

## Quality in Early Childhood Education: An Anthropologist's Perspective

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I use examples from my ethnographic work on early childhood education and care settings in Japan and France to demonstrate that quality standards are cultural constructs and to question the universality of such core U.S. standards of quality in ECEC as low student-teacher ratios and multicultural curricula. My argument is that quality standards should reflect local values and concerns and not be imposed across cultural divides. In a heterogeneous society such as the U.S., notions of quality should arise out of conversations in local communities among early childhood educators and parents.

### The Japanese Problem

Some years ago the psychological anthropologist Robert A. LeVine introduced the concept of the “Japanese problem” as a way of capturing the essence of what anthropology can contribute to the ethnocentrism of Western psychiatry and psychoanalysis:

I have long argued that cross-cultural evidence will eventually pose a fundamental challenge that psychoanalytic theorists must face, and that in dealing with it they must revise their conceptions of what is normal, necessary, and adaptive in the psychic development structure and functioning of humans. This is what I call “the Japanese problem. (1977, p. 3).”

LeVine goes on to point out that the Japanese approach to child rearing breaks many of the core tenets of Western child development. Japanese parents traditionally sleep with their children until puberty; mothers privilege the mother-child over the wife-husband bond; and interdependency (*amae*) is emphasized over autonomy. According to psychoanalytic theory, these beliefs and practices about raising children should produce a nation of neurotics. But by all appearances, Japanese grow up to be as stable, happy, and productive as people in the West (which, of course, is not to say that they grow up to be the same as people in the West).

In this paper, I suggest that American notions of quality in early childhood education face a similar “Japanese problem.” Japanese preschools—both *hoikuen* (daycare centers) and *yochien* (nursery schools/kindergartens) break almost every National Association of Early Childhood Education (NAEYC) quality standard. (I reference NAEYC quality standards here and elsewhere in this paper because these are the most influential quality standards in the country, not because I mean to suggest that NAEYC’s standards are more problematic or flawed than any other attempt to proscribe or measure quality.) As we explained in *Preschool in Three Cultures* (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989), *yochien* and *hoikuen* have student/teacher ratios of approximately 30 to one. Many Japanese teachers hesitate to intervene in children’s physical fights unless they think there is an imminent chance of physical injury, preferring to let children work out their disagreements on their own. In videos I made in Japanese preschools in 1985 and again in 2002, we see four-year-olds carrying toddlers down the stairs, feeding babies, and teaching two year olds to use an urinal by helping them pull down their pants and aim.

The ratio issue alone would place Japanese preschools totally beyond the pale of American quality standards. Thirty-children-to-one-adult is so far in excess of American quality standards as to preclude these programs being able to meet other criteria of quality. With such a ratio, how could there be adequate time for children to be observed, talked to, listened to, scaffolded, supervised, and protected from various kinds of harm, as they should be in a quality program?

Following LeVine’s argument, if our theories of quality in early childhood education are correct, the ratios, class size, non-intervention in fights and other factors of Japanese early childhood practices should produce children who leave preschool socially, linguistically, emotionally, and cognitively impaired. But by every appearance, Japanese children love their preschools, and they seem to move on to first-grade at least as ready for success as do American children.

The Japanese problem for American early childhood education hit home for me in 1989 when, in advance of the publication of *Preschool in Three Cultures*, I sent an article to *Young Children* titled "A Japanese Approach to Dealing with a Misbehaving Child," in which I described Komatsudani Hoikuen's non-interventionist approach to dealing with Hiroki and presented the voices of his teacher explaining the thinking behind this approach. My rhetorical goal with this paper was not to urge American early childhood educators to copy this Japanese practice, but rather to introduce an alternative way of thinking and talking about managing children's misbehavior.

My goal was admittedly provocative: to use a Japanese example to question taken-for-granted American assumptions about good practice. And yet I was taken aback by the virulence of the reviewers' reports. I seem to have long ago thrown them away or misfiled the reviews, but my memory is of phrases such as "it would be irresponsible of *Young Children* to publish a paper that endorses a teacher standing by while one child hurts another" and "the approach described in this paper flies in the face of everything we know about how adults should respond to children's violence towards each other." One reader suggested that the paper could only be published if the Japanese approach were presented not as an interesting alternative but instead as a negative example of what not to do.

