

Quality, Autonomy and the Profession

Author:

Mathias Urban

University of East London

Cass School of Education and Communities

m.urban@uel.ac.uk

Completion date:

March 2005

Quality, Autonomy and the Profession

Keynote Address to the CECDE International Conference on
'Questions of Quality'

23rd – 25th September 2004,
Dublin Castle, Dublin, Ireland

Dr. Mathias Urban

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg
Fachbereich Erziehungswissenschaften, Institut für Pädagogik
Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Franckeplatz 1, Haus 4
D-06099 Halle / Saale
Germany

Phone: +49 345 5523820

E-mail: urban@paedagogik.uni-halle.de

Web site: www.urban-uni-halle.de

Abstract:

Questions of 'quality' of pre- and out of school-provisions for children and their families have been raised increasingly in all modern societies since the early nineties. The appropriateness of pedagogical frameworks and approaches have not been the only issues in the debate. Other strands, for instance, have been focussing on adequate investments or the quality of management and leadership in the system. Constantly, from any of these (and other) possible perspectives on 'quality', high expectations and demands for the profession have been expressed. In Germany, the 'National Quality Initiative' (1999 – 2003) has undertaken a first attempt to develop quality criteria and evaluation procedures for pre- and out of school settings from a strictly professional perspective for the whole system in a federal country. Meanwhile – following PISA – general questions of 'quality' are more and more linked to the introduction of formal pre-school curricula. Considering international experiences, I will argue that we should be cautious and critical whether the increase of formal regulation can lead to the desirable outcome: the development of an autonomous profession for the early years sector.

I. Introduction

There is a 'wind of change' coming up in Early Childhood Education and Care in so many places of Europe today. Wouldn't it be great, if we all could join forces to make it a change for the better?

This afternoon, I would like to share with you some experiences gained mainly from our research on profession and curriculum development, and from the 'National Quality Initiative' in Germany. I want to start with a look at the terminology of quality that we all use so frequently. I shall then present some aspects of our work in the 'National Quality Initiative'. As a third step, I want to look at the crossroads of pedagogical cultures that we are facing now in modern societies. This leads to questions of professional challenges - and I shall conclude with an outlook to the new horizons of quality development.

Quality, Autonomy and the Profession

- Notions of Quality
- The German Experience (1):
Public Discourses and the National Quality Initiative
- The German Experience (2):
Pedagogical Cultures between Reggio and PISA
- Ireland's catching up:
Professional Challenges under Conditions of Change
- Frameworks and Horizons:
The Bermuda Quality Triangle

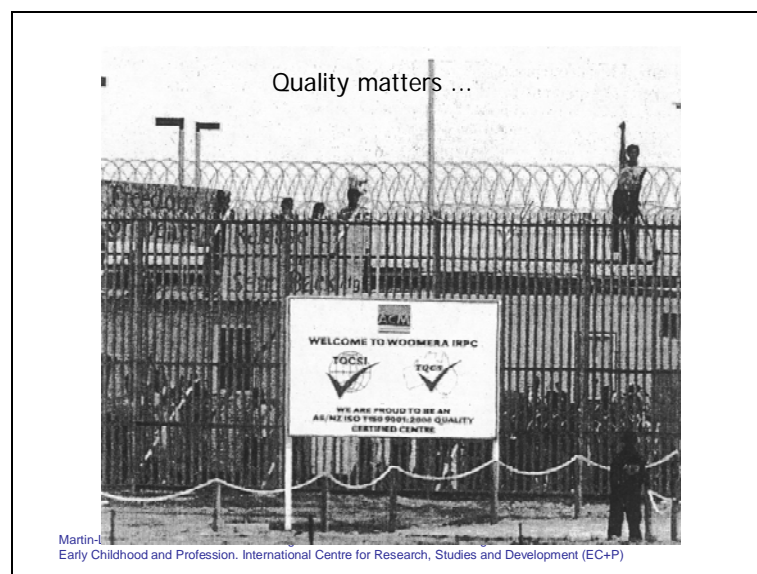
Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

II. Notions of Quality

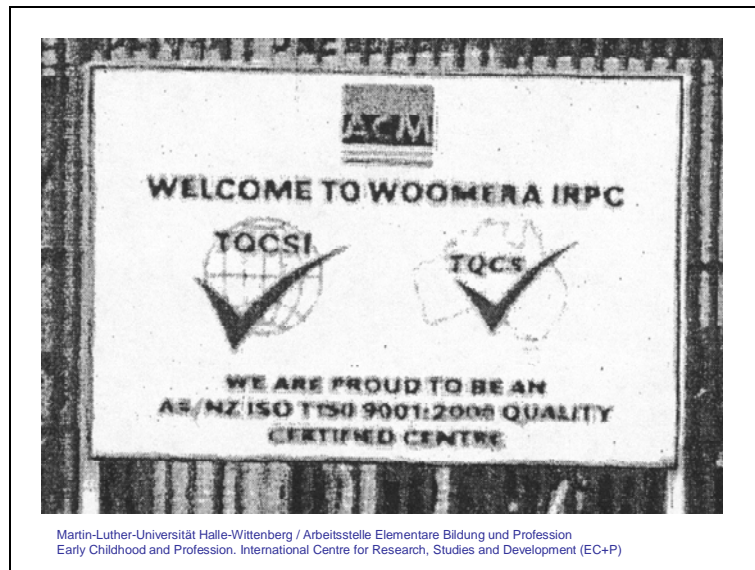
In most modern societies, questions of 'quality' of publicly funded services for children have been an issue of the professional and political debate since the early nineties of the last century. Several strands have emerged in the discourse, attempting to determine the way we look at early childhood institutions and how we value them from different perspectives. It does make a difference, whether we choose a political, pedagogical or even an economic approach to describe the tasks of early childhood education. There might be even more diversity: If we choose a pedagogical perspec-

tive - probably most of us would do so - we still need to explain whether our focus is on children or practitioners, on learning or teaching or even on the assessment itself.

