

Quality: Control Or Autonomy?

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Quality is an issue that has become central in early childhood education and a conference dedicated to discussing the concept and related concepts is very welcome. It is very welcome because in talking about quality and what it means, one has to reflect on the purpose and philosophies underpinning the education system in which early childhood education is taking place. The defining of quality and the implementation of quality standards can become an authoritarian top-down approach or a democratic approach to education and children involving all the participant voices. I want to differentiate between the physical conditions of early years setting and the teaching and learning that takes place within them.

This paper concentrates on teaching and learning and I wish to raise a number of matters related to defining and implementing quality in early childhood settings namely, language, teaching and learning and professional autonomy.

Language

Edward Said (1993:387), the literary critic, commented:

“Rarely before in human history has there been so massive an intervention of force and ideas from one culture to another as there is today from America to the rest of the world.”

One place where this is notable is in the use of language. TV programmes such as Friends, The Simpsons, Scrubs, Sex in the City etc. are somewhat responsible. More significant for today’s conference is the language of the market place that is profit motivated, results and product orientated and ruthless. It is a world of the survival of the fittest. Money and power are the driving forces. That this is the language of Irish business is not my particular concern today but the effect that such an ethos and language could have on education.

One of the hallmarks of a profit driven world is the demand for bigger, better, best. This can be found in the language of McDonalds, the burger outlets, where you can buy a big-mac, that is a large burger, or indeed you can buy a large big-mac, which is an even bigger burger, and you don’t have to stop there, you can buy a super, large big-mac, which of course is even bigger than the large big-mac. One would be tempted to speak on the need for good grammar in general society but I’ll resist this temptation to dwell

on a number of phrases that have become part of the language of early childhood education and which I feel we should discard for educational reasons.

Two in particular are '*Centres of Excellence*' and '*best practice*'. In some documents dealing with early years, these phrases are happily used. What does 'best practice' mean? Working as an early years educator is a practice. I will later speak of the professionalism involved in this, but for teaching, in whatever capacity, to remain a practice, it has to be defined as a living thing. Taking an example from another profession, say medicine: A surgeon in the Mater hospital may have performed heart surgery on a patient yesterday which turned out to be a successful procedure, meaning that the patient did not die and can continue to live well for many years to come. The operation was a success. The same surgeon may perform the same operation on a similar patient tomorrow and for all kinds of different possibilities, the operation may not be a success. The patient may die or have limited life expectancy. I am ruling out neglect of any sort. As a professional, self-reflective practitioner, the surgeon will want to examine and talk through with his colleagues involved the two procedures to see what they can learn. To an assessment process that judges on results, the surgeon was 'excellent' yesterday and a 'failure' today. My argument is that any practice is subject to a particular time and place and other factors may impinge to change the outcome of the process.

To use superlative language when assessing or defining quality in education is inappropriate, and I think, could put pressure on practitioners to feel a sense of continual failure. Before I began lecturing in St. Patrick's College, I taught young children in primary schools for many years. Often I had a class for a two-year period. Never in all my years teaching did I leave a class and feel, '*yes, I did an excellent job,*' implying that each child had reached his/her potential in all of the areas of the curriculum and in the non-curriculum areas. There was always something more I wanted to do with the whole class or with particular children within a class. I know that many teachers identify with this. But I equally know that the nature of teaching and learning means that such words as 'excellent' and 'best' are transcendent. Superlatives imply a finished conversation, an end rather than a continuing dialogue. I believe that my very last day of teaching, be it a general lecture, a tutorial or whatever, will be my best day of teaching because it will be the end result of all of my teaching life. I will have accomplished the most knowledge and experience, shared it with colleagues, read, researched and published, and will have arrived at the total of my professional life.

Is there some mythical standard of excellence that can be reached through acquiring certain technical skills? To promote such a concept is to de-humanise teaching, and more worryingly, to de-humanise children. Language matters and the language we use to describe our work with children indicates our understanding of childhood. There is also

the implication that there is a pre-determined standard that can be judged, tested and reached. It keeps things simple and neat, and therein rests the danger.

