

## Exploring Quality in Early Educational Communities

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### Introduction

"*The age of quality is upon us*," state Dahlberg, *et al.* (1999: 87). The term *quality* is used widely and varyingly in early childhood curriculum documents, and in conversations among administrators, educators, policy makers and communities. Such occurrences highlight a definition of quality which includes a focus on what teachers should do, the way in which children should learn, and how environments should be arranged and resourced to support learning. It would be difficult to justify any argument which did not agree that access to quality early childhood education and care for all children and families can be foundational in strengthening lifelong learning; however, the definitions and criteria of quality denotes a sense of 'taken-for-grantedness' - that quality is appropriate and standardized across cultures, communities and/or early childhood programs (Dahlberg, *et al.* 1999).

Postmodern scholars and researchers such as Cannella (1997), Steinberg (1999) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005) provide thought-provoking essays regarding reconceptualization in early childhood which focus on social justice and human agency. Relevant literature is a catalyst for critical conversations about the discourse of educational agendas for young children and early childhood professionals. The work of such scholars and researchers has included a critical look at the discourse of quality in early childhood education and care. In particular, they view quality as a socially-constructed, dynamic and culturally-based term (da Silva and Wise, 2006; Grey, 1999) and they question decision-making regarding quality in relation to education (who decides); what factors have, and continue to, influence understandings and practices of quality early childhood programs; and the complex nature of teaching and learning with children in varying contexts. Moss (2005: 406) advises that:

*"working with 'quality' may be a valid choice in certain conditions, but that to do so involves a judgement about the use of the concept rather than simply taking it for granted, and being aware that a political and ethical choice is being made."*

Rather than accepting standardised criteria of quality as objective realities to adhere to, implement and evaluate accordingly, this paper addresses the postmodern challenge by asking, 'what could an exploration of quality look like within an early childhood educational community which uses such documents as starting points for exploring teaching and learning with children and their families?'

### **Envisaging an Exploration of Quality**

As the OECD (2001: 9) highlights, determining quality in early childhood communities includes some countries focusing on externally-measured evaluations, while "*other countries favour co-constructing the programme aims and objectives at local level, engaging a range of stakeholders in the process.*" This paper shares the vision of co-construction and proposes that an exploration of quality in early childhood educational communities could be conducted as an inquiry in which all stakeholders reflect, discuss, plan, implement and evaluate their practices, the environment, learning and teaching together.

The methodology of action research, with its phases and/or cycles, provides a framework for such an inquiry, and is appropriate for researching *quality* as it supports recursive cycles of addressing *quality* through developing understanding, planning, implementation and critical reflection of their own practice, to facilitate and implement change. Adams (2005: 201) demonstrated that, "*the process of adopting a reflective approach to practice - benefiting from informed support within a culture that values and celebrates pedagogical thinking - appears to prompt the intellectual stimulation required to analyse practice critically.*" MacNaughton (1996) advocates that improvement in the provision of quality educational experiences for young children could be aided by greater use of action research in which learning communities reflect on their work and make changes in their practice.

Creswell (2005: 562) guides that, "*action research is a dynamic, flexible process and that no blueprint exists for how to proceed.*" Recognising that early childhood communities will not be identical in the ways in which they cope with the challenges of practice and carrying through innovations in a reflective way, the following discussion avoids providing a step-by-step, detailed blueprint. What is offered is an outline of five elements which every aspect of an action research inquiry could include when focused on exploring quality in early childhood communities.

### **A Place Which Provides Structure, Yet is Open to Possibilities**

A place for an exploration of quality will suit the inquirers; spaces which fulfil the group's needs. It is important to take great care in creating a place for an action research inquiry with teachers, staff, caregivers and students. Places where inquirers come together should provide warmth, safety for risk-taking, and a place to reflect and respond, to challenge and be challenged.

In an exploration of quality, structure can be provided using what Sumara and Davis (1997) call 'commonplace locations' - the boundaries and conditions for activity in which all inquirers discuss and explore meanings about teaching and learning knowledge,

beliefs, experiences and practices. The inquirers, together, will develop an environment for talking honestly and openly, and for beginning within themselves (their knowledge and beliefs, their experiences and practices). As Aoki (1988) advises, an inquiry of exploring quality must begin with the self-perceptions of teachers, staff, caregivers and students in the school community who are living the curriculum. The inquirers' written, oral and visual stories and experiences, fiction and non-fiction literature, and curriculum documents and artefacts would provide these 'commonplace locations'.

An exploration of quality would also begin by developing an understanding of the varied and layered contexts in which teaching and learning with children and their families takes place - the political, the economic, the social, the cultural, the macro and the micro. An exploration of quality is an active process that asks the inquirers to explore the ways in which their practices are shaped and constrained by wider social structures, as well as how their changing actions may reshape the social practices which shape their beliefs, understandings and ways of living, learning and teaching (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998).

#### **Evolving and Organic and Characteristic of Change**

An inquiry of exploring quality begins in a place of unknowing about a set final product. Rather, the focus is on the process. Uncertainty exists about how the collaboration in the inquiry community will develop (Robertson, 2000). The power within the group will prescribe the nature of the process.