Any of these possible approaches comes with an underlying assumption of 'quality', although it is not always clear what hides behind this term. If we follow the logic of ISO 9000 for instance, 'quality' is just "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service ..." (ISO 9004-2 p.9).



The picture above is a photo many of you will remember from the media about two years ago. It shows the fence of an Australian prison camp for illegal immigrants from Afghanistan. People can be seen, as they climb the fence, trying to get over it or at least trying to get a glance of the world behind the barbed wire. Nothing special in times where refugees are a common global phenomenon - until we zoom a little bit closer. Then we can learn that they are "proud to be an ISO 9001:2000 Quality Certified Centre"!



With this arbitrary approach, any institution or service can be connected to the terminology of 'quality'. If we agree that there are at least some differences between different 'quality'-institutions, such as prison camps or day care centres, we need a more detailed description of what we mean when we talk about 'quality'.

In the following I will argue that the reason for the emerging debate on 'quality' of early childhood education and care is closely linked to development of the early years' profession. With the increasing division of labour in all modern societies, 'education' of young children has turned into a profession itself. The responsibility for bringing up children has been successively extended from the family domain to public institutions. And whenever a common social practice - any social practice - is organized in a vocational way, the professionals need to legitimate what they do and why they might do it any better than everyone else did before. And so, in common speech, 'quality' turns out to be a synonym for 'good' or even 'best' practice.

But how can we tell what might be 'good', 'better' or more or less adequate, regarding our provisions, services and institutions for young children and their families? Looking back at the discourse on 'quality' in the last decades, we can identify three main strands. Each of them leads to a distinct practice of "defining, assessing and supporting" quality.

Possible notions of “quality”

- relying on scientific expertise
- recognizing multiple perspectives
- re-contextualizing “quality”

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

1. Definition of adequate conditions and practice is regarded as a task for educational science. This is closely related to the development of ‘standards’ and to attempts of rating or even ‘measuring’ quality.

In many countries of the world – including Germany – this approach has been linked to the application of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). The work of Thelma Harms and Richard Clifford has been a landmark in the emerging debate on quality. For the first time, it seemed, it was possible to ‘frame’ the woolly debate and to provide reliable data, gained from a clear perspective on the early years’ institution.

possible notions of “quality” (1)

- relying on scientific expertise:
 - Important approach to developing professional standards
 - Possibility to frame the debate and to provide data
 - Impacts political decisions until today (EPPE)

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

Until today, the approach serves as a basis for large scale studies, e.g. the EPPE-project in the UK which has an enormous impact in a national political context.

Of course, some authors have been very critical about the usefulness of the ECERS-approach. Elsewhere I have been arguing against an unreflected application of any method, tool or instrument. So, let us have a look at some pitfalls. Linking the debate to the profession, it is important to understand, that the dangers do not come from the instrument but from the players.

The temptation of producing data, of getting a hand on what is really going on in social practice, can easily veil the difference between 'rating' and 'measuring'. As 'rating' can only be done from a distinct subjective perspective, it is necessarily tied to a specific set of values, expectations and images that frame the perception of the one who does the rating. To 'measure', on the other hand, implies a much more objective description of facts and findings that are unaffected by personal influences – which of course can never be the case in a complex social context like education and care.

Whenever research findings are presented as being the truth or a reflection of reality, we should be very clear in asking whose truth and whose reality we are talking about.

The widespread confusion between the concepts of 'rating' and 'measuring' leads to another pitfall: 'measuring'-approaches regularly require scientific expertise, which is usually not ascribed to early years' practitioners. We must be aware there is a danger of solidifying hierarchies in the field, as practitioners remain objects of research. As a result, the 'quality-experts' are clearly distinguished from the pedagogues.

possible notions of "quality" (1)

- **relying on scientific expertise:**
(possible pitfalls)
 - the temptation of producing data may veil the difference between 'rating' and 'measuring'
 - increasing demand for 'quality'-experts
 - hierarchies and dependencies may be strengthened
 - practitioners remain objects of research

2. A second main strand in the discourse relates to 'quality' as a relativistic construct, which depends on a variety of perspectives. This regularly includes users and practitioners, sometimes representatives of the local community or service-providers. In most cases, parents are taken as "users" of the services. Children's views have scarcely been recognised. In the US, Lilian Katz has been first to introduce a multi-perspective view on 'quality' in early year's settings.

From a democratic point of view, this approach emphasizes the necessity of dialogue and negotiation between partners with equal rights. This is the focus of an early publication edited by Peter Moss and Alan Pence (1994 ed.) who present 'new approaches to defining quality'. In Germany, a multi-perspective approach to defining and developing quality has been introduced by our research-group in the mid nineties. The concept of 'dialogic quality development' (Kronberger Kreis 1998) has since been very influential for the further progression of the 'quality-debate' in Germany. It was – among others - one of the impulses for the launch of the 'National Quality Initiative'. I will report about this endeavour later.

possible notions of "quality" (2)

- recognizing multiple perspectives:
 - "quality" regarded as a relativistic construct
 - negotiation and dialogue between partners with equal rights

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

The recognition of different groups of 'stakeholders', who are likely to have very different views on what is good or adequate in an early childhood setting, has practical consequences: for how we define quality criteria as well as for the decisions we make to alter, develop and improve the services. As a matter of fact, complexity will increase. What answers will we get to our questions of quality, when we ask 3 year old Kevin? What if we ask Maneesha, who came from Afghanistan with her daughter af-

ter she had been forced to give up her work as a pediatricist in a Kabul Hospital and now makes a living in Berlin, sweeping the floors of a McDonald's restaurant? Talking to staff members might bring up a different view on what is important, than talking to the head teacher of the local primary school. What, if the centre is funded by the local authority? What kind of efficiency might then be regarded as 'excellent'? Can you imagine a Kindergarten which is the only remaining part of the social infrastructure in small village in a rural area? Would we have the same criteria as for the centre in Berlin?

