Getting 'Beyond Quality' to 'Transformative Change'

Peter Moss
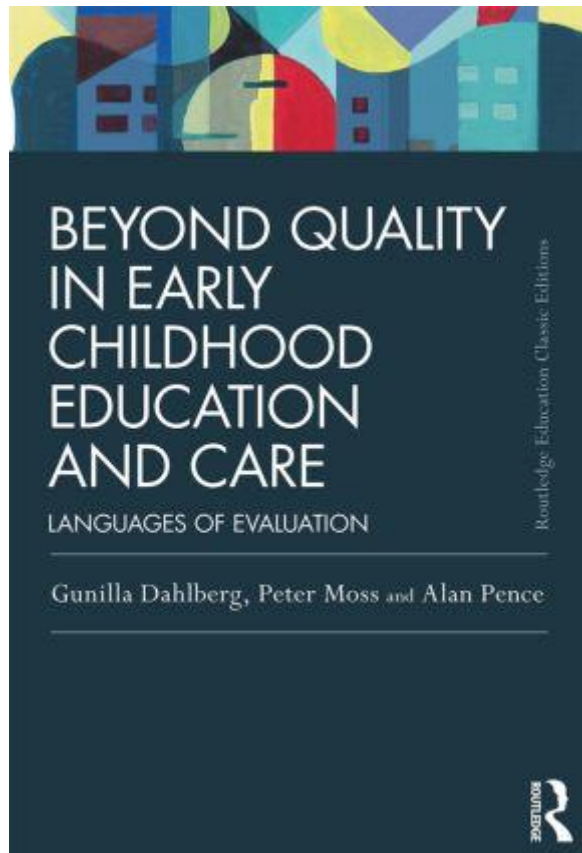
UCL Institute of Education

University College London

BEYOND QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

LANGUAGES OF EVALUATION

Routledge Education Classic Editions

Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence

"The problem with quality is not really a problem once we recognize that it is not a neutral concept, but that it is a concept which we can choose to take or leave"
(Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999)

- What is 'the problem with quality'?
- Why I chose to leave 'quality'
- Where that choice has led me…getting 'beyond quality' in 5 books
- Why the message of the book failed – 'quality' is alive and well…still treated as a necessity not a choice

CONTESTING EARLY CHILDHOOD ●●●

Loris Malaguzzi
and the Schools
of Reggio Emilia

A selection of his writings
and speeches, 1945–1993

Edited by Paola Cagliari, Marina Castagnetti,
Claudia Giudici, Carlina Rinaldi,
Vea Vecchi and Peter Moss

Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2019
FROM VISION TO ACTION

The problem with quality

"[T]he concept of quality in the early childhood field as some universal and knowable entity, waiting 'out there' to be discovered and measured by experts, has been questioned or problematized…[An increasing number of writers have] understood quality to be a subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept, with the possibility of multiple perspectives or understandings of what quality is"

The problem with quality

BUT CAN 'QUALITY'

- accommodate the diversity of subjectivity and values, multiple perspectives and understandings?
- cope with diverse contexts and changing conditions?

The problem with quality

If your answer is 'yes'

- 'Quality' has many and diverse definitions➔ meaningless and useless as a concept

If your answer is 'no'

- 'Quality'➔increasing standardisation and regulation based on a universal standard➔ 'quality control'/control by quality

The problem with quality

- The problem with 'quality' is not its definition…but the very concept of quality itself
- The concept of 'quality' is inscribed with a particular meaning and particular values

The problem with quality

- Meaning: conformity to a universal, objective and stable standard defined by experts and against which all services can be evaluated, regardless of context

- Values: universality, objectivity, certainty, stability

Quality is a technical tool for management to govern at a distance through the setting and measurement of norms of performance

'Quality' has its place…

Flying from London ✈ Hobart, I want to be on a 'quality' plane built to the highest standards agreed by all experts, everywhere in the world, to assure safe and efficient performance…I want universality, objectivity, certainty ✚ absolute conformity to norm…building a plane is a technical practice ✈☺

…but that place is not in education

- For complex social and cultural institutions like education, I don't want 'quality' because there are diverse ideas, perspectives, values about education…education is embedded in diverse cultural and social contexts
- There is not a universal, objective, stable, value-free and context-free standard for education… education is not a technical practice

The problem with quality

"The concept of quality…is about a search for definitive and universal criteria, certainty and order – or it is about nothing. Working with complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and temporal and spatial context means taking another position"

Taking another position means turning towards politics and ethics as first practice in education

CONTESTING EARLY CHILDHOOD

Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education

Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss

Ethics and politics as first practice

- Is early childhood education (ECE) first and foremost a technical practice…or first and foremost a political and ethical practice?

