Introduction

Although early childhood teachers play a central role in the enactment of quality, there has been surprisingly little investigation of their perspectives on quality. A review of over 200 peer-reviewed articles about quality (Fenech, Harrison, Sumsion, Press & Bowes, 2008) found only one that included the perspective of an early childhood teacher. While the review may not have been exhaustive, the lack of attention to early childhood teachers’ understandings of quality is concerning, given that teacher practices are a key determinant of quality (Layzer & Goodson, 2006). As Textor (1998, p. 167) points out, ‘What goes on is determined by the teachers to a very large extent’. This paper contributes to efforts to address the almost complete absence of teachers’ perspectives on quality by reporting on an exploratory study that investigated a) how six early childhood teachers working in long day care services understood and made provision for quality, and b) their perspectives on how quality was understood and provided for in their services. An in-depth interview was conducted with each teacher. Data analysis was informed by Cleveland and Krashinksy’s (2005) tangible and less tangible aspects of quality and Goodfellow’s (2003) hidden dimensions of professional practice. The paper highlights the potential use of metaphor to illuminate less tangible aspects of quality, particularly those associated with professional practice and policy making.

Perspectives on quality

In using the terms modern, post-modernist and reflexive, we do not mean to imply that perspectives on quality are necessarily sharply delineated or even mutually exclusive. Our intent is to offer a broadbrush conceptual tool to inform discussions about possibilities for evaluating quality. In this section, we briefly describe these perspectives and provide examples of studies that, in our view, reflect them. We discuss their strengths and limitations and identify perspectives evident in the Australian policy context.

Modernist perspectives

Modernist perspectives on quality are informed by the application of prescribed norms, derived from the domains of developmental psychology and science. From these perspectives, quality is considered primarily a readily measurable construct involving a set of observable and quantifiable characteristics (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney & Abbott-Shim, 2000). Thus, quality can be evaluated using a set of ‘objective’
statements that reflect prescribed norms. Commonly used scales that reflect modernist perspectives include the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales, Revised (ECERS-R) and the Infant Toddler Early Childhood Rating Scales, Revised (ITERS-R) (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998). Widely cited longitudinal studies framed around modernist perspectives include the Abercedarian Project, the High/Scope Preschool Perry Project and the Chicago Child–Parent Project—for details see Galinsky (2006).

Rating scales have been helpful in establishing baseline levels of quality and politically strategic in enabling links to be demonstrated between high-quality ECEC and broader gains for society. Thus, they have provided a powerful justification for investment in the early years. The generic application of rating scales, with their standardised and hence pre-determined criteria, can be considered a ‘top–down’ approach to evaluating quality, especially if little regard is given to contextual or cultural differences (Cegłowski & Bacigalupa, 2002). Limitations of top–down approaches can include difficulties in identifying the experiences of individual children; nuances that arise from contextual differences in service provision; and less easily measured aspects of quality and hidden dimensions of professional practice (Goodfellow, 2003) that contribute to quality.

**Post-modernist perspectives**

In contrast, those who adhere to post-modernist perspectives see quality as ‘a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interest, rather than an objective and universal reality’ (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 5). They argue that modernist discourses of quality are only one of many possible languages of evaluation (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). They see the term ‘quality’ as a value-laden term aligned to discourses of modernity and argue that the use of that term represents a decision to take up those discourses (P. Moss, personal communication, 19 August 2008). Post-modernist perspectives recognise that discourses shape ways of thinking about quality. These discourses shape teachers’ practices aimed at achieving and evaluating quality in particular ways (Clark, Trine Kjorholt & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Post-modernist perspectives on quality are evident in the Stockholm project in Sweden and schools in Reggio Emilia, in Italy (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Pedagogical practice in these settings is grounded in the culture, traditions and context of the communities in which they are embedded. Program decisions are based on discussions among children, families and teachers. Judgements of value are made collectively by all participants rather than from pre-determined rating scales that characterise modernist perspectives. A strength of post-modernist perspectives, therefore, is that they encourage contextually relevant judgements and promote early childhood settings as sites of democratic practice (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Critics might argue that post-modernist approaches assume high levels of professional knowledge, and without a core set of conditions for evaluating practice, professionals may lack sufficient direction and guidance. Soler and Miller (2003) also refer to criticisms about lack of adequate accountability.