So we might concede, that multi-perspective approaches to defining 'quality' can get us closer to life's reality, which seldom comes well arranged and sorted. With a clear set of problems, waiting to be handled step by step. No, the undeniable complexity of any early childhood setting very often appears to be complete mess!

This leads to a first preview to the professional tasks, that I promised you to talk about later. Professionals in social and educational practice are no technicians. Or as Donald Schön (1984) put it: "We are not solving problems, we are managing messes!"

possible notions of "quality" (2)

- recognizing multiple perspectives
(as a professional task):

**"We are not solving problems,
we are managing messes"**
(Donald E. Schön)

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

But again let's have a look at some pitfalls of this approach to defining and developing 'quality'.

The first is a consequence of hyper-complexity and is closely related to increasing the mess: If we can't rely on a shared framework, that helps to structure and orient

our perceptions, our comprehension and the resulting action, we are most likely to become arbitrary. There can be no development without reference and values. Or, in simplified terms: when anything goes – nothing will happen.

Another pitfall of the multi-perspective approach comes from the wish to reduce complexity, too. It is the temptation to get hold of the every day chaos. The recognition of various stakeholders, pursuing various interests has emphasized economic and technologic rationalization in the field. What would that mean?

Along with the arising of 'quality management' procedures (such as Total Quality Management 'TQM' or procedures linked to ISO 9000), parents have transmuted into 'customers' and the rules of the market have begun to determine the development of services - at least in my country in the 1990's.

possible notions of "quality" (2)

- recognizing multiple perspectives:
(possible pitfalls)
 - If 'anything goes' – nothing will happen!
 - emphasizes economic and technologic rationalization
 - "users" (parents) regarded as "customers"
 - concentrates on "managing" instead of "developing" quality

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

3. While both of the approaches mentioned above turned out to be more and more inadequate for description as well as for development of a highly complex arena like an early childhood setting, some authors (Woodhead 1996, Dahlberg / Moss 1999 / OECD 2001) have fundamentally questioned the relevance of a decontextualized terminology of 'quality' at all. From their point of view, concepts of 'quality' are then "... deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education" (OECD 2001, 63) in a certain social context. An Early childhood setting, then, might no longer be seen as "customer-orientated service" but 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.” (Dahlberg / Moss 1999, 7).

We must come back to the relevance of this perspective later, when we take a look at the professional challenges that emerge with such a shift from the concept of ‘service’ to the wider concept of ‘social institution’.

possible notions of “quality” (3)

- re-contextualizing “quality”:
 - early childhood settings as “arenas” or “forums in a civil society ...”
 - question: what are the underlying assumptions about childhood and education in a certain social context?
 - developing “quality” as a process of “meaning-making”
 - diversity is appreciated

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

Let me try to summarize the thoughts and glances of this introduction. What are early childhood institutions all about?

At first sight, we might say, it’s all about buildings and playgrounds, chairs and tables, toys and toilets, play dough, books, paper, crayons and so on. Things that we can touch, label and calculate.

If we step back and go to a meta-level of description, we would talk about organizational aspects like group-size and staff-ratio, but also about qualifications, programs, funding and outcomes.

But then there are people, children and adults, boys and girls, women (and a few men), laypersons and professionals, who are involved in all kind of relevant action. Who constantly gather and re-arrange in different groups, relating to one another in a specific place and time (or context) which we call setting. They are pursuing various interests and are continuously forming patterns which tend to be chaotic, as they cannot be predicted.

What are Early Childhood Institutions?

- Fields of social and cultural interaction...
- Manifest social co-constructions...
- Their 'quality' is related to attitudes and values,
- to power-relations and social justice

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

Early childhood institutions are fields of social and cultural interaction. They are manifest social co-constructions. 'Quality' then becomes a question of attitudes and values. It also becomes a question of power-relations and of social justice:

- Which questions do we allow to be raised, which ones do we ignore?
- Whose perspectives do we take into account, whose do we exclude?
- What kind of knowledge and whose expertise and experience do we acknowledge as being relevant?

These are the core-questions of quality!

III. The German Experience (1): Public Discourses and the National Quality Initiative

I come to my second part and invite you to share with me some experiences from the German discourse on early childhood education and some insights from the first attempt ever, to develop quality-criteria and assessment and evaluation procedures for the whole system of early education in Germany – the National Quality Initiative.

In Germany, like in most European countries, there is a long tradition of institutional education and care for young children. Unlike some other countries, there is long tradition of integrating 'care' and 'education' in the centres as well. Moreover, Friedrich Froebel's 19th century concept of the early childhood institution as a *Kindergarten*

was clearly distinguished from the idea of early schooling. The *Kindergarten* was meant to be a social institution, committed to the rights and needs of young children and to the development of a democratic society. More than that, it was meant to be a learning space for children and professionals at the same time. Needless to say, this was one of the reasons for the Prussian government to ban Froebel's Kindergarten after the failure of the 1848 revolution and force many well trained educators into emigration. In the following 150 years (I am making it short), 'care' and 'education' have always been two guiding concepts for any kind of early childhood setting in Germany. Yet, until today, the meaning of these concepts – and the relation between them in every day's practice - is strangely unclear. Although early childhood institutions are socially constructed, as authors like Dahlberg (1999), Canella (1997) – and others - have been pointing out, the crucial question has scarcely been an issue in the public debate:

What do we, be it as citizens, as policy makers, as parents and last but not least as professionals, think, early childhood institutions are for?

Today, we can determine the lack of public interest and debate as one major obstacle for an established professionalism in our early years' sector.

With this experience, I want to strongly encourage our Irish hosts to continue to systematically organize discourses about early childhood education. To pursue an approach like 'Talking about Quality' – and to widen it to the involvement of a broader public – is essential for a sustainable success of any quality initiative.

