EDITORIAL

THEMATICAL SECTION

Christina Segerholm  The Quality Turn. Political and Methodological Challenges in Contemporary Educational Evaluation and Assessment

Xavier Pons  The Turn and the Paths. School External Evaluation in England, France and Switzerland: A Sociological Approach

Laura S. Hamilton, Brian M. Stecher & Kun Yuan  Standards-Based Accountability in the United States: Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Peter Dahler-Larsen  Constitutive effects as a social accomplishment: A qualitative study of the political in testing

Barbara Crossouard  Classroom assessment and education: Challenging the assumptions of socialisation and instrumentality

D. Royce Sadler  Assessment, evaluation and quality assurance: Implications for integrity in reporting academic achievement in higher education

Thomas A. Schwandt  Quality, Standards and Accountability: An Uneasy Alliance

OPEN SECTION

Maria Hedlin  Admission policy of Swedish teacher education favouring men: Discussion in Parliament in 1962

Stig-Börje Asplund  Being a skilled reader: Reception patterns in vehicle engineering students’ literature discussion

Anna-Carin Jonsson & Dennis Beach  Predicting the use of praise among pre-service teachers: The influence of implicit theories of intelligence, social comparison and stereotype acceptance

Kerstin Bergqvist  “Own work” in primary school – A teaching and learning practice in the context of administration and control
EDUCATION INQUIRY

Education Inquiry is an international on-line, peer-reviewed journal with free access in the field of Educational Sciences and Teacher Education. It publishes original empirical and theoretical studies from a wide variety of academic disciplines. As the name of the journal suggests, one of its aims is to challenge established conventions and taken-for-granted perceptions within these fields.

Education Inquiry is looking for lucid and significant contributions to the understanding of contextual, social, organizational and individual factors affecting teaching and learning, the links between these aspects, the nature and processes of education and training as well as research in and on Teacher Education and Teacher Education policy. This includes research ranging from pre-school education to higher education, and research on formal and informal settings. Education Inquiry welcomes cross-disciplinary contributions and innovative perspectives. Of particularly interest are studies that take as their starting point, education practice and subject teaching or didactics.

Education Inquiry welcomes research from a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, and invites studies that make the nature and use of educational research the subject of inquiry. Comparative and country-specific studies are also welcome.

Education Inquiry readers include educators, researchers, teachers and policy makers in various cultural contexts.

Every issue of Education Inquiry publishes peer-reviewed articles in one, two or three different sections. Open section: Articles sent in by authors as part of regular journal submissions and published after a blind review process. Thematic section: Articles reflecting the theme of a conference or workshop and published after a blind review process. Invited section: Articles by researchers invited by Education Inquiry to shed light on a specific theme or for a specific purpose and published after a review process.

Education Inquiry is a continuation of the Journal of Research in Teacher Education, which is available in printed copies as well as electronic versions and free access at http://www.use.umu.se/forskning/publikationer/lof/

Editors
Associate Professor Nafsika Alexiadou, Umeå University, Sweden
Assistant Professor Linda Rönningen, Umeå University, Sweden

The editorial board
Professor Marie Brennan, Victoria University, Australia
Professor Bernard Corru, Directeur de la Formation - CNED, Directeur de CNED-EFAD, France
Professor Per-Ölof Enson, Umeå University
Professor David Hamilton, Umeå University, Sweden
Professor Brian Hudson
Professor Gloria Ladson-Billings, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA
Professor Martin Law, University of Edinburgh, UK
Assistant Professor Eva Lindgren, Umeå University, Sweden
Professor Lisbeth Lundahl, Umeå University, Sweden
Assistant Professor Linda Rönningen, Umeå University, Sweden
Professor Kirk Sullivan, Umeå University, Sweden
Associate Professor Manya Sundström, Umeå University, Sweden
Professor Gaby Weiner, University of Edinburgh, UK
Professor Pavel Zgaga, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Language Editor
Murray Bales, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Guidelines for Submitting Articles
See Education Inquiry’s homepage: http://www.use.umu.se/english/research/educationinquiry
Send Manuscripts to: EducationInquiry.Editor@adm.umu.se

