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## **CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF QUALITY IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION: NAVIGATING POLITICIZED LANDSCAPES**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

ECE sets the foundation for a child's life. However, ECE educators find themselves at the center of an increasingly politicized and contentious professional landscape, where debates over curriculum, equity, and instructional practices intersect with broader societal and political tensions (Hoffman et al., 2021; Williams, 2022). Recent controversies surrounding book bans, diversity initiatives, and the role of social-emotional learning have cast a spotlight on ECE, making it a battleground for conflicting ideologies that often prioritize political agendas over children's developmental needs (Meiners, 2022; Souto-Manning, 2021). Amid these pressures, educators struggle to uphold pedagogies of care and inclusivity while navigating a landscape that subjects their professional autonomy and decision-making to intense scrutiny (Kendall-Taylor & Lindland, 2021). The current political climate not only impacts how educators perceive their roles but also shapes broader definitions of quality in early education. As a result, what is deemed quality is no longer a neutral or purely pedagogical construct but a contested terrain influenced by shifting policy narratives and power dynamics (Hoffman et al., 2021; Grooms & Childs, 2021).

The concept of quality in ECE is highly contested, shaped by varying political, social, and cultural contexts (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Moss, 2014). Traditional metrics of quality have focused on child outcomes, teacher qualifications, and safe, structured learning environments (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020). However, with the rise of neoliberal reforms, definitions of quality have increasingly aligned with market-driven priorities, emphasizing standardization, accountability, and cost-efficiency over a more holistic and relational understanding of children's development (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020). These shifts have resulted in a narrowing of what constitutes quality, often overlooking care-based pedagogies and relational aspects that are essential for fostering children's well-being and growth (Urban, 2015).

In this paper, I critically examine the evolving discourse surrounding quality in ECE, utilizing a social constructionist framework and critical discourse analysis methodology to analyze how policy, practice, and stakeholder perspectives converge to shape contemporary definitions of quality. I argue that dominant narratives, which privilege standardization and economic outcomes, are insufficient for capturing the complexities of early education. Instead, this study advocates for a more inclusive, contextually responsive, and compassionate approach to quality that genuinely supports the well-being and holistic development of all children.

The complexity of defining quality in ECE can be better understood through the *ECE trilemma*, a conceptual model introduced by Morgan (1986) and later expanded by the NAEYC (1987). This model posits that quality is interdependent among three interconnected dimensions: affordability, availability, and programmatic quality. Efforts to improve one dimension often create tensions in the others, making it difficult to achieve balance across the system (Lash & McMullen, 2008). For example, initiatives to enhance programmatic quality—such as increasing teacher compensation—may reduce affordability for families or limit availability by decreasing the number of classrooms. Using the trilemma as an analytical lens, this paper explores how various stakeholders—including policymakers, educators, and families—construct and negotiate these meanings within a dynamic and often contradictory policy environment.

## Research Questions

To investigate how quality is constructed and articulated in ECE policy and practice, I examine the discourses of quality. I also explore how stakeholders' positions within the nested ecosystem of ECE shape their perspectives on quality. Lastly, I analyze interview responses, policies, and literature to examine how discourses of quality in ECE interact with the early childhood trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987). To pursue these aims, I ask the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant discourses of quality in ECE programs, policies, and practices?
2. How do stakeholders' positions within the nested ecosystem of ECE policy shape their perspectives on quality in ECE?
3. How do the discourses of quality in ECE intersect with the early childhood trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987)?

The analysis is organized within a nested ecological model, acknowledging that each layer of the ECE ecosystem—from classroom interactions to policy governance—significantly influences the establishment and implementation of quality standards (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). To cultivate a more nuanced and inclusive definition of quality, this study argues that all three dimensions of the trilemma must be addressed across the entire ECE ecosystem, requiring stakeholders from across the ecosystem (i.e., legislators, school leaders, directors, teachers, and families) to adopt a holistic perspective that integrates the viewpoints and experiences of children, families, educators, and policymakers. By prioritizing relationality, inclusivity, and contextual responsiveness in policy discussions, a more equitable understanding of quality can be achieved.

This paper advocates for moving beyond reductionist perspectives that define quality solely through standardized metrics and economic outputs. Instead, it promotes a reimagined discourse on care that recognizes the diverse needs of children and families, empowers educators as skilled professionals, and values the social and emotional dimensions of early education. By embedding the discourse of care within a holistic understanding of quality, this study challenges policymakers, educators, and communities to collaboratively construct a comprehensive definition of quality that transcends compliance and technical benchmarks, advancing a vision of ECE that honors the complexities of human development and the unique context of each educational setting. This reimagined vision moves away from viewing quality as a set of quantifiable outcomes and positions it as a multifaceted construct that genuinely supports the well-being, development, and lifelong learning of young children.

## Defining Quality in ECE Amid Political Contention

Quality in ECE is a dynamic and multifaceted concept, deeply shaped by cultural, societal, and political landscapes. Over time, definitions of quality have evolved, with organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020) traditionally emphasizing key indicators such as educator-child relationships, developmentally appropriate practices, and safe, nurturing environments. However, the political landscape of ECE has shifted dramatically in recent years, particularly since 2020, as quality has become increasingly politicized. This shift aligns with broader neoliberal trends prioritizing privatization, standardization, and austerity, which often undermine community-centered and holistic approaches to early learning (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). These pressures have contributed to a narrowing of quality definitions, favoring rigid accountability measures that neglect the relational and contextual dimensions that have long been integral to the profession.

