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**Article**

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## BEYOND QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE – LANGUAGES OF EVALUATION

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*The problems which the managerial state is intended to resolve derive from contradictions and conflicts in the political, economic and social realms. But what we have seen is the managerialisation of these contradictions; they are redefined as “problems to be managed”. Terms such as “efficiency” and “effectiveness”, “performance” and “quality” depoliticise a series of social issues (whose efficiency? effectiveness for whom?) and thus displace real political and policy choices into a series of managerial imperatives. (Clarke 1998, 179)*

We live in an age of quality. Every product and service must offer quality; every consumer wants to have it. In this historical context, quality has become reified, treated as if it was an essential attribute of services or products that gives them value, assumed to be natural and neutral. The problem with quality, from this perspective, is its management. How can quality be discovered, measured, assured and improved? What goals, to be achieved by technical means, will enhance performance and increase value?

Early childhood education and care has not escaped the increasing attention paid to quality; research and policy have become increasingly devoted to the subject. “Quality” is generally understood as an attribute of services for young children that ensures the efficient production of predefined, normative outcomes, typically developmental or simple learning

goals. Presence of quality is usually evaluated vis-à-vis expert-derived criteria, associated in research with achieving these outcomes. A recent report from a UK government agency, for example, commissioned a research review that identified seven factors “indicative of good quality pre-school provision” for their impact on child development: adult-child interaction that is responsive, affectionate and readily available; well-trained staff who are committed to their work with children; facilities that are safe and sanitary and accessible to parents; ratios and group sizes that allow staff to interact appropriately with children; supervision that maintains consistency; staff development that ensures continuity, stability and the improvement of quality; and a developmentally appropriate curriculum with educational content (National Audit Office 2004, 39).

Nearly ten years ago, together with Alan Pence, we published a book, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999), that addressed an emerging and very different problem of quality, a problem not with the management of quality but with the very concept itself. It relativised quality, arguing that it was one way of talking about and practicing evaluation, that quality was neither natural nor neutral, and was not therefore to be taken for granted. It was, to use the subtitle adopted for the Italian edition of the book and subsequently adopted for the second English-language edition (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2007), just one of the many possible “languages of evaluation”. In this paper, we discuss the “problem with quality” as we identified it in *Beyond Quality*, and consider “another” (not “the” other) language of evaluation, one that treats evaluation as primarily political rather than technical. In the process, we link the debate about quality to a larger debate in the early childhood field (but extending into many other areas): a debate about paradigm and the very different perspectives on early childhood education and care that different paradigms create.

### The problem with quality

Particularly as of the early 1990s in the early childhood field, the concept of quality as an inherent



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attribute, some universal and knowable thing waiting “out there” to be discovered and measured by experts, was increasingly questioned (see for example, Balaguer, Mestres and Penn 1992; Dahlberg, Lundgren and Åsén 1991; European Commission Childcare Network 1996; Evans 1994; Farquhar 1993; Moss and Pence 1994; Munton, Mooney and Rowland 1995; Pascal, Bertram and Ramsden 1994; Pence 1992; Williams 1994; Woodhead 1996). How could quality take into account context and values, subjectivity and plurality? How could it accommodate multiple perspectives, with different groups in different places having different views of what quality was or different interpretations of criteria? This problem became more acute as people began to talk about the importance of the process of defining quality and how this should include a wide range of stakeholders, not only academic experts but children, parents and practitioners.

One response to this questioning was to propose the redefinition of quality as a subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept. But *Beyond Quality* came to a more radical conclusion. “Quality”, it argued, is a concept with a very particular meaning and inscribed with specific assumptions and values. The concept of quality assumes the possibility of deriving universal and objective norms, based on expert knowledge. ‘Quality’ is an evaluation of the conformity of a product or service to these norms. It values universality, objectivity, certainty, stability, closure; and presumes an autonomous observer able to make a decontextualised and objective statement of fact. It deploys certain methods, based on applying templates to particular settings (e.g. rating scales, check lists, standardised inspection procedures).