In Germany, the lack of public discourse has intensified many contradictions in the field of Early Childhood Education. Due to a diversity of political responsibilities, service providers and pedagogical approaches in our federal society, there has never been a consensus about a shared framework or a curriculum for early childhood education and care on a national level.

In January 2000, the federal government launched the 'National Quality Initiative', a nation-wide project consortium, which - for the first time - was to develop quality indicators in a joint research venture across the system.

The 'National Quality Initiative' is funded by the Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, state ("Länder") Ministries and by municipal and non-governmental service providers. It comprises 5 individual research projects:

The German Experience (1): Public Discourses and the "National Quality Initiative"

- Nation-wide project consortium, funded by Federal Government, state ("Länder") Ministries, municipal and non-governmental service providers
- comprises 5 individual projects:
 - projects I + II quality indicators for work with children aged 0 – 3 / 3 – 6 (Tietze et al.)
 - project III school-aged children (Straetz et al.)
 - project IV quality indicators to a situation-based approach to pedagogy (Preissing / Urban et al.)
 - project V quality indicators for service providers (Fthenakis et al.)

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

Projects I and II were developing quality indicators and practicable assessment procedures for evaluating pedagogical work with children aged birth to three and three to six years, respectively.

Project III was designed to focus on school-age children.

I and my colleagues were involved in *Project IV*, which was to develop quality indicators and evaluation procedures for centres pursuing a contextually appropriate approach to pedagogy, that we refer to as 'Situationsansatz'.

Project V looked at quality indicators for service-providers.

Each of the five individual projects was dedicated to develop quality indicators and evaluation procedures for a specific aspect of the system of early childhood and out-of-school services. I shall speak mainly about our part of the National Quality Initiative (*Project IV*), because it is closely related to the issues of shared conceptual frameworks that we are discussing during this conference.

Other than most of the projects our work in project IV of the National Quality Initiative did not relate to a specific age group, but to a conceptual framework, supposing that any attempt to negotiate the appropriateness of the practice in any early childhood

setting requires a shared reference frame between the participants. This includes the researchers' duty to unfold and explain their own assumptions and values.

The so called 'Situationsansatz' is a pedagogical framework broadly accepted for pedagogical work in German early childhood centres. It aims to foster children's autonomy, solidarity and competencies in real-life situations. It has its roots in the work of Paolo Freire and the curriculum theory of Shaul B. Robinson. It relates strongly to the concept of 'generative themes'. So, in more common terms, 'Situationsansatz' can be understood as a "contextually appropriate approach" to early childhood education and care.

There were three guiding questions for the study:

Guiding questions

- What are the core quality indicators of the situation-based approach?
Can they be formulated and substantiated in partnership with experienced practitioners, with parents and other "experts"?
- How can the pedagogical work in early childhood centres be evaluated so as to show that the day-to-day activities reflect the chosen criteria?
- Which evaluation procedures are helpful not only for description of status quo but for the further development?

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

The study involved 17 centres all over Germany with 220 practitioners and, in addition, parents, management, consultants and other experts. With another 18 centres taking part in the external evaluation, we had a total of 35 centres participating in the study.

Participants

- 1st year (identifying core criteria):
 - 17 centres all over the country
 - 220 practitioners
 - parents
 - management
 - consultants and Teacher-Trainers
- 2nd / 3rd year (evaluation):
 - another 18 centres
(total = 35 centres)

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

In a first step, sixteen ‘conceptional principles’ were identified in a one year process of seminars and workshops. Those principles were agreed to be the framework which orients the work of the practitioners in the centres. There are 20 to 25 distinct criteria to each of the 16 conceptional principles. I will only show you an excerpt today. For more detailed information please do not hesitate to contact the research group.

Conceptional principles (situation-based approach)

The pedagogical practice is based on the children's and their families' social and cultural living situations.

...

Pedagogues analyse children's abilities and knowledge and what they want to learn and experience. They open approaches to knowledge and experience in real-life situations.

...

The practice in the child care centre acknowledges the challenges and opportunities of a culturally diverse society.

...

The child care centre is a learning organisation.

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

Obviously, any attempt to evaluate the realisation of these principles must go far beyond answering questions like “yes, we do” or “no, we don’t”. The more important questions focus on the meaning of pedagogical action in a specific context. They strive to understand *why* practitioners do what they do and *what for*. In consequence there will be a broad variety of possible answers to the question *how* the principles

are transferred into the every-day-practice of a specific centre, in its specific social milieu, with a wide range of diverse children and families and under diverse working conditions.

In a second step, we developed a set of methods and procedures for an internal evaluation which focuses on the process of transferring guiding principles into distinct practice. The internal evaluation process consists of the following steps which were inspired by the concept of “Empowerment Evaluation” as first published by David Fettermann et al. (1996):

Evaluation strategy
fostering change and autonomy,
connecting internal and external perspectives

- Structured *self-assessment* of every staff member in a centre
- *Synopsis* of the individual ratings to detect congruencies and differences within a team
- Structured *group discussion* to come to a conjoint rating
- *Setting goals* for Change
- *Taking action*

Each step is clearly documented and can so be relied on for further reflection.

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

The next step introduces an external perspective on the work in the centre. According to the sixteen ‘principles’, an external evaluator collects data by observing practitioners, interviewing parents, discussing specific issues with the whole team and referring to all kinds of documentation in the centre.

After a 2 to 3 day visit in the centre, the evaluator documents his experiences in a written report which is then handed out to the participants. The report is structured according to the 16 principles of the conceptual framework. After a couple of weeks for reading and reflection, the participants rejoin again to discuss the different perspectives. Plans for taking action are developed and responsibilities are determined. Parents are invited to participate in this discussion.

It is obvious, that in this dialogic procedure, the report of the evaluator does not mark the end of the evaluation process. In fact it serves as a data-based external perspec-

tive, but none of the other participants must necessarily agree to the views of the evaluator. Differences are valued as a source for setting goals and fostering change.

Do evaluations work? Do they really support the autonomy of practitioners and - most important - can they initiate development and change?

