

Starting wrong? The trouble with a debate that just won't go away¹

by Mathias Urban

I am completely persuaded of the importance, the urgency, of the democratization of the public school, and of the ongoing training of its educators, among whom I include security people, cafeteria personnel, and custodians, and so on. Their formation must be ongoing and scientific. Nor should it fail to instil a taste for democratic practices, among which should be an ever more active intervention on the part of educators and their families as to which direction the school is going.
(Paulo Freire, 2004, p. 14)

Implementing contextually inappropriate standards [...] will prove more disruptive than constructive in fostering children's development.
(Martin Woodhead, 1996, p. 17)

The last thing I expected when I first wrote about the troubling issues around the concept of 'quality' in early childhood education and care some 20 years ago, in a different country and in a different language, and being a generally optimistic person, was that one day hearing the term would leave me struggling to avoid an almost cynical 'been, there, done that, bought the t-shirt' sentiment. Quality, it seems, just won't go away. The debate about 'quality' and what exactly it entails, how (if, and by whom) it should be defined, developed, monitored and evaluated is a phenomenon that makes regular reappearances. The language and general appropriateness of 'quality' as a concept to understand the complexities of working with young children, families and communities in increasingly diverse contexts has encountered fundamental critique from early childhood scholars and professionals over the years (Dahlberg et al., 1999, Dahlberg et al., 2007, Pence and Moss, 1994,

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Penn, 2011). However, far from having moved 'beyond quality' we are still debating and arguing along the same lines and divides as 20 years ago. In this chapter I attempt a critical review of the ongoing debate. My central argument is that the debate can be understood as a struggle between control as an imagined possibility inherent in educational relationships and institutions (a 'desiring machine', to borrow a concept from Deleuze and Guatarri), and uncertainty and 'untested feasibility', as Paulo Freire puts it. Approached from this angle the question of 'quality' becomes a political project that implies and acknowledges a diversity of underlying values, interests and objectives. Reconceptualising 'quality' in early childhood as a democratic project, I argue, requires thinking (theory) and acting (practice) outside of the current policy consensus on early childhood education and care.

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 für 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 laypersons.

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 (Müller, 1996). Steamrollers are efficient, but they tend to flatten everything in their path.

A bigger picture: The EU and systemic approaches to 'quality'

I have chosen to begin this chapter with a look back at the early days of the "*Qualitätsdebatte*" in Germany, not because it takes me back to my professional and academic roots, but because it can be read as a microcosm of the patterns, tensions, contradictions, dichotomies and competing interests that continue to shape the discussions about 'quality' in a wider international context. To this day, these contradictions are reflected in high profile documents and policy approaches produced by influential international actors including the World Bank (2003), UNESCO (2007), and UNICEF (2008). In the European context, the European Union itself has shown an interest in early childhood particularly since the 1992 Council Recommendations on Childcare (Council of the European Communities, 1992). This document has been criticised for its socio-economically driven

focus on childcare (as opposed to early childhood education) and, more generally, for its underlying assumptions about gender roles in the labour force (Guerrina, 2002, 2005). It is, however, a first and important appeal for a systemic and comprehensive policy approach. The 1992 Recommendations urge EU Member States to ‘take and/or progressively encourage initiatives to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children’ (ibid, article 1). This requires coherent policies addressing the *provision of childcare services*, *matching parental leave arrangements*, *the organisation and structure of work in order to meet the needs of workers with children*, and a general commitment to gender equality: ‘the sharing of occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children between women and men’ (ibid, article 2). The document then specifies the characteristics of each of the above policy areas: childcare services should be affordable and accessible to all children and families and offer reliable care of high quality combined with pedagogical approaches. There is further emphasis on initial and continuous training of staff, close collaboration with local communities and appropriate public funding for services. The provision of childcare services needs to be complemented by much greater flexibility in the workplace in general, ‘which take[s] into account the needs of all working parents with responsibility for the care and upbringing of children’ (ibid, article 5). Member States are asked to ensure that ‘due recognition’ is given to childcare workers, their working conditions and ‘the social value of their work’.

