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Why can't we get beyond quality?

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Abstract
The article, by one of the authors of the book *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, has three goals. The first is to recap the 'problem with quality', the starting point for the book. The second is to summarise the argument in *Beyond Quality* for problematising the concept of quality, and why, therefore, 'quality' is a choice and not a necessity. Lastly, it is to examine the paradox of *Beyond Quality* and, in so doing, to worry away at a troubling issue: Why has it proven so hard to get beyond quality? Why does it exert such a strong gravitational pull?

Keywords
Early childhood education and care, meaning-making, paradigm, quality

Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care was published in 1999, authored by myself, Gunilla Dahlberg and Alan Pence. The book was one response to a growing 'problem with quality' and the need to understand it better, as well as to what might be done about it. For those troubled by this problem, the book proposed the possibility of going beyond quality, to adopt a different concept or language of evaluation from a different paradigmatic position. The original subtitle of the book – *Postmodern Perspectives* – suggested the paradigmatic shift required, while the later subtitle – *Languages of Evaluation* (used for the book's second English edition after its adoption in the Italian version of the book) – relativised 'quality' as just one of many possible approaches to evaluation.

Beyond Quality proposed that 'quality' was a choice, not a necessity, a choice that followed from adopting a particular position, inscribed with particular assumptions, values and beliefs. As such, the book was an attempt to free people from being in thrall to one particular concept and the way of thinking it embodied, insisting instead that there are alternatives – other 'languages of evaluation' available to us. By all means continue to use the concept of 'quality', it argued. But, if you do, acknowledge you have made a choice and take responsibility for the consequences of that choice.

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As one of the authors of *Beyond Quality*, its subsequent history seems paradoxical. At one level, the book has been very successful; at another, it has been an abject failure. Confronting that paradox, and seeking to understand its causes, can tell us a lot about the state of early childhood education today.

In this article, I want to do three things. The first is to recap the 'problem with quality'. The second is to summarise the argument in *Beyond Quality* and why, therefore, 'quality' is a choice and not a necessity. Lastly, it is to examine the paradox of *Beyond Quality* and, in so doing, to worry away at an issue that frustrates and troubles me: Why has it proven so hard to get beyond quality? Why does it exert such a strong gravitational pull?

The 'problem with quality'

Beyond Quality starts with the observation that we live in an age of quality. Quality is something everyone wants to have and everyone wants to offer, while 'quality' itself is taken for granted, as 'some thing – objective, real, knowable … waiting "out there" to be discovered and measured by experts' (Dahlberg et al., 2013: 5–6). But we also noted a growing groundswell of questioning during the 1990s about the concept itself – a 'process of problematization' (6). Typical of this process were the conclusions of *Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Services*, an edited volume published in 1994, to which all three of the *Beyond Quality* authors contributed:

> This volume commenced with the statement that 'quality in early childhood services is a relative concept'. As such, quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs, and interest, rather than an objective and universal reality. Quality child care is, to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder – and that beholder can be anyone or any group from among a range of stakeholders. (Pence and Moss, 1994: 172)

It is easy enough to say such things, but the problem was: What next? What to do about quality if it was, indeed, 'in the eye of the beholder'; if it was understood 'to be a *subjective*, *value-based*, *relative* and *dynamic* concept, with the possibility of *multiple perspectives* or understandings of what quality is'; and if, further, 'work with quality needs to be *contextualized*, spatially and temporally, and to recognize cultural and other significant forms of *diversity*' (Dahlberg et al., 2013: 6; original emphasis). For then 'quality' could have, to quote Massumi from this issue's call for papers, 'as many meanings as there are forces capable of seizing it'. It could have so many meanings as to become effectively meaningless in discourse and useless as a tool of evaluation. 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, practitioners and others, who might have very different perspectives.

Faced by the 'problem with quality', the authors of *Beyond Quality* set out to provide a provisional answer.