To get at least a glance of the answers to these questions, we had our project evaluated itself. The information on the impacts of the evaluation process was gathered with a questionnaire and by additional interviews. Here are some excerpts:

All of the queried teams state, that the evaluation process has initiated a continuous process of development in their pedagogical work. They concentrate on individual priorities. 80 % of the heads of the centres and 75% of the staff members state that next steps for quality development have been concretely agreed upon.

Does it work?
Main findings of a meta-evaluation (1)

- All of the queried centres stated, that the evaluation process has initiated a continuous process of development in their pedagogical work. They concentrate on individual priorities.
- 80 % of the heads of the centres and 75% off the staff members state that next steps for quality development have been concretely agreed upon during the process.

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

How do participants (practitioners) estimate the relevance of this approach? Here are some quotes:

Does it work? Main findings of a meta-evaluation (2)

Quotes:

"It means professional development to have a structure, an orientation and to work on shared priorities in the whole team."

"I think, to observe yourself and to reflect on your observation inevitably leads to professionalization ..."

"Professionalization is regarded from outside as well. I think parents, who have participated in the process, have changed their perception of our practice ..."

"It's personal development and it's a development in the profession, too."

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

Altogether the practitioners value the process as an effective way to further quality development.

As a conclusion of these experiences, I want to highlight the value of '*making differences*'. The concept of framing the complexity of educational practice rather than comparing it to objectivistic standards allows the introduction of an external perspective into the evaluation setting. Following this approach, the focus of evaluation is clearly defined, and so are the roles of the participants. An external evaluator will explicitly get involved in the process of valuing and 'meaning-making' in the specific context of an early childhood setting. There is no possibility for her or him to maintain what some still call a 'professional distance'. The researcher becomes part of the evaluation system. His 'findings' cannot pretend to be the only truth or even more objective than other interpretations. Dialogic evaluation raises questions, but does not predict the 'right' answers. Thus, it offers a possibility to make differences and to develop contextually appropriate practice.

To preserve the process and the development from being arbitrary, we find that a shared framework of values and orientations is essential. Within this framework, which is valid for both the practitioners and the researchers, a whole range of appropriate answers to the need of a specific community can be invented. They can not be standardized, as the concept of 'standards' implicitly brings with it the idea of possible perfection, once you meet the standard. But there is a real chance for them to be "good enough" – as Winnicott once put it.

IV. The German Experience (2): Pedagogical Cultures between Reggio and PISA

The National Quality Initiative is mainly a result of the questions of quality that have been raised from the early nineties of the last century. It was a decade when our publicly funded services for children and families were under an enormous pressure, due to budget deficits and cuts in the municipalities, who, in Germany are responsible for the funding of the early years' sector. The extension of services had come to an end. Municipalities, the majority of them in East Germany, began to close their centres and practitioners were confronted with mass redundancy. It was a crossroad for the further development of the system of early childhood education and care. Some even described the situation as standing on the edge of a cliff. Today – in 2004 – we have moved one step further.

We are now facing what I would call a new European competition.

To understand that, is important to look at a major obstacle for professional development: in spite of the Kindergarten being an early German invention, which has been successfully exported to many other countries in the 19th and early 20th century, there is a rather underdeveloped tradition of cross-national exchange and discourse among German practitioners and researchers in the field. By and large, until the mid 90's of the last century, the development of the early years' institutions in Germany has been uncoupled from international discourses and developments.

The German Experience (2):
Pedagogical Cultures between Reggio and PISA

Two obstacles for professional development:

- Lack of public debate (and interest)
- No culture of cross-national and cross-cultural exchange

But things are beginning to change very quickly. Germany's low score in recent international student assessments like PISA has started a lively public debate about the efficiency of the early education system. The socio-economic pressure on the whole education system is increasing, too (cf. Forum Bildung 2002). Public interest is growing! Along with the awakening interest in early education, which is communicated to a broader public through periodicals like *Der Spiegel* or *Die Zeit* comes a growing curiosity about what is going on in Swedish pre-schools, French 'écoles maternelles' and English 'Early Excellence Centres'.

One striking realization for both profession and public was the existence of national pedagogical frameworks or national curricula in many countries like Sweden, Norway, New Zealand and the UK for example. Early Childhood Education being a matter of interest on a national policy level, as *res publica*, that was quite different from the German reality! At least from the perspective of a West German dominated education system.

To understand the background of the recent debate on early childhood curricula in Germany, it is important to see that there is not only a federal system with 16 states, each of them having its own legislation and regulations. The situation is even more complex, because the field of early childhood education and care in Germany today is determined by two completely different traditions – or as I tend to say, by two different pedagogical cultures. More than that, hidden behind the legislation lie different notions of early childhood and of early childhood institutions, which obviously have an impact on what is going on in the centres. Other than in West Germany, where child rearing and education have long been regarded exclusively a private matter, that is, a matter of families and mainly mothers, care and education for young children have been a central state issue in the socialist GDR. Women's workforce was important to build up the economy. The ideology did not allow any differences in the access to the labour market for men and women. This is one reason for the extended provision of day care centres in East Germany. In addition, there was a specific perspective on the task of public education: If you attempt to introduce every citizen to the reality of the socialist society, *you got to get'em young!*

The *Kindergarten* in the former GDR has been part of an integrative education system since the 1960s. A formal, in many ways regulative and controlling curriculum

had to be applied in any centre in the country. Areas of learning, learning goals and outcomes and didactic approaches were precisely defined. Early childhood practitioners were well trained – on the same level as school teachers - and they were able to develop a professional *habitus* as experts for the development of young children.