The need for *comprehensive* approaches to a policy context as complex as early childhood has been a recurring theme in European policy documents. In more recent documents there is recognition, too, that ‘quality’ is multidimensional and that ‘quality’ for children and ‘quality’ of the early childhood workforce are two sides of the same coin.

Participation in high-quality early childhood education and care, with highly skilled staff and adequate child-to-staff ratios, produces positive results for all children and has highest benefits for the most disadvantaged.

(Council of the European Union, 2010, emphasis added)

What constitutes high quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a complex and often contradictory matter: definitions of quality and strategies to ensure it vary considerably across countries (Penn, 2009). There is, however, a general agreement between researchers and authors that quality is a *construct* that is value-laden and dependent on expectations and perspectives. ‘Quality’ is constructed in the ways we talk about it and the ways we aim at achieving it—in *discourses, practices and contexts*—all of which are subject to constant change. A rich body of literature provides evidence of an ongoing international debate that has examined the practices and

discourses of 'quality' and argued against the dominance of technocratic and managerial attempts to universally define, deliver, measure and assess it (Dahlberg et al., 1999, Dahlberg et al., 2007, Pence and Moss, 1994, Penn, 2011). Helen Penn (2011) suggests that the search for one final definition of quality is 'a search for fool's gold' (p. xi). There is, I argue, a different way of looking at this: it is exactly this continuous search, the *process* of questioning, debating, inventing and re-inventing, valuing and evaluating practices with and for young children, families and communities that *constitutes* the quality of early childhood education and care as a democratic and transformative practice.

How we understand early childhood education and care, its purposes and practices touches on key areas of European policies. These include:

- promoting democracy, citizenship, children's and civil rights
- working towards equality of opportunity and social cohesion
- addressing diversity (linguistic, ethnic, cultural . . .) including children with
- special educational needs
- reducing poverty and exclusion
- promoting creativity and innovation.

(Urban, 2012a, p. 478)

Interconnected socio-economic, educational and civil rights-based rationales for investing in high quality services for young children and their families have been laid out in European and international policy documents. Given the interconnectedness and complexity of the matters at stake, there are no simple solutions, technical interventions or 'quick fixes' available. As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Urban, 2012b), urgent questions arise about the *purpose* of early childhood education and care, questions of orientation, participation and desired outcomes (See also Moss and Urban, 2010, Urban, 2008). In imagining and building the future of early childhood institutions in Europe, the question is not 'what works?', but what should it work *for*, for *whom* and to *what end*? And, most important in a democratic society, as Gert Biesta suggests, 'who should have a say in determining the latter?' (Biesta, 2007, p. 5).

Helen Penn, in her 2011 book *Quality in Early Childhood Services* (Penn, 2011), offers an interpretation of how the 'curious political structure' (p. 78) of the European Union contributes to a particular perspective on the quality of early childhood services, which is one that derives mainly from its role as a guardian of economic well-being and competitiveness:

'The EU has arrived at the view, enshrined in its legislation, that the well-being of the workforce is integral to its economic success – its education and training, its workplace rights, its health, its transferability (from one member state to another) and its voice or representation in business affairs. [...] it considers that the position of women is a key to productivity, since women are potentially half the workforce. So equal opportunities at work, and measures to reconcile family life and the workplace through provision of childcare and maternity leave, are considered as essential measures'.

(Penn, 2011, p. 78)

While this explains the emphasis given to childcare as a service for working parents in early EU policies, there has been a significant shift of priorities in recent years. Led by the EU Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture, a focus on young children's learning (understood as the foundation of lifelong learning) has entered the policy discourse and the term *childcare* has been replaced by *early-childhood-education-and-care* (ECEC) (European Commission, 2011). A further important development is the recognition of the role 'high quality' early childhood education and care can play in addressing social exclusion and inequality – which are increasingly seen as threats to the economic success of the entire European Union. There is, a 2010 Council document states

'[...] a need to increase participation in early childhood education and care, to raise the number of young people with a tertiary-level qualification, and to increase adult participation in lifelong learning. Such needs are particularly acute in the case of those from a disadvantaged background, who statistically tend to perform significantly less well against each of the benchmarks. Only by addressing the needs of those at risk of social exclusion can the objectives of the Strategic Framework be properly met.'

