

(Re)configuring quality: From a hegemonic framework to story telling

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Abstract

In this brief colloquium, the authors consider a reconfiguring of quality and how this has impacted on practice in an early years setting. They demonstrate how their move from a formal quantitative strategic plan for the setting to their current narrative version, known as 'Violet's Story', contributes to the academic debate of quality framed by post-humanist theory and narrative methods. The authors explain how this shift reflects a 'qualia' understanding of quality and, in doing so, show how the narrative strategies and techniques deployed embody post-humanist sympathies, taking the reader beyond the subjective to reveal some of the complexities of entanglement that make up a shifting, contextualised understanding of quality. Finally, the authors illustrate the theoretical by representing one practitioner's reflection on what it can be like to work within a fluid, contextualised understanding of quality. They conclude that further studies should follow this line of inquiry for a better understanding of the real impact that such a reconfiguration of quality has on early years settings, the experiences of practitioners, and children and their families.

Keywords

Early childhood education, early years, narrative, post-humanism, quality

At the Association for Professional Development in Early Years (TACTYC) conference in 2015, the keynote speaker, Jayne Osgood, spoke about 'Reconfiguring quality: Beyond discourses and subjectivities to matter, bodies and becomings in early childhood education'. Osgood spoke of taking up the invitation to be flexible and engage in thinking and practice that reconfigure 'quality'. She argued that by moving away from hegemonic framings of quality to a 'diffractive analysis' of how quality can be multiply understood and experienced, embodied and onto-epistemologically entangled, we can explore new and more generative understandings of quality.

On returning from the conference, a group of us from The Red House Children's Centre read Osgood's paper. We asked ourselves again: What is quality? In what ways have we, as an organisation, moved 'beyond'? Have we really moved away from hegemonic framings of quality? Is 'Violet's Story' (our strategic plan) a statement of quality? How can you share the experience of 'Violet's

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Story' without making it into just another framing of quality or way of doing things, which in turn may be presented as 'best practice', becoming something it was never intended to be? We wanted to place the theory in the practical everyday workings of an early years setting and offer a discussion about the reality of 'quality' from practitioners who are working within the discourse and trying to manage the tension of offering 'quality' alongside political and social expectations of 'quality' early childhood education as a measurable phenomenon.

What is 'Violet's Story', how did it come to be, and how does it fit with our reconfigured understanding of quality?

Like Dahlberg et al. (2007), quality, for us, is something to be questioned. As a not-for-profit setting in the private, voluntary and independent sector, we are in a place where quality takes on a multifaceted role. Not only is 'quality' something that is assessed by an external agency (Ofsted – the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), but the outcome or judgement made of the quality of our provision, by parents and anyone visiting the setting, also impacts on the marketing image of the setting and, ultimately, the income the setting receives. Whilst marketing is not a priority, in order to offer the level of provision and education that meets with our strategic vision ('Violet's Story'), we need to ensure that we attract families to the setting. This makes engaging in debate and discussing quality fundamental. Whilst we may not choose to use certain methods of quality assurance and assessment tools, we have to understand them and be able to articulate why we have chosen not to use them. Not only do we, as a setting, have to be 'true' to our strategic vision ('Violet's Story') and ethos, but we also have to use language and meaning that are shared by everyone who is in contact with our provision.

As Pence and Moss (1994 in Dahlberg et al., 2007: 5) argue: 'Quality child care is, to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder'. Indeed, not only is it in the eye of the beholder, but it also permeates all aspect of their being. Understandings of quality are influenced by history, political agendas, cultural understandings and customs, personal experiences and preferences, as well as emotions, our senses and other things that may at first appear unrelated (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Therefore it could be argued that quality as a universal experience does not exist.

However, Osgood (2015) argues that quality can be viewed as 'multiplicities of vibrant matter, emotions, encounters, relationships, happenings – uncertain, shifting, contingent'. It is this concept of quality that we, as a setting, have been working with: quality as a momentary manifestation of everything that has contributed to that happening at that specific moment. Quality becomes everything. So, for us, like Giugni (2011, cited in Osgood, 2015), quality and becoming are an ongoing process of 'pushing ourselves to be, think and go beyond what we consider knowable and comfortable'.

The Red House Children's Centre had been frustrated by the confines of the normalising discourses of quality underpinned by developmentalism, as outlined by Osgood and Scarlet (2015). As a nursery, we found ourselves more aligned to a creative and playful approach that inspires and cherishes young children, such as that recommended by Moyles (2012) in her foreword to *Unhurried Pathways*. A few years ago, The Red House engaged in flexible thinking and practice that reconfigured our own understanding of quality, leading us to move away from dominant framings of quality that were embedded in an equally hegemonic, quantitative strategic plan, to a narrative version that we think supports new, generative understandings of quality. We wanted adults within the setting to feel inspired and not only to break free from 'uncritical, homogenised and routinised strategies for learning and teaching' (Moyles, 2012: 5), but also to embrace an understanding of quality that had congruence with our understanding of the importance of a unique childhood.