Such inquiries would explore the processes of quality in terms of the groups' experiences, meanings, questions and goals, rather than as adhering to specific educational objectives. Sumara and Davis (1997) have introduced the idea of 'simplicity', in which dependency on initial conditions with the space of the possible is fixed at the start. The authors also discuss 'complicity', in which the future is dependent on the present but not determined by it. An inquiry of exploring quality as described in this paper would be about complicity - organic and evolving, beginning with who am I (individual)? And then, through reflexivity, the inquirers begin to ask, what are we (community) interested in? An inquiry of exploring quality moves away from what must or should happen toward what might or could happen.

Furthermore, analysing, deconstructing and reconceptualising teaching and learning excellence should not be time governed; there is a need to linger longer in inquiries of exploring quality (Dahlberg, *et al.* 1999) and implement processes and structures to support continual inquiry and dialogue as a professional practice and commitment to excellence for children.

### **Theory and Phronesis, Self-reflection and Personal Transformation**

An exploration of quality emerges directly out of personal experience, critical reflection, and is embedded in theoretical discourse. As previously discussed, personal exploration and transformation begins an inquiry of exploring quality. How often to do we make the space and time to listen to teaching and learning stories? Willinsky (1998: 1 - 2) writes of the importance of sharing bibliographies, "*we are schooled in differences great and small, in borderlines and boundaries, in historical struggles and exotic practices...What has been learned can be learned again...*". In an exploration of quality, the inquirers require the space and support to begin to explore who they are, and who they are in the lives of children, and what assumptions and biases they bring with them.

Structure is also provided by theory. As Dahlberg, *et al.* (1999: 142) propose, "*A deep theoretical perspective combined with experience from practice opens up beneficial possibilities for dialogues and confrontation.*" At the same time, it is important to be mindful of the tension between literature reviewed as a structuring framework and literature reviewed as a kind of conversation between theory and the stories of life contained in the inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). A community of inquirers can use their own theoretical understandings and access other literature if appropriate and necessary during the inquiry with teachers, staff, caregivers and students.

Standardised criteria of quality could be used as a catalyst for beginning the dialogue in an exploration of quality. However, rather than using criteria of quality as standards of measure and excellence of teaching and learning practices, knowledge would be viewed as ambiguous, contextualized, incomplete and produced in diverse ways. The inquiry group would explore knowledge as non-universal, changing and non-absolute, and take responsibility for their own learning and meaning making (Cannella, 1997). The inquiry would also appreciate praxis - transferring knowledge and/or theory into practice - and phronesis - practical wisdom which comes from taking action based on theories and ideas, reflecting back and honouring different ways of knowing from experience. An exploration of quality would not be designed to provide or find right answers, but involve an engagement in the process of the inquirers developing an understanding of their own practices, and the situations in which these practices are carried out - to focus on what they do and the discourses in which they understand and interpret their teaching and learning.

### **Inclusiveness, Interconnection and Solidarity**

Pedagogical and philosophical work involved in an exploration of quality requires not only the space but also the support for critical analysis, deconstruction, reflection and reconceptualization. An exploration of quality involves a shared common commitment from students, teachers, staff and caregivers. In an exploration of quality, there is a

facilitator, yet no one would be in 'charge'. Students, caregivers, teachers and staff would all have a voice and participatory roles. It is important to stress that research about children is increasingly shifting from doing research on children to doing research with children. Voices of children are not always heard over the 'more authoritative' voices of other stakeholders in educational systems. With the support of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and research on the new sociology of childhood (Moss, 2005), more researchers have considered children's perspectives on their everyday lives. These perspectives are an important source of information on what engages them in learning and why and, as Davie, *et al.* (1996: 133) state, "*children are entitled to live in a society which respects their rights to be listened to and to participate in decisions which affect their lives.*"

As the group moves through the inquiry of exploring quality there would be critical conversations about the discourse of teaching and learning in a way that opens up opportunities for educators, caregivers and students to discuss new languages and constructions that come out of their discussions rather than dominant disciplines or capitalist fads (Cannella, 1997). Furthermore if new language is developed, then the inquirers would continue to deconstruct what this language means in terms of teaching, learning and children.

### **A Moral/Ethical Impulse**

An exploration of quality is also a deeply moral activity, just as teaching is a deeply moral activity (Sumara and Davis, 1997). An inquiry of exploring quality would reflect relationships of mutual obligations and responsibilities that form the essence of collaboration (Carson, 1996). An inquiry of exploring quality foregrounds relationships and is ineluctably, morally implicated and responsible (Sumara and Davis, 1999). The whole group must also take responsibility for making moral choices about what is relevant, appropriate and of excellence for children, teachers and families in an early childhood educational community.

An inquiry of exploring quality is also based on respect. While the term respect has different meanings and different actions for each person within their own culture, Cannella (1997: 169) is favoured as a way of viewing respect, which requires an "*...appreciation of the value of all other beings, acceptance of multiple ways of thinking and being in the world, and the willingness to fight for an equitable and just community for everyone.*"

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Rather than viewing the discourse of quality as taken-for-granted, appropriate and standardized across cultures, communities and/or early childhood programs, an inquiry

process such as one which is guided by the methodology of action research, draws upon criteria of quality as starting points for further analysis, deconstruction, reflection and reconceptualization within the political, economic, social, cultural, macro and micro contexts of the pedagogical work. The five elements described in this paper offer students, teachers, staff and caregivers guidance in establishing an ongoing process of quality which continually strives for excellence in teaching and learning in their own particular contexts.

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