©2012 The Authors. ISSN online 2000-4508
Quality, Standards and Accountability: An Uneasy Alliance

Thomas A. Schwandt*

Notions of quality, standards and accountability are ever-present in many societies around the world and, arguably, we would be hard pressed to journey through life without appeals of one kind or another to these ideas. Our everyday interactions with people and things reflect the fact that standards of various kinds abound, from the relatively uncontroversial engineering properties of materials we rely on every time we drive across a bridge or use our cell phones (density, hardness, tensile strength, shear, electrical conductance etc.) to the more contentious understandings of what constitutes quality of life or quality of care. We depend, often without much thought until a crisis of some sort arises, on standards for food safety, automobiles, children’s toys, water quality, housing construction, and the like. Similarly, we make appeals to quality norms when recognising that some accomplishments or performances are better than others (exemplary behaviour, low standard of living, high ethical character), and some things are better constructed or more durable than others and thus provide greater value for money. Organisations operate with various notions of quality as core to their business whether in the widely appealing idea of quality as fitness-for-use (meeting customer expectations), conformance to specifications or requirements, or providing assurance of access to and effectiveness of services (Reeves & Bednar 1994). Accountability for finances, for fairness, and for performance (Behn 2001) are all longstanding concerns of public agencies charged with spending tax dollars wisely in contributing to the welfare of society. We think it important as citizens in democracies to hold corporations, governments and individuals accountable for human rights abuses and adherence to the rule of law.

While we may not all live comfortably all the time with these notions, concerns about quality, standards and accountability are, in important ways, woven into the fabric of our lives. The fact that we typically are not indifferent to their meanings and contest their uses in various dimensions of social life is an indication of their importance. Numerous sociological, anthropological and socio-psychological studies

*Department of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA. E-mail: tschwand@illinois.edu
©Authors. ISSN 2000-4508, pp.217–224
point to our concerns. For example, we question what global accountability means for non-governmental and multilateral organisations like the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation absent the notion of global democracy (Grant & Keohane 2005); we reasonably worry about the consequences of linking and integrating standards and definitions of quality with one another across organisations, nation-states, and systems; we debate the pros and cons of the fact that standards by their very nature codify, embody and in some cases prescribe particular values or norms (Lampland & Star 2008); we are concerned with the proper use of standards (and associated notions of quality) as filters – allowing some people (or things) to pass through by meeting the standard while others fail (consider, for example, standards for becoming a naturalised citizen of a country, standards for being admitted to the practice of medicine, standards for being admitted to the practice of teaching, and so on) (Bush 2011:43). We endorse the idea of standards but are often suspicious of standardisation; we respect efforts to provide human services that are of high quality but worry whether the determination of quality in such services should be subject to processes of quality control. These concerns and disputed points of view on quality, standards and accountability are evidence of the fact that knowledge societies emerge as adaptations to persistent but evolving needs and changing circumstances of human conduct, yet that development is often unpredictable, paradoxical, uncertain and reflexive (Dahler-Larsen 2011).

It is in this contested space that the idea of the ‘quality turn’ in education has arisen with considerable force in the past two decades or so. The ‘turn’ has multiple antecedents including the wide-reaching influence of human capital theory on positioning education as an important ingredient of economic well-being, the worldwide concern for providing education for all children, efforts of international aid and lending agencies to couple economic reforms to education reforms (Kumar & Sarangapani 2004), and the considerable efforts undertaken by governments to reform the provision of public sector services in education, social welfare and health care by attending directly to agency accountability for efficiency and effectiveness in service provision. Although ‘the quality turn’ in education is spoken of as if it were a new phenomenon, concern for access to and participation in quality education is as old as theorising about the nature and purpose of education itself. Rousseau, Dewey, Piaget, Bloom, Stenhouse, Bruner, Montessori, Freire, and countless others (see Crossouards in this issue) have all offered views of what comprises quality education – where that term refers to the essential aims and characteristics of education – and what fails as an adequate portrayal of the fundamental significance, worth or importance of education.

