

Boris Problematizes Quality Assurance

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Introduction

This paper is the story of Boris and the way that as a small Aboriginal child, he reveals the Australian state's assurance of quality in child care delivery as an object working me as an early childhood services expert, as much as I work it. Boris attended two institutions subject to my pastoral care as an early childhood professional. These were quite different. On the one hand, a well-stocked and smoothly functioning pre-school facility, and on the other, a child care centre run by an Aboriginal organisation which struggled to meet standard quality bench marks, eliciting a worried concern from my professional self. Boris offered a powerful challenge to my taken for granted views of 'quality assurance' dissolving it before my eyes in an exemplary moment of what, from reading Foucault, I have learned to see as "problematization".

This entity Quality Assurance was 'born' and quickly expanded and intensified its reach in the domain of childcare, across the time period in which my professional persona also expanded and intensified. In order to describe the impact Boris had, I first do most of my thinking through telling a story of my emerging as 'a professional' working in the area of childcare provision, and my growing familiarity with quality assurance as an object of governance. I see now that in actuality the figure of my professional persona as an 'expert' and the entity quality assurance that I as an expert know through and with, grew and matured together.

I foreground Foucault's notion of problematization which Carol Bacchi (2012) suggests direct attention to the heterogeneous politics which shape lives, and "alerts researchers to their unavoidable participation in these relations" (p.1). I examine "quality assurance" as problematization and therefore attempt to understand how it came to be accepted in childcare centres in Australia and treated as a key characteristic of early childhood education and care (ECEC). I attempt to access the problematizations which govern educators and children in ECEC, and me. I end the story of the growing mutual intimacy of quality assurance as an object of governance and the figure of the knowing expert (me), with the story of Boris.

Quality Assurance comes to be 'real', and I become an 'expert'

Problematization puts into question accepted truths about what is real. By studying the practices, political structures and ethical forces which establish a "problem", that process of becoming real comes to be more noticeable and "opens up for examination the complex relations that produced it and the effects of its operation" (Bacchi, 2012, p.2). Additionally,

“Foucault selects his sites – his ‘problematizing moments’ – by identifying times and places where he detects important shifts in practice.” (Bacchi, 2012, p.2). Here, I am writing about two shifts in practice regarding the ascendance within the field of educational policy and governance of quality assurance and assessment. I had a professional connection with quality assurance at the time these two shifts in practice emerged.

From the early 1970’s, the Whitlam Labor Government committed to a range of reforms including, those for women and childcare. However, in the 1980’s, feminist and early childhood care and education advocates lobbied the Australian government for more accessible, affordable and *high quality* childcare for all families on the basis that access to child care arrangements was (and remains) a major barrier to the participation of women in the workforce (Harrington, 2014). From 1984, the Hawke Labor government introduced Child Care Subsidies which continue to exist in various forms (Massanauskas & Philip, 2007; Hawke, 1987). In 1990, Labor introduced the world’s first *compulsory* Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS), (Rowe, Tainton & Taylor, 2006) into Australia’s childcare industry and extended payment of the Commonwealth Child Care Benefit to private, for-profit childcare. This was much to the chagrin of the community not-for-profit sector which objected strenuously to the private sector receiving Government funds. At the heart of the QIAS was improvement of quality care through the introduction of standards for all childcare centres in Australia. Even so, the actual interpretation of high quality was left to people like me – a tertiary teacher in early childhood education.

When I was first appointed in 1990 by the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) as a reviewer in the pilot project of the QIAS, I was chuffed. I had already been working in early childhood centres in Australia for 10 years, had earlier experience of working with children on a Kibbutz in Israel and in London, and was now working providing professional development and resources to other childcare workers and organisations. I was impressed by the notion that a national system of improvement and accreditation would lift the standard of care and education offered to children, believed the standards were measurable, was “forthright that the childcare industry in Australia required an external control mechanism if quality care was to be consistent across centres” (Abbey, 2001, pp.8-9); and I was excited to be personally involved.

So along with a small group of other people from across the country, I was trained in how and what to assess in a childcare service for the 52 principles of quality and I felt I was expert enough to do just that. I used the documentation to decide if each target centre would be worthy to be ‘accredited’. Ironically, I was sent to visit centres in urban and regional South Australia rather than the Northern Territory, where I would likely know most of the centres under review. This ensured I showed no bias, did not upset staff, or jeopardise longer-term working relationships if my decision about the quality of their care did not go in their favour.