So, in 2012, we abandoned our narrow, formulaic, quantitative strategic plan and wrote a story instead. This narrative is known as ‘Violet’s Story’, as has been referred to above. It is a story of how quality can be engaged with by every child, family and member of The Red House community. We now find ourselves working within ‘Violet’s Story’, our strategic plan, and, arguably, ‘Violet’s Story’, and the way in which we are immersed within it, has become a place of ‘multiplicities of vibrant matter, emotions, encounters, relationships, happenings – uncertain, shifting, contingent’ (Osgood, 2015).

We hope that by sharing an extract of ‘Violet’s Story’ we can demonstrate why storytelling became the obvious way for making the move from the previous constraints of the former strategic plan towards a space where a more generative approach could flourish. Storytelling is a familiar everyday occurrence both within and beyond the context of the early years. Stories communicate every aspect of our experiences and, as we believe that we understand the world narratively, it makes sense that we should explore our engagement with it, and beyond it, narratively (Riessman, 2008: 8). Freeman observes that storytelling is often selected over non-narrative forms of communication – such as our previous strategic plan – in order to accomplish certain ends. However, he goes on to qualify that

this is not to claim that the intentionality of narratives is always conscious and deliberate; the ends that are being achieved may be utterly obscure to those whose narratives they are. Rather, the claim is simply that narratives, as sensemaking tools, inevitably do things for people, for social institutions, for culture, and more. (Freeman, 2002, cited in Riessman, 2008: 8)

We hope that ‘Violet’s Story’ can provoke similar change and uncertainties.

The story follows a fictional child, named Violet, and how her journey throughout one day evokes multiple opportunities to engage with entanglement – that is, every complexity that has led to a moment’s manifestation in which quality emerges. Although Violet presents as the main protagonist, we intend to show how the narrative strategies in the story decentre her, bringing into the foreground that which is beyond her. This refers to everything that can be smelt, heard, touched, seen and felt. We believe that this shares something with a post-humanist approach to quality, such as that referred to by Osgood (2015), Osgood and Scarlet (2015) and Wolfe (2010). Wolfe’s perspective on post-humanism is reflected within our narrative decentring of Violet – a decentring that enables us to think, with Violet, with ‘greater specificity’, including a multi-sensory experience of what is human, non-human and beyond human:

far from surpassing or rejecting the human [post-humanism] actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with *greater* specificity ... It forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself by recontextualising them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of bringing forth a world. (Wolfe, 2010: xxv)

Furthermore, each reader’s engagement with the story inevitably creates a new story, generating multiple interpretations. We suggest that this could support Osgood’s ‘diffractive analysis’ of how quality can be multiply understood and experienced, thus highlighting and bringing to the foreground all the entanglements and nuances that lead to our understanding of quality in that particular moment. As Shuman (2005: 6) notes: ‘When stories travel beyond their owners, the messages they convey are larger than an individual incident or an individual life’.

The following extract from ‘Violet’s Story’ illustrates how we pre-empted our encounter with Osgood’s invitation, as above, and perhaps how your engagement, as a reader, with the extract will

create new stories, multiple interpretations and maybe even a 'diffractive analysis' of how quality can be multiply understood and experienced.

I walk into the room and it smells of spices. There are always different smells coming from this room as the adults are always adding natural objects to the sensory shelves. Elena once brought in some funny shaped pebbles that she found on her holiday. We spent time looking closely at these pebbles, trying to work out where they might have come from and how they got to become that shape. I found out that every pebble has a story. I once saw my friend Katie play with the pebbles, adding them to a shopping bag and pretending they were magic beans. Katie had selected the smooth, shiny pebbles that felt cold and hard in our hands. I preferred the rougher, scratchy pebbles. I liked the way they left marks when I pressed them into my palm. Even when I put them down it felt like they were still in my hand. I was a bit worried that Elena's pebbles might get lost, but, as Katie put them into her shopping bag, I heard *Betty* remind Katie that when she had finished with the pebbles, she must return them to the shelf so that other children can enjoy them. Katie did, but we noticed that one was missing. We all decided to have a look for the missing pebble, but although we searched everywhere, we couldn't find this pebble. We wondered where it might have gone. Elena noticed the missing pebble but she wasn't upset and said that she would collect more next time she was on holiday.

As Shuman (2005: 6), in her study of other people's storytelling, states: 'In listening to or even in retelling other people's stories, narrators become witness to others' experiences and storytelling provides some hope for understanding across differences'. In this instance, not only does Violet act as a witness, but, as readers, we are also witnessing. Shuman goes on to say:

Storytelling offers as one of its greatest promises the possibility of empathy, of understanding others ... In fact what might be the most compelling feature of storytelling is the possibility that its power to transfer and transform will change the meaning of experience. (Shuman, 2005: 6)

A further illustration of how Violet becomes decentred and 'non-humanised' in the narrative is demonstrated when Violet admires a print of a painting on the nursery wall, and her thoughts take us beyond her aesthetic appreciation of it to her wonderings about its origin. She thinks about the physical manifestation of painting itself, questioning who or what might have painted it, how the colours and different marks came to be, and, if indeed it had been painted by someone, like the paintings she did, where were they now? Were they dead or alive?