Quality of education is often at the centre of concerns about education equity (fairness and inclusion regardless of personal and socio-economic circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background) as evident in a recent OECD (2012) report on supporting disadvantaged students, a recent US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights report revealing inequities for minority students in disciplinary
practices, access to rigorous courses, and access to quality teachers (US Department of Education 2012), and in the relationship of the capability approach to human development through education championed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum and others. In the worldwide concern with achieving universal education – as evident in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals, the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO 2005), and so on – it is increasingly apparent that the achievement of universal participation in education is fundamentally dependent upon the quality of education available. In short, access to education for all is necessary but insufficient. Children must have access to a quality education that includes:

- learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities;
- environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities;
- content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace;
- processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities; and
- outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

This definition of quality education reflects an understanding of education as a complex system embedded in a political, cultural and economic context (UNICEF 2000:4).

Yet it is not this ever changing, endlessly challenging, and never to be completely resolved philosophical and practical debate over what constitutes quality education (understood in terms of its proper aims and how those aims are best realised) that is the focal point of the way the ‘quality turn’ in education is currently understood. Ironically, we might say that this longstanding discussion of quality in education has been undermined or at the very least bypassed by a ‘new’ way of understanding and addressing quality in education. ‘New’ is a relative term here – quality understood as a system or procedure to be followed is firmly entrenched in many large organisations as evident in quality assurance standards such as ISO 9000, Good Manufacturing Practice, Laboratory Certification Standards, and so forth. What is ‘new’ is that this way of thinking of quality has been brought to bear on the organisation and management of educational and social services. This ‘new’ way regards quality as technocratic
and adiaphoric in character – quality is regarded as an apolitical phenomenon, a formalised approach to accountability, and the determination of quality is exempt from any kind of moral-political or normative debate; quality simply is performance (of teachers, students, administrators, schools, school systems etc.), and performance simply is measurable against agreed-upon standards and traceable through indicators. The authors of a recent book linking the quality turn to a form of governing European education note that “under the weight of the intense obsession in contemporary culture with control, surveillance and risk avoidance, quality re-emerges as a concept primarily defined by its role and function in bureaucratic and managerial systems. Quality becomes measurable, statistical, and standard-based” (Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm, & Simola 2011:2-3).

It is this re-emergence or, perhaps better said, redefinition of quality linked to notions of quality assurance as a way of managing educational organisations that is at issue. In this way of thinking, the turn to quality means developing and implementing carefully planned systematic activities related to measurement of performance, comparison of performance with a standard, monitoring of processes through indicators, and associated feedback loops to ensure that errors in attaining standards are identified. To claim there has been a ‘quality turn’ in education is to claim that this kind of standards-and-measurement-based approach to determining quality is regarded as ideal. Evidence of this ‘quality turn’ abounds in the heated discussion surrounding standards-based education accountability in the USA (Hamilton et al. this issue), the controversy surrounding the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK, new journals such as Quality Assurance in Education, Quality in Higher Education, Quality Approaches in Higher Education and in the formation of agencies such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (with over 200 members).

Whether this way of thinking poses methodological and political challenges to the field of evaluation and assessment and the kinds of challenges it might pose depend, of course, on one’s allegiance to various kinds of evaluation and assessment practices. For example:

• For evaluators committed to the idea that determining the quality of education is a relatively open-ended affair less dependent on macro-level quality criteria and more focused on how quality is experienced by stakeholders and beneficiaries in situ (Stake & Schwandt 2006), ‘the quality turn’ poses significant political challenges to positioning this more locally bound, site-specific kind of determination of education quality (Bullough in press) as a centrepiece in policy arguments for improving education.

