

Moderating tensions between Modern and Post-modern views of educational quality: Notes on indicators of pre-school quality in México

A paper prepared by

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“Quality is an international buzz word, not only in early childhood services but in connection with every kind of product and service. Yet in its mantra-like repetition, the word is in danger of being rendered meaningless. It attracts widespread support – for who could not want ‘good quality’ – unless and until we have to say what we actually mean, at which point it becomes far more elusive.

Moss, 1994, pg. 1

This paper will set out briefly tensions between “modern” and “post-modern” views of educational quality and describe how a project to evaluate the quality of preschool education in Mexico attempted to move beyond that dichotomy in designing and carrying out an evaluation and in using results.

Modernism and Postmodernism

It is ironic that a *postmodern* way of looking at the world, which in theory eschews or “problematizes” dualistic thinking, has in practice been set up as a direct opposite to a *modern* view of the world. When “modernity” and “postmodernity”, representing historical periods with certain characteristic tendencies become “modernism” and “postmodernism” they become alternative ways of viewing knowledge and represent opposing guides to actions.

Consider the following descriptive words or phrases that have been used to describe the two views:

Modernism is characterized by:	Postmodernism is characterized by:
Absolute, knowable/truth/certainty	Multiple and changing truths/uncertainty
Universal/uniform/standardized knowledge	Relative/diverse/plural knowledge
Predictable/coherent/logical/reasoned knowledge	Unpredictable/unintegrated/experienced knowledge
A controlled/orderly/neat view of the world	An uncontrolled/disorderly/messy view of the world
Objective/value-free/neutral ways of knowing	Subjective/value-laden/personal ways of knowing
A linear and continuous view of “progress” achieved through application of absolute, reasoned knowledge	A non-linear and discontinuous view emphasizing change through creative adaptation; appreciation of diversity
Knowledge that transcends place, culture and history	Knowledge that is context specific, including multiple perspectives, temporal and spatial specificities
“Finding truth” through abstract disinterested inquiry (the “real” is external)	Making (constructing) meaning through dialogue, negotiation of power. (“real” is what is valued locally)
“Meta narratives” embodying general knowledge	Little narratives embodying local knowledge

Embedded in the differences between the modern and postmodern are, then, a broad set of dichotomies including a dichotomy between local and national levels of discourse and operation.

My struggle with these differing views intensified as I became involved, in Mexico, first in a project whose goal was to search for indicators of well being for children under six years of age at a national level and then in a national project to evaluate a program of “Schools of Quality”.

The modern/postmodern dichotomy (or tension) and the concept of quality

Let us look at how these two viewpoints play out as they are applied to defining the quality of education. To do that I have taken the following quotes and observations from the challenging book titled “Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care” by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999). In “Beyond Quality” the authors apply a post-modern view to understanding early childhood and early childhood institutions. They begin, however, by observing that, at present and for the most part, the process of defining quality follows a modern paradigm rooted in an industrial tradition. They state that:

“The concept of quality is primarily about defining, through the specification of criteria, a generalizable standard against which a product can be judged with certainty. The process of specification of criteria, and their systematic and methodical application is intended to enable us to know whether or not something – be it a manufactured or service product – achieves the standard. Central to the construction of quality is the assumption that there is an entity or essence of *quality* which is knowable, objective and certain truth waiting “out there” to be discovered and described. (p. 93)

“The discourse of quality values and seeks certainty through the application of scientific method that is systematic, rational and objective. At the heart of this discourse is a striving for universality and stability, normalization and standardization, ... the quest for permanent or stable criteria of rationality founded in the desire for objectivism and the belief that we must somehow transcend the limitations to knowing that are the inevitable consequence of our socio-temporal perspective as knowers.” (p. 93)

“The specification of criteria of quality is undertaken by a particular group whose authority to specify comes from various sources, including expert status or political, bureaucratic or managerial position. Production of criteria is a process of construction permeated by social, cultural, political and moral influences. Typically, though, the definition of criteria is treated as a technical process based on the application of disciplinary knowledge and practical experience (or alternatively political, managerial or other types of authority), free of values.”(p. 94)

“Once defined, criteria are then offered *to* others and applied *to* the process or product under consideration.” “Quality is a decontextualized concept.” (p.94)

“The overriding aim is to reduce the complexity and diversity of the products measured and the contexts within which they exist and operate to a limited number of basic measurable criteria which can then be encapsulated in a series of numerical ratings – the dream of modernity.”