- A 'quality' early childhood education treats ECE as a technical practice…there is one right technical choice to be supplied by experts

Ethics and politics as first practice

- If we treat ECE as first and foremost a political practice, political choices must be made in response to political questions…and we must take responsibility for our choice of a 'good' education

"[Pedagogy is] always a political discourse whether we know it or not…it clearly means working with political choices" (Malaguzzi,1970s)

Political questions

- What is the 'diagnosis of our time'?
- What image of the child...educator...school?
- What is early childhood education for?
- What is 'education'? what is 'care'?
- What ethics?
- What fundamental values?
- What kind of society do we want? What do we want for our children, now and in the future?

What ethics?

- education is a relational practice - if you understand learning as a process of co-construction of meaning in relation with others

Therefore we need to make political choices about

- relational ethics - how we should relate to each other, e.g. ethics of an encounter, ethics of care

Ethics of an encounter

- How can I relate to the Other without grasping the Other and making the Other into the Same?

"Putting everything one encounters into pre-made categories implies we make the Other into the Same…To think another whom I cannot grasp challenges the whole scene of pedagogy… [How can] the encounter with Otherness, with difference, take place as responsibly as possible" (Dahlberg, 2003)

Ethics of care

"*A practice rather than a set of rules or principles…
[involving] particular acts of caring and a general habit
of mind to care that should inform all aspects of moral
life*" (Tronto, 1993)

- 'General habit of mind' includes attentiveness (to
  the needs of others), responsibility, competence,
  responsiveness
- Care of the self…of others…of the environment

Ethics of care

- Rather than separate 'care' services ('childcare', 'daycare'), *all* public institutions for *all* children should work with an 'ethic of care'
- Malaguzzi created 'schools for young children' not 'childcare centres'…"*schools must adapt to factory hours*" of employed parents - but that is not their primary purpose
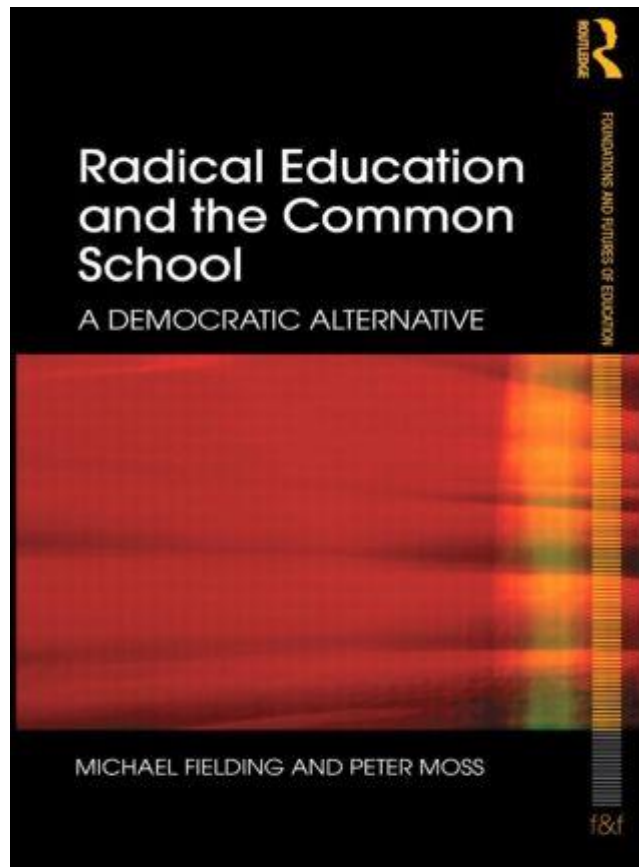
What fundamental values?

Malaguzzi's political choices for RE's schools included:

- Solidarity and cooperation
- Subjectivity and uncertainty
- Inter-connectedness and complexity

AND

- Democracy

A democratic alternative

Argues for

- A new public education for children and young people from birth to 18 years, practiced in
- The 'common school'…for all children in its local catchment area…age-integrated, human scale… focused on depth of learning and based on team work
- Care as an ethic and democracy as a fundamental value

A democratic alternative

- Builds on a long tradition of progressive democratic education, e.g. Dewey, Korczak, Freire, Freinet, Bloom, Malaguzzi

"[O]ne prepares the democracy of tomorrow by democracy in the school" (Freinet) *"Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife"* (Dewey)

- Today democracy is an explicit educational value in some countries e.g. Nordic states, Portugal