As a result, ECE educators find themselves navigating an increasingly politically charged environment, where governance structures impose policies that limit professional autonomy and promote anti-teacher rhetoric (Brown, 2015; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020; Shelton et al., 2019; Vandenbroeck, Lehrer, & Mitchell, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these tensions, with policymakers and administrators prioritizing quantifiable performance metrics and economic considerations over the well-being of children and educators (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). These shifts placed unprecedented pressure on ECE professionals,

who were not only tasked with maintaining learning continuity but also forced to navigate the politicization of public health measures (Hoffman et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

## Overview of Quality Discourses in ECE

Quality in ECE is not a fixed or universally agreed-upon concept. It is shaped by a variety of definitions and frameworks that are often influenced by cultural, societal, and political contexts. Historically, quality in early childhood education has been measured by child outcomes, educator-child relationships, and safety standards (NAEYC, 2020). However, in recent years, these definitions have become increasingly politicized, reflecting broader trends in public education, such as neoliberal reforms, privatization, and standardization (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020). As Tobin (2005) notes, quality standards are inherently subjective, reflecting the values of the time rather than objective measures of progress. This fluidity raises significant questions about how quality in practice is defined and measured, especially in a context where consensus among educators and researchers is increasingly elusive. In this environment, the evolving discourse of quality in ECE is shaped by both political shifts and societal values, raising the critical issue of how educators, policymakers, and stakeholders can navigate the tensions between standardized measures and the holistic, relational care that defines high-quality early childhood education.

Moreover, conservative-backed parents' groups increasingly leveraged these debates to challenge educators' expertise, often through harassment of ECE teachers and staff members, and through aggressive demands to eliminate safety protocols (Borter et al., 2022; Cunningham, 2023; Nossel, 2022; Williams, 2022). These dynamics reflect a broader movement to marginalize early childhood educators in critical decision-making processes, undermining their ability to advocate for policies that support young children's developmental needs. In resisting these pressures, a more holistic and equity-centered approach to defining quality in ECE must emerge—one that values the voices and professional expertise of educators while rejecting the imposition of decontextualized, market-driven benchmarks. This turmoil underscores the urgent need to examine how notions of quality are defined, internalized, and evaluated amidst a landscape fraught with competing narratives.

As Tobin (2005) observes, standards for quality are frequently subjective, reflecting contemporary values rather than objective measures of progress. This ambiguity leads to persistent questions within educational contexts: What does quality truly mean? Educators strive to teach with quality, policies aim to implement quality, and evaluations seek to measure quality; yet the definition remains contested (West, 2022). The increasing influence of neoliberal policies, which prioritize market-driven accountability and efficiency over relational and contextual aspects of education, further complicates this discourse (Cuevas, 2022; Hernandez et al., 2024). These policies have fueled efforts to undermine diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, exposing the entrenched power dynamics that shape educational decision-making. In this climate, defining and defending quality in education requires a critical examination of whose interests are served by prevailing frameworks and whose voices are excluded.

In today's politically charged environment, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers an essential lens to examine how the notion of quality in early childhood education is constructed and influenced by external political forces. CDA focuses on the meanings ascribed to language and the social actions stemming from it (Fairclough, 2012). This approach uncovers the discursive processes that shape policies, revealing how they often reflect dominant cultural values while marginalizing underrepresented communities. As Cottle and Alexander (2012) note, the concept of quality is frequently cited yet rarely defined, indicating a prevailing assumption of a consensus model for quality in childcare settings. This assumption merits critical examination, particularly through the lens of personal experiences in navigating the complexities of early care and education.

Through a multi-method approach combining policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews with ECE stakeholders, this research aims to illuminate the nuances of quality in early care and education, revealing the often-hidden power dynamics and social assumptions that shape educational policies. By examining how quality is defined, internalized, and evaluated across different contexts, my study critically interrogates the ways in which dominant discourses influence both policy and practice. In doing so, it advocates for a reimagined understanding of quality that moves beyond standardized metrics to embrace a more inclusive and equity-centered framework. Ultimately, by challenging prevailing narratives, this research seeks to equip educators, policymakers, and advocates with the tools to collaboratively construct a model of quality that authentically reflects the needs and values of all stakeholders in early care and education.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: POLITICAL INFLUENCES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

In recent years, ECE has faced significant challenges amid contentious political climates characterized by debates over curriculum content, censorship, and policy reforms. These political dynamics profoundly impact ECE teachers, necessitating strategies to support their professional identity and agency (Au, 2021; Hernandez & Tuber, 2022).

Political discourse increasingly shapes ECE policies and practices. Hernandez and Tuber (2022) emphasize that while children's literature can promote equity, educators often struggle to balance inclusive practices against politically motivated censorship. Au (2021) highlights pressures on teachers to adjust instructional methods while maintaining educational integrity, a concern echoed by Mason (2022), who critiques policies that overlook children's diverse needs, fostering systemic inequities. Grooms and Childs (2021) further note that standardization and neoliberal ideologies prioritize efficiency over child-centered approaches, exacerbating these challenges.

Neoliberalism has transformed ECE into a commodity characterized by privatization, austerity, and standardized practices (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020). This shift increases reliance on private funding and performance-based accountability, compelling ECE programs to demonstrate measurable outcomes, which undermines relational and holistic aspects essential for child development. Dahlberg et al. (2007) argue that this commodification simplifies quality assessments into standardized metrics, reducing children to investments and parents to consumers. Such a focus often neglects social equity and the complexities of quality education, ultimately prioritizing output metrics over nuanced understandings of diverse needs.