The authors go on to argue that this way of thinking is inappropriate precisely because it does not allow for diversity and context, change and uncertainty, pretending to define for all something that, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. In addition, they contend that to correct the present thinking about quality it is not sufficient to

simply reconceptualize the notion of quality to incorporate diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and varied historical contexts; such reconceptualizations are futile (hence the title of their book, “Beyond Quality”), because they still assume universal criteria to define quality. Their preference, instead of accepting the “meta-discourse of quality” is to speak of “meaning making”. Meaning making requires dialogue and *reflexive conversation*, a process very different from specifying quality by “experts” who establish quantifiable criteria against which to measure quality, presumably representing the inherent essence of quality. It leads to many meanings.

The modern view fits very well the way in which the project on indicators of well being for young children was being conducted. As part of that project, a group of “experts”, albeit an inter-institutional and interdisciplinary group, was trying to come up with a set of limited standards or criteria which could be applied to all preschools to see how well the system was doing with respect to achieving something called quality, a central feature of the political discourse of the current government. Intentions were good, linked to accountability and policy and program improvement.

The post-modern view, however, offered an unsettling challenge to what the project was trying to do and to the process it was following, a challenge that I found congenial. It seemed obvious, for instance, that parents and teachers and experts and politicians can have very different, and equally valid, views of quality. But then, if quality is in the eye of the beholder, how can it be captured by a set of indicators pertinent to all or even most contexts? What business did a limited group of people have trying to establish such indicators? Should the concept of quality and the effort to define it in an operational way so that monitoring could be carried out at a national level be abandoned?

The tension between the two views grew because, while recognizing the value of the post-modern critique, I found the meta discourse of quality extremely useful, helping to call attention to something, vague as it might be, that needed attention. And I firmly believed, operating from an NGO, that the public should be entitled to know, at a general as well as local level, whether the government is carrying through on its educational proposals. I also felt the need to try and link discussions at a local level with discussions at a national level. While fostering local, contextualized discussion (which can contain a great deal of diversity of opinion related to local differences in context and/or which can be marked by a narrow and imposed version of the one accepted truth) it also seemed valid to foster informed national discussion, something that the post-modern view appears to downplay if not set aside.

The challenge, it seemed was not to discard out of hand the notion of quality but to see whether ways could be found to reconcile the seeming contradiction between the construction of an instrument to measure quality, applicable in a variety of contexts and the post-modern idea that there are multiple and highly contextualized definitions of quality that need to be taken into account?

The search for quality in the Mexican Context

When the current Mexican government arrived, replacing the party that had been in power for over 70 years, their discourse placed strong emphasis on quality and equity

in education. It also emphasized the importance of transparency and public accounting. However, a look at reporting systems revealed that the only indicators used to monitor and report on early education were indicators of coverage. Indicators of quality were absent. This motivated the recently-formed inter-sectorial and inter-disciplinary group to include in its indicators project a working group on the quality of early education and care.¹ This group of experts began by examining the literature to determine what should be included in a definition of the quality of early education. They also drew on their personal experiences. Discussion focused on characteristics that it was thought had the strongest relationship to the learning and development of young children, as defined by the system.² The first result of the group's deliberations was to identify "dimensions" of quality and to define a set of indicators that characterized each dimension. A next step was to try and operationalize the indicators by creating instruments that could be used to monitor quality at the national level (and possibly at local levels as well). As observed above, the exercise was firmly planted within a modernist tradition.

One result of the project deliberations was to create a scale of preschool quality with, in its first version, approximately 50 items organized in four dimensions of quality: the availability and use of resources, educational management, the educational process and the relation of preschools with families and communities. A research project was set up to try out the scale in 40 very diverse preschools (Martínez, Linares and Myers 2003). A revised version of the scale was then adopted as part of an evaluation of a national evaluation of the Schools of Quality program, still in progress.