**Reflexive perspectives**

Like post-modernist perspectives, reflexive perspectives acknowledge quality as ‘a value-laden, subjective and dynamic concept which varies with time, perspective and place’ (Pascal & Bertram, 2000, p. 7). In contrast to post-modernist perspectives, however, reflexive perspectives use a combination of approaches for evaluating quality. Some stem from top–down approaches and include a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures. Others develop from bottom–up approaches, where teams of early childhood professionals work together to develop shared understandings of, and procedures for evaluating, quality (Pascal, 1993). Several major studies from the United Kingdom (UK) have taken a reflexive and dynamic approach to evaluating quality, using combinations of quantifiable and qualitative measures. These include the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2003), Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002) and the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) (Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002). These studies have been valuable in highlighting the connection between high-quality early childhood services and gains in children’s development. An advantage of reflexive approaches is that they enable evaluations of quality to be tailored to individual services and contexts. On the other hand, when they are derived from diverse and non-standardised measures, they do not easily allow for larger scale comparisons of quality.

**Perspectives of quality evident in the Australian policy context**

In Australia, the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) is responsible for quality assurance in long day care services, family day care and outside of school hours care through the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS). While not necessarily the original intent of QIAS (Wangmann, 1995), the current system appears to adopt primarily modernist perspectives. The seven quality areas and 33 principles focus predominantly on aspects of...
quality that are relatively easily identified and measured and lend themselves to be interpreted in modernist ways. While these quality areas and principles make an important contribution to understandings of quality, they potentially provide a superficial view of professional practice by narrowing the ‘parameters of quality’ to readily observable and quantifiable aspects (Fenech, 2007, p. 12). A recent report from an expert advisory panel (EAP) to the Australian Government’s Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2009) acknowledges concern about the current regulatory environment and the ‘sidelining’ of professional judgements and risk management in an effort to deliver high-quality programs. The report emphasises the need to move beyond structural aspects, which consider program attributes and process aspects, that focus on ‘environmental supports and/or interactions like the extent and quality of caregiver–child interaction’ in conceptualising quality (Martinez-Beck, 2009, p. 2). The EAP argued for a range of ‘aspects of quality’ and ‘quality enablers’ including orientation quality, educational concept and practice, operational quality, child-outcome quality or performance standards and standards pertaining to parent/community outreach and involvement (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 18–20).

Conceptual framing
The report of the EAP is in keeping with the work of Cleveland and Krashinsky (2005) who consider tangible and less tangible aspects of quality. Their construct of these, complemented by Goodfellow’s (2003) construct of hidden dimensions of professional practice, provided the conceptual frame for the current study. Tangible aspects of quality are similar to structural aspects of quality and include readily measurable aspects, such as child–staff ratios, group sizes, qualifications of staff, learning materials and physical capital. Less tangible aspects of quality include enthusiasm, leadership, motivation, child–staff interactions, beliefs and the complexity of decision making that contributes to professional judgements (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2005). Goodfellow (2003) refers to these aspects as hidden dimensions of practice. Less tangible aspects of quality and hidden dimensions of practice encompass a broader range than process aspects and are difficult to measure by traditional systems and rating scales.

Methodology
The exploratory study reported here investigated a) how six early childhood teachers in long day care services understood and made provision for quality, and b) their perspectives on how quality was understood and provided for in their services. Participants held a degree in early childhood education and worked in long day care services in a regional Australian city or its surrounds. They were recruited through an invitational email to nine prospective participants known to one of us through our professional networks and selected because of their experience, qualifications and employment in a long day care service. Six of the nine teachers contacted agreed to participate. Three participants were employed in the non-profit sector and three in the for-profit sector.