Resistance to neoliberal pressures is growing within the ECE community. Scholars like Vandenberg and Moss advocate for socially just, child-centered pedagogies that prioritize holistic approaches over market-driven models (Vandenberg & Peeters, 2014; Moss, 2014). This movement challenges restrictive definitions of quality imposed by neoliberal reforms, promoting an understanding of ECE that values complexity and care. By rejecting commodification, educators aim to ensure that policies and practices prioritize children's needs rather than economic imperatives (Lubeck et al., 2001; Langford, 2010).

### **THE IMPACT ON ECE EDUCATORS AND CARE WORK**

Neoliberalism's emphasis on standardization has eroded ECE educators' professional autonomy, undermining care-based pedagogies in favor of rigid accountability measures (Woodrow & Press, 2007; Souto-Manning, 2019). This shift prioritizes compliance over educators' professional judgment, diminishing recognition of their emotional labor and expertise (Osgood, 2006; Akaba et al., 2020). As educators become implementers of prescribed standards, they face burnout and disillusionment, threatening their ability to foster meaningful learning experiences (Bradbury, 2012; Lubeck et al., 2001). The increasing dominance of neoliberal policies in ECE not only devalues care but also narrows pedagogical possibilities, reducing children's opportunities for holistic, inquiry-based learning (Kilderry, 2015; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2021). Understanding the complex interplay between neoliberalism and ECE is crucial for fostering an educational landscape that centers the well-being of children, educators, and families while resisting the erosion of relational and equity-driven pedagogies (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015).

### **Pandemic-Era Policy Responses and Their Impact on Early Childhood Education**

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked debates over safety protocols like mask mandates and social distancing, reflecting broader ideological divides (Kozlowski et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Fluctuating guidance from health authorities created confusion for educators, complicating the delivery of high-quality care (NAEYC, 2020). Additionally, early childhood educators were often excluded from key policy decisions, leading to frustration and demoralization, as systemic conditions prevented them from fulfilling their professional commitments (Hoffman et al., 2021; Jalongo, 2021; Santoro, 2018). This disconnect highlights the importance of involving educators in decision-making processes, recognizing their expertise and moral agency (Furman, 2022; Jiang, 2022). Research shows that when educators have greater autonomy and influence in shaping policies, they are better able to navigate crises and maintain their commitment to the profession (Charney, 2021; Hoffman & Miller, 2021).

The pandemic also had significant financial impacts on ECE settings, with many centers facing economic strain due to forced reopening and reduced enrollment (Jalongo, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Resource disparities exacerbated these challenges, leading to program closures and limited access to quality ECE (Kozlowski et al., 2021). Ultimately, the pandemic revealed the fragility of ECE systems and underscored the need for policies that balance safety with developmental needs. Ensuring robust support structures that prioritize teacher input and equitable practices is essential for maintaining high-quality ECE during crises (Hoffman et al., 2021; Charney, 2021).

### **Conflicting Views on Quality in Early Childhood Education**

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated conflicts over defining quality in ECE. Stakeholders often prioritized different aspects; some emphasized adherence to safety protocols, while others focused on maintaining educational continuity (McMahon et al., 2021; NAEYC, 2020). This divergence mirrored broader societal tensions regarding public health and educational needs, complicating the establishment of consistent quality measures across ECE programs (Baker et al., 2021).

The lack of clear standards during the pandemic led to fragmented practices, resulting in varied experiences for children and families (NAEYC, 2020). This situation highlighted the urgent need for adaptable policy frameworks that incorporate diverse perspectives (McMahon et al., 2021; Baker et al., 2021). Lessons learned during this crisis should inform future policy development to create a resilient ECE system that prioritizes care and quality.

### **Struggles for Quality: Educator and Community Resistance**

During the pandemic, ECE educators joined broader labor movements advocating for improved conditions, wages, and public education support (Labor Notes, 2024). For example, a six-day walkout in Phoenix revitalized local organizing, resulting in significant gains in pay and working conditions (Labor Notes, 2024). These movements connect with social justice issues to resist the commodification of education and uphold professional autonomy (Au, 2021).

### **Defending the Right to Teach and Learn**

In response to rising political interference, educators have resisted efforts to limit discussions of race, gender, and history, defending academic freedom in their teaching. Advocacy groups emphasize the importance of maintaining spaces for critical thinking and diverse perspectives (Giroux, 2024). These movements aim to protect a truthful and holistic education that fosters engagement with complex social issues (Blades et al., 2021).

### **Affirming BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ Students in ECE Settings**

Educators in ECE settings are actively countering reactionary movements targeting inclusive education. Legislative attacks on race and gender discussions have met resistance to ensure BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ students feel affirmed (Shelton et al., 2019). Through diverse curricula and professional development, educators strive to create equitable environments that support every child's identity (Baker et al., 2021).

### **Support Mechanisms for Educators**

Given the contentious political climate, robust support mechanisms are vital for empowering ECE educators. Professional development should prioritize educators' voices, fostering community and shared strategies (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013). Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can inform support structures considering multiple levels of influence on ECE teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Effective support systems enhance teacher agency and resilience, allowing them to uphold equitable practices despite political pressures (Dillenbourg et al., 2019; Skrla et al., 2001). Continued research and advocacy are essential for maintaining these supportive environments.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is grounded in social constructivism, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and contextual experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This perspective is particularly relevant in ECE, where children's learning is deeply influenced by their interactions with peers, educators, and the broader community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning environments that foster dialogue, shared understanding, and the co-construction of knowledge (Hoffman et al., 2021).

