

Telling new stories about early childhood education: getting beyond quality to real utopias

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Sequence of books

- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. and Pence, A (1999) *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation*. London: Routledge
- Dahlberg, G. and Moss, P. (2005) *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. London: Routledge
- Moss, P. (2013) *Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education: A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality*. London: Routledge
- Cagliari, P., Castegnetti, M., Giudici, C., Rinaldi, C., Vecchi, V. and Moss, P. (2016) *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A selection of his writings and speeches 1945-1993*, London: Routledge

‘Beyond Quality’: context

“The ‘age of quality’ is now well and truly upon us, and not just in relation to early childhood institutions, but every conceivable type of product and service. No day goes by without the word appearing in countless places attached to countless activities and institutions, goods and services. It is what everyone wants to offer, and everyone wants to have”

‘Beyond Quality’: the problem

- No critical reflection about the concept of ‘quality’...taken for granted
- No answers to ‘the **problem with quality**’

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'

CAN 'QUALITY' WELCOME AND
INCLUDE:

- diversity of subjectivity and values,
multiple perspectives and understandings?
- 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 uniformity based on a universal standard → ‘Quality control’ = control by quality

The problem with 'quality'

- The problem with 'quality' is not how to define quality...it is the **very concept of 'quality'**

BECAUSE

- 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**

The problem with ‘quality’

*“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**”*

‘Quality’ has its place...

Flying from London ✈ Tokyo, I choose 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 choose '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 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

‘Ethics and politics’

- 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’

- If we treat ECE as first and foremost a political practice, there is no one right technical choice...experts defining a ‘quality education
- Instead, **political choices** to be made in response to **political questions**...a democratic politics of education to deliberate on what is a ‘good’ education

*‘[**Political questions** are] not mere technical issues to be solved by experts...[but questions that] involve decisions which require us to make **choices between conflicting alternatives**’ (Mouffe, 2007)*

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

What political questions? What political choices?

Some of my political questions

- What is the ‘diagnosis of our time’?
- What image of the **child**...educator...**EC centre**?
- What is knowledge? How do we learn?
- What is education? What is education for?
- What is a commensurate pedagogy?
- What fundamental **values**? What **ethics**?
- What kind of society do we want? What do we want for our children, now and in the future?

What image of the child?

*“A declaration [about the image of the child] is not only a necessary act of clarity and correctness, it is the **necessary premise for any pedagogical theory, and any pedagogical project**” (Malaguzzi, 1990)*

Malaguzzi's political choice

*“There are rich children and poor children. We [in Reggio Emilia] say **all children are rich, there are no poor children**. All children whatever their culture, whatever their lives are rich, better equipped, more talented, stronger and more intelligent than we can suppose”* (Malaguzzi, 1990)

Malaguzzi's political choice

- **Rich children** are protagonists...born with 100 languages...competent...learning
“[They are] not bottles to be filled” but “active in constructing the self and knowledge through social interactions and inter-dependencies” ...“not bearers of needs, but bearers of rights, values and competencies”
(Malaguzzi, 1990)

What image of the EC centre?

Malaguzzi's political choice

EC centres are **NOT**

- childcare centres (but 'must adapt to factory hours')
- businesses selling products to parent-consumers
- substitute homes ('*scuola materna*')
- preparation for compulsory school ('*scuola preparatoria*')... "completely contradicts [our belief] that children's education begins at birth" (Malaguzzi, 1977)
- factories using human technologies to process children

EC centres **ARE**:

- schools providing education for children as a citizen right – ‘*scuola dell’infanzia*’...”*focusing on children and their rights*”
- “*living centres of open and democratic culture*’... for ‘*creating culture*” (Malaguzzi, 1971)
- a **public responsibility** and **public spaces**...open to families and local communities...”*no longer seen as a separate institution...but participating in building an educating society*” (Malaguzzi, 1975)

EC centres **ARE**

- *“public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social cultural political and economic significance”* (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999)

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 CHOOSE

- **relational ethics** - how we should relate to each other

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 qualities of attentiveness (to the needs of others), responsibility, competence, responsiveness
- Care of **self**...of **others**...of **environment**

Ethics of care

- no longer have 'childcare' or 'daycare' services, but...
- education services that work with an ethics of care for ***all*** children and adults, and...
- with opening hours adapted to parents' working hours

Ethics of an encounter

- Western thought has a **strong will to know**...I need to know someone or something by applying my own system of understandings, concepts and categories
- In my will to know, I '**grasp**' the Other and make the Other into the Same...I **master** the Other by making them part of my world
- This involves **oppression**, even **violence**

“As soon as I finish a conversation with another person, as soon as I pause to reflect, I have the opportunity to think. Once I think, I will try to understand what my discussion partner is saying in categories already familiar to me... imposing my ideas of what the other has said. In this way, I have reduced the otherness of the other to the sameness of my thought. I do not allow the other to appear in her light, but the light I lend to her” (Diedrich et al., 2003)