I remember the feeling of being in control when I visited the centres; and recall in particular the nervous staff in a childcare service in Port Augusta, South Australia. It caused great excitement when I assessed their ‘babies room’ as being at a higher level than the centre had in its self-assessment. I still remember the feeling of warmth, comfort and order in that room which I thought were indicators of high quality relationships with children and respect for them, and of good planning. The educators and I referred together to the new (pilot) accreditation documentation, compared their self-assessment to my own, and discussed my ultimate decision and advice about their practice. We were literally working off the same pages, and I felt I was making a contribution to quality childcare in Australia. Many years later, in the Aboriginal childcare centre, I realise that my position has shifted to become that of a judging observer, and Boris will help me see that good relationships and respect can occur in many ways.

Quality Assurance as security for the future

Another ‘problematization moment’ that acted for me as an entry point (Bacchi, 2012) to access and reflect on quality assurance as an object of governance occurred with the emergence of neuroscience in early childhood care and education. Research by neuroscientists highlighted the critical importance of the early years to brain development and to the future. Brain research linked the familiar notions of development and wellbeing to quality childcare and preschool as sound economic investments for the future, “pre-empting and resolving problems early on” (Oberklaid, 2007, pp.8-11) and saving governments money in areas of education, law enforcement, health etc. Oberklaid and others identified problems arising in adults that have their roots in early childhood: mental health; family violence and anti-social behaviour; crime; poor literacy; chronic unemployment and welfare dependency; substance abuse; obesity; cardiovascular disease and diabetes. According to Oberklaid (2012),

Any adversity that impacts on the parents or caregivers has the potential to have a negative impact on brain development in the young child and therefore to act as a risk factor for the health and development of the child (p.19).

Indeed, “by the second grade ... gaps in test scores across socioeconomic groups are stable by age, suggesting that later schooling has little effect in reducing or widening the gap that appears before students enter school (Heckman, 2006, p.4).

Twenty years after the first quality assurance and improvement system for childcare centres, the Federal government responded to the argument that high quality early childhood education benefits all children, and delivers economic benefits in the future, by offering government funding to preschool education as an entitlement for all Australian four year olds (Penn, 2011, pp.1-16). Until this time, the provision of early childhood (preschool) education in Australia was the sole responsibility of state and territory governments. Now under the new Education and Care Services National Law, there is commitment to collaborative national approach through the National Quality Framework, including assessment and rating against National Quality Standards. And, now the relevant regulatory authority in each state and territory undertakes the assessment and rating process. Furthermore, the ratings must be displayed by each service and are published on the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority and MyChild websites.

Whilst Early Childhood Education and Care advocates had espoused for years the value of ‘high quality’ early childhood experiences, it was a stroke of genius in relation to getting the attention of government to make direct links to fiscal policy. Childhood emerges as a significant public problem and is viewed in relation to what dire economic consequences might occur in the future without the assurance of high quality care – the nature of which is defined by government - and quality assurance is an intervention against economic insecurity. Bacchi (2012) refers to Walters’ identification of “security as a dominant motif in national and international governance” (p.5). Similarly, Lakoff and Collier (2010) write of the central tool of imaginative enactment in anticipating the occurrence of security interventions “as a way to generate knowledge about current needs in the face of future events” (p.259). Whilst they write of critical infrastructure protection against multiple threats such as nuclear attack and natural disasters; in this case, young children are identified as vulnerable, especially in the domains of cognition and in terms of emotional regulation for the future, particularly for Indigenous children. Quality childcare and education is vital in securing intervention and saving money in the long term for government; and a new accreditation system is enacted to mitigate potential catastrophe: that is one side of the coin which is quality assurance, but of course there’s also an underside. My long promised story of Boris is what reveals this underside.

A new journey for me and for Quality Assurance

Twenty years on, still working in early childhood education and care, I found myself visiting an Indigenous community in the Northern Territory again doing work based on quality care and education, and quality assurance. This time, however, I began to wonder about the strange political technology that now seems to be doing something different than what I first imagined.

I visited both the childcare centre and the preschool in an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. Over a two year period, I delivered Certificate III in Children's Services training to Indigenous staff in the childcare centre, and next door at the preschool, worked with the non-Indigenous teacher on a project to build the literacy and numeracy of the Indigenous children in readiness for school. This period of time coincided with the introduction of the National Quality Framework for early childhood and the 'Belonging, Being and Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework for Australia' (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p.1-50) which is "built around a number of key concepts and principles which require educators to use particular understandings and practices effectively to achieve the desired outcomes" (p.2). The Framework includes specific commitment to closing the gap in educational achievements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

It is significant to mention here that the childcare centre I visited is one of those across Australia funded under special budget arrangements which deliver child care, early learning and outside school hours care to predominantly Indigenous children in rural and remote areas where it might not otherwise be financially viable. These services, at the time of writing, were exempted from meeting the national quality standards. Nevertheless, quality care and education and quality assurance already 'existed' in the national training packages I was utilising. I was convinced that, the preschool teacher, Aboriginal educators and I were all thinking about 'high quality' as we journeyed together, albeit, as I was to discover, in very different ways. As Bacchi (2012, p.5) points out, such 'thinking' about high quality is "a set of practices in its own right."