• For evaluators committed to culturally relevant evaluation and assessment (e.g., Gerdes 2001; Nyerere 1968), the challenge is to position indigenous approaches to quality education that are sensitive to education’s relevance...
to the socio-cultural circumstances of the learner and a given nation in such a way that they offer viable alternatives to Northern ideas of determining quality education.

- For evaluators concerned not simply with diagnosing the collateral, paradoxical and differential effects of the ‘quality turn’ across countries (see Pons, Dahler-Larsen in this issue) but assisting in managing and addressing these effects, ‘the quality turn’ poses challenges to developing methodologies for studying such effects that draw on complexity science (Mitchell 2009) and systems perspectives (Jervis 1998). The challenge is that these ways of thinking undermine traditional intervention logic with its attendant assumptions of linear change and readily determinable effects.

- For assessment experts committed to the idea that standards-based educational accountability is worth pursuing but that it has devolved into, more or less, ‘test-based’ accountability, the challenge is to develop a set of comprehensive indicators of education quality across a wide range of dimensions (Hamilton et al. in this issue).

- For the very same assessment experts and evaluators, the foregoing challenge is accompanied by the methodological problem of how to synthesise multiple types of evidence of performance and accomplishment across a variety of criteria of merit to reach a composite judgment of quality. Schemes for amalgamating evidence from different sources are notoriously difficult to develop.

- For evaluators who argue that evaluation is a process of determining the value (merit, worth or significance) of some project, reform or policy for the purposes of recommending continuation, modification, elimination or improvement, the quality turn threatens this very idea of evaluation for it seeks to replace evaluation understood in this way with assurance – a process of certifying, warranting and guaranteeing quality as a judgment against stable authoritative stands (Sadler this issue). As I have noted elsewhere, a society that experiments with determining quality is not the same as a society that audits quality (Schwandt 2008).

- For evaluators and assessment experts committed to the idea of educational accountability but convinced that a new assessment paradigm is necessary to refocus accountability on assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning (Shepard 2000); and, who endorse a turn away from the use of high stakes summative assessments to using various kinds of assessment data to inform meaningful formative changes in instructional practice, the challenges are multiple: Teachers and administrators must be trained in the dimensions of assessment literacy, understand what is involved in making
reasonable and defensible inferences based on evidence, learn how to design and use databases and knowledge management systems that are not rigidly tied to instructional prescriptions or remedies, and so forth.

• For politicians and influential leaders in what Cronbach et al. (1980) called the “policy-shaping community”, the challenge is how to promote a framework for understanding, monitoring and improving quality without resorting to formula that prescribe or standardise quality. The Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2005 recognises the complexity of such a challenge (UNESCO 2005).

• For evaluators committed to a practice informed by ideas from critical theory (Freeman 2010), the challenge presented by the ‘quality turn’ is to examine, critically assess and contest how we make sense of quality, standards and accountability, how and why we organise particular practices around them, and whether such understandings and practices are socially just – all with the aim of fostering stakeholders’ abilities to evaluate and alter their own practices.

• Finally, as we were recently reminded in the extensive press coverage in the USA touting the Finnish educational system as a model for achieving quality education based on PISA results (e.g. Ravitch 2012), for all researchers, evaluators, assessment experts and politicians who are committed to the ideal of quality education for all, the challenge is to be mindful that any model linking quality education-standards-accountability is likely never to be an optimal solution (Feuer 2006; Pons this issue) and that the pursuit of such a model is naïve at best.
References

Behn, R.D. (2001) *Rethinking Democratic Accountability*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute.

Bullough, R.V., Jr (in press) Against best practice: Uncertainty, outliers and local studies in educational research. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy* 38, 4.

Bush, L. (2011) *Standards: Recipes for Reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cronbach, L. et al. (1980) *Toward Reform of Program Evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dahler-Larsen, P. (2011) Afterword: Evaluation as a field and as a source of reflection – Comments on how QAE restructures education now and in the future. In J. Ozga, P. Dahler-Larsen, C. Segerholm and H. Simola (eds.) *Fabricating Quality in Education: Data and Governance in Europe*, London: Routledge.