Getting 'beyond' quality

A main conclusion of *Beyond Quality* is that trying to turn 'quality' into 'a *subjective*, *value-based*, *relative* and *dynamic* concept' is futile, for 'quality' is a concept with a very particular meaning and inscribed with specific assumptions and values. The concept of quality assumes the possibility and desirability of experts discovering and measuring universal, objective and stable norms; a 'quality' early childhood service is one that is evaluated as conforming to these norms. As such, quality is a language of evaluation inscribed with the values not only of universality, objectivity and stability,

but also certainty and closure; and which presumes an autonomous observer adopting a God's eye view to make a decontextualised and true statement of fact. It is a technical language applying expert-derived templates to particular settings (e.g. rating scales, checklists and standardised inspection procedures).

'Quality' is an example of what Rose (1999: 52) terms a 'human technology', intended 'for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired events'. 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 it is a technology of regulation, providing a powerful tool for management to govern at a distance through the setting and measurement of norms of performance. None of this is commensurate with a '*subjective*, *value-based*, *relative* and *dynamic* concept', or with any approach to early childhood that recognises the importance of context and diversity.

'Quality', therefore, is neither neutral nor self-evident, but saturated with values and assumptions. It is a constructed concept. In *Valuing Quality*, we had written of 'quality' as a 'constructed concept', but in the sense that definitions of quality were constructed. Now, in *Beyond Quality*, we meant that the very concept of 'quality' itself was a construct, and as such the product of particular ways of thinking about the world. We sought to understand these.

Originally developed as a part of management theory, 'quality' has been incorporated into early childhood care and other services as part of the revolution of new public management and the growth of the 'audit society' (Power, 1997). It slips comfortably into an Anglo-American discourse on early childhood education, which has become increasingly influential – an example of what de Sousa Santos (2004: 149) 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'. I have subsequently described this discourse as 'the story of quality and high returns', a highly instrumental narrative that tells of the large profits to be made from social investment in early childhood education if only the correct technology (i.e. 'quality') is applied in the correct manner (Moss, 2014).

'Quality' may be produced and foregrounded 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 what *Beyond Quality* attempted was to step back further and understand such discourses as being, in turn, the product of a specific paradigm – a mindset for understanding the world, our position in it and how to relate to it. In the case of quality, the paradigm is modernity or, to be more precise, a particular paradigm of modernity: regulatory modernity (De Sousa Santos, 1995; Hardt and Negri, 2001; 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 predictability, 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, produced within a particular historical and cultural context. It is unable to see itself as just one perspective, one way of thinking and practising, one way of understanding the world.

So our conclusion in *Beyond Quality* was that quality is the child of a particular time and place, the product of a 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., 2013: 105)

Indeed, such struggling, trying to make quality accommodate subjectivity, multiple perspectives and so on, 'will prove to be a wild goose chase' (111).

But *Beyond Quality* did not end on this critical note; we did not want to criticise without creating. If quality could be understood as one language of evaluation, the book offered another language – what we termed 'meaning-making' – recognising that there may well be others. In early childhood education, meaning-making is first and foremost about 'constructing and deepening understanding of the early childhood institution and its projects, in particular the pedagogical work – to make meaning of what is going on' (Dahlberg et al., 2013: 112). We make meaning always in relationship with others, in processes of co-construction, processes that involve dialogue, reflection, contestation and interpretation.

Constructing and deepening understanding is valuable in its own right. But people may choose to continue by making judgements (evaluations) about the work so understood, judgements that are made

> in relation to the wider questions of what we want for our children here and now and in the future – questions which must be posed over and over again and which need to be related to even larger questions about 'what is the good life?' and 'what does it mean to be a human being?' (Dahlberg et al., 2013: 113)

After understanding and judgement, people may further choose to seek some agreement with others about these judgements – 'to struggle to agree, to some extent, about what is going on and its value' (112).

The language of quality ends in a statement of fact; the language of meaning-making, by contrast, produces a judgement of value. Meaning-making is '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, contextualized and provisional because it is always subject to contestation' (Dahlberg et al., 2013: ix). It values subjectivity or, rather, 'rigorous subjectivity' (Lather, 1991), uncertainty, provisionality, contextuality, dialogue and democracy. Last but not least, it employs particular methods suited to its democratic political practice; in particular, pedagogical documentation, a tool for participatory evaluation that 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.

If 'quality' makes sense when viewed from the paradigmatic position of regulatory modernity, 'meaning-making' makes sense when viewed from a different position, which might be termed 'post-foundationalism', encompassing a variety of perspectives – for example, postmodernisms, post-structuralisms, post-colonialisms and post-humanisms. 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; and 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 partial; and that all experience is subject to interpretation.