When I first meet Boris (4 years old) at preschool, he is disruptive and uninterested, despite the fact that there are many rich, new resources and equipment provided. He does not stay long at any one of the prearranged table activities and only reluctantly performs the daily hair combing and teeth cleaning routines. When the non-Indigenous preschool teacher and I 'test' his word or number recognition, he is disengaged and all but rolls his eyes at the questions. He is perceived to be performing at below anticipated levels. I caught his full attention once when I read to a small group a book of a 'dreamtime' story written by a local author (Boris immediately asked for it to be read again).

In the childcare centre, unlike the cosy order for the babies which so impressed me in South Australia all those years ago, the children and adults are noisy, chaotic and disorganised (Hazard, 2013, pp. 3-8). But for Boris, in this setting, there is a transformation. Here the Indigenous staff are his caring extended family. He plays for long periods on the bicycle, inviting and helping other younger children to ride on the back (especially, I later learn, targeting those children to whom he is directly related). He draws pictures of his fishing trip with his father and uncles from the weekend and writes his name proficiently across the page. He responds proudly when an adult asks him to tell me his totem. He watches the cars going past the centre and conducts a running commentary on the people inside ("That's my cousin"). He is involved in detailed and serious discussion with the adults, who also consult him for information ("who is that person who came to your house last night?"; "where has Joseph gone?"). All of this occurring in a setting that seems to me sparse and uninspiring.

Unlike the preschool, the childcare centre is under-resourced, much of the equipment is broken and books torn. The main room is for the most part empty until the tables are dragged to the middle of the room for meals. Here I see the adults and children ‘herding’, moving together from one activity to another; I hear adults calling out to the children loudly if something is getting out of hand. And yet, I am also seeing happy, relaxed, connected and ‘normal’ children and adults. When I refer to the nascent Early Years Learning Framework, I see in Boris a child who has a strong sense of identity and wellbeing; a child connected with and contributing to his world; a confident and involved learner; and an effective communicator. I am without a doubt witnessing a way to ‘do’ quality that is a long way from my previous experience of what constitutes quality childcare. Everything is unfamiliar and disconcerting. Boris and his teachers are demonstrating a particular sort of (Aboriginal) quality assurance, that is clearly viable, but which undoes some of my assumptions about formal education and my own professional knowledge and any notion I had of being an expert able to interpret quality.

Boris problematizes Quality Assurance

Carol Bacchi (2012) presents problematization in this way:

Problematization doesn't mean the representation of a pre-existent object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn't exist. It denotes the set of discursive or non-discursive practices that makes something enter the play of the true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought (pp.1-8).

In my initial experience of ‘administering’ decisions about the status of quality in a number of childcare centres, I considered myself expert and was treated accordingly. I understood (even more than the people in their own centre) what quality care they were offering, and guided them towards a “true”, common end, “quality”. I knew that all the other people trained as assessors were making more or less the same decisions as I was as they visited centres across the country.

But in my most recent experience, things are different. I am still essentially an administrator for the government but I am confronted with the strangeness of ‘quality’. My power to decipher ‘quality’ is disrupted; here, I am the judging observer. I am now wary of the technology of the accreditation document. I am no longer confident of my own ability to administer it, and especially uncertain about the implementation at the local level. Rather than starting with specifications of what quality looks like, and checking for their existence in this setting, I am realising that here I do not recognise what I am seeing. Indeed, Boris helps me to realise I do not even know what I am looking for.

If I consciously or unconsciously imagined that I had the same authority as when I first visited centres for the purpose of accreditation, I am quickly aware that it is not the case now. When I visited the childcare centre on the community, I was the one being reassured by the educators and by Boris that quality care and education existed. The Aboriginal staff did not independently consult the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (and indeed, were not yet obliged to as a service provider receiving budget based funding). Nor did they necessarily even think about quality assurance as an object of governance, but they were able to identify the importance of relationships, connectedness, identity and wellbeing as most important for the children and themselves and to function together in the childcare centre accordingly.

Boris and the Aboriginal teachers, without even thinking about, or needing to justify quality care and education in their childcare service, exposed uncertainties and complexities of quality assurance that might have otherwise been invisible, dismissed or ignored by me. Boris, by

clearly “belonging”, “being” and “becoming” alongside other children and adults within a space that I might have regarded as not meeting quality standards, resisted a “true” understanding of quality assurance that I had come to take for granted, and thereby made quality assurance, as an object of governance, more noticeable.

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