In the introduction to *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives* (2003) the authors, Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence raise this matter when they comment on such questions as: How do we measure quality? What are the most cost effective programmes? What standards do we need? How can we best achieve desirable outcomes?

“The common feature of such questions is their technical and managerial nature. They seek techniques that will ensure standardization, predictability and control. They aspire to methods that can reduce the world to a set of objective statements of fact, independent of statements of value and the need to make judgements.....they are not questioning questions, which ask about value, acknowledge the probability of multiple perspectives and meanings, diversity and uncertainty, and which open up for democratic participation, dialogue and further questioning. In short, they express a desire for a clean and orderly world, devoid of messiness and complexity.” (Dahlberg et al., 2003:2)

So, I am recommending that in defining quality in early childhood education in Ireland, we reject the language of the market place, and while demanding high standards, define them within the language of education. The avoidance of superlatives would be helpful in this process.

Learning and Teaching

Teaching and learning are complex processes. There is no one theory explaining all the complexities of the development of the human mind and there is a need for a diversity of approaches in teaching. For good practice to be enacted in early years settings, it is vital that an articulation of what is understood by learning and development is defined and that such discussions are not fudged. I say this because it is one of my few criticisms of the Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999). In the recent published *Framework for Early Learning* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2004), both Piaget and Vygotsky are referred to. However, at the beginning of the consultative document “developmentally appropriate” is defined as:

“Activities are developmentally appropriate when they reflect a child’s particular age and stage of development.” (NCCA, 2004:3)

This would appear to be a direct acceptance of a Piagetian understanding of children. If it is, it should be acknowledged as such and personally, I don't accept Piaget's understanding of age-related development. Erica Burman, in *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, argues that it is precisely because Piaget's influence on developmental psychology has been so profound in structuring the form of the discipline that the Piagetian undertones are largely invisible (Burman, 2000:151). For quality to be enacted, it has to be based on what is understood as teaching and learning and will directly effect what is assessed, how it is assessed and by whom. There is not time to go into the details of these arguments now, but to give an example of how this fits into my argument of rejecting superlative language and acknowledging the diversity of learning, here is a quotation from Robert Fisher on the complexity of acquiring a concept:

"Learning a concept is not an 'all or nothing' process, it is the building up of successive approximations, of finer distinctions, of a widening network of related ideas, of coming closer to the common understandings of a culture and to the knowledge structure of experts." (Fisher, 1995:60)

Furthermore he stresses:

"We are always in a state of incomplete knowledge, of coming to know, of building on our partial understandings. Throughout life, we are (or should be) constantly developing our conceptual understanding of the world." (Fisher, 1995:61)

Just as Fisher claims forming a concept is an on-going process, so too does he comment that it is an integral part of a cultural understanding. Early childhood education can have many universal features, but equally it has many that are local and specific. The educationalists in Reggio Emilia in Italy often stress that their system is not a blue print to be transplanted worldwide but the principles involved can be utilised by other communities in keeping with their own environment and culture. This emphasis on the local also has implications for defining quality. Woodhead is strong in arguing such a case:

"I challenge the global distribution of any single framework of quality. Such a framework might inevitably lead to a world of uniformity, a standardised recipe for the quality of childhood." (Woodhead, 1996:17)

How does one move beyond the general definitions? Certainly one approach is to encourage practitioners to define their own quality within the context of a general definition. This leaves a space for the professional autonomy of the early years educator. She or he may well discuss these and certainly inform both parents/ guardians and children as to what these are, why they are and how they can participate in them. This brings me to the matter of professionalism.

Professionalism and Critical Thinking

There are guidelines as to what professionalism is and what questions can be asked to establish it as such:

- Is the area complex and is its complexity known and understood?
- Do the claimants to professional recognition operate at a critical decision-making level and have they the expertise/ skill to do so?
- Is the knowledge and expertise necessary for the day-to-day job?
- Is the area one where a unique, definite and essential social service is required?