“Quality” is an example of what Rose (1999) terms a “human technology”, powerful and multi-purpose. It is a technology of normalisation, establishing norms against which performance should be assessed, thereby shaping policy and practice. It is a technology of distance, claiming to compare performance anywhere in the world, irrespective of context, and a technology of regulation, providing a powerful tool for management to govern at a distance through the setting and measurement of norms of performance.

“Quality”, therefore, is neither neutral nor self-evident, but saturated with values and assumptions. It is not essential, but a constructed concept. Originally developed as a part of management theory, it has been incorporated into early childhood care and other ser-

vices as part of the revolution of new public management and the growth of the “audit society” (Power 1997). It fits comfortably into an Anglo-American discourse on early childhood, which has become increasingly influential, an example of what Santos (2004) has called “hegemonic globalisation”: “the successful globalisation of a particular local and culturally-specific discourse to the point that it makes universal truth claims and ‘localises’ all rival discourses” (149).

The globalisation and dominance of this local Anglo-American discourse has arisen as a result of the spread of the English language, of American research, and of neoliberalism, whose values and assumptions it embodies. It offers a compelling narrative of how social and economic problems can be eliminated by early childhood services, delivering predetermined outcomes through early intervention with powerful technologies; of workers as competent technicians; and of children as redemptive agents, able if given the right start to rescue society from its problems. The discourse is positivistic and technical, instrumental and calculating, tempting us with a high return on public investment. It is inscribed with certain values: certainty and mastery, linear progress and *predetermined* outcomes, objectivity and universality, stability and closure. It draws heavily on certain disciplines, namely child development, management and economics.

“Quality” may be produced and prioritised through particular discourses – including those that are both more general, such as managerialism, and more specific, such as the Anglo-American narrative on early childhood. But we can step back further and understand such discourses as being, in turn, the product of a specific paradigm, a mindset for understanding the world and our position in it. In the case of quality, the progenitor paradigm is modernity – or, to be more precise, a particular paradigm of modernity, the paradigm of regulatory modernity (Hardt and Negri 2001; Santos 1995; Toulmin 1990). The concept of quality is inscribed with the values and assumptions of that paradigm, some of which have been already mentioned: for example, the value given to certainty and mastery, linearity and *predetermined* outcomes, objectivity and universality. Believing in objectivity and the ability of science to reveal the true nature of a real world, modernity cannot recognise that it is a paradigm, a particular way of understanding the world produced within a particular historical and cultural context. It is unable to see itself as offering just one perspective, one way of thinking and practicing.

Our conclusion in *Beyond Quality* is that quality is a child of its time and place, the product of particular nature and nurture. As such, the concept of quality:

*cannot be conceptualized to accommodate complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives, and other features of a world understood to be both uncertain and diverse. The “problem with quality” cannot be addressed by struggling to reconstruct the concept in ways it was never intended to go (Dahlberg et al. 2007, 105).*

Quality is a language of evaluation that fails to recognise a multilingual world and, in so doing, denies the possibility of other languages. And as Clarke describes in the quotation with which we begin the article, “quality” is part of a process of depoliticisation that displaces “real political and policy choices into a series of managerial imperatives” – substituting managerial methods for democratic deliberation.

### Meaning making

*Beyond Quality* explores an other language of evaluation, meaning making, recognising that there may well be many others. The language of quality can be summed up as ending in a statement of fact: “it speaks of universal expert-derived norms and of criteria for measuring the achievement of these norms, quality being a measurement (often expressed as a number) of the extent to which services or practices conform to these norms” (Dahlberg et al. 2007, viii). Meaning making, by contrast, speaks of “evaluation as a democratic process of interpretation, a process that involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and argumentation, leading to a judgement of value, contextualised and provisional because it is always subject to contestation” (Dahlberg et al. 2007, ix).

Meaning making is evaluation as a participatory process of interpretation and judgement, made within a recognised context and in relation to certain critical questions: for example, what is our image of the child? what do we want for our children? what is education and care? It values subjectivity (or rather, “rigorous subjectivity” (Lather 1991)), uncertainty, provisionality, contextuality, dialogue and democracy. It assumes a participant who makes – in relation with others – a contextualised, subjective and rigorous judgement of value. It foregrounds, therefore, democratic political practice, the exercise of collective deliberation.

