

Quality: Children's right to appropriate and relevant education

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Many global initiatives, including Education For All (EFA) launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 and reaffirmed in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, still regard quality as a topic of minor importance. Paradoxically, although it is a requirement subject to constant evaluation using efficiency parameters, it lacks sufficient technical and financial support for correct implementation.

This article attempts to highlight that to achieve quality, a theoretical position is needed from which a proper operating system can be developed. The discussion suggests that it is important to try to move forward towards a position that, regardless of whether it is termed postmodern, metamodern or simply more human, subscribes to a set of basic criteria and is open and flexible enough to include other parameters that take into account the history of each provision.

Theoretical issues and practical approaches

Quality is surely the most frequently occurring educational issue of concern to modern governments and societies. Paradoxically, it is one of the least developed topics in the literature, both conceptually and operationally. As early as 1968, Coombs indicated that it was the most 'slippery' term in education. More recently, authors such as Moss and Pence (1994) and Casassus (1999) stated that the concept has become a 'panacea' in education, used so frequently that it can lose its specific meaning and thus its contribution to consensus and good practice.

The difficulty in constructing a better definition of quality seems to reside in the fact that 'educational quality' always implies judgements over the content of education (what is taught), assembled from specific theory and defined paradigms. If these are not presented explicitly, it is hard to reach basic agreements for putting quality into practice.

Nowadays, educational quality is not only the concern of professional teachers but also of other decision-making agents, especially those in the

political and economic sectors and, in some cases, the 'users', i.e., the community, the family and even the students. It is claimed that one aspect explaining the difficulty in defining quality is the redistribution of power that results from it: "as regards the process and especially one of construction and transformation, its *leitmotif* is power and change" (Casassus 1999).

The question of quality was raised first by the Carnegie Commission (1968) and a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) symposium (Beeby 1969). The central theme of the symposium was an analysis of the quality problems derived from the democratisation of primary education that was taking place worldwide. This indicated inadequacies, problems with cost and evaluation and a scarcity of results. The study of quality then began to be extended to other sectors, but was still kept within the boundaries of positivist rationalism.

More recently, there has been some theoretical development of the subject but this has not gone beyond a few specialist circles. In fact, what has

been observed is a more extended treatment of quality from a rather modernist and universalist position, in contrast to a postmodernist handling of the subject embracing diversity of contexts and situations, multiplicity of options and, especially, the opinions of the agents involved.

Along these lines, Moss and Pence (1994) claim that “quality is a relative concept and not an objective reality”, adding that “definitions of quality reflect the values and beliefs, needs and agendas, influences and authorities of various decision groups who have an interest in those services”. Similarly, Carr (1993) argues:

“Those who are not professional educators, such as politicians, economists and business people, will tend to interpret and evaluate teaching quality in terms of values that are unconnected with the educational process. From these perspectives, education is seen as something serving extrinsic purposes, such as national interest, society’s economic needs or labour market demands. In such cases, judgements on quality in teaching will be made, not by applying the criteria that qualify teaching as an educational process, but based on criteria that focus on the effectiveness of teaching in order to serve a purpose that is not purely educational”.

To make progress on this aspect, theoreticians in education argue that the reductionist vision of quality needs to be broadened. The thoughts of Aguerrondo (1993) are revealing, stating the limited vision held by some about ‘quality in education’ is due to their restrictive definition of the subject and that, in contrast, the subject has the potential to address a ‘complex and all-embracing’ and ‘socially and historically determined’ concept.

We should therefore move from the modernist-instrumentalist focus, which is not the only one in existence, but is the most used in official policies and metrics, to a more postmodernist viewpoint that accepts the historical and contextualised view of educational processes, the diversity of the ‘qualities’ to which we aspire, the importance of the agents implicated and so the human dose of relativity and uncertainty common to all social processes.

But we should not treat the subject in a way that polarises the two opposing viewpoints. In some circumstances, it may be valid to employ a quality control focus in line with the investment made and the need to purchase services. But it is also possible to consider criteria that go far beyond those that are purely economic or productive. In this way, a more integrated, contextualised and participative vision of quality in education can be maintained, as shown by experience in Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua.

Woodhead (1996) is one author who puts forward a more integrated approach, saying: “quality is relative but not arbitrary”. Focusing on children’s education, he states: “like the rainbow, we are capable of identifying invariant ingredients in the spectrum of quality for early infancy, but the spectrum is not fixed because it emerges from a combination of special circumstances, viewed from individual perspectives”. Every educational programme is “a complex human system involving many affected individuals and groups” so “there are potentially many quality criteria that are closely linked to beliefs about objectives and functions”.