In the context of supporting ECE teachers during contentious political times, social constructivism offers a lens through which to analyze the complexities of teaching in an era marked by heightened scrutiny and censorship (Au, 2021). The political landscape significantly impacts educators' professional identities and agency, as they navigate the challenges posed by authoritarian policies and societal pressures (Charney, 2021; Hernandez & Tuber, 2022). As teachers engage with their students and colleagues, they create spaces for critical discourse that challenge the dominant narratives and empower their communities (Hernandez et al., 2024). This aligns with Bacchi's (2016) poststructural policy analysis, which underscores the need to interrogate how educational policies shape perceptions of teaching and learning.

Social constructivism further highlights the role of context in shaping knowledge construction. For ECE teachers, understanding the specific needs and values of their communities is essential for fostering inclusive environments that promote equity and social justice (Dennis & O'Connor, 2010; Mitchell, 2022). This aligns with the insights of Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007), who argue that quality in ECE transcends standardized measures, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of children's experiences and the sociopolitical dynamics that influence them. By emphasizing collaboration and reflection, social constructivism empowers ECE educators to navigate political challenges while remaining focused on the needs of their students and families.

Adopting a social constructivist framework allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities ECE teachers face during contentious political times. By recognizing the importance of social interactions, contextual experiences, and critical dialogue, this framework provides a valuable lens for exploring strategies to support teachers as they advocate for their students and respond to the evolving political landscape (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Lynch, 2023). This approach not only reinforces the significance of community engagement but also highlights the necessity for ongoing professional development that addresses the unique challenges educators encounter in today's political climate (Mason, 2022; Moreno, 2021).

## **METHODOLOGY: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how quality in ECE is constructed, contested, and influenced by political forces. As Cottle and Alexander (2012) highlight, quality is often discussed in ECE without clear definitions, suggesting an unexamined consensus on what constitutes quality childcare and practitioners. This assumption warrants closer scrutiny, especially given the ongoing question: What is quality in ECE? Educators aim to teach with quality, policies strive to implement it, and evaluations seek to measure it—yet the meaning of quality remains unclear.

The politicization of ECE since 2020 has intensified, with political discourse increasingly favoring quantifiable metrics over the qualitative aspects of education (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). In this neoliberal context, even immeasurable elements of ECE are subjected to market-driven evaluations, reducing the complexity of teaching and learning to simplistic scores. For example, the U.S. State Department of Education's 2017 checklist of quality indicators attempts to define standards like warm interactions and trained educators, but these components resist objective measurement. This raises important questions: must all quality indicators be quantifiable? Can such metrics truly capture the essence of quality in ECE?

CDA provides a framework for analyzing the relationship between language, power, and policy in ECE. Fairclough (2012) asserts that CDA examines the meanings ascribed to language and its impact on social actions in specific contexts. By using CDA, this study seeks to uncover how policies are shaped by discourses that reflect dominant cultural values while often sidelining marginalized perspectives (Diem et al., 2018). This analysis, informed by a social constructionist epistemology, prompts critical questions: How is quality defined and evaluated in policies,

especially without explicit definitions? What assumptions influence these processes, and how do they affect everyday practices in ECE settings?

The study employed a multi-method approach, combining policy document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and thematic coding to explore stakeholder responses within the ECE ecosystem. A comprehensive search identified 170 policy documents, including state manuals, education board policies, and budgetary guidelines. Each document was analyzed for references to quality, whether explicit or implied, and tracked using a detailed spreadsheet.

The analysis was iterative, narrowing down to 40 key documents relevant to the study’s focus on quality in state ECE programs. These documents were read multiple times, and critical dialogue with the text was fostered through highlighting quotes and annotating reactions. This method aligns with Diem and Young’s (2018) concept of “concentrated looking,” which critically questions what is stated, assumed, and omitted from the discourse.

For example, when analyzing the policy document *The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects* (Pre-Kindergarten Task Force, 2017), I questioned the definition of "optimal stimulation" and the underlying assumptions about family environments that informed claims linking poor learning conditions to external factors like neighborhood violence and poverty. This critical engagement revealed how policies frame social issues and propose solutions, highlighting the complexities in constructing quality in ECE.

In addition to document analysis, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders across the ECE ecosystem—legislators, state directors, district administrators, principals, and teachers. These interviews provided insights into how quality is understood and operationalized at various levels of the system. Findings revealed significant variation in definitions of quality: legislators, operating within the macrosystem, emphasized financial metrics, while teachers focused on relational aspects. Through this analysis, I examined how the discourse of quality is articulated within the early childhood trilemma—availability, affordability, and program and teacher quality.

## METHODS

This study consists of two primary parts: policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in ECE in North Carolina. The goal is to understand how discourse informs, enables, and constrains ECE policy and practice, as well as how written discourse is enacted and understood by stakeholders. Table 1 lists the documents analyzed for this research.

