

From 'Beyond Quality'
to
'Ethics and Politics in Early
Childhood Education'

Peter Moss

Institute of Education

University of London

'Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care'

The 'age of quality' is now well and truly upon us...It is what everyone wants to offer, and everyone wants to have...If there is an issue in the current discussion of quality, it is about definition, for example what constitutes good quality in early childhood institutions...But the concept itself has achieved such dominance that it is hardly questioned.

'Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care'

*For the most part it is taken for granted that there is some thing - objective, real, knowable - called quality. It seems to us, however, that the very concept of quality does need questioning - **because there is a problem with quality***

(Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, Alan Pence, 1999)

1. The problem with 'quality'
2. Why do we talk so much about 'quality' today?
3. From early childhood education and care (ECEC) as, first and foremost, a technical practice ►► ►► first and foremost, a political and ethical practice
4. Evaluation always matters - but we can do it differently when we get beyond quality
5. 'Quality' is a choice not a necessity

3 books and 1 book series

- Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss & Alan Pence (1999) *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives / Languages of Evaluation*
- Gunilla Dahlberg & Peter Moss (2005) *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*
- Peter Moss (2014) *Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education*

Contesting Early Childhood series

'Questions dominant discourses in early childhood, and offers alternative narratives of an area that is now made up of a multitude of perspectives and debates'

Resistance movement in ECEC

Contesting a hegemonic Anglo-American discourse that is distinguished by:

- narrow theoretical perspectives – child development and human capital
- strong instrumental rationality – achieving predetermined and standardised outcomes...high returns on investment
- focus on technical practice – what works?
- will to control and govern children and adults
- ‘quality’ as a central concept

1. The problem with quality

The problem with quality

‘Quality’ is a taken-for-granted concept...
treated as natural and neutral



Very technical questions: ‘what is the definition
of quality?’ or ‘what is good quality ECEC’?

But the concept is neither natural nor neutral...
‘Quality’ is saturated in values and assumptions
and has a very particular meaning

The problem with 'quality'

'Quality' means...

- a universal, knowable, stable and objective **standard of technical practice** (e.g. organisation of children and space, organisation of workforce, pedagogical programme), with...
- proven ('evidence-based') ability to deliver **predetermined outcomes** (e.g. developmental or learning goals), which can be...
- defined, applied and measured by **experts**

The problem with 'quality'

'Quality' values:

- Objectivity
- Certainty
- Stability
- Closure

It **assumes** a correct and universal standard can be technically defined and assessed - independent of context, perspective and politics

The problem with 'quality'

'Quality' is...

*a **technology of normalisation**, establishing norms against which performance can be assessed...a **technology of distance**, claiming to be able to compare performance anywhere in the world, irrespective of context...(and) a **technology of regulation**, providing a powerful tool for management* (Dahlberg et al.)

The problem with 'quality'

'Quality' contributes to...

- **increased governing** of children, educators and parents, to ensure correct technical practice ('quality') is precisely applied to achieve correct outcomes

The problem with 'quality'

'Quality' contributes to...

- an approach to ECEC that is **simplistic and static, technical and reductionist, objective and universal**...with no place for complexity and movement, diversity and subjectivity, values and context...with no time for a world of multiple perspectives

The problem with 'quality'

The more we seem to know about the complexity of learning, children's diverse strategies and multiple theories of knowledge, the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities of this learning and knowing. Policy makers look for general structures and one-dimensional standards...[T]he more complex things become the more we seem to desire processes of reduction and thus increase control (Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, 2010)

2. Why do we talk so much about 'quality' today?

Why do we talk so much about 'quality' today?

'Quality' is part of the vocabulary of an Anglo-American discourse about ECEC seeking global hegemony

The story of quality and high returns

'Early intervention' + 'quality'

=

↓ social problems + ↑ 'human capital'

The story of quality and high returns

*Economists such as Nobel prize-winner, James Heckman have shown how early learning is a good investment because it provides the foundation for later learning. The big insight from these economists is that a dollar, euro or yen spent on preschool programmes generates a higher return on investment than the same spending on schooling...[But] **early childhood education and care needs to be of sufficient quality** to achieve beneficial child-outcomes and yield longer term social and economic gains...The OECD is now developing an Online Policy Toolbox for identifying how to improve quality...The toolbox will include checklists, self-assessment sheets, research briefs, lists of strategy options etc. (OECD, 2011)*

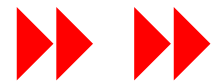
Why do we talk so much about 'quality' today?

- The spread of the 'story of quality and high returns' is inextricably connected to the spread of **neoliberalism**
- Both place high value on instrumental rationality... calculative relationships...technical practice and managerialism...economistic thinking
- The 'story of quality and high returns' offers the secret to success in neoliberalism's highly competitive global market...survival in the global race

- If you do not share the values and assumptions of 'quality'
- If you do not think ECEC can or should be reduced to a universal, knowable, stable and objective standard of technical practice

you have to get beyond quality

3. From ECEC as, first and foremost, a technical practice



first and foremost, a political and ethical practice

ECEC as political and ethical practice

‘Quality’ is part of a discourse that treats ECEC (all education) as first and foremost a **technical practice** - the key question is: ‘what works?’