Data was generated through an individual, in-depth semi-structured interview with each participant. Interviews were conducted in a venue chosen by the participant and ranged in duration from 30 minutes to one hour. Interviews were audiotaped and, as a precautionary measure, notes were taken of the key points discussed.

Participants were asked about how they understood and made provision for quality and how quality was understood and provided for in their service (see Appendix for interview schedule). Transcripts were analysed inductively using techniques of constant comparison and inferential codes to establish emerging patterns and themes in the data (Garrick, 1999). Patterns were referred to as themes if they were evident in the responses of at least half the participants. The themes were then analysed deductively using the constructs of tangible and less tangible aspects of quality (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2005) and hidden dimensions of professional practice (Goodfellow, 2003).

Findings
Eight themes were identified overall (Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Examples from interview transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Quality for the children, quality for the staff, quality for the parents ... the relationships between all of those people. [Quality is about] the relationships the staff have with the parents and the children—how comfortable everyone is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified staff</td>
<td>The qualifications of the staff ... gives people a better understanding on where they are coming from and why they are doing things the way they are doing it It’s the hiring of qualified staff that’s really important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming</td>
<td>The type of educational program that you have ... epitomises quality The way you set up play spaces ... the programming side of things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Themes Examples from interview transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Examples from interview transcripts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Things like a safe, secure environment. The environment is safe and beautiful and it’s stimulating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional judgements</td>
<td>That you are making the right decisions at the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>[Ve] work really hard on team building so there is a good relationship with the staff. Staff working together as a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards</td>
<td>Quality in long day care makes me automatically think of accreditation [and regulations] To make sure we are meeting all of those guidelines [accreditation] and are on the right track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at professional development</td>
<td>Supporting staff training and attendance at professional development Continuing your professional development</td>
</tr>
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**Challenges of articulating understandings of quality**

Participants’ responses to the question, ‘What does “quality” mean to you?’ highlighted the inherent difficulties in articulating understandings of such complex phenomena as quality. There seemed to be two main reasons for the difficulties experienced by participants. First, as Sally, a teacher with two years of experience, employed in a corporately owned long day care centre noted, quality is ‘very personal and also contextual. Quality for one person is very different for another’. She later noted, ‘It’s such a hard word to define and a topic that is really fluid in meaning’. Sally made an implicit link between concepts of quality and teachers’ beliefs: ‘I think it is really important to believe in what you are doing and understand why you are choosing to do something in a particular way’. It seems likely that teachers’ beliefs about what constitutes high-quality practices influence their understandings of quality, the emphases they place on different aspects of quality, and the decisions they make (Brownlee, Berthelsen & Segaran, 2009). The challenges associated with articulating beliefs, therefore, could account for difficulties in articulating understandings of quality.

Second, the multiple and interconnecting contributors to quality appeared to add to the participants’ difficulty in articulating their understandings of quality. The complexities of these connections mean that quality can be thought of as ‘rhizomatic’. A rhizome or rhizomatic structure is a complex web of links and connections (Deleuze, Guattari & Massumi, 2004). As Deleuze et al. (2004, p. 7) explain, rhizomes assume ‘very diverse forms’ and extend ‘in all directions’. Caroline, an experienced teacher working in a not-for-profit long day care centre, seemed to be alluding to the ‘rhizomatic’ nature of quality when she commented, ‘Everything you do needs to have that quality flowing through it’.

Rhizomatic ways of thinking about quality do not fit comfortably with linear approaches evident in the primarily modernist perspectives underpinning Australia’s current quality-assurance mechanisms (Hutchins, Frances & Saggers, 2009). They highlight the need for new languages for articulating quality and discovering multiple connections (Sellers, 2005). Given the lack of alternative languages in the existing regulatory environment, it is not surprising that the participants in this study struggled to articulate their understandings of quality.