(Council of the European Union, 2010, p. 6)

The EU has to be commended for becoming so explicit about the damage inequality causes to the social and economic fabric. However, it is highly problematic that the proposed solutions remain firmly with those at the receiving end of exclusion and disadvantage. Provided with proper opportunities (education) the poor and marginalised are expected to raise themselves out of disadvantage. Increased performance against externally set (educational) 'benchmarks', in this frame of thinking, equals reduction of inequality and exclusion. There is far too little recognition in European policy documents of the devastating effects of the unbroken *cycles of advantage*. Credible strategies to challenge the vested interests of those benefiting from inequality, exclusion and racism are conspicuously absent from the policy debate. In relation to the topic of this chapter – approaches to defining and developing the 'quality' of early childhood education and care – one of

the key questions that remain is: who sets the 'benchmarks' and targets against which children are expected to 'perform'?

Quality Targets in Services for Young Children

One of most relevant activities that came out of the EU was the result of a collaboration initiated by the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities in the mid-1990s. The 'European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities' – or, shorter, Childcare Network – was coordinated by Peter Moss and produced a review of early childhood services across the then 15 Europe member states that was translated into all EU languages and widely circulated (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996b, 1994). The review was the first, at European level, to adopt an explicitly systemic perspective and to point out the necessity of addressing 'quality' as a multi-dimensional construct. The Childcare Network then developed this initial discussion paper into a set of 40 *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children* (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996a). The targets were presented in an overall framework addressing nine distinct but interconnected dimensions. The dimensions comprise

1. **Targets 1-6 for the policy framework**, outlining governments' duties to develop such a framework based on democratic debate over the purpose of early childhood services, and to have clear programmes and responsibilities for implementation.
2. **Financial targets to be incorporated in the policy framework (7-10)**. Most influential here is probably target 7 that states that 'public expenditure on services for young children should not be less than 1% of GDP' (p. C16). This figure has been widely accepted and has effectively become a benchmark.
3. **Targets for levels and types of services to be incorporated in the policy framework (11-15)**. The targets under this heading point out the need for services for all age groups, flexibility and parental choice. Target 14 is explicit about the need to acknowledge, address and support diversity of language, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability, and to challenge stereotypes (p. C20).
4. **Education targets (16-18)**, pointing to the need for coherent values and objectives, and an explicit educational philosophy for all services, developed jointly by 'parents, staff and other interested groups' (p. C23).
5. **Targets for staff child ratios (21-24)**, including specified 'non-contact time' for preparation and continuous professional development (p. C27)

6. **Targets for staff employment (25-29).** These targets aim at pay parity with primary school teachers, the level of formal qualifications, the right to continuous in-service training, and trade union affiliation. Target 29 aims at increasing the number of men employed in ECEC to 20% of the workforce (p. C30).
7. **Environmental and health targets (30-33).** These targets are inspired by the view that 'pedagogic aims should determine the environment for children' (p. C33).
8. **Targets for parents (34-36)** outlining the need to recognise and respect parents as 'collaborators and participants', and to proactively engage with the community This should be reflected in an (ethnically) diverse workforce (p. C36).
9. **Performance targets (37-40).** These reflect the need for democratic accountability of public services, for monitoring progress towards agreed aims and objectives, taking into account the views of multiple stakeholders, including parents and the wider community (p. C39).