**Table 1**  
*ECE Documents Analyzed for Critical Discourse Analysis*

<b>ECE Policies Reviewed for Critical Discourse Policy Analysis</b>
NC Pre-K Program Requirements & Guidance
Title I Pre-K NC Standards and Procedures January 2021
North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development
NC PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM, 2019
CHAPTER 9 - CHILD CARE RULES Effective August 13, 2020
Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan For North Carolina FFY 2019-2021
Quality Progress Report (QPR) For North Carolina FFY 2019
North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) Site Monitoring Tool State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020-2021
Foundations for families Fantastic Fours
Early Educator Support Unit ENROLLMENT APPLICATION

<b>ECE Policies Reviewed for Critical Discourse Policy Analysis</b>
A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Environment Rating Scale Assessment Process (ECERS-R)
WHY CLASS? Exploring the Promise of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System ® (CLASS)
UPDATED 2020-2021 NC Early Learning Inventory Requirements
Developmentally Appropriate Practice National Association for the Education of Young Children
Child Care License Requirements Overview
North Carolina Preschool Eligibility Crosswalk Public School Preschool Programs (flow chart)
NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items
Standards for Birth-Kindergarten Teacher Candidates
Teacher Evaluation Process NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development
Star Rated License
NC Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program Fiscal and Contract Manual
Program Standards
Education Standards What are "Education Standards"?
NCRLAP Quick Reference Brochure
ECERS-R Assessment Process: Information for preschool classrooms in public schools
NC Pre-K Policies Reviewed for Critical Discourse Policy Analysis
Article 7 Chapter 110 of the North Carolina General Statutes Child Care Facilities
EESLPD Teacher Manual – Section 2 Steps Toward Professional Growth
Creating a quality Learning Environment About the Assessment Process in NC
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION POLICY STATEMENT ON EXPULSION AND SUSPENSION POLICIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS
Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review)
Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education Final Recommendations
Child Care in North Carolina
Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children
Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators
The Smart Start Resource Guide of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices
NC Early Childhood Action Plan
North Carolina’s Statewide Birth through Five Strategic Plan
North Carolina Statewide Birth-5 Needs Assessment Final Report

The 40 policy documents share a common emphasis on standardizing and regulating early care and education (ECE) practices, reflecting dominant discourses of quality that prioritize measurable outcomes, accountability, and school

readiness. These policies collectively promote compliance with state and federal standards, emphasize the use of assessment tools (e.g., ECERS-R, CLASS), and underscore the importance of professional development for educators. While they aim to enhance quality, their focus on regulation and performance metrics reveals the influence of neoliberal accountability frameworks on ECE settings.

Table 2 lists the interview participants' roles within the ecosystem and trilemma.

**Table 2**  
*Interview Participants' Roles within the ECE Ecosystem and Trilemma*

<b>Interview Participant Position</b>	<b>Role within ecosystem</b>	<b>Role in ECE Trilemma</b>
Assistant principal	microsystem	Teacher quality
Regional Executive director	mesosystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Early learning coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Preschool Coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
State ECE Administrator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Director of ECE Programs	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Preschool Coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Preschool Program Coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
ECE Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
ECE Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
ECE Lead Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Itinerant Special Education Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Pre-K Lead teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Principal	microsystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Principal	microsystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Preschool coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality

<b>Interview Participant Position</b>	<b>Role within ecosystem</b>	<b>Role in ECE Trilemma</b>
ECE and elementary ed director	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
ECE program specialist	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Former state ECE program director	exosystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Assistant superintendent	mesosystem	Availability, affordability
Preschool Coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Preschool Specialist	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Director of Preschool Programs	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
ECE coordinator and specialist	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Elementary principal	microsystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Retired state representative	macrosystem	Availability, affordability
State Senator	macrosystem	Availability, affordability
Chair for ECE Governance Commission	exosystem	Availability, program and teacher quality

*Note:* Chart of all interview participants including position, quality definition, and membership within the ecological system.

This chart reveals how the discourses of quality in ECE are shaped by a hierarchical structure within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological framework, where those in the macrosystem (e.g., legislators) influence affordability and access, while mesosystem actors (e.g., directors and coordinators) prioritize program and teacher quality. Meanwhile, educators in the microsystem and individual levels directly experience the challenges of availability and quality but have limited influence on systemic policy decisions. This top-down dynamic reflects a neoliberal accountability framework, where quality is framed through compliance with standards rather than relational, child-centered care.

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

To address the first research question—*What are the dominant discourses of quality in) programs, policies, and practices?*—I began by reviewing ECE policies, literature, and interview responses. I conducted keyword searches for the term "quality" within each policy document and analyzed how different levels of the nested ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) influence the discourse of quality. This allowed me to explore how quality is embedded in both written policy and the practices that stem from it, examining the social construction of policy and the context-dependent nature of policy implementation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The second research question—*How do stakeholders' positions within the nested ecosystem of ECE policy shape their perspectives on quality in ECE?*—emerged from the analysis of interviews with 30 ECE stakeholders. These participants represented a range of roles across the state's ECE system, from policymakers and administrators to teachers and program directors. The interviews revealed how stakeholders' discursive positions in relation to policy implementation led to varied definitions of quality. For example, policymakers, situated in the macrosystem, often defined quality in terms of financial indicators, while educators focused on relational aspects of quality, such as teacher-child interactions and social-emotional development.

The third research question—*How do the discourses of quality in ECE intersect with the early childhood trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987)?*—examines how discourses of quality interact with the three interconnected elements of the early childhood trilemma: availability, affordability, and program and teacher quality. I argue that discourses of quality are present within each element and that these discourses shape how quality is defined and evaluated across the dimensions of ECE. This investigation provides a comprehensive understanding of how different perspectives of quality intersect and influence the lived experiences of children, families, and educators.

Through the combination of policy analysis and interviews, this study examines how discourse shapes the construction, evaluation, and implementation of quality in ECE across different levels of the policy and practice ecosystem.