**Tangible and less tangible aspects of quality**

When asked about what they understood by quality, participants also identified a mix of tangible and less tangible aspects. Seven themes (that is, patterns in the data evident in the responses of at least half the participants) were identified. As identified in Figure 1, in order of salience, these were: relationships, qualified staff, programming, the environment, professional judgements, teamwork and standards. Three of these themes—relationships, professional judgements, and teamwork—were coded as reflecting, for the most part, less tangible aspects of quality. The four remaining themes—programming, qualified staff, the environment and standards—were coded as reflecting, for the most part, tangible aspects. Participants considered both tangible and less tangible aspects to be important.

**Figure 1. Comparison of what teachers understood by quality and how they considered quality was understood within their service**

Participants gave most emphasis to relationships between children, staff, families and the community. As Jane, a teacher with more than 20 years of experience and currently employed in a not-for-profit long day care centre, noted, ‘The relationships are so important. You can do without some of your equipment and some of your facilities if you have good relationships going;
they’re really important’. Participants also discussed the centrality of discerning professional judgements and daily decision making to quality. As Sally explained, ‘I think it is about [en]trusting that you are making the right decisions at the time’. Their views were consistent with Goodfellow’s (2003) emphasis on relationships and complex professional discernment as hidden dimensions of professional practice. Goodfellow (2003) refers to early childhood teachers ‘thinking and acting in complex, contextual and emotional ways’ as they participate in these relationships or ‘human encounters’ (McLean, 1999, p. 67, as cited in Goodfellow, 2003, p. 51).

Participants also referred frequently to teamwork which they saw as closely connected to themes of relationships and professional judgements. Caroline noted, ‘Our service works really hard on team building so there’s a good relationship within the staff which I think flows on to quality care’. These were coded as less tangible aspects of quality. As with other less tangible aspects of quality, the complex connections of teamwork, professional judgements and relationships are not easily measured and identified. In comparison, programming, qualified staff, the environment and standards appeared more tangible in the sense of being identifiable and measurable, at least on initial coding. Yet, even here, many aspects were not measurable. For example, Karen, an experienced teacher employed by a large corporation, discussed differences between her professional judgements, programming and the environment. She stated:

All of that [professional judgement] helps the quality of your program … that helps you decide where you and the children are going to next and the way you document and work together. The environment is the other thing that makes up quality … and that plays a really big part in your program.

Here the less tangible aspect (professional judgement) directly influenced the tangible aspects (programming) and (environment).

Participants considered that qualified staff were key to quality. Jane commented on the differences that, in her view, qualified staff bring to programs:

I think again it comes down to the quality of the staff; that’s really important and that is a lot to do with the training … they ask more in-depth questions about a particular child and their needs and they make reflections and come up with suggestions.

Although the employment of qualified staff can be considered a tangible aspect of quality, the hidden dimensions of their practice are not easily identified and so, to some extent, remain less tangible. This paradox supports Layzer and Goodson’s (2006) argument that measures of quality and influences on quality are often confused and not easily understood.

### Disjunctures between understandings of quality

When participants were asked to describe what quality meant within their services, rather than what they, themselves, understood by quality, similar, but not identical, themes emerged (Figure 1). Six themes of relationships, qualified staff, teamwork, programming, standards and attending professional development were identified. There was, however, a difference in emphasis.

The theme of standards was particularly prominent. Indeed, each participant referred to standards. For example, Sally noted, ‘It means that we are doing the job we are supposed to be doing. That we are meeting the expectations of regulations, accreditation and of our families’. Sally considered that, within her service, quality was understood to mean abiding by a set of rules or standards that govern her practice. Yet, when Sally expressed her own understandings of quality, she highlighted her professional judgement, trust and meaningful interactions with children. Participants noted that accountability documents and systems within their services constrained their ability to enact professional judgements; time they could have otherwise spent engaging with the children. Sally noted the tension between being accountable for quality and enacting quality when she stated:

Well, I need to make sure that I’m doing all this [completing service documentation to account for quality] and I need to tick all the boxes and I think … that might have been a quality interaction [with a child] if I didn’t have to step back and document that it actually occurred.