Re-reading the quality targets almost 20 years on I feel a slight discomfort with some of the terms (and their underlying concepts) used by the authors, and about what, in hindsight, appears to be an almost naive trust in governments and the state as guarantors of the public good. Nevertheless, the importance of the 1996 quality targets cannot be underestimated. They are the first systematic attempt to conceptualise the quality of early childhood services from a holistic, systemic, and unapologetically European perspective. Moreover, when the 'targets' were published they were put forward by the authors as a 'proposal for a ten year action programme' (the subtitle of the document) because they were 'realistic', had 'already been achieved within one or more Member States' and were deemed achievable for all Member States 'within 10 years' (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996a, p. C41). As the document cautiously reminds us in the footer of the contents page, this did 'not necessarily represent [European] Commission's official position' (p. C3). For a document prepared for and endorsed by the EU it is still remarkable. As write this chapter, nine years after the deadline for realising the 40 quality targets has passed, I have on my desk a document titled 'Proposal for principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care' (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014). This tentatively titled and cautiously worded document is the product of a working group initiated and hosted by the European Commission between 2012 and 2014. Summarising its remit the group that brought together 'ECEC experts and policy makers from across Europe' describes its working method as a 'review of existing evidence' with 'the child at the centre of its reflections'. The document identifies topics such as *access*, *workforce*, *curriculum*, *evaluation and monitoring*, and *governance and funding* as 'areas where action has led to clear improvements in the quality of provision' (ibid, p. 4). While the new

framework is a far cry from the ambitious and decisive 1996 quality targets, it does represent an acknowledgement that more leadership is needed at European Union level. I doubt this would have been possible without the work of the 1996 Childcare Network. The immediate impact of the 'quality targets' however was mixed. While it became the 'basis for further work on quality systems' in some countries, 'in others it sunk without much trace' (Penn, 2011, 79).

The 'quality targets' did leave an important trace, however, in shaping what probably has become the most influential international comparative report on the quality of early childhood education and care systems – the Starting Strong study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Starting Strong

In 1998, the OECD Education Committee launched a *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy*, building on the organisation's interest in Lifelong Learning as a key policy tool to achieve economic growth. Improving access to 'high quality' early childhood education and care – recognised as the foundation for Lifelong Learning – had become a policy priority for the OECD. Initially 12 countries – Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States – joined a large project to voluntarily review and compare their ECEC policies and services. The first phase of the project resulted in the report *Starting Strong* which was launched at an international conference in Stockholm in 2001 (OECD, 2001). Following the publication of this first report, a second project phase was commissioned and eight additional countries – Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, South Korea and Mexico – joined the panel for a second round of reviews between 2001 and 2004. *Starting Strong* draws on a rich data set from a variety of sources: statistical data was collected from the participating countries throughout the study. Each participating country prepared a *background report* to outline policy priorities and to provide demographic information that shaped these policies (e.g. women's employment, [child] poverty). These *background reports* informed the members of the *review teams* that visited each country for talks with officials, policy makers and stakeholders from the ECEC sector. Based on their critical evaluation of the *background reports* and in the light of the conversations and observations during the visits to the country, the review teams then produced a *country report* for that particular country. The two-stage process allowed the project to identify critical issues and inconsistencies between the official self-description and the first-hand impressions gained by the team during their visits. Understandably, internal and external perspectives do not always match and divergences had to be negotiated in order to produce a final *country report*. Such a design, aiming to build consensus, brings its own problems, as

Helen Penn reports in her account of the *Starting Strong* exercise: 'In the last resort the officials and politicians who commissioned the report had to recognize themselves (in one country they didn't, and no country report was produced)' (Penn, 2011, p. 83).

Together with additional input from a range of leading experts and researchers, the collection of country reports formed the basis for the two overview reports: the initial publication *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2001) and the much more substantial *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006). *Starting Strong II* in particular has become a 'reference point for all policy makers everywhere' (Penn, 2011, p. 83).

Based on the insights into the early childhood systems from a hugely diverse sample of 20 countries, the report concludes by proposing a set of ten policy areas 'for consideration by governments and the major ECEC stakeholders' (OECD, 2006, pp. 205-220):

1. To attend to the social context of early childhood development
2. To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies
3. To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance
4. To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services
5. To base public funding estimates on achieving quality pedagogical goals
6. To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights
7. To encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services
8. To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff
9. To provide autonomy, funding and support to early childhood services
10. To aspire toward ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy

These ten areas outline a comprehensive and systemic approach to developing policies and practices for young children, their families and communities. They take into account the social, cultural, economic and political context of early childhood systems and the complexity and diversity of countries' histories that inevitably shape their institutions and shared understandings of what 'quality' in early childhood means and how it can and cannot be developed. Kirsten Scheiwe and Harry Willekens (2009) use the term 'path dependency' to explain why there can be no one-size-fits-

all approach to 'quality'. The authors of the first *Starting Strong* report were well aware of this as they describe the vantage point for the comparative review:

'From this perspective, ECEC policy and the quality of services are deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff?'