Casassus (1999) expresses the same ideas. By recognising that the concept of quality has a historical and socially constructed nature, they make progress in attempting to indicate the dimensions that may help measure and evaluate it.

In summary, given the complexity and plurality of the educational process and the contexts in which it takes place, it is possible to assume a conceptualisation of quality. This goes beyond a set of standards fixed by some technical authorities, usually in the economic sphere, and towards more flexible criteria that are chosen historically and in which the various agents participating in education have a voice. In this way, the concept may be understood and valued by all, and the parameters will be formed not only for the purpose of controlling but also for understanding and moving forward.

Therefore, educational quality from a more postmodern perspective would include a set of distinctive and relevant educational criteria that must be validated as satisfactory and meaningful

for the agents involved in educational activities. Achieving educational quality by meeting specific shared criteria would enable progress in both general and specific terms.

Educational quality: a right for all children

Rather than responding to a demand from the agents involved, quality of education has usually been considered as a requirement by external agents who are particularly interested in the results. Although a more active role has been given gradually to adults involved in educational processes (teachers and family), there has been little progress in considering quality of education as a children's right in their process of training for citizenship. Given that children are the 'subjects' of education, it is also necessary to address the 'perspective of rights' in the analysis. This means in general terms "recognising the principles regulating forms of social activity, such as the criteria of fairness that recognise and offer development possibilities for all" (Alvarado and Carreño 2007). It is evident that such a perspective is applicable in this field.

Arango (2001) stated that when "attention on children is based on a foundation of rights and the doctrine of integrated protection, and is implemented starting from the family, its relationship with the community and with state institutions, society is not only fighting against social exclusion. At the same time, it is contributing to the creation of social, political, cultural and economic conditions that enable countries to construct citizens, strengthen participative democracy in the present and future, develop their social capital, strengthen local organisations and improve their competitiveness. All these factors help society to engage more successfully in the processes of change demanded by the contemporary world".



Photo: Jon Spaul

Quality in early childhood education is not determined by expensive facilities or materials but by the processes and particularly the interactions that take place

All children, without exception, have the right to quality early and primary education. The imperative for the exercise of this right is most urgent in the most vulnerable sectors: the poor, marginal urban areas, rural areas, immigrants, border areas, displaced groups, etc. The limited number of quality programmes for these sectors and the absence of monitoring and evaluation prove that this area needs more work. Social and cultural relevance is an essential factor of the quality of educational programmes and, together with agent participation, must form an intrinsic part of their definition.

Assessing quality in early education: a complex but feasible task

On reviewing the bibliography, it becomes clear that some quality criteria are relatively common while others vary according to prevailing circumstances. Several authors identify possible criteria (e.g., Darder 1991, Dahlberg 1999, OECD 2006). These papers illustrate contextual issues, such as culture and family participation, and other issues connected with educational and curricular experiences that are process or product related. For example, in Latin America, the criteria on the subjects of learning activity, integration and participation, cultural pertinence and relevance have been discussed, updating a previous debate (Peralta 1992) about some essential principles of early education (the first three). The other two principles deal with issues that are more relevant to Latin America and its particular educational problems. The latter would be applicable to curricular process criteria, not the most commonly found in this field.

In fact, the trend over the last 20 years has been to address quality in early education in terms of a supposedly objective modern view, which puts quality into “rational and universal standards defined by the experts on the basis of unquestionable knowledge and measured in ways that reduce infant educational institutions to stable and rational criteria” using “methods that placed the emphasis on and gave priority to ‘how’ rather than ‘what’” (Dahlberg 1999). This view has gradually given way to one of greater openness and complexity. For example, Sylva (1999) states: “understanding the efficacy of early education requires research based on a range of paradigms, as no single one can provide answers to all our questions about policies and practices”.

So, the central problem is how to re-conceptualise educational quality taking into account diversity, subjectivity, the various views of the agents involved and the wide range of spatial and temporal contexts, without losing sight of the factors that guarantee a good educational experience. Some authors have addressed this issue. Dahlberg (1999) suggest that the solution may lie in “looking for meanings”. This involves dealing first with the rationale or reason for existence of each early childhood education centre. This would enable judgements to be made on the

different stages of work and agreement sought with others on these judgements. To summarise, the basic idea is to ‘co-build’ the meanings and judgements on the value of a particular educational experience in order to define its quality. As the OECD *Starting Strong I* report puts it: “A participatory focus to ensure and improve quality: defining, improving and controlling quality must be a democratic process involving teaching staff, parents and children. Standards are needed to regulate all forms of services, supported by joined-up investment” (OECD 2001).