A democratic alternative

Democracy as a multi-dimensional concept

- A way of governing...but a way of life and relating

"Democracy is more than a form of government: it is primarily a mode of associated living, embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life" (Dewey, 1939)

"[Democracy is] a way of being, of thinking of oneself in relation to others" (Rinaldi, 2006)

A democratic alternative

- Democracy as a relational ethic calls for:
  - listening
  - dialogue
  - respecting diversity…not making the other into the same
  - recognising multiple perspectives
  - welcoming *confronto…*questioning interpretations and perspectives of others, offering your own for similar challenge

A democratic alternative

- Representative and procedural...but also participatory and everyday

"Building everyday democracy depends on applying its principles to everyday institutions through which people make their choices and develop their identities" (Bentley, 2005)

The early childhood centre/school as an everyday institution for participatory and everyday democracy

A democratic alternative

- Learn democracy by doing, by living...not a subject to be taught

"*Lessons about co-operation or tolerance or injustice will not form right attitudes nor change wrong ones. By living experiences within the community the child learns; the fuller and deeper the comprehension of the experience the more they 'cut into' the fibre of his being and become an integral part of his self*" (Bloom, 1950)

A democratic alternative

- Democracy can be practiced in
  - learning and pedagogy, e.g. a pedagogy of listening
  - decision-making, e.g. the Mosaic approach
  - management of schools, e.g. 'social management'
  - evaluation, e.g. pedagogical documentation
  - community participation

A democratic alternative

"[The school] may be one of the most important institutions we have to help us build a democratic conversation about the future. A physical, local school where community members are encouraged to encounter each other and learn from each other is one of the last public spaces in which we can begin to build intergenerational solidarity, respect for diversity and democratic capability" (Facer, 2011)

- 'Radical Education and the Common School' explored the possibility of building an education from 0➔18 years based on shared values, ethics, images, understandings and practices…shared political choices

  This means reconceptualising the relationship between early childhood education and compulsory school education

Reconceptualising the relationship

- Widespread view that purpose of ECE is to 'prepare' children for compulsory schooling…the labour market

- ECE in subordinate relationship➔'schoolification' - "*taking over early childhood institutions in a colonising manner*" (OECD, 2001)…narrow focus, inappropriate methods

Reconceptualising the relationship

"I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (Dewey, 1897)

"This concept [preparation for school] completely contradicts certain beliefs we have: that children's education begins at birth" (Malaguzzi, 1977)

There are other possible relationships

Reconceptualising the relationship

"*Strong and equal partnership…provides the opportunity to bring together the diverse perspectives and methods of both ECEC and schools, focusing on the strengths of both approaches, such as the emphasis on parental involvement and social development in ECEC and the focus on educational goals and outcomes in schools*" (OECD, 2001)

Reconceptualising the relationship

- "*Preschool and school – two different traditions and the vision of a meeting place*" (Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi, 1994)

- ECE and compulsory education have different traditions, cultures, images, practices

- Rather than a 'colonising' relationship, both come together in 'pedagogical meeting places' to understand differences and co-construct new, shared pedagogical culture

Reconceptualising the relationship

- There are alternative relationships between ECE and compulsory education…again we have political choices

- But alternatives are ignored and we are told there is only one right relationship

An example of the power of stories…ECE as readying for school is part of a dominant story in today's ECE

Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education

A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality

Peter Moss

Transformative change and real utopias

Stories are very important

- Mankind has an innate tendency to communicate and to make sense of existence through stories (Bruner, 1990)
- "*It is through stories that we weave reality*" (Dark Mountain Project, 2009)
- "*Stories are the means by which we navigate the world*" (Monbiot, 2017)

Transformative change and real utopias

The dominant story in ECE
Story of Quality and High Returns [QHR]

Apply the correct human technologies (='quality') at the correct time to get high returns on investment (improved education, employment & earnings ✚ reduced social problems)…we live happily ever after

'quality'+'early intervention'=⬆'human capital'+⬇dysfunction

Transformative change and real utopias

"Research has shown that taxpayers receive a high average return on investments in high-quality early childhood education, with savings in areas like improved educational outcomes, increased labor productivity, and a reduction in crime" (Obama White House, 2013)
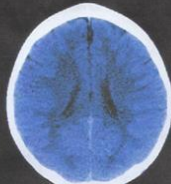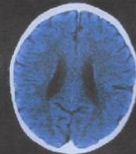
Transformative change and real utopias