Another participant, Julie, an experienced teacher employed by a large corporation, discussed differences between her understandings of quality and her perspectives of how her service understood quality:

[Company name] has a lot of forms and formats that we have to use; to them that’s providing a high-quality service by making sure all areas are covered … whereas to me, the ‘hands-on’ is the quality, whether it is cooking with the children, doing group time or sitting down talking to them … the paperwork takes second place to that.

For some participants, the emphasis in their services was on accounting for their provision of quality rather than enacting it. In their view, onerous responsibilities for the purpose of accountability for quality reduced their availability and energy needed for engaging in meaningful experiences with children, other staff and families. These findings were consistent with a larger recent Australian study (Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2006) that highlighted early childhood teachers can feel subjected to a deficit model of accountability framed around risk-management discourses rather than a model grounded in respect for professional judgement. Notably, professional...
judgements and the environment were not mentioned by participants in the current study when they discussed how quality was considered within their service. It may be that an over-reliance on measures emanating from modernist perspectives creates ‘blind spots’ in which other aspects of quality emphasised within post-modernist or reflexive perspectives may be overlooked.

Figure 1 compares the most salient themes in participants’ responses when asked a) what they understood by quality, and b) what was considered important within their services. The teachers emphasised less tangible aspects of quality and the hidden dimensions of professional practice. Within their services, however, they perceived that there was more emphasis on tangible aspects of quality. In particular, the teachers placed most emphasis on relationships (less tangible), while in their view the greatest emphasis in their services was on standards (tangible). Figure 1 highlights the disjunctures between these early childhood teachers’ understandings of quality and their perspectives of how quality was understood within their services. Again, however, we emphasise caution in interpreting these findings given the small numbers in this study.

Discussion, implications and contributions of the study: The possibilities of metaphor

Although it is not possible to generalise the findings of a small qualitative study such as the one reported here to a broader population, the findings appear to raise issues for discussions about Australia’s foreshadowed new National Quality Framework (DEEWR, 2009). In particular, they suggest that there is a need to consider new ways to articulate understandings about quality as a complex and interconnected phenomenon. They also indicate a need to highlight and explore less tangible aspects of quality. Moreover, they call for focused discussions among stakeholders who have an interest in, but not necessarily shared perspectives of, quality. In the remainder of this paper we argue that the use of metaphors offers possibilities for addressing these implications. We illustrate our case using two metaphors—quality as water and quality as a map—to highlight complex and interconnected understandings of quality while acknowledging that other metaphors, such as ‘quality as a rhizome’, may be equally generative.

Metaphor as a means of conceptualising complex ideas

Metaphor, as a means of ‘seeing something in terms of something else’ (Burke, 1945, as cited in Cameron & Low, 1999, p. 3), can assist in conceptualising and clarifying complex ideas. Metaphor, along with the use of poetry and visual images, has been used previously in early childhood research substantially or tangentially related to quality, usually as a medium for generating rich data from which new insights might be drawn (for example, Jorde Bloom, 2000). Our interest in metaphor in this article is somewhat different and, following Cameron and Low (1999), focuses on the possibility that deliberate changes in the metaphors used might bring about changes in ways of thinking; in this case, about quality in ECEC and professional practices and policies aimed at ensuring quality. We are particularly interested in the potential of metaphor to make visible less tangible and hidden dimensions of quality.

Metaphors of quality as ‘water’ and ‘maps’

In reflecting on the themes identified in Figure 1, and on the disjunctures between the participants’ emphasis on less tangible aspects of quality and what they perceived to be an emphasis on tangible aspects of quality in their services, we explored, in a preliminary and tentative way, the potential of metaphors of ‘water’ and ‘maps’ to help us think more deeply about quality.