We can read in these reviewers' critiques some core values of American early childhood education. A hallmark of quality programs is first of all to allow no child to harm another. Another hallmark is constructive intervention in disputes, which are viewed as teachable moments where teachers can usefully scaffold children's social development. To stand by doing nothing while one child physically hurts another is irresponsible, the antithesis of good quality. Children who attend a preschool where teachers do not intervene in children's fights and fail to model and scaffold mutually respectful conflict resolution cannot be expected to enter first grade able to control themselves and respond appropriately to each other. When this preschool has student teacher ratios of 30 to one, children should turn out deficient in other ways as well. And yet, Japanese children seem to enter first grade at least as happy, bright, and socially competent as their preschool educated American peers. How can this be?

### The French Problem

For a second cross-cultural example, consider the case of the French *école maternelle*. I am currently working with an international team of researchers studying how early childhood education and care programs in Europe and the U.S. are serving children of recent immigrants. Our study is just beginning, but it is already apparent that France's approach to working with children of immigrants, and more generally to early childhood education, differs radically from that of the United States. Indeed, France differs in ways that present to American notions of quality a challenge even more direct and disturbing than does the case of Japan. I would wager that just about any *école maternelle* you could find would score even more poorly than a Japanese *hoikuen* or *yochien* on a NAEYC quality inspection. The student/teacher ratios in *école maternelle*, as in Japan, are around 25 to one. But unlike in Japan, the teachers in France, who are trained and certified as elementary teachers, have little or no early childhood education training. Indeed, the *école maternelle*, which enrolls children as young as two year olds, is the beginning of public elementary education in France and thus by definition is an educational rather than, like the *crèche* system that serve children under

three, an early childhood domain. The curriculum of the *école maternelle* is unapologetically teacher-centered and academic. For children four and older, play occurs only on the playground during recess. There is little or no interest in constructivism, child initiated activities, or the project approach. Moreover, there is no multicultural curriculum, no acknowledgment of cultural differences, other than pork alternatives at lunch, and no bilingual education.

Does this mean French preschools lack quality? Many people might say so, but few of them are French. There is little internal debate about the quality of early childhood education in France, no public discourse of dissatisfaction with the *école maternelle* system, and no pilgrimages to Reggio Emilia in search of inspiration to leverage change. There are scholars of early childhood education in France who raise critical questions and who encourage curricular change, wishing that French early childhood education were a bit less school-like, but their arguments do not have much traction. There was a brief period in the aftermath of the 1968 student uprisings when critiques of the *école maternelle* and *crèche* systems from leftists intellectuals and community groups led to some structural reforms and to the rise, temporarily, of alternative childcare centers. But French parents and French society seem in general to be satisfied with their nation's approach to early childhood education. Attendance in school in France is not mandatory until age six, and yet more than 95% of parents in France enroll their children in at least two years of *école maternelle*.

What then does this say about our notions of quality in early childhood education? One possibility is that our notions of quality are correct and universal and that French and Japanese preschools are mediocre institutions that serve children badly and that French and Japanese educators, parents, and their societies in general are blind to what is wrong with their systems. But another possibility, and one much more inherently plausible to an unreformed cultural relativist such as me, is that the French and Japanese cases challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions that quality standards are universal, generalizable, and non-contextual.

As I write this section of the paper in my hotel room in Paris after a day spent videotaping in an *école maternelle*, I can report, for what it is worth, that French preschool children do not appear to be suffering. More objective evidence would be that they end up doing as well academically as children in countries that have systems of early childhood education that would score much better on NAEYC quality standards. Everyone in France attends *école maternelle*, and the society seems none the worse for it. By and large children in France go on from *école maternelle* to grow up to be adults who by all appearances are happy, moral, economically successful, and democratic. Or at least no less so than adults in Italy, England, or the United States.