In order to carry out this kind of process, studies show that it is essential to build the search for the basic meanings of the educational project with the participation of the whole educational community and by going through a critical and reflective process. Questioning and discussion is a fundamental part of applying ideas based on sound pedagogical documentation, and it is vital to set up a dialogue between the various agents involved. It is also helpful to provide facilitators who support the core group in their search, analysis and quality criteria-building process, based on the background and physical context of each case.

The latest research indicates that protecting the process of co-building and quality analysis described above can lead to finding some shared parameters that can then be contextualised. For example, the classic criterion of ‘teacher–child ratio’, normally held to be a key indicator of quality, should be “interpreted according to each country’s view of the appropriate pedagogical measures for its children, together with financial and organisational aspects” (OECD 2001). It is well known, and contemplated by cross-cultural research into nursery education, that some Asian countries (e.g., Japan) intentionally place children in larger groups to help them adapt to societies with a high population density.

It is therefore possible to have a set of quality parameters or criteria that respect the meaning of each project, as well as its dynamics and the various agents and views involved, whilst addressing the major core issues at stake. These issues are highlighted in various studies, although curricular quality criteria are often addressed alongside others

Table 1. Common quality criteria in early childhood education

Criteria/ studies	A ¹	B ²	C ³	D ⁴	E ⁵	F ⁶	G ⁷	H ⁸	Total mentions
Involvement of parents in educational projects	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
Adequate adult–child interaction	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
Suitable programme (clear and relevant intentions)		X	X		X	X	X	X	6
Evidence that children take on an active role in their own learning through play			X						1
Suitable and well–organised physical spaces			X	X		X	X	X	5
Stable routines				X					1
Monitoring and evaluation	X		X	X		X			4
Ongoing team training					X	X			2

1. Schweinhart 1981; 2. US Department of Education 1990; 3. Pugh 1996; 4. Salazar 1996; 5. National Childhood Accreditation Council 1994; 6. Myers 2001; 7. OECD 2001; 8. Tietze 2007

related to administration and management. These too are important, since they can both facilitate and hinder the quest for quality. Table 1 illustrates common quality criteria used to measure early childhood education.

Analysis of the quality criteria highlighted by research shows that the most influential factors in childhood education in order of their impact are as follows:

1. **The contribution of parents** to the design and implementation of programmes is important in terms of the child's emotions and for ensuring consistency of educational issues at home and at school.
2. **The quality of interaction** between all participants, but especially in adult-child relationships, both emotional and cognitive. The quantity of children under the care of one adult has some impact on this criterion, to the extent that it produces a more assertive and personal relationship.

3. **An explicit, clear and relevant educational programme** in which the general principles are appropriate for all participants.
4. **Monitoring and evaluation systems** for the programme and for children's learning, the results of which are taken into account when planning educational practice.
5. **Adequate and organised physical spaces**, with access to materials that enable children to explore, discover and transform. It is more important to have a variety of materials, produced by the creativity of the teachers and the community, than sophisticated and expensive ready-made items.
6. **Stable routines**, which organise children's days into regular periods (food, hygiene, etc.), but without becoming monotonous.
7. **Ongoing training and preparation for the work team**, which involves on-the-job training using adult learning methodology.
8. **Children taking an active role in their own learning through play.**

Another way of organising quality criteria in early childhood education is suggested by Woodhead (1996) under three broad headings:

1. Entry indicators, which establish the base for regulating basic quality standards. These reflect the more permanent areas in the programmes and are the easiest to define and measure. They include:

- the building and its surroundings (amount of space per child, heating, lighting, toilets, washing facilities, etc.);
- materials and equipment (furniture, play equipment, teaching and learning materials, audiovisual equipment, etc.);
- the team (qualifications, basic experience, salaries and conditions, children–adult ratios, etc.).

2. Process indicators, reflecting what happens on a day-to-day basis. These are the most difficult to identify and standardise. Some examples are:

