

Introduction to the Special Issue “Quality in Extended Education”

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Extended Education defined as all services provided to support children’s education outside of regular school hours (Schüpbach, 2018), is growing in number and importance in many countries. Studies show that participation in extended education programs can have a positive impact on students’ academic or socio-emotional development, depending on the quality of the program (e. g. Fischer & Theis, 2014; Lilla & Schüpbach, 2019). While school quality has been a focus of research for several years, the study of quality in extended education is relatively new in our field. This research gap needs to be filled, especially as there many expectations from different stakeholders in the extended education sector, such as the reduction of educational inequalities. The WERA TASK FORCE Global Research in Extended Education Conference 2023 took up this challenge and discussed over 50 contributions on quality in extended education, five of which are presented in this special issue.

Early research on international comparisons in extended education shows that the development is often culture and context specific and rooted in political and pedagogical discourses (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009). Yet, in terms of the quality of extended education, several countries have developed specific quality frameworks (e. g., Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2024; National Afterschool Association [NAA], 2011) or curricula (Fischer et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there is a need for a global understanding of quality. Therefore, parallel to the input-process-output model of school quality (Scheerens, 1990), a model with three dimensions of quality can be used to describe quality in extended education (Fischer & Kielblock, 2021; Willems & Becker, 2015). Structural quality is tied to context and includes all aspects of quality that are visible at first glance, such as infrastructure, opening hours and staff-child ratios. Process quality describes aspects of quality that are in the hands of staff: interactions, rules and rituals, activities offered and means of communication (Fischer et al., 2022; Strätz et al., 2003). Output quality, which is often called “orientation quality” (Annen et al., 2017) describes goals that extended education programs can strive for, such as providing students with academic support, helping them develop socially or individually, or, at another level, contributing to gender equality by providing childcare outside of school hours (Fischer & Klieme, 2013). All these aspects emerge from the research and literature on quality in extended education and vary in importance depending on the perspective. The articles presented in this issue can be grouped according to these dimensions and further separated by the focus perspective: the extended education staff perspective and the children’s perspective.

The first three contributions focus on the staff perspective. The contribution by Knut Løndal, Siv Lund and Kirsti Riiser focuses on a specific aspect of structural quality – that of

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professionalisation. Their analysis of interviews with staff in Norwegian extended education institutions points to the need for professionalisation measures to improve quality in extended education. The authors conclude that there is a need to introduce qualification requirements for extended education staff. The contribution by Laurin Bremerich, Gunther Grasshoff, and Markus Sauerwein follows this line and argues that the shortage of formally qualified staff makes it necessary to also employ people without the desired qualifications. Therefore, they are interested in the structural and personal integration of such “lay educators” in all-day schools. The results of their mixed-methods study conducted in Germany show that the integration and belonging of lay staff plays an important role for quality. The contribution from Sweden by Christina Grewell and Björn Haglund also focuses on the staff perspective and examines how a structural aspect of quality, namely the physical learning environment is related to the teaching in school-age educare (an aspect of process quality). Staff in school-age educare centres in Sweden were interviewed about the teaching practices in the physical learning environment provided. The results show that aspects of structural quality – such as limited space – are important for the development of good process quality. Furthermore, the subordination of extended education staff to school staff, which also shows up in the use of the physical environment, can be limiting.

The other two papers consider a perspective that is often overlooked: the children’s perspective. The contribution by Jasmin Näpfli and Kirsten Schweinberger focuses on all dimensions of quality. Through photo tours and group discussions with 194 children in extended education facilities in Switzerland, their subjective point of view is taken into account. The results show that children talk more often about aspects of the process dimension of quality than about structural aspects and that they are most concerned about relationships, autonomy, and participation. The contribution by Taylor Michelle Wycoff, Sandra D. Simpkins and Alessandra Pantano provides another shift in perspective by looking at the perspectives of minoritized adolescents in extended education settings regarding their perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Focusing on process quality enables a closer look at what kind of practices can be included in specific activities and how they are connected to the orientation or output quality of the whole after-school program. The authors describe that extended education settings can become more culturally responsive by using diverse teaching practices.

The different papers in this special issue all point to important dimensions and aspects of quality and use both qualitative and quantitative methods. The focus on a particular perspective or aspect of quality allows for an in-depth analysis and the formulation of recommendations for further development. Furthermore, all contributions connect their findings to different aspects of quality. Nevertheless, the question remains, whether a more global approach to quality and the development of an international quality framework also spark a common discussion and a global vision for the future of extended education.

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