Meaning making employs particular methods, suited to its democratic political practice, in particular pedagogical documentation, a tool for participatory evaluation. Pedagogical documentation has its origins in the innovative and, today, world-famous municipal early childhood services in the Northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia (for further reading on Reggio Emilia and pedagogical documentation, see Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Dahlberg et al. 2007; Giudici, Rinaldi and Krechevsky 2001; Rinaldi 2006). It requires, first of all, making practice visible through many forms of documentation: written or recorded notes, the work produced by children, photographs or videos, the possibilities are numerous. Then it requires a collective and democratic process of interpretation, critique and evaluation, involving dialogue and argumentation, listening and reflection, from which understandings are deepened and judgements co-constructed.

Its origins owe much to Loris Malaguzzi, one of the twentieth century’s great pedagogical thinkers and practitioners and the first director of Reggio’s municipal early childhood services.

*Documentation represents an extraordinary tool for dialogue, for exchange, for sharing. For Malaguzzi, it means the possibility to discuss and dialogue “everything with everyone” (teachers, auxiliary staff, cooks, families, administrators and citizens)...[S]haring opinions by means of documentation presupposes being able to discuss real, concrete things – not just theories or words, about which it is possible to reach easy and naïve agreement” (Hoyuelos 2004, 7).*

This concreteness of pedagogical documentation is critical. Measures of “quality” involve looking for what has been predefined, discarding what does not figure in the template; it involves the decontextualised application of abstract criteria, reducing the complexity and concreteness of environment and practice to scores or boxes to tick; it strives for agreement and the elimination of different perspectives; it assumes the autonomous and objective (adult) observer. Above all, “quality” offers consumers information about a product, for “quality” is a language of evaluation suited to a particular understanding of early childhood (or other) services: as suppliers of commodities on the market to parent consumers.

Meaning making through documentation involves contextualised interpretations of actual practices

and actual environments. It assumes that citizens participate with other citizens in the exercise of a public responsibility. This language of evaluation understands early childhood services as public forums and collective workshops, places of encounter for citizens young and old, with the potential for an infinite range of possibilities – cultural, linguistic, social, aesthetic, ethical, political and economic – some expected and predetermined, but many that are not.

“Meaning making” therefore is generated from within a different discourse about democracy in general and early childhood in particular, a discourse which has a very different understanding than that of the managerial (and neo-liberal) discourse producing “quality”. The discourse that generates meaning making also arises from a different paradigm which might be termed “postfoundationalism”, encompassing a variety of perspectives – for example, postmodernisms, poststructuralisms and postcolonialisms. This paradigm challenges the basic tenets, or foundations, of the paradigm of regulatory modernity: the possibility of objective, stable and value-free knowledge, universal laws, escaping context; the transparency and neutrality of language; linear progress ending in closure; dualistic – either/or – ways of thinking and relating to the world. It values what regulatory modernity finds problematic: complexity and multiplicity, subjectivity and context, provisionality and uncertainty. Post-foundationalism recognises that any phenomenon – early childhood education and care, for example – has multiple meanings, that any knowledge is perspectival, and that all experience is subject to interpretation.

Today, increasing numbers of scholars and practitioners in the early childhood field, across many countries, are working with postfoundational thinking and their theories and concepts have begun to influence practice and research. As the American early childhood researcher Joseph Tobin (2008) has noted, many scholars today “have drawn heavily on French social and philosophical theory (Foucault, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Althusser, Deleuze and Guattari) as well as feminist, queer, post-colonial theory to develop critical perspectives on dominant practice” (23, original English version). In the series that we edit, *Contesting Early Childhood*, books published or in preparation draw heavily not only on the work of Foucault, but also of Derrida, Levinas, Deleuze, Guattari and Bakhtin (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; MacNaughton 2006; Ermiston 2007; Borgnon

forthcoming; Lenz Taguchi in preparation). With their provocative perspectives and understandings, such work is introducing into the field of early childhood new thought, diverse forms of knowledge, and (literal and metaphorical) multilingualism.