(OECD, 2001, p. 63)

What constitutes 'quality' in early childhood services and systems depends on the value systems of those involved in defining it (or those experiencing and 'receiving' the services, which can be a very different thing). The same is true for research, comparison and international reviews. From my point of view, as colleagues and I have suggested elsewhere (Urban et al., 2012), one of the most important achievement of the *Starting Strong* study is that it is explicit about placing the question of quality in the context of democratic ECEC governance, and that it suggests a multi-dimensional approach to understanding, developing and assessing quality that takes into account the perspectives of all stakeholders (OECD, 2006, p.p 127-129).

Starting all over again: the toolbox approach

Most of the experts, professionals and researchers that are engaged, across Europe and internationally, in ongoing struggles to ensure the best possible experience for *all* young children, their families and communities agree that *Starting Strong II* is a landmark study and a benchmark for ECEC policies. Not surprising, therefore, that the launch of a new *Starting Strong* report in 2012 created a lot of interest in the international early childhood community. *Starting Strong III* (OECD, 2012) presents itself in the familiar format of the two previous reports; it even uses the same colourful title graphic, a child's drawing of the globe carrying three houses and populated by a solitary human figure standing on what appears to be the arctic ice shield. The layout can lead the reader to the expectation that *Starting Strong III* is a follow-up to the two previous reports. There is, however, one marked difference: Where *Starting Strong I* and *II* announce their topic broadly as *Early Childhood Education and Care*, *Starting Strong III* promises something much more specific. It offers, we learn from the subtitle, a *Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*.

Reading the term *toolbox* in the context of the first two *Starting Strong* reports causes more than slight unease, considering the repeated warnings in *Starting Strong I* and *II* that there can be no 'quick fix', no universal, one-size-fits-all solution to the complex and contested issue of quality in

services for young children in diverse contexts. But since it is not appropriate (in most cases) to judge a book by its cover the question arises if, and how, *Starting Strong III* is true to the holistic framework – or if it is something very different altogether.

The introductory paragraphs of the report leave an ambiguous impression. There is, on the one hand, explicit reference to the preceding reports, and an acknowledgment that they ‘set the analytical framework’ for what is presented in *Starting Strong III* (OECD, 2012, p. 3). On the other hand, the introduction of the report as a ‘quick reference guide’ (ibid) is a first cause for concern. The text stops short of advertising *quick fixes* – although the concept of ‘quick wins’ is used throughout the entire document. Worrying, too, is the very first paragraph of the introduction. This is where authors usually set the scene and the atmosphere for what is to follow. The opening paragraph tells the reader in a nutshell what to expect:

‘There is a growing body of evidence that children starting strong in their learning and well-being will have better outcomes when they grow older. Such evidence has driven policy makers to design an early intervention and re-think their education spending patterns to gain “value for money”.’

(OECD, 2012, p. 3)

What are the key terms in this opening paragraph, and how is the relationship between them constructed? The paragraph opens with the seemingly inevitable reminder (in documents addressed at policy makers) that what follows is based on a *body of evidence*, positioning the report within a paradigm of evidence-based policies and practices. Apart from the implicit (and unfortunately widespread) conflation of *evidence* and *proof*, this clearly identifies the authors’ priorities. Situating a document on what ‘quality’ entails in early childhood education and care in this particular paradigm is a choice, not an inevitability. Can we imagine, instead, the document opening with a statement about *values* (democratic, participatory, and rights-based)? This opening sentence is not without consequences, as Gert Biesta reminds us:

‘[...] evidence-based education seems to favour a technocratic model in which it is assumed that the only relevant research questions are questions about the effectiveness of educational means and techniques, forgetting, among other things, that what counts as “effective” crucially depends on judgements about what is educationally desirable.’