## **FINDINGS: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL ASSUMPTIONS ON QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) POLICIES**

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 40 policy documents and interviews with early childhood education (ECE) stakeholders reveals that the concept of quality in ECE is shaped by standardized, market-driven metrics that frequently marginalize holistic care and reduce educators' autonomy. The data highlights four key findings:

1. ECE quality is defined by standardized, market-driven metrics that marginalize holistic care.
2. Stakeholder position within the policy ecosystem shapes their perception of quality.
3. Neoliberal discourses of quality undermine educator autonomy.
4. The ECE trilemma creates systemic tensions that impact quality.

Together, these findings underscore the need for a reimagined, equity-centered definition of quality that values holistic, contextually grounded practices and restores educators' voices in shaping policy and practice.

### **Finding 1: ECE Quality Is Defined by Standardized, Market-Driven Metrics That Marginalize Holistic Care**

The analysis reveals that ECE quality is frequently framed through standardized assessments, licensing benchmarks, and child outcome measures, promoting a narrow, decontextualized definition of quality. This focus on quantifiable metrics often overlooks the relational and holistic aspects of care that are central to early childhood education.

Schoch et al. (2023) describe high-quality ECE programs as those that "go beyond basic health and safety requirements to provide warm, responsive relationships with educators, stimulating and developmentally appropriate curricula, and ongoing training for educators" (p. 1). They emphasize that these features enhance children's cognitive and social-emotional development. However, while this definition acknowledges relational and developmental elements, it still reflects a policy-driven framing of quality based on programmatic features rather than lived experiences.

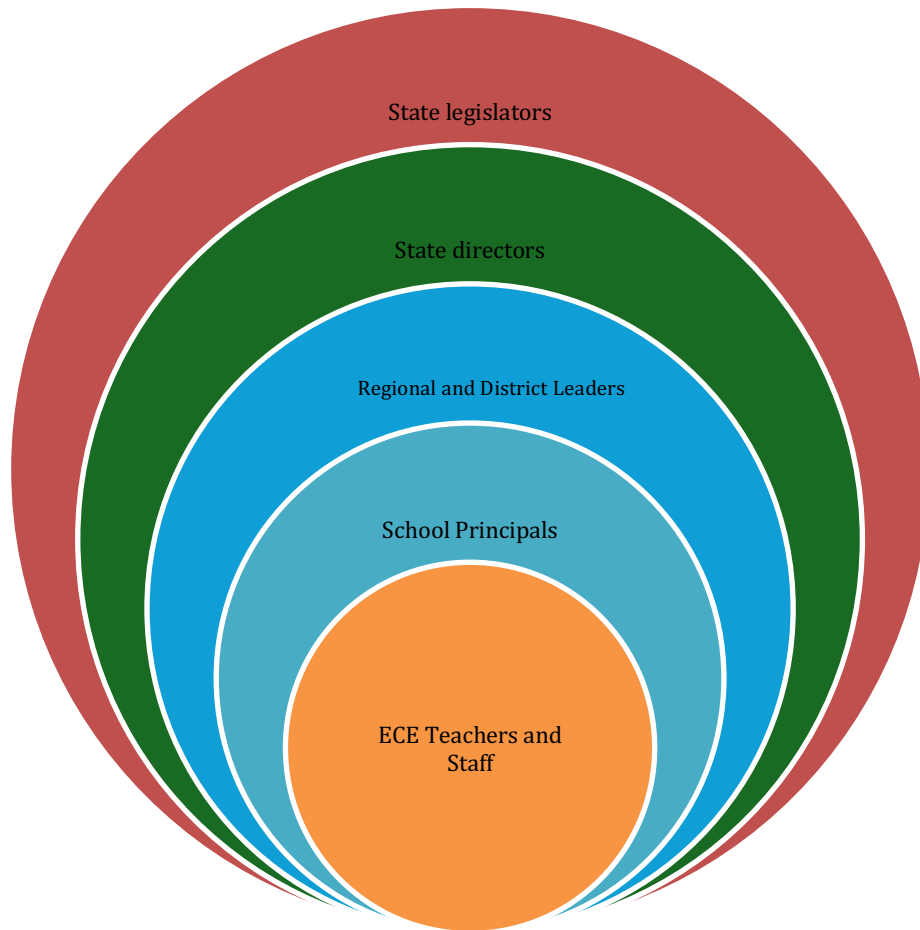
In contrast, educators in this study described quality in more nuanced, child-centered terms, highlighting social-emotional learning (SEL), meaningful activities, and responsive relationships. One ECE teacher defined quality as: "Interactions, engagement, conversations, learning and play, SEL, and physical setup—where children can be themselves, smiling and laughing." This perspective underscores how educators view quality as relational and

experiential, prioritizing children’s emotional well-being and self-expression over compliance with standardized assessments.

The findings also reveal that policies frequently adopt a deficit-oriented lens, particularly when addressing children from marginalized communities. Several documents framed quality improvement efforts around "fixing" perceived deficiencies in children's home environments rather than recognizing and building upon the cultural and social strengths of diverse families. This narrative reinforces systemic inequities, positioning children and families as subjects in need of intervention rather than as partners in the educational process.

**Finding 2: Stakeholder Position Within the Policy Ecosystem Shapes Their Perception of Quality**

Using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory as a framework, the findings demonstrate that perceptions of quality vary significantly based on stakeholders' positions within the ECE policy ecosystem. Quality is not a universal construct; rather, it is interpreted differently at each ecological level. Figure 3 describes each stakeholder’s position within the nested ecosystem.