The metaphor of ‘water’ represents the fluid and less tangible aspects of quality and hidden dimensions of practice, such as relationships, teamwork and professional judgements. More generally, it reflects participant comments about the ‘fluid’ and less visible nature of quality; for example, Sally noted that ‘quality is not necessarily so visible’, while Caroline commented that ‘it sort of flows’. Miller eloquently encapsulates the fluid nature of water when she describes how ‘... it takes the shape of the container that holds it, be it a walker’s cupped hands or the hollow in the hills’ (Miller as cited in Dombrovskis & Miller, 1978, p. 62). An analogy can be drawn between the interconnected (less visible) and fluid aspects of quality shaped by the contexts where they are enacted and the images in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Quality as water—fluid and contextual
and physical resources. This metaphor is implicit in the comments of participants, like Jane, who when talking about current accreditation documents, noted ‘it’s all written out so well … they [staff] can recognise the standards we should be keeping’. While Jane’s comment points to the benefits of a map for prescribing quality practices, Caroline alluded to the limitations of maps. In stating that ‘as far as accreditation [is concerned] I guess they are addressing quality but I think they are only addressing aspects of what quality could be’, Caroline seemed to be agreeing with critical commentators (e.g. Fenech, 2007) that maps to quality may have a ‘narrowing’ effect on professional practice.

Figure 3. Quality as a map

Tensions between metaphors and perspectives of quality

The findings of this exploratory study highlight possible tensions, conflicts and professional dilemmas for the participants in balancing their understandings of quality and their views about the aspects of quality emphasised in their services. Similarly, we contend that there can be tensions, conflicts and dilemmas for ECEC policy-makers and professionals, more broadly in balancing different perspectives or metaphors of quality. We are concerned that under the current QIAS, a modernist focus on measurable, tangible aspects of quality has become overly dominant. Metaphorically, as Bateson (1988, as cited in Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 37) cautions, ‘We live with the illusion that the map is the territory, or the landscape, and the name is the same as the named’.

Dahlberg et al. (2007, p. 36) draw our attention to the ‘dangers of this kind of mapping’ as also noted in Lewis Carroll’s story of Sylvie and Bruno concluded:

Mein Herr looked so thoroughly bewildered that I thought it best to change subject. ‘What a useful thing a pocket map is!’ I remarked.

“That’s another thing we’ve learned from your Nation,’ said Mein Herr, ‘map-making. But we’ve carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?’

‘About six inches to the mile.’

‘Only six inches!’ exclaimed Mein Herr. ‘We very soon got to six yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!’

‘Have you used it much?’ I enquired.

‘It has never been spread out yet,’ said Mein Herr. ‘The farmers objected: They said it would cover the whole country, and shut out sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well’. (Carroll, 1996, pp. 556–557)

Lewis Carroll’s story could be read as caution against seeing tangible aspects of quality that can be identified on a QIAS ‘map’ as synonymous with quality. If the map alone is perceived as quality, there may be a tendency to overlook other, more fluid and contextually relevant possibilities for making provision for quality, emphasised in post-modernist and reflexive perspectives of quality and the metaphor of ‘quality as water’. Equally, we acknowledge the dangers of overemphasising the less tangible aspects of quality and its fluidity and situatedness. Nor do we want to create unhelpful binaries between different perspectives and metaphors of quality.

Metaphors as a means of bringing about change

While mindful of these dangers, we return to Cameron and Low’s (1999) contention that metaphors have potential to bring about change. We see metaphor as a potentially productive means of expanding ways of thinking about quality and professional practices and policies aimed at ensuring quality. In the remainder of this article, we identify changes we would like to see in light of our reflections on quality.