(Biesta, 2007, p. 5)

The opening paragraph then continues to set the parameters for the authors’ approach to services for young children. *Learning and well-being* are two key concepts that figure prominently

throughout the entire report. They are presented here, as well as in the main body of the document, as a combined term (learning-and-well-being). Children learn all the time and, in principle, there can be nothing wrong with drawing attention to the importance of the experiences and situations in which learning takes place as an important factor in children's well-being. It is the second part of the sentence that gives reason for concern, as it presents us with an understanding of learning-and-well-being that is clearly situated within a very specific *educational* paradigm. Ensuring *all* children are well and can enjoy meaningful learning environments are not values of their own, we are led to understand. Instead, they are priorities for a purpose, a means to an end: to improve *outcomes* as they *grow older*. The purpose of any effort to ensure that children *start strong* is immediately removed from the children's experiences in the *here and now* and projected into their future as adult members of society, the workforce. It is as if the authors of *Starting Strong III* are caught up in a taken for granted *grand narrative* of linear progress, predictability and local causality – a narrative that has become questionable, incredible and untenable as a basis for education since Margaret Mead exposed the crisis of the hierarchical adult-child relationship in modern society (Mead, 1978). In the second decade of the 21st century, in a context of diversity, uncertainty, and global interconnectedness – a 'complex intersolidarity of problems, crises, uncontrolled processes and the general crisis of the planet', as Edgar Morin (1999) put it – we have irretrievably lost our capacity to meaningfully predetermine *outcomes* for children.

There is another, no less important reading of the *Starting Strong III* opening paragraph: the focus on *outcomes* when they *grow older* denies children what for Janusz Korczak was a fundamental right of every child: *the right to the present day* (Korczak, 1991).

Not surprising then, that the following sentence from the opening paragraph combines two further key concepts from *Starting Strong III* in an equally purposeful way: *early intervention* and *value for money*.

But what about other principles and values that many in the international early childhood professional and academic community have come to see as the cornerstones of our work with young children, families and communities? Without claiming to be exhaustive, my list of priorities would start with a firm commitment to *children's rights* to education, but also to protection, development and meaningful participation as spelled out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and specified for the youngest children in General Comment Nr. 7 (UNCRC, 2005). *Democracy* as a guiding principle for all services, for the relationships between actors, and for the governance of the early childhood system would also feature prominently on my list (Moss and Urban, 2010). Respectful *dialogue* between equal partners (individuals, communities, institutions, professions) is

an orienting value and a fundamental practice at the core of ‘quality’ early childhood institutions. The entire list would be underpinned by respect for *diversity* and a commitment to *equality* and *social justice*.

How do these values and concepts feature in *Starting Strong III*? And how do the two *Starting Strong* reports compare? I admit that a quick and rough analysis, using the search function of Adobe Acrobat®, is an overly simplistic approach. It is revealing, nonetheless.

Search term	Frequency (Starting Strong III)	Frequency (Starting Strong II)
Children’s rights	0	3
Democracy	3	12
Dialogue	8	19
Diversity and Equality	0	0
Social justice	1	3
Participation	84	180

Children’s rights, a concept that is at least mentioned in *Starting Strong II*, is completely absent from the *Starting Strong III* toolbox. Democracy, dialogue, participation and social justice all lose out in the transition from *Starting Strong II* to *III*. However, one term that does not appear on my preliminary list of values for early childhood education and care sees its use increased in *Starting Strong III*: *compliance*, mentioned three times in the previous report, now features 25 times.