- Ethics of an encounter **contests** the will to know
- Assumes the **absolute alterity** and **unknowability of the Other**...this is a unique Other whom I cannot understand by imposing my ideas
- My ethical relationship with the Other must be one of **respect for their absolute alterity** recognising they are a stranger “*whom it is impossible to reduce to myself, to my thoughts and my possessions*”

The challenge of the ethics of an encounter

“Putting everything one encounters into pre-made categories implies we make the Other into the Same... To think another whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy. It poses other questions to us pedagogues. Questions such as how the encounter with Otherness, with difference, can take place as responsibly as possible” (Dahlberg, 2003)

‘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’

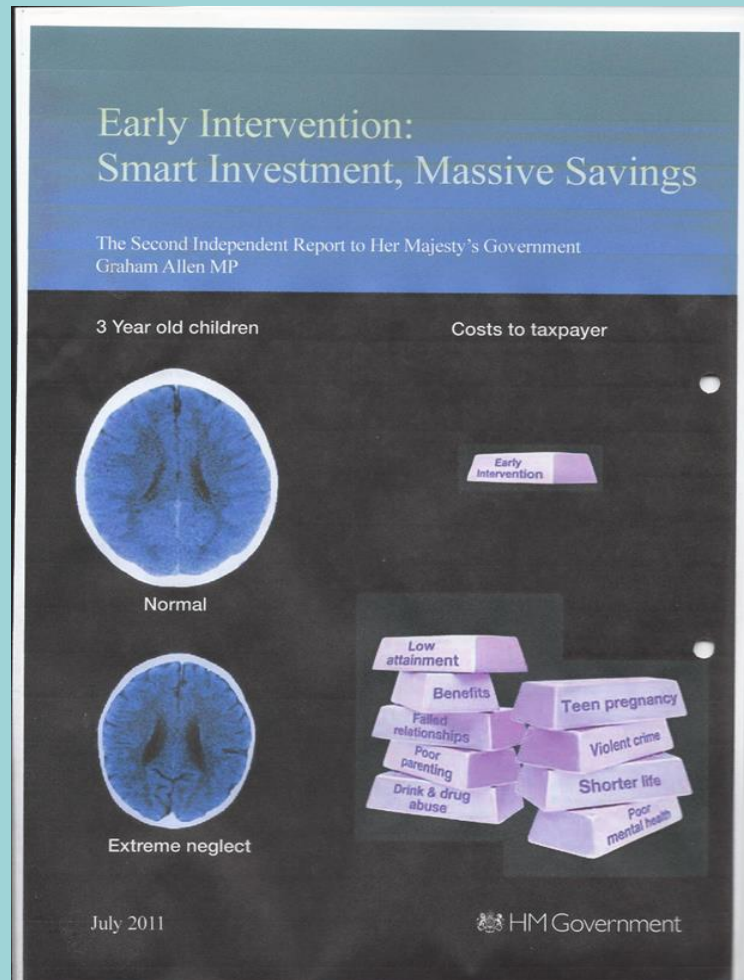
The dominant story in ECE

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 all live happily ever after

The Story of Quality and High Returns

*“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)*



The Story of Quality and High Returns

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)

Story of Quality and High Returns

Why I dislike this story

- Impoverished image 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 the rich child... *“[W]e never know in advance what a body can do”* (Spinoza)

Democracy as a fundamental value

- 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

Democracy as a fundamental value

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)

Democracy as a fundamental value

- Democracy as a **relational ethic** means:
 - listening and 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

Democracy as a fundamental value

- 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)

Democracy as a fundamental value

- 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

Experimentation as a fundamental value

“It expresses a willingness, a desire in fact, to invent, to think differently, to imagine and try out different ways of doing things. It is driven by the desire to go beyond what already exists, to venture into the not yet known, to be surprised, and not to be bound by the given, the familiar, the predetermined, the norm. Experimentation is open-ended (avoiding closure), open-minded (welcoming the unexpected) and open-hearted (valuing difference)”

‘Transformative Change and Real Utopias’

- The Story of DEP is a ‘real utopia’
- ‘Real utopias’ need to be desirable ***but also*** achievable...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)

Some conditions for 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

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

Sweden	1.6%
OECD average	0.7%
Japan	0.4%
United States	0.3%

In conclusion

- ‘Beyond Quality’ very successful as a book...but its message has failed
- ‘Quality’ is alive and well...still treated as a necessity not a choice

WHY?

- ‘Quality’ is a concept of a dominant paradigm – **positivism**; a dominant politico-economic regime – **neoliberalism**

- But nothing lasts for ever...these dominant discourses are entering a period of crisis and new discourses are emerging...new stories to replace the old ones

In conclusion

- Do you choose to work with ‘quality’ or go beyond quality?
- What are your political questions? What are your political choices?
- What stories about ECE do you want to tell?