But I argue that ECEC (all education) is first and foremost a **political and ethical practice** – the key question is ‘where to?’

Technical practice matters, but is secondary to
politics and ethics

ECEC as political and ethical practice

Why? Because ECEC (all education)

- is built on answers to **political questions**, which *'always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives'* (Chantal Mouffe, 2007)
- is a relational practice, built on **relational ethics**

ECEC as political and ethical practice

Some relational ethics

1. Ethics of Care (Joan Tronto and others)
2. Ethics of an Encounter (Emmanuel Levinas)
3. Postmodern Ethics (Zygmunt Bauman)
4. Ethics of Hospitality (Jacques Derrida)

ECEC as political and ethical practice

Some political questions

- What is the 'diagnosis of our times'?
- What do we want for our children, now and in the future?
- What is the purpose of ECEC?
- What do we mean by 'education' and 'care'?
- What are the fundamental values and ethics of ECEC?
- What is our image of the child...the educator...the early childhood centre?

What are your political questions?

ECEC as political and ethical practice

- There is no correct and universal answer to political questions...there is no correct and universal ethical approach...there is no correct and universal answer to ECEC – no objectively true and universal standard of ‘quality’
- There are only choices between conflicting alternatives...we need to discuss these alternatives and choices within a democratic politics of education

We need to tell and discuss a diversity of stories

ECEC as political and ethical practice

*We believe that the roots of [the converging crises of our times] lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves...We will reassert the role of story-telling as more than mere entertainment. **It is through stories that we weave reality** (Dark Mountain Project, 2009)*

We should tell ourselves stories about the sort of education we value, desire and envision, stories based on our answers to political questions

For example...

Story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality

- ECEC in which democracy and experimentation are fundamental values and the image of the child, educator and school is one of potentiality – for '*we never know what a body can do*' (Baruch Spinoza)
- This story is my idea of a 'good' early childhood education...it is a political and ethical statement and position...with its own vocabulary

Different stories, different vocabularies

Dominant story

*child development...
developmentally
appropriate practice
early intervention...
programmes
assessment/rating scales
investment...outcomes...
returns...human capital
quality*

My story

*projects...potentialities...
possibilities
experimentation...democ-
racy
uncertainty...wonder...
surprise
lines of flight...rhizomes
images...interpretations...
meaning making*

4. Evaluation always matters ...
but we can do it differently when we get
beyond quality

Languages of evaluation

Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care:

Postmodern Perspectives → *Languages of Evaluation*

Many languages of evaluation...ways of thinking and talking about evaluation

Doing evaluation differently

Evaluation in the dominant discourse uses the language of quality...evaluation as conformity to a standardised norm – a ‘quality’ kindergarten meets a universal, stable & objective standard of technical practice set by experts

Evaluation = statement of fact

Doing evaluation differently

Evaluation in the story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality uses the language of 'meaning making'...participatory democratic process of dialogue, reflection, interpretation and negotiation in relation to political questions

Evaluation = judgement of value

Doing evaluation differently

Different languages work with different methods:

- ‘Quality’ applies expert-derived templates (e.g. rating scales, check lists, standardised inspection procedures).
- ‘Meaning making’ works with participatory processes, e.g. pedagogical documentation (making pedagogical work visible and subject to democratic deliberation)

Doing evaluation differently

*Behind this practice [pedagogical documentation] is the ideological and ethical concept of a transparent school and transparent education...Documentation means the possibility to discuss and dialogue 'everything with everyone'...Sharing opinions by means of documentation presupposes being able to discuss **real, concrete things**, not just theories or words (Alfredo Hoyuelos, 2005)*

5. Quality is a choice –
not a necessity

Quality is a choice not a necessity

- 'Quality' is part of the language of a dominant discourse/story.
↓
- BUT there are other discourses/stories to be told; created from other values, beliefs and assumptions; using other theoretical and disciplinary perspectives...and using different languages
↓
- So working with 'quality' is a choice, not a necessity

Quality is a choice not a necessity

*Our modest aim in writing [‘Beyond Quality’] was to make people and organisations think twice before using ‘quality’...We did not call for the concept to be abandoned; but rather for **its use to be a deliberate choice, a political choice**, made with an awareness that there are other ways of talking about what is important to us, ways that are more democratic and dialogic in **assumption, value and practice** (Introduction to 3rd edition of ‘Beyond Quality’)*

Quality is a choice not a necessity

If you choose to go 'Beyond Quality' to 'Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education'

- ✓ You no longer talk about 'high quality' or 'good quality'
- ✓ You talk about what **you** really value and desire – what **you** judge to be 'good' – based on politics and ethics
- ✓ You acknowledge there are alternatives...you welcome dialogue and contest alternative understandings of 'good' in a democratic politics of education
- ✓ You recognise you have made a choice and you take responsibility for that choice...you do not delegate responsibility to experts

peter.moss@ioe.ac.uk

For more information on 'Beyond Quality', go to
<https://www.routledge.com/products/9780415820226>

For more information on 'Contesting Early Childhood' series, go
to <https://www.routledge.com/series/SE0623>