A tentative conclusion: it is possible and necessary to move beyond the quality paradigm

At the launch of the first *Starting Strong* report, in Stockholm in 2001, Peter Moss talked about the important role shared learning across national boundaries can play in our efforts to create a better understanding of what early childhood services can be about, and how, in the light of the shared perspectives, we might go about transforming our practices. In his presentation, he drew attention to what he called the *conundrums* of this kind of cross-national work:

‘Cross-national studies of early childhood can lose sight of the child. Or rather, their focus on structures and technologies runs the risk of producing an image of the child as a universal and passive object, to be shaped by early childhood services – to be developed, to be prepared, to be educated, to be cared for. There may be little sense for the child as a social

actor, situated in a particular historical and spatial context, living a childhood in these services, and making her own meanings from the experience.'

(Moss, 2001)

As I am writing this, early childhood practitioners all around the globe are committing their professional activities, often under difficult circumstances and in inappropriate work conditions to making sure *all* young children, their families and communities stay firmly in the picture, and that their rights as human beings and citizens are honoured. They need the support of scholars and researchers, and of the organised 'big players' in the field. With *Starting Strong II* the OECD has demonstrated that international comparative reviews can be attentive to, and respectful of local practices that are put under their critical evaluative lens. They can contribute to an increasingly global conversation about how we relate to young children – and what these relationships teach us about ourselves (as members of the human society, as a profession and a discipline). Instead of simple, decontextualized comparisons and the naïve 'cultural borrowing' (Alexander, 2000) that promises to make what works *there*, work *here* (Urban and Dalli, 2011), reports like *Starting Strong II* help reflect on our own, local practices in the light of diverse international scenarios:

'Taken for granted assumptions and understandings of childhood can become visible, and so subject to deliberation and confrontation. In this way, for example, cross-national work can contribute to making childhood contestable. But for this to happen, the starting point for cross-national work needs to be, how is childhood constructed here? What is the image of the child here?'

(Moss, 2001)

Reading through *Starting Strong III* leaves me with a feeling of unease. Despite its claims to continuity within the *Starting Strong* 'analytical framework' the *toolbox* is a step back to the 'focus on structures and technologies' (Moss, 2001) that we thought we had left behind in favour of more democratic, systemic and value-based approaches to 'quality'. Not yet, I'm afraid.

Europe seems unable to escape the discourse of technocratic control (*manageriality*) of early childhood practices. Policy and the mainstream of early childhood research and scholarship are caught in a self-referential cycle of evidence that perpetuates narrow ideas of quality and continues to promote more-of-the-same policies and practices to increasingly complex life experiences of children, families and communities. In the other corners of the globe, meanwhile, interesting developments are taking place in so-called 'developing' countries. Colombia, to give just one example among several from Latin America, has recently adopted an ambitious early childhood policy framework that takes the notion of quality into new directions. Acknowledging the need for a

systemic approach (competent system!) the framework brings together areas of health and well-being, education, social cohesion, and equality in an attempt to address human development in the broadest sense. Such an approach is a bare necessity in a highly diverse country like Colombia. Considering the lived experience of children, families and communities that are supposed to gain most from attending 'high quality' early childhood provision – *highest benefits for the most disadvantaged* (Council of the European Union, 2010) – European policy makers would be well advised to abandon their Eurocentric world view and learn from forward looking initiatives like the one taken by Colombia. Shifting the paradigm requires a sustained interest in the *bigger picture*: An extended systemic approach that recognises all dimensions of a 'competent system' and the 'critical ecology' of theory and practice (Urban, 2012b). Such an approach would enable us to move beyond dichotomies in thinking that are no longer appropriate in contexts of diversity, multiplicity and fragmentation. As Rosi Braidotti puts it 'present day Europe is struggling with multiculturalism at a time of increasing racism and xenophobia. The paradoxes, power dissymmetries and fragmentations of the present historical context rather require that we shift the political debate from the issue of differences between cultures to differences within the same culture' (Braidotti, 2002, p. 14). A recognition of the *margins within* would involve, I want to suggest, a respectful interest in, and learning from indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing – ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies as a way to interrogate the situation of marginalised communities in Europe. As a profoundly political project, research into what entails 'quality' for whom – and who decides – would prioritise *why* questions over *how*, and critical positionality over supposed neutrality (Jones et al., 2014). The project of quality might yet be transformed into a project of social justice and radical critical inquiry.

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