

Children's Perspectives on Quality in Extended Education: Agency, Co-construction, and the Role of Staff as Facilitators

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Abstract: Extended Education in its current form does not always achieve the intended effects, which are closely linked to its structure and quality. While quality has often been assessed from an adult and objective perspective using predefined standards, this paper adopts a relational understanding of quality as a reflexive construct shaped through discourse and negotiation.

Building on a service-theoretical approach, the focus lies on children's perspectives to better understand the perceived benefits and uses of Extended Education. Grounded in childhood research, children are seen as experts in their own everyday experiences whose views may differ from those of adults.

This paper investigates how children perceive and co-construct quality in Extended Education. Drawing on two qualitative studies with 159 primary school children and six adolescents from one Swiss canton, the paper employs photo walks, group discussions, ethnographic observations, and interviews. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) was used to identify patterns across the data.

Findings show that Extended Education serve as important social spaces and shape opportunities for autonomy, participation, and interaction. Children not only engage, but also resist, negotiate, or selectively participate. The ability to negotiate one's own involvement emerges as a key quality dimension. Staff should focus on their roles as facilitators of participation and co-construction and quality assurance frameworks should move beyond structural indicators to systematically include children's voices.

Keywords: *Extended Education, Quality, Children's Perspective, Socio-Pedagogical User Research, Participation, Agency, Staff*

1 Introduction

Extended Education offerings are gaining significance worldwide, with more and more school-aged children¹ participating in a wide range of educational and care-related programs beyond regular school hours (Bae, 2018), referred to by various names across different contexts. Following Schüpbach et al. (2017, p. 58), we use the term *Extended Education Offering (EEO)* to refer to these diverse settings. EEOs have become key social spaces where children learn, interact, and shape their everyday experiences (Schüpbach & Lilla, 2019). As a

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1 When the term "children" is used, it refers to school-age children from 4–16, thus including young people

result, childhood is becoming increasingly embedded within institutional contexts (Seitz & Hamacher, 2024).

EEOs are expected to promote inclusion, family support, and social as well as individual learning (Bae, 2018; Stecher, 2019). However, research shows that EEOs do not always meet these expectations (Sauerwein, 2019; Thieme, 2018), as their effectiveness depends on program quality and structure (Zuechner & Fischer, 2014), on children's regular and long-term participation and the extent to which this participation is voluntary (Sauerwein, 2019).

In recent years, growing attention has been paid to quality in EEOs (Fischer et al., 2012; Landwehr, 2015; Sauerwein, 2017; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; Fischer et al., 2022). Traditionally, quality assessments have been adult-centric, relying on objectivist frameworks and pre-set standards. Although children generally rate EEOs positively, most existing studies capture their perspectives predominantly through quantitative surveys (Coelen & Wagener, 2010; Sauerwein, 2016; 2019). This approach restricts children's evaluations to adult-defined aspects and therefore often fails to reflect their lived experiences and active engagement. As childhood studies emphasize, children are not passive recipients but active social actors with their own perspectives (Corsaro, 2015; Corsaro & Molinari, 2017; Hauke, 2019).

To address this gap, the study adopts a relational understanding of quality (Harvey & Green, 2000) and draws on socio-pedagogical user research (Oelerich & Schaarschuch, 2005), which emphasizes users' subjective experiences. Quality is thus seen as emerging in the interplay between institutional structures and individual meaning-making. This aligns with childhood studies, which recognize children and adolescents as experts in their own everyday lives.

This paper investigates how children perceive, use, and benefit from EEOs, drawing on two qualitative studies conducted in a Swiss canton—one at the primary level and one at the secondary level. Building on a relational understanding of quality, a thematic analysis is employed to explore how children actively construct and define quality in these settings.

By integrating service theory with participatory methods, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of children's perspectives and to inform the development of more responsive and sustainable educational practices.

2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical foundation for understanding children's perspectives on EEOs draws from recent Service Theory (2.1) and the principles of new childhood studies (2.2). Both frameworks emphasize the active role of users—children—as co-creators of social and educational services. Section 2.3 provides a literature review on quality in EEOs, with an emphasis on children's perspectives.

2.1 Service Theory Approach

Recent service theories in social work provide a useful framework for analyzing how children engage with EEOs. Socio-pedagogical user research (Oelerich & Schaarschuch, 2005) con-