

Invited Paper

Quality in Time and Space: Defining 'Quality' in a Canadian Context

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Abstract

This paper discusses how a European initiative to discuss quality in childcare, which was developed and disseminated over a seven year period, was taken up and used 10 years later in Canada. As one of the authors of the original European document on quality, I discuss shifts in thinking about 'quality' across time and space. Questions that emerged when re-writing the document on quality childcare for a Canadian audience were: (1) an increase in women's participation in the workforce, (2) the rapid increase in the number of early years services and in particular services run for-profit, (3) issues of governance, (4) multiculturalism, (5) environment and globalism and (6) child rights.

Key Words: Quality; child care

Introduction

Most of my working life, first as a campaigner, then as an administrator, and for the last 15 years as a researcher, I have been wrestling with the concept of quality in early childhood services. 'Quality' might be translated roughly as 'good practice', but as Bourdieu (1992) suggests practices of any kind accumulate slowly and partly unconsciously, built up out of whatever local repertoires exist. So what kind of behaviours, attitudes and assumptions go to make up good practice in early education and care? How long have they been in the making? How can they be influenced? What kind enabling conditions are necessary for good practice to emerge? What are its outcomes? Are there widely accepted good practices which cross local and national boundaries or are such definitions irredeemably local?

In this paper, I put forward a conventional view that quality, especially in early childhood, is contextual and value based, whilst retaining certain general features, but I provide a recent example of value-based and contextual shifts. Local contexts seem to me to be very important; or conversely, ideas and practices differ considerably across countries and within communities.

The recent *Starting Strong II* (OECD 2006) provides an up to date example of policy discourses on quality across rich nations, but teasing out what is universal and what is local, what is factual and what is conceptual, is much more problematic between North and South. (Maggi, Irwin, Siddiqi, Poureslami, Hertzman & Hertzman, 2005). I have been a consultant to a variety of organizations working in central Asia and Southern Africa, where some fundamental differences in values have been exposed – for example the priority given to individual as opposed to group or collective understanding and activity; or in making sense of very different levels of resourcing (Penn 2005). These differences are generally underestimated; almost all countries in producing documentation and evidence about what constitutes a quality programme or environment fail to realise how local or parochial their

prescriptions are (Penn 2004). However, in this paper, I am going to discuss how one particular document on quality has shifted in its emphasis as it has moved through time (over a ten year period) and space (from Europe to Canada).

A Very Brief History of ‘Quality’

For those concerned with the discipline of child development, micro-level explanations of quality, particularly quality of relationships, are seen, by and large, as universal and timeless and scientifically proven. These micro-level definitions are seen as timeless and as universal or contextless. For example the definition of quality as ‘warm, responsive, contingent care’ is regarded as universal (Melhuish 2004). It is only when questions of the value assigned to children and the typical nature of adult-child relationships within a society is queried, that this variable becomes less of a scientific fact and more of a cultural artefact (LeVine, 2003).

For children at school or kindergarten in the USA, Katz (2005) and others have put forward the notion of creating ‘dispositions to learn’. Katz for example has an all-purpose list of 60 or so points about how learning to learn might be achieved. Farquhar (2003) provides a best evidence synthesis on how young children’s learning can be stimulated, reinforced, and assessed - in other words what aspects of teaching are more likely to produce positive outcomes for diverse children within New Zealand. The focus on micro-level evidence of what works for teaching and learning does not take into account the quality of the service and its features.

Macro-level explanations of quality focused on the programme and quality service can also be queried, especially as they apply and are translated into policy and practice in different social, cultural and pedagogical contexts. These definitions arise from scientific investigatory methods – experimental control groups or randomized controlled trials - which in turn lend additional credibility to the definition.

The quality of day-care in the USA is most commonly rated using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). The ECERS has seven categories of practice, each subdivided into a further seven items, with a separate set of categories according to the age of the child (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 1990). The mainly unregulated system in the USA is characterised on the whole by very low standards (OECD 2000), and ECERS in this context is an important attempt to provide a base-line for quality standards. Although many claims are made for it as a universally applicable research tool, it is primarily a reflection of the American market for which it was designed, and works much better in that context than elsewhere (Farquhar 1989).