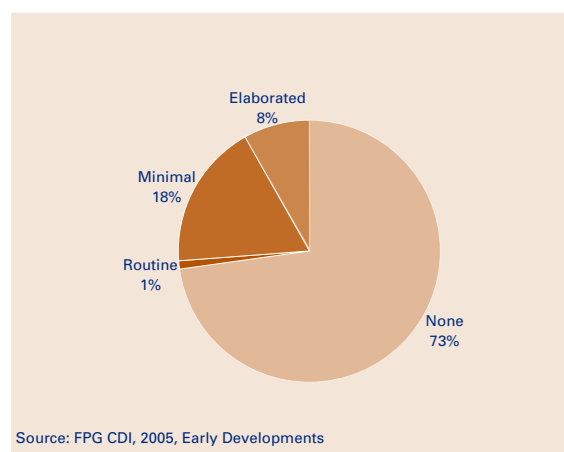
- style of care (whether adults are available for the children, ability to respond, consistency, etc.);
- children’s experience (variety, the way it is organised; choices allowed; patterns of activity, meals, rest, play, etc.);
- approach to teaching and learning (control, support for children’s activities, tasks set, sensitivity to individual differences, etc.);
- approach to control and discipline (setting limits, rules, managing the group, strategies for discipline, etc.);
- relations between the adults (day-to-day communication, cooperation, etc.);
- relations between parents, carers and others (greetings, opportunities for talking about the children, mutual respect, cooperation, awareness of differences, etc.).

3. Exit indicators, which deal with the impact caused by the experience. This falls into the realm of efficacy and cost-benefit and can include:

- children’s health (monitoring growth, list of illnesses, etc.);
- children’s skills (motor coordination, language, cognitive aspects, social relations, introduction to maths, reading and writing);
- children’s adjustment to school life (transition problems, progress through grades, school achievements, etc.);
- family attitudes (supporting children’s learning, parental competencies, etc.).

Once again, what is interesting about all these suggestions is that they reiterate the importance of the curriculum or programme delivered, especially the impact caused by the quality of the adult–child interaction. On this topic, an interesting argument was put forward during a recent presentation in the USA (OAS 2007). It was alleged that the poor results obtained in proportion to the investment made were due to the predominance of ‘typical’ interactions between teachers and children in various educational institutions across the country (see Figure 1). The amount of time during which there is no interaction (73%) indicates that the mere fact that children are in a school, even though it may have excellent facilities, does not guarantee anything. What is important is what they do there and how the staff work with them.

Figure 1. Typical teacher–child interaction



Similarly, a major European study (Tietze et al. 1997) found four types of educational styles related to certain countries and cultures and which are in turn related to results obtained from applying a quality control tool (Table 2). The authors allege that when the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) was applied, “the best scores on the scale came from the type of activities undertaken, aimed more at free play and developing self-reliance, choosing activities, working in small groups, etc., which is also linked to having fewer children per teacher”. In this context, the results from Austria and Germany are better than those from Spain and Portugal.

Table 2. Educational styles in four European countries

Country/ educational style	Directive	Directive- collective	Free and planned	Free
Spain	81%	15%	0	1%
Portugal	0	50%	33%	16%
Austria	0	25 %	48 %	23%
Germany	0	8%	6%	86%

Source: Tietze et al. (1997), quoted by Lera (2007)

However, the analysis is not quite this simple, since certain organisational features of Spanish nurseries have a more significant effect on the quality of the education than culture. Here, the average is 25 children per adult and this, according to Lera (2007), means that in “directive environments, methodologies are designed by text books”. In contrast, less traditional working methods are more stimulating, have a greater effect on language development and tend to attract greater resources. Development of freer practices relies on provision of ‘adequate teacher training’ (Lera 2007) and this includes “knowledge of educational psychology and child development” (Arnett 1987).

To conclude, the quality of the adult-child interaction is important and is based on the way it is developed. By using more open-plan working styles, greater levels of participation, self-reliance, language development, etc. can be attained.

Is quality early childhood education possible in developing countries?

Research suggests that quality in early childhood education is not determined by expensive facilities or materials but by the processes and particularly the interactions that take place. The directive style is not the most useful one, and it can be claimed that quality can be achieved through good teacher training and by a low ratio of children per adult.

The main issues of relevance in developing countries are those such as the relevance of family participation, programme ownership and guidance, and the use of local human, natural and cultural resources.

The view that quality in early childhood education can be assured by bringing in a wide range of material resources has been abandoned in both research and practice related to experiences measured all over the world. Therefore, by focusing on issues other than material resources, State provision (usually with less funds) can deliver better quality programmes than the private sector, as seen in research from Chile (Villalón et al. 2002; see Figure 2).