*Figure 1. Layers of the ECE Ecosystem*

At the macrosystem level, policymakers and legislators emphasized financial and regulatory language, often prioritizing compliance with funding requirements, teacher-student ratios, and measurable outcomes. Policy

documents from this level primarily defined quality through technical, programmatic indicators, such as classroom size and standardized assessment scores.

In contrast, at the microsystem level, educators and administrators framed quality in relational and pedagogical terms. Their definitions highlighted meaningful child-teacher interactions, play-based learning, and the socio-emotional dimensions of early education. During interviews, one administrator stated: "When we talk about quality, we're talking about the children feeling safe and loved. We're talking about teachers being present, knowing their students and families."

The exosystem level, encompassing program administrators and organizational leaders, reflected a hybrid perspective. These stakeholders acknowledged the regulatory pressures of the macrosystem but also recognized the importance of fostering positive educator-child relationships. Their perspectives demonstrated a tension between external accountability demands and internal commitments to relational care. This finding underscores how stakeholders' positions influence their definitions of quality, with policymakers focusing on compliance and measurability, while educators emphasize the day-to-day realities of classroom experiences.

### **Finding 3: Neoliberal Discourses of Quality Undermine Educator Autonomy**

The findings reveal that neoliberal discourses of quality, characterized by market-based principles and standardization, undermine educators' professional autonomy. ECE policies frequently prioritize data-driven accountability measures, positioning educators as implementers of predetermined standards rather than as experts with valuable insights into classroom practice.

Several teachers reported feeling disempowered by prescriptive quality assessment frameworks that restricted their ability to adapt practices to meet children's individual needs. One educator expressed frustration, stating:

It feels like we're being asked to check boxes instead of truly seeing the children. The data doesn't capture the moments when a child feels safe enough to share their feelings or takes pride in learning something new.

Additionally, the research highlights how educators navigate conflicting expectations from administrators, policymakers, and families. Inadequate training for principals and evaluators in early childhood pedagogy exacerbates this issue. Principals often reported challenges in assessing ECE teachers due to limited knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices, leading to inconsistent and sometimes inaccurate evaluations.

The dissonance between educators' expertise and policy-driven accountability measures contributes to increased stress, diminished job satisfaction, and, in some cases, attrition. By prioritizing narrow, outcomes-based measures, neoliberal quality frameworks overlook the nuanced, context-dependent realities of ECE classrooms, reducing educators' professional agency.

### **Finding 4: The ECE Trilemma Creates Systemic Tensions That Impact Quality**

The analysis also reveals that the ECE trilemma—the interconnected challenges of quality, accessibility, and affordability (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987)—creates systemic tensions that influence how quality is defined and experienced.

At the macrosystem level, policymakers frequently frame quality in terms of fiscal accountability, prioritizing affordability and access through funding models. This emphasis often leads to policies that promote cost-cutting measures, such as increased classroom sizes or reduced teacher-child ratios, ultimately undermining the relational quality of ECE programs.

At the microsystem level, educators expressed frustration with insufficient compensation and limited professional development opportunities, which they viewed as direct barriers to delivering high-quality care. One teacher explained: "We're expected to provide the best care and education, but we can't even afford to stay in the profession. How can we give children consistency and stability when we're struggling to survive ourselves?"

Interviews further revealed that the trilemma creates disparities in access and quality, particularly for marginalized families. Some administrators described how affordability policies inadvertently compromised program quality by creating funding gaps that restricted investments in curriculum, staffing, and materials. As one director noted: "The push for affordability means we operate on bare-bones budgets. We lose qualified staff because we can't pay them competitive salaries."

The trilemma also impacts families' access to high-quality programs, with affordability concerns disproportionately affecting low-income families. This systemic tension demonstrates how quality cannot be isolated from broader financial and accessibility challenges—it is embedded within the trilemma and shaped by stakeholders' efforts to balance competing priorities.

## **Reimagining Quality in ECE: Toward an Equity-Centered Framework**

The findings of this study highlight the need for a reimagined, equity-centered definition of quality in ECE. Current policies often reflect standardized, market-driven metrics that marginalize holistic care and undermine educators' professional autonomy. However, the data also reveals educators' deeply relational, child-centered perspectives, which emphasize the importance of care, connection, and socio-emotional development.

To move beyond standardized quality frameworks, policymakers must engage directly with educators, families, and community members. A reimagined framework would prioritize:

- Relational care as a core component of quality, valuing meaningful child-teacher interactions.
- Contextual adaptability, allowing educators to respond to children's diverse needs rather than adhering to rigid, standardized measures.
- Equitable compensation and support for educators to enhance retention and sustain high-quality programs.

By adopting a more nuanced, contextually grounded approach, ECE policies can better reflect the lived realities of educators, children, and families, fostering environments where all stakeholders thrive.

## **DISCUSSION: REIMAGINING QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: TOWARD AN EQUITY-CENTERED FRAMEWORK**

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to reimagine and redefine quality in early childhood education (ECE) through an equity-centered lens. Existing policies often reflect standardized, market-driven metrics that marginalize holistic care and undermine educators' professional autonomy. However, the data also reveal that educators hold deeply relational, child-centered perspectives, emphasizing the importance of care, connection, and socio-emotional development. By moving beyond rigid, decontextualized frameworks, policymakers can create a more inclusive and responsive definition of quality that genuinely reflects the lived realities of children, educators, and families.