There is also the Postmodern argument put forward, for example, by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) and further articulated in Dahlberg and Moss (2005). Postmodernists draw on the work of French philosophers who argue that those in power establish ‘regimes of truth’ which are hard or impossible to contradict. Using the particular example of Reggio Emilia, Dahlberg et al (1999) argue that what matters is openness to the views of ‘the other’ whether the other is a child or an adult. Opponents of the postmodern approach argue that, in its emphasis on individual responsiveness, it minimises the importance of context and local practice.

Alexander (2001) gives a clear account of the nuanced, contextual importance of quality in his prize-winning book *Culture and Pedagogy* which is a comparative description and analysis of primary education in five countries; the UK, Russia, India, France and the USA. In a comparative paper of the education of six year-olds in three countries he further illustrates a range of values and practices of quality (Alexander, 2003). Alexander explores the cultural history of primary education in each country and he then convincingly analyses

policy and practice in terms of that cultural history, for example in terms of individualistic values (USA) and collective values (France, Russia); or in terms of class (UK).

Shifts in Time and Space

About 12 years ago. I worked with members of the European Childcare Network (see Footnote No. 1) to produce a series of discussion papers and guidelines on issues of quality. The Network organized a series of seminars on key issues, for example on Men in Childcare. Irene Balaguer, who was the Spanish member of the Network and in charge of early childhood services in the city of Barcelona, and I were then tasked by the Network to produce an open-ended discussion paper on Quality. An initial draft was circulated and modified by members of the Network. This resulted in a publication *Quality in Services for Young Children* (1990) which was translated into 12 languages and widely circulated and discussed in member states. From the feedback received on the discussion paper, Irene and I then produced a second document *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children* (1996).

Quality Targets in Services for Young Children stressed the relative, contextual nature of quality, but also the kind of minimum standards that should hold good everywhere within the EU (This is of course before the EU was enlarged). It put forward a broad set of targets – 10 in all encompassing targets for a policy framework, for financing of services, for levels and types of services, for education targets, for staff-child ratios, for staff employment and training, for environmental and health targets, for parents and community involvement, and for performance and assessment. The draft of this was similarly discussed by members of the Network, and revised, and eventually published by the Childcare Network in 1996. It was translated into all the major European languages and over 20,000 copies were printed. The Network received more than 3000 responses. The *Quality Targets* document was the fruit of a sustained attempt by senior practitioners and researchers from 15 countries to reach an agreement about good practice. The document was influential at a policy level as the OECD described it as a benchmark and incorporated it into their most recent reports on early years (OECD 2004, OECD 2006).

Both the Childcare Network quality documents had the usual shelf-life of five or so years. The *Quality Targets* were published in 1996, but gradually disappeared from public view, as the Network's funding programme which promoted them was disbanded. Then in 2004, I was asked to be the rapporteur of the OECD team visiting Canada. The OECD reviews were a kind of peer review system, the visiting team usually being made up of an established researcher as rapporteur, senior policy officials from other countries, and a representative of the OECD. The Canadian team was comprised of senior ministry officials from Belgium and Finland, John Bennett from the OECD and me. The team visited early education and care facilities throughout Canada. As rapporteur I read considerable documentation and produced a report on the state of early education and care in Canada on behalf of, and with the agreement of, the team. The report, published last year, is available on the OECD website (OECD 2005).

As a result of this OECD report, Irene Balaguer and I were asked by a Canadian advocacy group, the Canadian Resource and Research Centre (CRRU) to produce a new discussion paper, based on work we had undertaken for the EU but directed to a contemporary Canadian audience. There is currently no nationwide consensus or guidance on quality issues in Canada, although individual states provide their own regulatory criteria, mostly in terms of health and safety requirements. CCRU asked us to produce a general discussion paper, explaining what we thought the important issues were in thinking about quality, rather than specific suggestions for practice. We produced several drafts of this discussion paper for the Canadian group and it was finalised earlier this year. Unfortunately the

Canadian Government, which had funded the work, then changed, and the paper is in a kind of limbo, but will probably reappear next year.