But the main question for this presentation is "What was done to moderate, if not eliminate, the tensions and seeming contradictions between applying a modern view and a post-modern view to quality." The answer lies in adjustments made to the processes of constructing, applying, interpreting and utilizing the scale and its resultant indicators. The following seem worthy of note:

Construction

1. In the process of construction, additional "stakeholders" were sought out. More people, with different views were involved in dialogue leading to definition. The process of negotiation and dialogue in the creation of the instrument was strengthened. Indeed, the process of design and construction of indicators and instruments became more important than the resulting instrument. Those involved began to look at quality in a different light because of their participation. For instance, the idea that the center of gravity of quality should be resources and management began to shift toward examination of the educational process. The standard discourse began to change. For example, the idea of "inspection" which had begun to shift

¹ The intersectorial group, coordinated by the Department of Planning, Programming and Budgets of the Secretariat of Education (SEP) but included participants from other divisions of the SEP, from the Family Welfare organization, the Secretariat of Health, universities, non-governmental organizations, international organizations (UNICEF and UNESCO) and, from time to time, other organizations such as the National Census Institute and the Population Council.

² Another working group, obviously relevant to the discussion and definition of quality, was charged with trying to define indicators of early childhood development. That group has tried to define "competencies". But that is another story and I will focus here on characteristics of institutions that have been created to try and foster learning and development rather than on learning or developmental outcomes.

toward “supervision” took still another conceptual turn toward “accompaniment.”

2. The scale included items that were important to different groups even though complete agreement was not reached. For instance, including people from the health sector led to a set of items that educators did not necessarily think of as part of the definition of quality from their more limited perspective. Including parents led to particular items regarding communication and participation that were not part of the original thinking. Including a wide variety of items moderates a more simplistic approach to defining quality in terms of one or two indicators thought by some to be key (for instance the number of children per adult).
3. Values were made explicit. The idea was accepted that whatever the product of negotiation and debate, an instrument still represents a particular posture. For instance, the scale values a constructionist view of learning and the “active child.” This posture resulted not only from familiarity with the Mexican curriculum and from a multi-national analysis of curricula (Peralta, 2000) but also from a discussion of the world we live in and the kind of country that is desired. In a dynamic and constantly changing world and in a world that functions democratically and respects diversity, children “should be” dynamic, informed, critical, participatory, creative, and tolerant. This implies schools and educational processes that foster these qualities.
4. The instrument has not been viewed as a final product. Indeed, it is now in a fifth version and continues to undergo revision.
5. The instrument itself was left open, including blank items at the end that sub-systems and local schools can use to add areas thought to be pertinent to their own situation but not included in the scale.

Application

6. In application, there are spaces for comments which the individual evaluator can make about why a particular level of quality has been selected for each particular item. Doubts and contingent observations can be recorded.
7. The scale is seen as one source of “evidence” to be used when discussing quality. Other sources include results of interviews or discussions with parents and children, photographs and teacher’s dairies.

Interpretation and use

8. Up to now, emphasis has been placed on the use of results for discussion and reflection, not for certification. Although the scale has been established in such a way that it is hoped all schools will meet some minimum conditions, no “standard” has been created that schools are required to meet.
9. In the Schools of Quality project, application has been linked to a process of accompanying the participating schools. Results are presented in a written

report to schools and used as a basis for discussing 1) whether these results seem acceptable or not (there is no one truth), and 2) what might be done in the short and medium term to make changes that would improve the quality of preschool education.

Concluding observations

In closing, several observations:

1. The process of constructing the scale has been more important than the scale itself; its insertion in “the system” as part of an evaluation of a major program has fostered discussions that had not occurred previously.
2. That process has led to a much broader view of quality than that which previously guided discussions, linked narrowly on one hand to children’s performance, or on the other hand, to resources and management. It has helped restore discussions of how to define and monitor the quality of the educational process within the system.
3. Several examples of local adaptation and use of the scale have appeared. There is a move toward incorporating it as one component in a system of diagnosis and self-evaluation by individual preschools.
4. The scale and indicators have not yet been incorporated into a continuous national monitoring process (except for the Schools of Quality program) or system of indicators; it remains to be seen whether that will happen and, above all, if it does happen, how the scale of quality will be applied and how resulting indicators will be used and interpreted.

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