

Starting wrong? A critical perspective on the latest permutation of the debate on the quality of early childhood provision ^[1]

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Excerpted from chapter introduction

Déjà vu? Setting the scene from a personal point of view

To begin with, I must admit that in writing this chapter I am having a déjà vu moment. In the mid- 1990s I was part of a research group working on developing integrated services for children, families and communities in a project called 'Orte fuer Kinder' (Children's Spaces) in Germany (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, 1994). It was during this project that we encountered, for the first time, a hitherto unknown phenomenon. Triggered by a first (and in hindsight rather harmless) wave of pressure on public budgets in the late 1980s and early 1990s, early childhood service providers found themselves confronted with increasing requests to a) justify and reduce public spending, and b) improve and 'manage' the 'quality' of the provision funded by public coffers. What alarmed us at the time was that the new demands, as well as the approaches and 'tools' provided to meet these demands seemed alien to the practices early childhood services had been working to develop: inclusive, participatory spaces of development for all (children, families, and practitioners). This was completely at odds with the notion of children's spaces as 'a forum in civil society where children and adults meet and participate together in projects of cultural, social, political and economic significance, and as such to be a community institution of social solidarity bearing cultural and symbolic significance' as Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence (1999, p. 7) would put it so succinctly a few years later, in their book *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* (the book has become a key text that, in its revised edition, keeps orienting the critical discussion on 'quality' (Dahlberg et al., 2007)). Instead, we found public institutions set up for the education of and care for the youngest children (re)defined as 'services'; parents as 'clients' or 'customers', and pedagogical practices as technologies to achieve largely predetermined outcomes.

Many educators were suspicious of a rhetoric they felt was imposed on them by a fast growing army of 'quality managers' that had already invaded health and social services and that was now turning its attention to early childhood. 'Quality' had introduced itself as a contradictory term from the very beginning. On the one hand early childhood practitioners welcomed the new public attention that was being paid to services for young children and their families. It was seen as an overdue recognition of a long history of reforms from within the sector that had, in their experience, largely been ignored by policy makers and the wider public. From their point of view, Kindergarten (the umbrella term for German early childhood education and care) was a topic of sole interest for two marginalised groups in society: the practitioners who worked there, and the families that used the services. On the other hand practitioners sensed that the new interest in the 'quality' of their professional practice with and for children and families might largely be a pretext for cost-reduction and rationalisation (Kronberger Kreis fuer Qualitätsentwicklung in Kindertageseinrichtungen, 1998).

The new quality experts came equipped with an impressive array of tools, instruments and procedures. None of them was in any way specifically designed for professional practice with young children and families, let alone developed by and with the field. What all of the new quality experts had in common was that they conceptualised 'quality' as something that needed measuring, assessing, assuring and most of all managing. The early discourse on the quality of early childhood, social services, health services, etc. in Germany was rife with technocratic concepts borrowed from contexts of industrial production, e.g. TQM (Total Quality Management), standardisation (ISO 9000), benchmarking and so on.

It would be a gross oversimplification, however, to read these early developments as a dichotomy between the forces of good and evil, with educators grounded in holistic pedagogy positioned against technocrats, managers and accountants. Writing this chapter I find it revealing to (re)discover how quickly members of the early childhood profession adopted the new terminology. Publication titles from the 1990s include (my translation): *Quality management in services for young children* (1997), *Kindergarten quality and clients' expectations* (1997), *Minimum standards for childcare and early education* (1993). It was as if the authors were delighted to get a handle on the intangible, woolly and messy aspects of early childhood practice, and to rid themselves of the fundamental uncertainty of a profession that is defined through its relationships with children, parents, and other lay persons.

A second emerging body of literature from within the early childhood discipline focused on actual pedagogical practice. 'Quality', authors argued, is about adult-child interactions, the environment, and most importantly about outcomes for children (Fthenakis and Textor, 1998, Tietze et al., 1997). While different at the outset (educational instead of managerial), the approaches taken by these authors were just as concerned with control and certainty as the proponents of total quality management and industrial style standardisation: interactions had to be purposeful and planned, environments structured and outcomes predetermined in order to be effective, assessable and measurable. More important for the topic of this chapter is that these early educational publications provide a link to an emerging international debate that would impact on local understandings of 'quality' in the years to come. The publication by Tietze et al (1997) is probably the best example of this. It is a translation into

German of Harms' and Clifford's original 'Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale' (ECERS), first published in the USA in 1980 (Harms and Clifford, 1980) and revised several times since. This is not the place for a detailed critical discussion of ECERS and the problematic notion of evaluating the quality of early childhood settings through 'rating' the environment. What I want to point out here is how the scene was firmly set for a debate that is still with us today. Fault lines and tensions appear, not between educators (good) and managers / accountants (bad) but between those, in any role or position in the early childhood system who are caught up in concepts of certainty, predictability and accountability, and those who embrace uncertainty, openness – Paulo Freire's 'untested feasibility' (Freire, 2004, p. 3) – and democratic responsibility instead.

In any case, the ongoing international debate about the 'quality' of early childhood institutions and practices is one that has the irresistibility of a steamroller ('die Unwiderstehlichkeit einer Dampfwalze'), as German social pedagogue Burkhard Mueller (1939-2013) put it so succinctly in an early critique of the quality rhetoric (Mueller, 1996). Steamrollers are efficient, but they tend to flatten everything in their path.

Region: Europe ^[3]

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