Beyond 'beyond quality'

In recent years, my own thinking about 'quality' and other languages of evaluation has evolved somewhat, without abandoning the main arguments in *Beyond Quality*. It seems to me that the

concept of 'quality' emerges not just from a philosophical paradigm, but also from a particular politico-economic regimen: neo-liberalism. For 'quality', being about 'human technologies' that can assure high returns on social investment, is part of neo-liberalism's instrumental, calculative and economistic rationality.

It is also part of neo-liberalism's attempt to remove politics from any subject – to reduce everything to a technical practice of problem-solving and performance, focusing on means to the exclusion of ends. As Clarke (1998: 179) observes: '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'. 'What works?' not 'Where to?' is the lead question.

However, as Gunilla Dahlberg and I have argued (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005), early childhood education (indeed all education) is first and foremost a political and ethical practice. Technical practice matters, but in the service of politics and ethics. We wrote in *Beyond Quality* of meaning-making always being in relation to answers to 'critical questions', but now I reframe these as 'political questions', which are 'not mere technical issues to be solved by experts … [but questions that] always involve decisions which require us to make choices between conflicting alternatives' (Mouffe, 2007). And, to those questions already mentioned, I would add others, such as: What is our diagnosis of the times? What is our image of the child, the educator, parent and school? How do we understand 'education' and 'care'? What is education for? What are the fundamental values of education? What ethics?

So, I would argue, we can only evaluate early childhood education – make meaning of it and a judgement of value – by first deciding what we think is 'good' education, and deciding that depends on our answers to political questions, answers that will never be unanimously agreed. Getting 'beyond quality' therefore means not only repoliticising evaluation, but also opening it up to a democratic process involving dialogue, contestation, deliberation and collective choice. This inevitably will lead to some degree of acknowledged diversity and negotiated of view and to seeking to negotiate agreement, though always provisional and subject to movement and experimentation. It is a long way, indeed, from the will to certainty and closure that drives the concept of quality.

Have we got beyond quality yet?

> Why is it that here in the United States we have such difficulty even *imagining* a different sort of society from the one whose dysfunctions and inequalities trouble us so? We appear to have lost the capacity to question the present, much less offer alternatives to it. Why is it so beyond us to conceive of a different set of arrangements to our common advantage? Our shortcomings – excuse the academic jargon – is *discursive*. We simply do not know how to talk about these things. (Judt, 2009: 86; original emphasis)

I referred at the beginning of this article to a paradox – of *Beyond Quality* being both very successful and an abject failure. The book has done well, at least in terms of traditional academic metrics: three English editions and substantial sales; translated into 10 languages; many citations; and acknowledgement as 'a groundbreaking work'. This sustained and widespread interest reflects, in part, the book's appeal to a substantial global minority that is resistant to the dominant Anglo-American discourse in early childhood education, with its technical, instrumental and predictable language, including 'quality'. By contesting quality, *Beyond Quality* is part of a swelling movement that contests this 'dictatorship of no alternative', with its reduction of education to the attainment of a predefined set of outcomes.

The failure, however, resides in not disrupting 'quality' – in not inducing a stutter in the story of quality and high returns. As the authors of the book, we wanted to get 'beyond quality', to work

with another language of evaluation – a language more in line with our values, assumptions and perspectives. But we recognised a continuing place for both (and other) languages of evaluation, and indeed argued more generally for an early childhood education of multiple perspectives from different paradigmatic positions, in which people made deliberate and acknowledged choices. And that has remained our position. 'Quality' is a choice and not a necessity. By all means choose to use the concept of quality, but recognise that you have made a choice and that your choice has consequences, for which you take responsibility.

But judged in these terms, it seems to me that the book's impact has been negligible. The unqualified and unquestioned use of the term 'quality' continues undiminished; indeed, I would guess that it has grown substantially. The desire for 'quality', the language of 'quality' and the methods of 'quality' continue to dominate policy documents, academic publications and practitioner discourse. 'Quality' remains as taken for granted as ever, with its many users not acknowledging that they are making a choice. References to the 'problem with quality' or to alternatives are few and far between. Even a critical journal like *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* seems wedded to the term, seeking in its call for papers 'new possibilities for what might constitute "quality"', to open quality 'in ways where diversity, multiple perspectives, contextual specificity and subjectivity can be attended to', and to 'breathe new life into [the] concept'. It still seems so hard to actually get beyond quality – to abandon that 'wild goose chase' in order and its forlorn attempt 'to reconstruct the concept in ways it was never intended to go' (Dahlberg et al., 2013: 111, 105).