The German Experience (2): Pedagogical Cultures between Reggio and PISA	
West (until today):	East (until 1990):
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Child care and early education as a private matter• No ECEC-Curriculum (now: first attempts in several of the 16 „Länder“)• Inadequate Provision (especially 0 -3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Care and early education as a central state matter• Integrative education system since the 1960's• National Curriculum for 0-3 and 3-6
<small>Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)</small>	

It is obvious: whenever *curriculum* is meant as a *canon* or catalogue of fixed learning goals and *learning* is reduced to the transference of predefined experiences, the relation between adults (practitioners) and children can only be seen as a one way street. And this is exactly what happened in the centres. Adults naturally defined themselves as the active part. Children were the objects of their endeavours; they were to be taught, to be developed, and to be educated.

I am not going to dive deeper into the East German experience here. But we all should be aware that there are crossroads ahead in the development of the early year's sector in almost every European country.

Talking about pedagogical cultures in the context of a quality conference means to talk about the possible focus of professional practice. What we are facing now in Germany is a growing attention for 'early learning' which sometimes is (mis)understood as being something different from 'care' or 'well-being' or the individual children's right to develop their whole personality.

Again, there are pitfalls on the road that leads to fixed learning goals and outcome-oriented assessment procedures. You all know about the temptation of ‘teaching to the test’ and the dangers of focussing on children’s deficits rather than on their capabilities.

The German Experience (2):
Pedagogical Cultures between Reggio and PISA

- Growing attention for early learning
- High quality provision as an issue in the public debate
- Possible pitfalls:
 - Narrow focus on achieving early learning goals?
 - Primary school preparation vs. Childrens’ rights for holistic development?

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

There are lots of opportunities, of course: the importance of high quality provision as an issue in the public debate, for instance and the political acknowledgement of economic advantages through investment in education.

We must decide now: what kind of pedagogical culture do we want to develop? Do we narrow our focus and reduce the questions of quality to the efficiency of early learning and teaching environments, instead of building civil institutions? Do we settle for achieving learning goals instead of widening horizons of children? Shall we focus on children’s rights or on the needs of primary-school preparation?

These are core issues that will shape the profile and further development of the profession.

Pedagogical cultures in Germany today are moving back and forth between these crucial questions. There certainly is a danger that again we narrow our focus to only one aspect of the whole system, instead of opening our perception for integrative developments. While Reggio is getting a bit out of sight, we are getting closer to PISA.

How many different pedagogical cultures and underlying assumptions do you have in Ireland? How are they subject to change and diversification? In my third part of the journey, we need to look at some of the challenges of change in modern societies.

V. Ireland's catching up: Professional Challenges under Conditions of Change

Only a few weeks ago, some Irish colleagues and I were attending a conference on the beautiful Island of Malta. One night, while we were having a pint or two, we were joking about Irish and Germans and Scots. This always happens at every serious scientific conference. We finally got to the point of time and one colleague was making fun of Ireland being one hour behind in comparison to the rest of Europe. Yes, I said, but beware – Ireland's catching up very quickly!

On my way back home I couldn't stop thinking about that. Wasn't that bit of joke a perfect description of the dramatic and rapid social, cultural and economic changes, not only in Ireland but in all modern societies?

It is obvious, that the Irish economy is flourishing in a way it never has before. And along with the 'Celtic Tiger', there are other countries in Europe, like Portugal or Spain, that go through a phase of prosperity. The Baltic countries in the east and Malta in the far south, for example are catching up, too.

For the first time in history, unemployed workers from Germany emigrate to Ireland. And they don't come to dig potatoes. They are highly qualified and find their jobs in the computer industry. Due to economic developments, Ireland is attracting more and more immigrants from all over the world and the Irish, who have long built their self-conception around being emigrants themselves, must now cope with a complete new situation.

But regarding the whole range of social and cultural change we must consider – to alter the quote of an American president – that "it's not the economy, stupid!" – not only, at least.

Gunilla Dahlberg (1999, 2002) argues that the economic, social or technological changes we are facing today are much more than just the reflection of the shift from an industrial to an information-based society. There is, she writes

“ a growing scepticism about modernity [...] and growing disillusionment with its inability to comprehend and accommodate human diversity, complexity and contingency ... “(1999, 22)

More than that, many of the basic assumptions that have been shaping our perception of the world are becoming more and more questionable. We can no longer rely on continuous and linear progress. The certainty of an absolute truth, which can be discovered by applying objective scientific methods, has vanished, too. Instead, uncertainty and contingency in every aspect of life is becoming a common experience.

Ireland's catching up:
Professional Challenges under Conditions of Change

- Rapid social, cultural and economic transformation (in all modern societies)
- Necessity to cope with uncertain situations
- „it's **not** (only) the economy, stupid!“
- Basic assumptions of life are becoming questionable
- Consequences for pedagogical theory and practice?

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

We insist, that there is no way to develop high quality early childhood education that is not closely linked to the social and cultural context of growing up. But then new questions arise about the presuppositions for our pedagogical theory and practice:

How can we organize the relationship between children and adults, which we refer to as teaching, under conditions of constant change and uncertainty?

Looking at the changes in our own life, do we really know today, what to teach children, so they will be able to cope with future challenges? We certainly don't.

What we do know is that our experiences and our knowledge as adults can no longer be projected in a linear way or serve as a blueprint for our children's future. Margaret Mead, the American ethnologist, has first introduced the concept of a 'prefigurative culture' where it will be the child – not the parent or grandparent – that represents what is to come (Mead 1978, 83).

As a result, of course, we are facing a radical change in pedagogical relations. It brings with it – as some may complain – the complete loss of what we thought was natural authority.

Instead of leading children into a future, that is by and large already known by adults, we now “all are equally immigrants into the new era”, to quote Margaret Mead again (1978, 70).

Can we link the discourse of cultural transformation to an extended view on professional development in early childhood education and care? Obviously, there is a shift in the role of the adult. But in which way would that influence our concept of ‘profession’?

In prefigurative cultures any ‘top-down-concept’ of teaching, aiming to fill up children’s minds with knowledge, becomes obsolete. Many of us will agree that learning is much more about ‘making experiences’, which is an activity of the learner. We do know today, that these experiences are more likely to be sustainable, when they are gained and reflected upon in shared activities between children and adults. So, even when we look at children as ‘immigrants’ and as explorers of a new land, they still need accompanists.