What gives the French problem the potential to challenge the taken-for-grantedness of our core cultural beliefs, including those about quality in early childhood education, is not so much that their practices are different but also that their explanations for their practices represent a way of thinking that is foreign to us, which is surprising considering the similarities of our democratic traditions. An example is the veil controversy that currently is raging in France and giving France a black eye not just in Islamic countries but in Europe and North America as well. The recently passed French law banning the wearing of veils and other cultural or religious clothing by teachers or students in schools is supported as an expression of the French values of Republicanism and *laïcité* (secularism). Republicanism means that

everyone who lives in France and agrees to live by the laws (and customs) of French society is entitled to full equality and protection under the law. Among the proponents of the anti-veil legislation are left wing and women's groups. In other words, forces in society that we would expect in the U.S. to be on the side of celebrating cultural diversity in the classroom in France are likely to push to have cultural differences including languages other than French left at the classroom door (or better yet, left at home). It must be said that many leftists are against the laws prohibiting the veil while many on the right support the prohibition. Many adherents of Republicanism argue that the veil law is hypocritical (in denying Islamophobia and being blind to the dominance of Christian symbols within the supposedly secular public realm) and counterproductive in further marginalizing minority groups. But for the purposes of my argument the important point here is that socially conscious citizens in France who support immigration and equal rights often are opposed to educational multiculturalism. This is a difference so profound that it can function (if we allow it to) as a challenge for American scholars, what LeVine would call "the French problem," or what the French refer to, proudly, as "French exceptionalism." The logic of Republicanism as practiced in French early childhood education has the power to challenge our notions of multicultural education, which in France is widely viewed as a wrong-headed and counter-productive approach to cultural, racial, and religious diversity. Once we allow the French problem to question our taken-for-granted assumptions about the value of multicultural education, we are faced with possibility that we believe in multiculturalism despite the absence of adequate empirical evidence to support its efficacy. Multicultural educational practices such as having dolls of various colors in the play area and celebrating a variety of cultural and religious holidays in school is a quality standard that I suggest is more a cultural belief and value than an objective, empirically supported truth. Moreover, I suggest this same logic applies to all standards of quality in early childhood education.

In the sections that follow I discuss a series of problems I as an educational anthropologist have with the concept of quality standards. I am not suggesting that stakeholders in early childhood education programs should not talk about or seek quality. I am arguing that attempts to come up with universal, decontextualized, external standards of quality are conceptually flawed, politically dangerous, and often counter-productive.

### *Cultural Relativism*

What I am calling here the Japanese and French problems for American early childhood education are examples of the logic of what anthropologists call cultural relativism. One corollary of this concept is that the beliefs and practices of a culture cannot be meaningfully evaluated using the criteria of another culture. This is the most often cited and most controversial tenet of cultural relativism, controversial mostly because it is blamed for moral relativism, an inability or unwillingness of anthropologists to take moral stands. This accusation reflects a misunderstanding of anthropology and of anthropologists (who do in fact often get morally and politically involved in causes affecting the cultures they study). At its core, cultural relativism is an epistemological rather than a moral concept which argues that it is intellectually and methodologically unsound to attempt to understand another people's cultural practices using the assumptions and categories of one's own culture. The second corollary of cultural relativism, one that is less talked about but more germane to the task at hand, is that the beliefs, practices, and standards of our own culture are cultural and as such are no more or less deserving of being considered universal than are those of any other

culture. Japanese and French beliefs about early childhood education are a challenge to American quality standards because they suggest that these standards are not universal or culture free but instead are reflections of values and concerns of particular people in a particular time and place.

For example, the fact that *yochien*, *hoikuen*, and *école maternelle* operate effectively with twenty-five or more four-year-old children per teacher works to challenge the American belief that lowering student-teacher ratios produces higher educational quality. My reading of the research on ratios suggests that this causal relationship holds within the United States but not cross-culturally. Given American pedagogy, which emphasizes dyadic interaction between the teacher and each of her students, larger classes seem to lead to a diminution of quality (cf. R. Ehrenberg et al., 2001). But in systems of education including those of France and Japan whose pedagogical approach is fundamentally different, class size and student-teacher ratios are not important quality factors (Tobin, Davidson, & Wu, 1987).