Educating children in the early years complies with all of these questions and sometimes it can be difficult to define the complexity of human relationships that take place in an early years setting. Eisner comments on this:

“The realities of the classroom... will always present more to the perceptive teacher than propositional language can ever hope to capture. The uniqueness of an individual child, the emotional tone of something said in love or anger, the sense of engagement when a class is attentive will always elude the language of propositions.” (Eisner, 1984:51-52)

Critical theorists such as Rex Gibson (1986) and Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (1989) warn of the dangers of de-skilling teachers and attempts at ‘teacher-proofing’ curricula that reduces teachers to technicians. With constant demand for quality assurance and accountability, combined with the pressure of school league tables and litigation against schools, the reduction of teaching to a skills-based function is a very immediate threat. At present in Ireland there is an-going debate whether or not to publish school league tables based on examination results. No final decision has been made but the danger inherent in the demands for publication is that education becomes classified as a commodity, using the language and the values of the market place. Gibson (1986:7) attributes this outlook on education to the *“obsession with calculation and measurement: the drive to classify, to label, to assess and number all that is human.”* Giroux and McLaren offer an alternative that they call emancipatory authority and which gives teaching its dialectical meaning. Within such a construct, there is an emphasis on children finding their own voices and to construct meaning out of their own narratives, based on their family experiences and their neighbourhood lives:

“A critical pedagogy in this case addresses, affirms and critically analyses the experiences, histories, and categories of meaning that shape the immediate reality of student’s lives, but it does not limit itself to these categories.” (Giroux and McLaren, 1989:146)

This is not meant to imply an isolationist position. We have a great deal to learn from practices in many and varied parts of the world in terms of quality provision for our children, and in interacting with other systems, we can critically reflect on our own. An example of this is a visit I made to Finland last semester as part of an Erasmus programme. I went to the university of Savonlinna and visited a number of early years settings with one of the lecturers. On one such visit I was talking to the teacher of a class of four-to-five year old children. I was asking her about daily routines, and despite her very good English, at one point communication broke down. She was explaining to me that when the children came back in from playing she would be doing a lesson on touching. I explained that we too do this with our children, thinking of programmes like Stay Safe. However, after some minutes of confusion, I realised the Finnish teacher's lesson involved teaching the children how to touch each other, how to hug, how to gently rub the back of a finger along someone else cheek, to make a circular motion on each other's back etc. This activity was taught through engagement of the children with each other, with their teacher and the nursery nurses present. I realised how my own understanding of touching, a very basic and instinctive way of communicating, had become warped when applied to a professional setting. I think this reflects outside influences in Irish society. I wondered to myself what would happen if I suggested to our B.Ed students in St. Patrick's college that on their next Teaching Practice they should do a class on touching. What has happened to us as a society that in our genuine desire to protect our own and other children, we have allowed some good educational practice to be detached from basic healthy communication? This is just one small example of some of the issues we need to reflect upon as educators before we allow litigation and market place language determine what we teach, how we teach it and how it is assessed. Critical reflection is now more than ever a necessary part of being an early childhood educator.

Autonomy or Control?

This is the question I set out with and to which I would say yes to both. There is a need for public accountability to a democratically elected government. We elect governments and pay tax that we expect the government of the day to re-distribute. We may well argue not enough goes to education and to early childhood education. However as Readings (1996:131) so accurately puts it we should "*refuse to equate accountability with accounting.*" There needs to be general principles laid out at a national level for the education of young children. These can be informed by both national and international practice and research and consultation with interested bodies and experts in the field. A government needs to assure its citizens that there is quality and standards in the provision of early childhood education and care. The interpretation of general principles in the sense of 'meaning making' in early years settings should be within the remit of the practitioners and the children in their care. This way, there is a recognition that there can be many meanings or understandings as opposed to an attempt to reduce what is going on to fit preconceived categorical criteria.

In summary, quality in early years depends on the values of the society of which it is part. How do we view the future? If we wish to see values that recognise the dignity of each person and the diversity within our society and to encourage participation by educators and children in their own lives and the lives of their communities, then the language and definition of quality needs to reflect this. So the control that supports quality needs to be flexible and supportive of the autonomy of practitioners and experts. I would therefore recommend:

- Note with caution the language we use and recommend the disuse of superlative when talking of teaching and learning;
- Discuss further what we mean by teaching and learning;
- Ensure there are central broad principles on ECCE;
- The implementation is left within the autonomy of the professionals involved.

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