What might be helpful for practitioners to take with them on such a journey? Remember, there are no maps and it’s certainly not going to be a guided tour.

Ireland’s catching up:
Professional Challenges under Conditions of Change

- Consequences for the pedagogical profession?
- We need
 - educated ...
 - reflective ...
 - confident / self-confident ...
 - autonomous ...

Practitioners
How can we support them?

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg / Arbeitsstelle Elementare Bildung und Profession
Early Childhood and Profession. International Centre for Research, Studies and Development (EC+P)

First of all, it is still not bad to have a good deal of own experience and even knowledge. Even in times of post-modern contingency, we do know a lot about children's learning and development. Professional preparation and initial practitioner education for any person working with young children and their families must reach for highest standards.

Along with knowledge and own experience comes the awareness, that knowledge can not simply be applied. So a second basic requirement would be the ability to constantly generate 'actionable knowledge', as Chris Argyris has called it, and to constantly reflect upon your actions in a specific context.

We have been looking at pedagogical situations as being less predictable and more complex than ever. From this point of view, systematically dealing with uncertainty is the major and most challenging professional task. The more we regard education as co-construction or as interaction between partners with equal rights, the more important it is to have confidence (and self-confidence) as part of the professional equipment.

Confidence is needed on the political level of the education system, too. Acting professionally, in the way we are discussing it now, can neither be prescribed nor controlled with technical approaches. But of course it can be facilitated, fostered and developed.

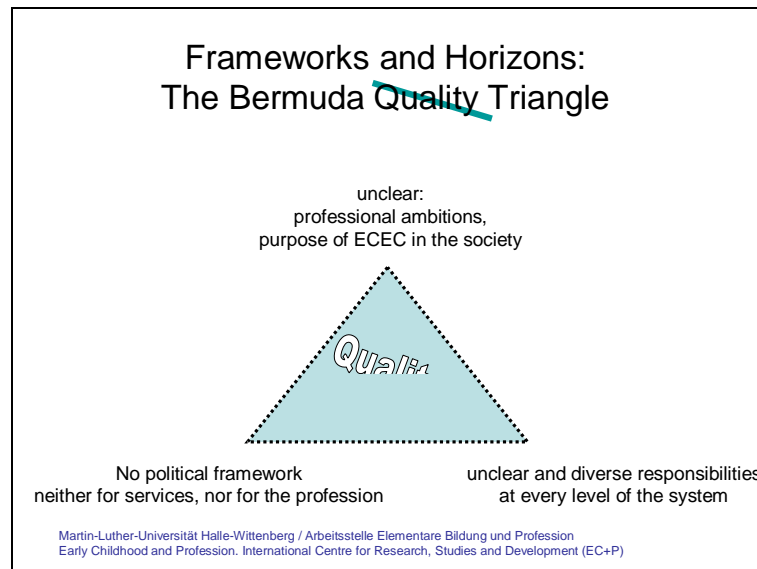
To quote Margaret Mead again:

"Now, with our greater understanding of the process, we must cultivate the most flexible and complex part of the system – the behaviour of adults. We must, in fact, teach ourselves how to alter adult behaviour so that we can give up post-figurative upbringing, with its tolerated cofigurative components, and discover prefigurative ways of teaching and learning that will keep the future open. We must create new models for adults who can teach their children not *what* to learn, but *how* to learn, not *what* they should be committed to but the *value* of commitment." (1978, 87).

VI. Frameworks and horizons: The ~~Bermuda~~ Quality Triangle

Let me try a conclusion. What are the loose ends, and can there be a chance to tie them together?

When we started to raise 'questions of quality' systematically in Germany some 15 years ago, developments in early childhood education and care seemed to be determined by a number of perturbing factors. They added up in a crisis of legitimation for the whole system.



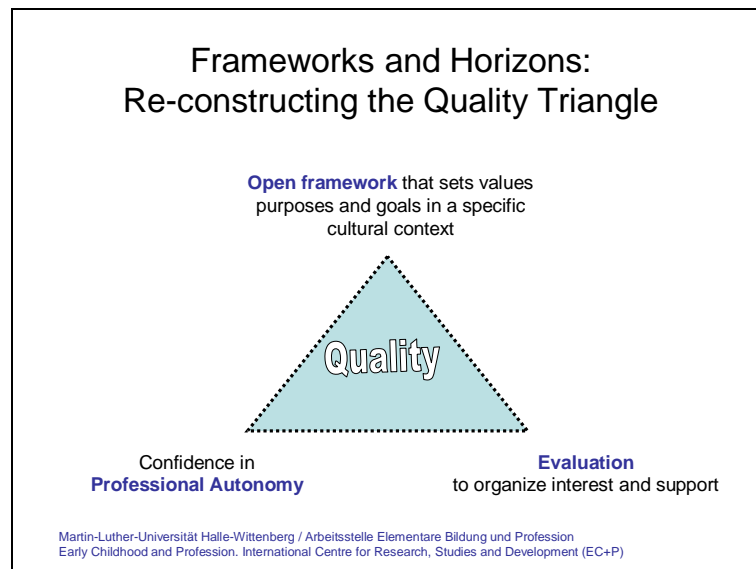
1. Neither the professional ambition nor the purpose of the early years' sector in the society was clear. We had not been debating, what early childhood institutions should be for.
2. As a consequence, there was no adequate political framework. Neither for the development of the services, nor for professional development.
3. Unclear and diverse responsibilities at every level of the system had led to a complete failure to ensure adequate investment in the services, in the qualification of practitioners and even in research.

These factors shaped what I have elsewhere called the 'Bermuda-Triangle of Quality' and the whole project of early education and care for every child was at risk of getting lost in rough sea.

In the following years, external factors helped to raise a public debate, which then brought forth a National Quality Initiative. Today, the ongoing process of European integration and worldwide competition opens the door for investments in the system. It has, on the other hand, narrowed the focus of the public debate to questions of early learning.