In producing a new discussion paper on quality based on the European Childcare Network papers (1990, 1996) and discussing the circumstances which might shape good practice in the Canadian context we identified a number of issues not previously considered. Some of these issues were specifically Canadian and some more general. These included changes in work patterns, for-profit care (in which nurseries are managed as businesses), governance and federalism, multi-culturalism, global and environmental considerations, and importantly a new emphasis on the rights of the child. I will take these issues in turn and discuss them below.

1. Changing Work Patterns

There has been a considerable shift in thinking and practices in all English speaking countries about the role of women as workers and in the home. In just the last ten years it has changed from being respectable for women with young children to stay at home – to being an exceptional choice. There is a push especially to get mothers in receipt of state benefits back to work, as a way of reducing the social benefit bill and as a way of increasing tax revenues. This has been a notable feature of recent social policy in the USA and UK and it was a topic for discussion when the OECD visited Canada.

In order for women to work there must be an adequate supply of childcare services. In English speaking countries the amount of time young children spend outside of their home has been perceived as a problematic issue and services have often been part-time rather than full-time. But in many European countries today, for example Belgium and Finland, it is accepted that early education and care services must match parents' working hours, and part-time services are unusual. There is considerable ambivalence about these new social policy directions. In Canada, equality for women in the workplace is a widely accepted goal. But its corollary, the provision of childcare in order to enable women to take part in the workforce, is not an accepted goal. We therefore included an extended discussion on this issue in the Canadian document.

2. For-Profit Services

We did not foresee when writing the *Quality Targets* document (1996) that the demand for childcare would be met mostly through the private sector. In the UK for example, within a seven year period (1997- 2003), the number of private services changed from being a negligible percentage to 85% of all day-care (National Audit Commission, 2004). Today the majority of places are concentrated in just 20 nursery chains and the biggest chain in the world, the Australian group ABC Learning Centres is now entering the UK (Nursery World 2006). The expansion of the private sector in turn has gone hand in hand with the Government placing a greater emphasis on regulatory control.

We had assumed in writing the European Childcare Network documents that the vast majority of services would be non-profit, either directly provided by the state, or funded by the state. In our view, although it has some advantages of flexibility, for-profit care is problematic; it produces inequality of access, it leads to uneven quality, it requires public subsidy in poorer areas, and, as mentioned, it raises problems about the nature of regulation (OECD 2006). This was one of the new issues we raised for the Canadian quality paper. At present in Canada a majority of day-care provision is provided by non-profit voluntary and self-help organisations. Many of these organisations receive subsidies, but subsidies, up until now, in most states, have not been given to the private sector. As a result, the private sector has remained at a relatively low level.

3. Governance of Services

A third new issue for consideration as a quality topic was that of the governance of services. Canada is made up of constituent states, and although education and health policies are determined at a central government level, up until now all preschool provision has been within the jurisdiction of the State. So a central issue for Canada is the extent to which central Government could or should introduce any common standards or impose any common funding for childcare across the country. Whilst the funding might be welcome news to childcare advocates, the principle that Canadian states determine their own budgets has been sacrosanct.

4. Multiculturalism

An issue we needed to reconsider for the Canadian document was what I call multiculturalism. Cultural diversity was substantially covered in the European Network documents, but took on a new resonance in this update. Canada is a country which is built on immigration – mainly Scots, Irish, French and Eastern European in the 18th and 19th centuries, but increasingly from Asia and Africa in the 20th century. Vancouver for example could now be described as a primarily Asian city. These patterns of immigration were at the expense of the indigenous or First Nation peoples, the original inhabitants of Canada, who are now an extremely marginalised group. We needed therefore to acknowledge the complex reality of this multi-culturalism and raise the issue of indigenous peoples in the Canadian document. We raised questions about what kind of practices would best support indigenous children whose languages were threatened and whose communities were marginalised.