Why, in practice, has it proven to be so hard to get 'beyond quality'? Why is there a near universal and unexamined usage, with at best a lingering hope that 'quality' can be reconstituted to accommodate the complexities of early years education?

Some reasons are obvious and mundane. The great majority of those with an interest in early childhood education have never read the book (which almost never gets referenced in policy documents or literature reviews). Those who have read *Beyond Quality* may not accept the argument or find it difficult to grasp. With 'quality' still unquestioned and ascendant among policymakers and those who dispense funds for research and development, there are strong incentives for continuing to speak this language of evaluation, rather than problematising it. While in everyday parlance, 'quality' readily becomes a convenient shorthand to indicate you want something that is good – despite the loss of meaning in the process.

A deeper problem lies in a defining feature of the paradigm of modernity: its failure to recognise or accept the existence of the paradigm and consequent belief that it is the only way to see the world. A book like *Beyond Quality*, which assumes that multiple perspectives, subjectivity and provisionality are inescapable, though also invigorating, has little interest or relevance for the positivist researcher, the managerial administrator, the 'evidence-based' policymaker or the technician-practitioner. So the book has generated no dialogue across the 'paradigmatic divide' (Moss, 2007); to speakers of the dominant discourse, it remains either unknown or a subject of indifference.

However, in order to fully understand the enduring dominance of the concept of 'quality', we are forced back to consideration of what has given birth to this state of affairs. We live in a world where the paradigm of regulatory modernity and the regimen of neo-liberalism are hugely powerful – not totally dominant, since there are many resistances, but dominant enough to stifle alternative thinking and to constrain what can and cannot be thought and said. In early childhood education, this dominance is expressed in 'the story of quality and high returns', with its own particular vocabulary: not just 'quality', but 'child development', 'developmentally appropriate practice', 'early intervention', 'programmes', 'assessment scales' and 'baseline assessment', 'investment', 'outcomes' (implicitly understood to refer to *predetermined* outcomes), 'returns' and 'human capital'.

Tony Judt was an eminent historian and a fierce critic of neo-liberalism, whose life was cut short by motor neurone disease. But he did 'not go gentle into that good night', attacking the state we are in right up to the end, including the *cri de cœur* with which I started this section. The triumph of neo-liberalism, he argues, has deadened our imaginations – taken away our capacity to question and offer alternatives. I think that this has plainly happened in early childhood education, with 'quality' and its associated impoverished vocabulary closing down our ability to think, criticise and explore alternatives. Our shortcoming, as Judt says, 'is *discursive*. We simply do not know how to talk about these things'. Our vocabulary has withered, limiting our capacity to imagine and talk about a different sort of society and a different sort of early childhood education.

It is in partial response to Judt's critique and partially in response to that of an ecological group – '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) – that I have been drawn to the importance of stories and their potential to 'weave reality' and to find different ways 'to talk about these things'. Personally repelled by two dominant stories in early childhood – the story of quality and high returns, and also the story of markets – I have worked at telling another story: what I call the story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality, a story in which democracy and experimentation are fundamental values and the image of the child, educator and school is one of potentiality, of not knowing what a body can do (Moss, 2014). And I have consciously worked at developing a distinctive vocabulary for the story, a different way to talk about early childhood education, using words such as: 'projects', 'potentialities', 'possibilities', 'uncertainty', 'wonder', 'surprise', 'lines of flight', 'rhizomes', 'images', 'interpretations', 'democracy', 'experimentation' – and 'meaning-making'.

'Quality' has no place in this story – or in many others that could be told – and, since writing *Beyond Quality*, I have tried to avoid using the word (unless, of course, writing about the concept). Getting 'beyond quality' has proven to be, for me at least, an enormously liberating choice, opening up alternatives and new ways to talk about them. I can thoroughly recommend it.

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