertiveness, peer communication), and child-task interaction (e.g., self-reliance, engagement within tasks). These measures are based on scientific evidence from history, and they are often validated in various cultures. Moreover, they include randomized control trails in their validation to stress on personal biases of researchers and trainers, and they are based on large data that cannot be obtained by any institution on their own. They provide valuable information for ECEC institutions to explore, reflect, understand and plan.

Documentation process can benefit from empirical research of ECEC in many ways.
Firstly, quality measures help childcare institutions to make valuable hypotheses by suggesting undervalued perspectives to reflect on. In fact, when focusing on documenting the process, a lot of variables that are relevant to define the quality of ECEC can be observed, and scholars can get in-depth understanding of how they systemically function: the variables to be observed might well come from the results of previous quality measures' research. For example, empirical evidence has shown that some children are more sensitive to the quality of childcare than others (Pluess & Belsky, 2010). This difference is based on the variation of children's temperament which leads some children to be more environmentally sensitive than others (Pluess et al., 2018). These empirical studies indicate that the quality of childcare is not only based on the nature of the activity, but it also depends on how children perceive it. Nevertheless, these individual differences might be overlooked in the documentation of the

group's learning process, if the teachers were not focusing on the sensitivity of children to the activity and how they respond to it. By obtaining this information, teachers can reflect and analyse the documentation from a new perspective. Another example can be found in studies that focus on caregivers. It appears that caregivers' job satisfaction and relationships with children are related both to their perception of the job and their autonomy in decision making (Debora et al., 2017; Grant et al.,2019). Gajek & Wysłowska (2023) identified six types of teachers' work when they engage in childcare: information work, relational work, emotional work, safety work, child development work, and professional identity work. Usually, teachers' job satisfaction and its relation to children is neglected and overlooked when teachers are documenting about children. These studies, on the other hand, can provide teachers with new perspectives on their own experience, highlighting factors that relate to their own learning process. Documentation might even become a reciprocal process of attentioning all involved learning processes and styles, by engaging the children in documenting about teachers and children-teachers relation, when they discuss how knowledge is produced. Secondly, caregivers and teachers could use evidence from their own observation and experience, but also from scientific data of randomized and controlled research. The latter, in fact, provides caregivers with information they could not obtain on their own and offer them opportunities to view a phenomenon from multiple perspectives. For example, when debating about the level of involvement in the activities of children, they might find research indicating that children do like caregivers' involvement but only at certain conditions (Roorda et al., 2017). Finally, when parents, caregivers, and other members of childcare institutions make hypotheses relating to ECEC quality or child development, they can have a broader knowledge about other cultures and contexts to verify their understanding and compare different viewpoints. By integrating documentation with research-based knowledge, stakeholders overcome subjective biases and visions, enriching personal observations and understanding with evidence from controlled research and studies. This would be meaning-making at societal and even global level.

## 4. Discussions and Conclusions

The examination of both quality discourse and meaning-making discourse in Early Childhood Education and Care reveals that neither a top-down nor a bottom-up approach alone is sufficient to transform educational systems effectively. Quality discourse, often driven by national standards and expert measurements, risks overlooking local values and the unique contexts of individual childcare institutions. This can lead to resistance and inefficiencies in implementing reforms. Conversely, the meaning-making discourse emphasizes local decision-making and contextualized educational practices but can struggle with the lack of standardized guidelines and the equitable distribution of resources.

The study suggests that an effective ECEC reform requires bridging the gap between these two approaches. Documentation, a method central to the meaning-making discourse, can be integrated with empirical research from quality discourse to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ECEC quality. By combining the strengths of both approaches, stakeholders can develop more nuanced and context-sensitive educational policies and practices within a real learning community. As Dahlberg and colleagues (2013) suggested, the construct of childcare institution is a community where "individuals —children, young people and adults— can come together to participate and engage in activities or projects of common interest and collective action" (p.73)".

Ultimately, a collaborative framework that includes both top-down and bottom-up elements, supported by empirical evidence and localized documentation, offers a promising path forward for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of early childhood education. This

integrated approach can ensure that reforms are both theoretically sound and practically viable, addressing the diverse needs of children, caregivers, and educational institutions.

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