5. Globalism and Environmentalism

There are wider international concerns which have emerged since Irene and I wrote the European Childcare Network documents. As Alexander (preface: 2006) notes in an interdependent world, “Our concerns are global no less than national, moral no less than economic.” One obvious example of these concerns is environmentalism. Consciousness of topics such as climate change and global warming, carbon footprints and ‘garbage’ mountains have percolated through to early childhood services. Early years practitioners, no less than any other responsible citizen, have to take note of these issues and consider how their practices might have to change as a result. There are other more immediate examples, such as poor food consumption patterns especially amongst young children together with decreased levels of activity that have led to serious concerns about the health of young children. The OECD team visiting Canada was struck by the very low levels of physical activity within the kindergartens, nurseries and childcare facilities we visited, and the lack of prominence or even mention of the need for physical activity in childcare and early education training manuals. These were all concerns we emphasised in our revised document for the Canadian audience.

6. The Rights of the Child

UNCRC marked a big shift in the conceptualisation of childhood by academics and practitioners in many countries. Firstly it presented children as people whose entitlements have been overlooked. As such, it gave fuel to many agencies of all descriptions to campaign for better services for children, and in particular, the need to protect them from danger and hurt, psychological and physical. Secondly, accompanied by theoretical shifts in sociology and psychology, it gave rise to a view of children as competent, sturdy individuals, paradoxically as less in need of protection and shielding than we previously thought. Listening to the ‘voice’ of children is seen to be a key feature in shaping services.

Woodhead (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2005) has attempted to provide a further document – agreed by the UNCRC committee and put out in their name - which defines the rights and needs of young children in relation to the initial UNCRC statement, and which stresses the competency and agency of young children. These various UNCRC statements have been very influential in focusing attention and in reconceptualising early childhood education. Any document on the quality of practice has to address these issues. In our update of the quality documents for the Canadian audience they have inform much of our writing.

The Canadian document, instead of being organized around 10 Quality targets as in the European Network document (1990), was restructured around three themes: 1) Changing Societies; 2) What should Governments do to Ensure the Quality of Education and Care; and 3) Reviewing Practice: What has Changed and What Needs to Change. The purpose of the document, like the original European Network document, was to stimulate debate rather than to give practical advice; so much of the discussion is very general. It is in no sense a guide for action.

Summary

This brief paper has outlined new contextual issues which could be said to influence profoundly the debate on quality. In identifying and considering these issues we see how our view on quality in Europe has shifted as it has crossed time and crossed space into Canada. Discussions of quality are inevitably nuanced, contextual and shifting. As we said in the original European document, discussions about quality are about process as well as about outcomes, a continual, critical revision of practices, rather than uncovering a holy grail of quality. This argument could be considerably amplified. If I were being more discursive, I would also draw on examples from some of the ex-Soviet countries, or from the struggle to introduce standards in South Africa, to show how very different priorities, values and assumptions underpin dialogue about practice, and slowly shape and reshape it, despite the constant rhetoric of universalistic understanding about child development. The good practice or quality of the services our children receive should concern us all, but it is surprisingly difficult to define, to redefine, to modify, and to adapt practice, despite the continual pressures for change. However, the persistence of particular practices despite changing contexts is another paper altogether.

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Footnote

1. French and Flemish Belgium; Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, UK, Finland and Sweden.

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Helen Penn is Professor of Early Childhood in the School of Education, University of East London, UK. She first became interested in quality issues in the 1980's when she was Director of Preschool Services in a large local authority in Scotland. This led to work with European Childcare Network, and subsequently with OECD. Since taking up her professorial appointment in 1999, she has become increasingly involved in global childhood issues, and has worked in a number of countries in Central Asia and Southern Africa. She has written many academic papers, research reports and chapters in books. Her most recent books are *Understanding Early Childhood: Issues and Controversies* (Open University Press 2005 - second, enlarged edition due in 2008) and *Unequal Childhoods: Young Children's Lives in Poor Countries* (Routledge, 2005)