Why I dislike this story

- Naïve and reductionist: belief that technical fix ('quality ECE') can solve deep structural and political problems caused by inequality and injustice…magical thinking!
- Increased governing of children and adults to ensure correct application of technology for high returns: "*very tightly defined programmes [produce] good results*" (Melhuish, 2009)

Transformative change and real utopias

"Are we sure there is no magic potion that will push poor children into the ranks of the middle class? Only if the potion contains health care, childcare, good housing, sufficient income for every family, child rearing environments free of drugs and violence, support for parents in all their roles, and equal education for all students in school. Without these necessities, only magic will make that happen" (Zigler, 2003)

Transformative change and real utopias

Why I dislike this story

- Impoverished view of the child and the teacher: passive…needy…unready…'poor'
- Unquestioning: ignores 'converging crises' of our times…assumes more of the same is desirable and possible
- Disregards ethics and politics: not mentioned…the story is all about technical practice

Transformative change and real utopias

- Transformative change needs other stories to be told about ECE…*"The only thing that can displace a story is a story"* (Monbiot, 2017)
- The Story of Democracy, Experimentation and Potentiality [DEP]…democracy and experimentation as fundamental values, the infinite potentialities of children, educators and schools…*"[W]e never know in advance what a body can do"* (Spinoza)

DEP is a 'real utopia'

Transformative change and real utopias

- 'Real utopias' need to be desirable but also achievable…moving from Vision to Action means attention to conditions

- "*We cannot create an artist at will, but it is equally true that the conditions for an artist to be born and to develop can be created from now on*" (Malaguzzi, 1946)

Conditions for Story of DEP

- fully integrated, education-based 0-6 early childhood service
- universal entitlement from end of well-paid parental leave
- well educated, well paid, well supported workers
- attention to the environment
- democratic management and accountability
- collaborative networks not competing markets
- adequate public funding

Conditions for story of DEP

Total public spending on ECEC as % of GDP (2015)

Sweden   1.6%

Australia   0.7%

United Kingdom 0.6%

United States   0.3%

(source: OECD Family Database)

Conditions for story of DEP

Anglophone countries
- fail all of these conditions
- in the grip of neoliberalism for a generation

Neoliberalism

- Ideology increasingly dominant globally since 1980s…strongest in Anglophone world
- Values competition, individual choice, calculation… technical and managerial…the autonomous, self-interested subject, '*homo economicus*'
- Believes everything commodified and tradable in the market…everything economized; non-economic domains (political, social, cultural) turned into economic ones

Neoliberalism

"Neoliberalism has a devastating impact on the early childhood sector with its focus on standardisation, push-down curriculum and its positioning of children as investments for future economic productivity" (Sims, 2017)

Neoliberalism

Consequences of neoliberalism

- explicit standards, measures of performance…trust in numbers, mistrust of people

- economic images: children as 'human capital' and 'investments'; services as factories to produce predetermined economic outcomes ✚ as businesses competing in 'childcare'/'daycare' markets

Neoliberalism

- technical language of calculation, management and economics

'outcomes'…'testing'…'assessment'…'interventions' …'programmes'…'evidence-based'…'best practice'… 'readyness'…'business'…'investment'…'human capital'…

and 'quality'

Neoliberalism

- Malaguzzi's rich language of life, hope and emotion:

'evolution'…'wonder'…'joy'…'pleasure'…'subjectivity'
…'uncertainty'…….'unpredictability…'complexity'…
'inter-connectedness'…'culture'… 'experimentation'…
'holistic'…'flow'… 'process'… 'ferment'…'democracy'

Neoliberalism

- 'Beyond Quality': a successful book but failed to put a stutter in the 'story of quality and high returns'…a story of neoliberalism

- 'Quality' is a neoliberal concept, part of a search for standards and performance…so 'quality' still taken for granted rather than as a problem and a choice

BUT THERE IS HOPE

Neoliberalism

- Neoliberalism increasingly discredited…can't respond to converging environmental and other crises

- Resistance movements, including ECE where growing disenchantment…"*question[ing] the current dominant discourses in early childhood and offer[ing] alternative narratives in an area that is now made up of a multitude of perspectives and debates"* (Contesting Early Childhood' series)

Neoliberalism

- As neoliberalism moves into crisis, time to take the advice of Milton Friedman

"Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable" (Friedman, 1982)

Some concluding questions:

- Do you choose to work with 'quality' or go beyond quality? With ECE as a technical or as a political practice?

- What are your political questions? What are your political choices?

- What relationship do you desire between early childhood and compulsory education?

- What alternatives do you want to existing policies?

- What stories about ECE do you like?

peter.moss@ucl.ac.uk