Increased use of metaphor as a tool

Metaphor can serve as a tool to articulate new understandings. In this study we used metaphor as a tool to reflect on what quality meant for the early childhood teacher participants and their perspectives of what quality meant within their services. Low (1999) rightly warns that researchers can make unwarranted assumptions about metaphors and be inclined to see what they anticipate or want to see. Nevertheless, we believe that our use of metaphor led to deeper insights into the interview data and into our own thinking of quality than would have otherwise been the case. It enabled us to recognise, for example, that some properties of water—its fluidity, the way it changes shape according to its container, its reflectiveness, and its capacities to sustain
and transform—can equally apply to quality. Mindful of Low’s warning, we then discussed our interpretations with a ‘critical friend’ who has internationally recognised expertise in narrative and metaphorical ways of thinking. We think it likely that metaphor may be an equally useful tool for early childhood professionals.

Future research could usefully explore whether metaphor can assist early childhood professionals to articulate their understandings of quality. It could also investigate whether metaphor might be an effective tool for clarifying and negotiating both subtle and substantial differences in perspectives and understandings of quality. The potential of metaphor in policy development, professional learning and pre-service teacher education, as a means of extending and complexifying conversations about quality and conceptualising new possibilities for enacting and ‘measuring’ quality, could be a further focus for exploration.

More attention to the less tangible and interconnected aspects of quality

Goodfellow (2003, p. 48) noted that hidden dimensions of professional practice are ‘largely ignored’ in quality assurance systems such as QIAS. The same could be argued about the less tangible aspects of quality. For example, ‘staff qualifications’ are currently viewed by quality assurance systems as a structural and tangible aspect of quality. Yet the contributions and influence of qualified staff, through the complex daily decisions they make based on their professional judgements, in effect constitute less tangible aspects of quality.

Because they are less easily identified, less tangible aspects are generally not made explicit, even though they are vital to quality. Measures that only consider tangible aspects of quality, therefore, could have a deleterious effect on the provision of quality by further reinforcing attention primarily on tangible aspects. In the current study, participating teachers hinted at a professional dilemma—should they focus more on the less tangible aspects of quality, which they considered important even though they are not accounted for in the QIAS, or on the tangible aspects of quality that, in their view, were considered more important within their services because they are emphasised in the QIAS? The use of metaphor could help to redress the current imbalance in the focus of quality assurance systems by assisting in articulating and making more explicit the less tangible and hidden dimensions of quality.

Similarly, the interrelated, rhizomatic nature of quality makes it difficult for traditional measures of quality emanating from modernist perspectives to account for the complex array of connections and influences between aspects of quality. Greater attention to these interconnected aspects and how they play out is warranted. Again, we believe metaphor has a useful role.

Conclusion

An impetus for the current study was concern regarding the apparent dearth of research about early childhood teachers’ understandings of quality (Fenech et al., 2008), even though teachers are a key determinant of quality. Although small and exploratory, the study has demonstrated that examining early childhood teachers’ understandings of quality illuminates different perspectives about quality and the complexity of providing for quality. Given that, at the time of writing, Australia’s foreshadowed National Quality Framework is currently under development, it is important and timely to pay greater attention to early childhood professionals’ understandings of quality. As we have also argued, metaphor appears to have considerable potential as a tool for exploring and making more explicit the less tangible and interconnected aspects of quality that can often be overlooked in quality assurance systems based primarily on modernist perspectives of quality. Accordingly, we advocate further exploration of the usefulness of metaphor for early childhood professionals, students enrolled in pre-service preparation programs, policy-makers and researchers with an interest in quality.

Appendix

Interview questions

1. [Name of participant] … I’m wondering if you could tell me what quality [in early childhood services] means to you?
   [Prompt: It might help to think about what you consider high quality in services you’ve seen.]
2. What does quality mean in your service?
3. In what ways are you able to implement and address quality in your service?
4. How does your service set about providing quality care?
   [Prompt: It might help to consider ways your service supports quality or any barriers to providing quality.]
5. What aspects of the way your service operates are the most and least helpful in assisting you to provide quality care?

References