### Living in a multi-lingual world

One of the dilemmas of trying to de-naturalise the language of quality – so that “quality” can no longer be taken for granted as a neutral concept devoid of values or assumptions – and to differentiate it from another language, such as meaning making, is that the process may set up binary oppositions. The impression may be given that you must either go with quality or with meaning making, that it is a matter of either/or. But this has not been our intention; we argue for a multi-lingual world, where there is a continuing place for both – and other – languages of evaluation and, more broadly, for early childhood work to adopt different perspectives based on different paradigmatic positions.

We are more aware today than when we wrote *Beyond Quality* that the choices we make require far more than simply stating a preference. Working with the language of meaning making is difficult. It requires, or at least is greatly facilitated by, certain conditions: commitment to particular values, such as uncertainty, subjectivity, democracy; creativity, curiosity and a desire to experiment and border cross; a reflective, research-oriented and socially valued workforce; and sustained support from critical friends (for example, the *pedagogistas* or pedagogical coordinators in Reggio Emilia, who work closely and deeply with a small number of centres), networks of services, policy makers and politicians. Such conditions, we agree, are not widespread; and where they are lacking, it may be necessary to use the language of quality, which is easier to learn and speak, and requires the capacity to follow instructions and apply techniques correctly.

The decision to work with quality should, however, be viewed as a political choice made in a particular temporal and spatial context. The choice should be accompanied by the recognition that alternatives exist and by a view about future directions. Quality may be the right choice to make here and now, but is it the language of choice for 10 or 15 years hence? If yes, then what is the rationale for this stasis? And what are the dangers of staying with a language that



is so strongly related to criteria and standards, that is so powerfully normalising and regulatory, that results in exclusion and lack of diversity? If no, if the intention is to learn and speak another language over time, or to become multi-lingual, then what conditions need putting in place, how will the transition be achieved? Will it be a general top-down change or will it be led by individual centres or networks of centres choosing to take up meaning making (or some other language of evaluation)? What norms and criteria will remain, even after these changes, since we think it is likely that even in the most decentralised and experimental system there will remain some normative framework, setting down some common values, principles, objectives and entitlements?

The recognition of different perspectives and a reluctance to limit possibilities by setting up either/or choices does not mean accepting uncritical relativism. Respecting other perspectives and positions does not free any of us from our responsibility to make a choice (for a fuller discussion of this issue, see Dahlberg and Moss 2005). Thus, other perspectives and positions, the different languages of evaluation, are not a problem. What does present a problem is when others take a position as if no choice was involved, as if their position was the only one. So while we defend the right to adopt different perspectives and languages, we do so with an important proviso: that “all those engaged with early childhood and early childhood institutions recognise that there are different perspectives, that the work we do (whether as practitioners or parents or policy makers or researchers) always takes a particular perspective – and that therefore choices – or judgments of value – are always being made from which flow enormous implications in terms of theory and practice” (Dahlberg et al. 2007, 119).

Unfortunately, the acknowledgement of different perspectives is uncommon both among researchers and policy makers. Journal articles in the early childhood field frequently show no recognition of the authors’ position with respect to paradigm and discourse, and its implications for defining questions in research and evaluation, the choice of methods and the interpretation of data. Although today there is a sort of standard policy document, produced by governments and international organisations, which offers a predictable rationale and prescription for early childhood education and care and draws on the same much-quoted research, it does not provide so much as one critical question or recognition that there may be different perspectives and views.

Not only do these documents make dull and repetitive reading. They stifle democracy. Political and ethical choices are replaced by a search for technical specifications. The current expansion of early childhood education and care provides, potentially, many benefits and possibilities for children, parents and wider society. But as Foucault enjoins us to remember, “everything is dangerous, but not always bad”, and expansion brings with it major risks, not least of which is increasing regulation and normalisation, what Nikolas Rose terms “governing the soul”. If these risks are to be reduced and the potential benefits realised, societies need to put technical and managerial practice in its place, as subservient to democratic political and ethical practice, and to open themselves to diversity and experimentation.

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