Feuer, M. (2006) *Moderating the Debate: Rationality and the Promise of American Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Freeman, M., (ed.) (2010) *Critical Social Theory and Evaluation Practice*. New Directions for Evaluation, Number 127. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gerdes, P. (2001) Ethnomathematics as a new research field, illustrated by studies of mathematical ideas in African History. In J. J Saldaña et al. (eds.) *Science and Cultural Diversity: Filling a Gap in the History of Science, Cuadernos de Quipu No. 5*. Mexico City: Sociedad Latinoamericana de Historia de las Ciencias y la Tecnología.

Grant, R.W. and Keohane, R.O. (2005) Accountability and abuses of power in world politics. *American Political Science Review* 99(1), 29–43.

Jervis, R. (1998) *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kumar, K. and Sarangapani, P.M. (2004) History of the quality debate. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005, “Education for All – The Quality Imperative.”

Lampland, M. and Star, S.L. (2008) *Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Mitchell, S.D. (2009) *Unsimple Truths: Science, Complexity, and Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nyerere, J. (1968) *Freedom and Socialism. A Selection from Writings & Speeches, 1965–1967*. Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press.

OECD (2012) *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Ozga, J., Dahler-Larsen, P., Segerholm, C. and Simola, H. (eds.) (2011) *Fabricating Quality in Education. Data and Governance in Europe*. London: Routledge.

Ravitch, D. (8 March 2012) Schools We Can Envy. *New York Review of Books*.

Reeves, C.A. and Bednar, D.A. (1994) Defining quality: Alternatives and implications, *Academy of Management Review* 19(3), 419–445.

Schwandt, T. A. (2008) Educating for intelligent belief in evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation* 29(2), 139–150.

Shepard, L.A. (2000) The role of assessment in a learning culture. *Educational Researcher* 29(7), 4–14.

Stake, R.E. and Schwandt, T.A. (2006) On discerning quality in evaluation. In I. Shaw, J. C. Greene and M. Mark (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
UNICEF (June 2000) Defining Quality in Education. A paper presented by UNICEF at the meeting of The International Working Group on Education Florence, Italy. Working Paper Series, Education Section, Programme Division. New York, NY: United Nations Children’s Fund.

UNESCO (2005) Education For All – The Quality Imperative. Paris: UNESCO.

U.S. Department of Education (2012) New Data from U.S. Department of Education Highlights Educational Inequities Around Teacher Experience, Discipline and High School Rigor. Press release 6 March 2012 from http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/new-data-us-department-education-highlights-educational-inequities-around-teache, accessed 20 March 2012.
CONTENT
Editorial

THEMATIC SECTION
Christina Segerholm The Quality Turn: Political and Methodological Challenges in Contemporary Educational Evaluation and Assessment
Xavier Pons The Turn and the Paths. School External Evaluation in England, France and Switzerland: A Sociological Approach
Laura S. Hamilton, Brian M. Stecher & Kun Yuan Standards-Based Accountability in the United States: Lessons Learned and Future Directions
Peter Dahler-Larsen Constitutive effects as a social accomplishment: A qualitative study of the political in testing
Barbara Crossouard Classroom assessment and education: Challenging the assumptions of socialisation and instrumentality
D. Royce Sadler Assessment, evaluation and quality assurance: Implications for integrity in reporting academic achievement in higher education
Thomas A. Schwandt Qualit, Standards and Accountability: An Uneasy Alliance

OPEN SECTION
Maria Hedlin Admission policy of Swedish teacher education favouring men: Discussion in Parliament in 1962
Stig-Börje Asplund Being a skilled reader: Reception patterns in vehicle engineering students’ literature discussion
Anna-Carin Jonsson & Dennis Beach Predicting the use of praise among pre-service teachers: The influence of implicit theories of intelligence, social comparison and stereotype acceptance
Kerstin Bergqvist “Own work” in primary school – A teaching and learning practice in the context of administration and control