We know now, that high 'quality' in early childhood can only be achieved by looking at all levels of the system at a time, that is practice, management and leadership, curriculum and legislation *and* professional development.

This gives us a possibility to re-construct the triangle:



There are (of course) three corners of the triangle: To start with, the complexity of an early childhood education and care system in a modern society can only be developed within an open framework. A framework that sets values and overall goals, which describe the purpose of early childhood institutions in a social and cultural context. Its main aim is to orient the public and professional discourse.

Confidence in professional autonomy would be another corner of the triangle. While the general questions of early years' institutions can be discussed and reflected upon on a national or even an inter-national level, the answers still have to be developed in the context of the local community.

To bridge the gap between the open and general framework and the concrete practice in every centre, it is important to develop an idea of evaluation for the system. Not to increase control but to systematically organize interest and mutual support.

I suppose you have already taken important steps towards the construction of an Irish 'Quality-Triangle'. I want to encourage you to carry on conjointly on this way.

When I left my office at the University of Halle, a colleague, who is a frequent visitor to Sligo, told me never to end a lecture with out a story. So I found this one for you and of course it is about open frameworks and professional autonomy:

A bumblebee goes to see a wise man, asking for advice how she could survive the coming long, cold winter. The wise man thinks for a long time, than he advises the bumblebee to transmute into a cricket. Then she could easily survive close to a warm oven. The bumblebee then asks what she must do to become a cricket. ‘Well’, said the wise man, ‘I gave you the big idea. You have to work out the details by yourself.’

Thank you for your attention!



References

- Arbeitsstab Forum Bildung (2002 Ed.) *Empfehlungen und Einzelergebnisse des Forum Bildung*, Bonn.
- Canella, Gaile Sloan (1997) *Deconstructing Early Childhood Education. Social Justice and Revolution*, New York: Lang.
- Carr, Margaret (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings. Learning Stories*, London: Chapman.
- Dahlberg, Gunilla / Moss, Peter / Pence, Alan (1999) *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care. Postmodern Perspectives*, London: Falmer.
- Fthenakis, Wassilios E. / Oberhuemer, Pamela (2004 Ed.) *Frühpädagogik international. Bildungsqualität im Blickpunkt*, Wiesbaden: VS.
- Heron, John (1996) *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. London: Sage.
- Kronberger Kreis für Qualitätsentwicklung (1998) *Qualität im Dialog entwickeln. Wie Kindertageseinrichtungen besser werden*. Seelze:Kallmeyer.
- Laewen, Hans Joachim / Andres, Beate (2002) *Forscher, Künstler, Konstrukteure. Werkstattbuch zum Bildungsauftrag von Kindertageseinrichtungen*. Neuwied, Kriftel, Berlin.
- Leontjew, A.N. (1973) *Probleme der Entwicklung des Psychischen*. Frankfurt am Main.
- Lewin, Kurt (1968) *Die Lösung sozialer Konflikte*. Bad Nauheim.
- Mead, Margaret (1978) *Culture and Commitment. The New Relationships between the Generations in the 1970s*. Revised and updated Edition, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ministerium für Gesundheit und Soziales des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt (2002) *Armut und Reichtum in Sachsen-Anhalt*. Berlin.
- Ministerium für Volksbildung der DDR (1985) *Programm für die Bildungs- und Erziehungsarbeit im Kindergarten*. Berlin.
- Moss, Peter / Pence, Alan (1994 Ed.) *Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Services. New approaches to defining quality*, London: Chapman.
- Oers, Bert van (2003 Ed.) *Narratives of Childhood*. Amsterdam: Free University Press.
- Oers, Bert van (2003) *Marking out pupils' learning trajectories. Developmental narratives as a tool for teachers*. Paper presented at the 13th annual conference of EECERA, Glasgow 2003.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001) *Starting Strong. Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2002) *Education at a Glance*. Paris.
- Patton, Michael .Quinn (1997) *Utilization-Focused Evaluation. The New Century Text*. London: Sage.
- Reason, Peter / Heron, John (undated) *A Laypersons Guide to Co-operative Inquiry*. University of Bath.
- Schön, Donald E. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Urban, Mathias (1998) Qualitätsentwicklung in Kindertageseinrichtungen als dialogischer Prozess. In Fthenakis, Wassilios E. / Eirich, Hans (Eds.) *Erziehungsqualität im Kindergarten. Forschungsergebnisse und Erfahrungen*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Lambertus.
- Urban, Mathias (1999) *Qualität, Professionalität und das ganze alltägliche Durcheinander. Anmerkungen zur aktuellen Debatte um die Qualitätsentwicklung in Kindertageseinrichtungen*. In: Kita-Aktuell, Ausgabe Hessen, Rheinland-Pfalz, Saarland, Heft 6.
- Urban, Mathias (2001) Das pädagogische Handwerkszeug. Was Erzieherinnen brauchen, um Vielfalt und Qualität zu sichern. In *Lebensort Kindertageseinrichtung. Bilden - Erziehen – Fördern. Dokumentation des Fachpolitischen Diskurses*. Ministerium für Frauen, Jugend, Familie und Gesundheit des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen. Köln.
- Urban, Mathias (2002) Qualitätsentwicklung in der Kindertageserziehung: dialogisch, kooperativ, kontextorientiert. In Vomberg, Edeltraud (Ed.) *Qualitätsmanagement als Zukunftsstrategie für die Soziale Arbeit. Theoretische Konzepte und praktizierte Beispiele aus sozialen Einrichtungen*. Schriftenreihe des Fachbereichs Sozialwesen der Hochschule Niederrhein, Band 32. Mönchengladbach.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society. The development of higher psychological functions*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Willke, Helmut (1998) *Systemtheorie III: Steuerungstheorie. Grundzüge einer Theorie der Steuerung komplexer Sozialsysteme*. Stuttgart.