As a group of professionals working in the early years, having 'Violet's Story' as a strategic vision allows for a space in which we can mediate our thinking. We can take aspects of the story and consider all of the strands and entanglements that have led to an engagement with quality that Violet's story is drawing attention to. For example, Violet notices the smell of some flowers by the front door as she arrives at nursery. This one small aspect of the story can prompt us to ask: What might 'quality' be in this example of Violet's experience? How could this encounter be felt differently by another child? What are we bringing to this encounter? What has happened, in all its complexities, in order to arrive at the point where the flowers appear in the vase? All of this thinking displaces a defined statement of what constitutes quality, and instead we are opening up a forum for discussion, allowing for a recognition of quality as subjective to the person experiencing it and acknowledging quality as a transient occurrence which is complex and influenced by many factors. It supports and challenges our own thinking about our practice – the things we do, feel and think within the context of quality. This thinking is supported by the Buddhist concept of the 'non-self' (*anatman*), which also succinctly reflects Wolfe's (2010) perspective on post-humanism:

When we look deeply at a flower, we see all the non-flower elements there, such as earth, sun, minerals, the gardener and so on. If we look deeply enough, we will see that the whole cosmos has come together to

manifest this miracle. The flower is full of all the elements of the cosmos – time, space, the sun, rain, even your consciousness – everything. But the flower is empty of one thing. It is full of all things, but it is empty of one thing: a separate existence. It is empty of any separate entity called self. (Hanh, 2010: 106)

What does it feel like to be a practitioner working with an understanding of quality which attends to ‘every strand or entanglement that has led to a moment’s manifestation in which quality emerges’?

We recognise that there is certain comfort to be found in the demands to perform ‘quality’ as formulaically set out in curriculum frameworks, assessment tools and inspection criteria (Osgood, 2015). We recognise that, for many of our colleagues, a performance within this comfort zone could be a relatively fearless place. However, as a setting, we have agreed that we cannot endorse such a constraining and politically motivated agenda that compromises diversity and complexity, leading to a standardisation of early childhood education, even when this means that we have to ‘push ourselves to be, think and go beyond what we consider knowable and comfortable’ (Giugni, 2011, cited in Osgood 2015).

What follows is a personal reflection on what it feels like to work with ‘Violet’s Story’:

Because you are thinking about all aspects of everything you do and analysing every action, thought, feeling and response to everything you do, all the time, sometimes you feel like you are going crazy. It’s really hard to switch off when you view quality as working in the spaces between everything – and includes attending to our awareness of every strand or entanglement that has led to a moment’s manifestation in which quality emerges. When you view quality in this way, you are The Red House and The Red House is you, and everyone and everything human and non-human and beyond human. You are individual yet connected physically, emotionally and visually (I can’t think of another word for this, but I mean seen, viewed or judged by others) in this particular time and space, for that one moment, in this ever changing and fluid concept of what it is to be quality and what it is to be The Red House. There is never stillness; everything is always being thought about and reviewed. Sometimes it feels like we are overcomplicating things, thinking about things too much. This is not a negative thing. There is the recognition that quality is not fixed, and nor should our responses and thoughts be. Sometimes you feel lost, overwhelmed and consumed by it, but you also feel free and able to challenge and change things. Sometimes that process is painful on an individual level, but can also help to ‘go beyond’ where we were, to a reconfigured understanding of quality of that particular ‘thing’. ‘Violet’s Story’ offers a shared understanding of what we want for children and families who come in contact with The Red House, and a way of reflecting on given situations as they arise. We might not always get things ‘right’, but by being able to discuss and reflect, I think we have an opportunity and freedom not afforded in some other quality assessment tools. It is not ‘Violet’s Story’ or any one thing that makes us ‘outstanding’ [Ofsted, 2010, 2012, 2014] because I am sure there are times when aspects of our practice aren’t. But working with a view of quality that allows for engagement with the complex entanglements gives us myriad opportunities to try something that may be considered ‘alternative’ or beyond a political understanding of quality in our quest to be the best we can be for every child and family. (Red House practitioner, 2015)

Looking at how it feels for practitioners working within a fluid, contextualised understanding of quality is an area of research that we, The Red House Children’s Centre, are in the early stages of investigating. We are working on developing a narrative methodology and processes through which we can share stories of experiences of practitioners working within a reconfigured understanding of quality. We hope that, by these stories of working with a view of quality that acknowledges the complexities and entanglements of each individual momentary manifestation of quality,

we will help make the discourse and debate about quality more accessible to a broad spectrum of practitioners across multiple settings.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Author biography

The Red House Children's Centre is an independent, fifty three place Nursery for children aged two to five years. There are currently one hundred and five families on roll. Opened in 1988 the Nursery has always worked in an open plan environment supporting collaborative team teaching where the process of working within and beyond critical pedagogies is openly contested and supported through on-going debate. This piece of work has arisen from all aspects of the collaborative work/practice at The Red House, drawing its inspiration from conversation, experience, critical reflections, ethos and organisational culture, which in turn is supported by the appointment of the current in house research associate. The Red House would welcome contact from other academic researchers who are interested in working collaboratively with those deeply immersed in Early Years practice.