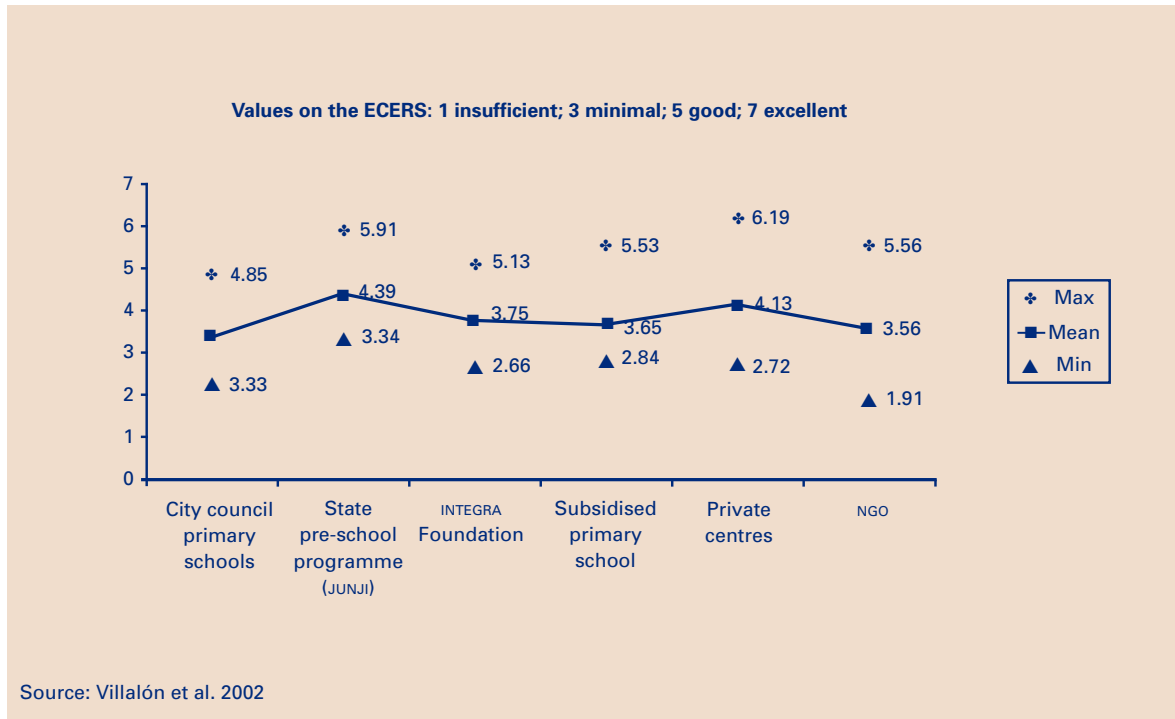
In the study, the schools belonging to the three organisations receiving only public funding showed better results than those in the private sector. In addition, the public-funded Junta Nacional de Jardines Infantiles (JUNJI) pre-school centres had a more appropriate educational focus, with professional educators, a clear programme and relevant family participation.

Although most results lie somewhere between minimum and good, one of the limiting aspects is clearly the children–adult ratio, which ranges from 30 to 45 in schools and 25 to 32 in nurseries. It can therefore be deduced that if all these quality factors are put together to work in synergy, better results could be achieved.

In Mexico, Myers et al. (2007) undertook a quality evaluation process concluding that, in centres where there were problems, the following issues needed to be addressed:

- identifying and including children’s interests;
- creating opportunities for children to propose ideas and events for themselves;

Figure 2. Evaluation of the quality of the educational environment in Transition 1 Level classrooms in Chilean pre-school education



- providing activities that foster active study, e.g., exploring, handling and reflecting;
- paying attention to cultural diversity;
- resolving conflicts in the school's relations with parents and the supervising and care community.

One or more of these criteria have been applied and observed in Latin America, Africa and some parts of Asia; however, a lack of systemisation and research in these areas means that this type of practice is not sufficiently known, valued and disseminated. There is also a great deal of directive, authoritarian and excessively strict practice driven by a lack of adequate staff training, with large numbers of children per adult and a complete lack of resources to change the situation.

Taking the contribution made by the research mentioned here as a reference, it is clear that if the quality of early childhood education in developing countries is to be improved, there must be consistent and synergistic provision of the relevant aspects. Such provision must be made in context and with

the participation of all those involved (community, families, educators and the children).

In conclusion

Early childhood education must take significant steps to develop its educational level. The fact that the initial phase of putting into place a basic coverage has not yet been completed, particularly in the case of the most needy pupils, means that quality has been relegated to second place. However, it should be fully integrated in every proposal for widening coverage.

While quality is a requirement that is subjected to constant evaluation, it often lacks sufficient technical and financial support for correct implementation. There is another major task for international organisations to take on board. Debate on the 'what' and the 'how' of early childhood education must be part of all major forums, agendas and projects, leading to policy documents and actual resources for the sector. To do this, not only the experts but also the people on the ground must have a voice. The views and opinions of communities, parents and children must be taken into account.

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