### **Challenging Standardized Quality Metrics**

This research supports the argument that attempts to establish universal, decontextualized quality standards are conceptually flawed and counterproductive (Tobin, 2005). The discourse of quality in ECE is shaped by multiple and often contradictory influences, including power dynamics and broader socio-political structures. Current dominant frameworks tend to prioritize efficiency and accountability over relational and developmental aspects of education, reducing quality to measurable outcomes. As a result, policies frequently fail to capture the complexities of early childhood learning environments, neglecting the fundamental role of relationships in young children's development.

To move beyond these limitations, a reimagined framework must prioritize:

- Relational care as a core component of quality, valuing meaningful child-teacher interactions.

- Contextual adaptability, allowing educators to respond to children’s diverse needs rather than adhering to rigid, standardized measures.
- Equitable compensation and support for educators to enhance retention and sustain high-quality programs.

## **The Trilemma of Quality, Availability, and Affordability**

Defining quality in ECE is a multifaceted challenge, deeply influenced by social constructionist frameworks (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). An analysis of literature, policy, and practice reveals three foundational definitions of quality in ECE, informed by the "trilemma" articulated by Morgan (1986) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1987). The trilemma framework highlights the interconnected dimensions of quality, availability, and affordability, underscoring the challenges in balancing these priorities.

ECE policies often emphasize affordability and availability while neglecting quality, particularly in terms of equitable teacher compensation. This imbalance creates systemic instability, akin to the instability of a three-legged stool when one leg is weak or missing. By framing quality through the trilemma—supported by empirical evidence, policy documents, and educator perspectives—we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how policy decisions impact program sustainability and educational equity.

## **Nested Ecosystem and Political Context**

Stakeholders engage with the trilemma based on their positions within the nested ecosystem of ECE. While many policies primarily address financial aspects, such as teacher compensation, others emphasize programmatic quality and the need for equitable educational experiences. Interviews with educators reinforce the idea that teachers are the most crucial component of quality in state ECE policy and practice. Consequently, their voices must be central to discussions about educational reform.

Defining teacher quality must incorporate various elements, including:

- Strong qualifications and ongoing professional development
- The ability to build positive relationships with families and students
- Commitment to fostering equitable, inclusive learning environments

These components are essential not only for individual teacher effectiveness but also for fostering a community of care, particularly in today’s politically charged educational climate.

## **Reclaiming Care as Central to ECE Quality**

In the current landscape, neoliberal definitions of quality prioritize quantifiable outcomes, often at the expense of care-centered approaches. However, the discourse of care provides a transformative framework that challenges these limitations. By recognizing children as whole beings—socially, emotionally, and cognitively—this perspective emphasizes the importance of environments that nurture all aspects of their development (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007).

Theories such as Relational Play-Based Pedagogy (Hedges & Cooper, 2019) and social reproduction theory (Ferguson, 2009; Nadasen, 2021) further unpack the significance of relational care in ECE. These frameworks highlight how nurturing environments empower both children and educators, allowing them to engage in learning experiences that extend beyond mere academic outcomes. Instead of rigid, outcomes-driven assessments, an equity-centered approach champions the idea that quality education must prioritize relationships, responsiveness, and holistic development.

## **Empowering Educators as Decision-Makers**

Reclaiming the discourse of care necessitates repositioning educators as key decision-makers within their classrooms and communities. As frontline professionals, educators possess valuable insights into quality practices that align with the diverse needs of children and families. Empowering educators through participatory governance models and collaborative professional development creates educational environments that genuinely reflect community values. This shift enhances educational quality and affirms the expertise of educators, ensuring their voices are integral to policy discussions and decision-making processes.

## The Politicization of Quality in ECE

The discourse surrounding quality in ECE is deeply influenced by the sociopolitical landscape, with ongoing challenges that extend beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic exposed systemic inequities in ECE, these issues persist, continuing to shape the field (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). The increasing politicization of education—marked by market-oriented policies and right-wing attacks on public education—has further complicated discussions of quality. Educators now face heightened scrutiny, curriculum censorship, and policy shifts that disproportionately impact marginalized communities (Santoro, 2018; Osgood, 2006).

Amid these challenges, educators continue to advocate for a vision of ECE that prioritizes care, inclusivity, and responsiveness to diverse needs (West, 2022). This advocacy is critical in a policy environment that often values compliance over meaningful learning experiences (Hoffman et al., 2021). By resisting the dominant narrative that equates quality with standardized metrics, educators can work toward a system that centers relational, compassionate, and equitable approaches to teaching and learning (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Furman, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The nested trilemma framework provides a valuable lens for understanding the complex relationship between affordability, availability, and programmatic quality in ECE. This study reveals that quality is not a static concept; it evolves in response to shifting societal values, power dynamics, and the lived experiences of children, families, and educators. Findings highlight that market-driven policies often undermine relational care, and sustainable, high-quality ECE systems require a comprehensive, equity-centered approach.

Moving forward, policymakers and educators must collaborate to construct a holistic definition of quality that transcends narrow metrics. Policy initiatives must prioritize care at all levels, advocating for increased funding, equitable compensation for educators, and professional development focused on relational practices. Supporting family engagement strategies will further strengthen connections between home and school, fostering cohesive support systems for children.

By embedding care as a fundamental principle within policy frameworks, ECE can cultivate nurturing, inclusive environments that value the rich potential of every child. This reimagined perspective on quality ensures that early education remains responsive, equitable, and empowering. To truly honor the complexities of human development, stakeholders must challenge prevailing narratives that reduce quality to mere outputs. Instead, they must recognize the unique contexts in which early education unfolds, fostering environments that promote holistic child development and social justice. Our ECE providers and children deserve nothing less.

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