Similar arguments can be made about the culture-boundedness of multicultural education (which is seen as divisive, superficial, and insufficiently secular by French early childhood educators) and of the belief that teachers should intervene in children's disputes, a practice that is seen as a counter-productive strategy by many Japanese and French educators.

This does not suggest that NAEYC is wrong to insist on low student-teacher ratios, to promote multicultural education, or to introduce teachers to strategies for mediating children's disagreements. A national organization has a right and even an obligation to put forward national standards. These standards become a problem when we lose sight of the fact that they are cultural and contextual and not universal (Fuller & Clark, 1994; Lubeck et al., 2001); when they are applied, imperialistically, to systems of early childhood education outside of our country; and when they are imposed on communities within the United States who do not fully endorse the values and beliefs of the dominant culture.

### *Progressivism*

Quality standards change from generation to generation (or even decade to decade). What was taken for quality a generation or two ago we now see as a reflection of ignorance. Quality standards are most typically justified using language of progressivism—"contemporary research on—fill in the blank: brain development, speech, cognition, pre-literacy, media effects, maternal-child bonding, nutrition, and so on—informs the quality standards that follow in this document." It is no doubt the case that research in all these areas is of high quality and that new and important things are being learned every day. But the claim that quality standards follow in some simple and direct and value-free way from scientific discovery is spurious. This was one of the main problems I and others had from the start with DAP, the claim that good, best, or merely appropriate practice can be deduced from knowledge of child development. Knowing how children develop does not automatically suggest any particular best practice, any particular student/teacher ratio, any particular approach to dealing with misbehavior, or any particular strategy for serving children of recent immigrants. It is also the problem I have with applying brain research to early childhood education. The study of the early development of myelination and neural synapses is important work, but it leads in no straightforward way to any particular preschool curriculum or practice. And yet training materials for preschool teachers are full of claims that their

approach is informed by “the latest breakthroughs in brain science.” Just as anthropologists are relativists when it comes to judging cultural differences, so too are we skeptical about claims about the superiority of the practices or knowledge of the contemporary era to those of the eras that came before. I would argue that contemporary standards of quality in early childhood education are less a result of scientific progress than a reflection of contemporary concerns and values. The quality standards of earlier eras were not worse, just different. To believe otherwise is to suffer from progressivism, the unwarranted belief that the standards and practices of every generation are better than those that came before.

### The Global and the Local

In his book *Science in Action* (1988), Bruno Latour introduces the notion that ideas or processes that are able to operate outside of their original context will inevitably compete with and eventually defeat ideas and processes that cannot be generalized. Latour suggests that there are two different kinds of scientific knowledge: the local and the universal. The universal types, such as the Linnean botanical classificatory scheme, are not necessarily better science than the local types (such as the Hawaiian ethnobotanical schema); but they spread more successfully not just because they are pushed by more powerful forces (e.g. colonialists, multi-national businesses, prestigious universities) but also because they are less dependent on context. Indeed, it is precisely their relative lack of context dependency that makes them attractive in the first place to colonial powers. The science of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British colonizers of the tropics worked by ignoring or assimilating rather than acknowledging or learning from local meanings (B. Tobin, 1999). A religion featuring gods that belong to particular valleys, such as many of the deities of the Hawaiians, could not become a world religion as could a religion like Christianity, which featured a god who is omniscient, who belongs to no one place, and has wisdom for people, in all times, in all places.

The argument I am making here is that a cost of decontextualized quality standards in early childhood education will be that local approaches that are well adapted to their local context will be driven into extinction by ideas and programs that are less context-dependent. A case in point: the renowned preschools of the Reggio Emilia region of Italy. My argument is not with Reggio Emilia’s preschools or with the idea of preschools in other parts of Italy or the world learning from Reggio Emilia, but of Reggio Emilia as a quality standard and Reggio Emilia as a decontextualized force. I have no doubt that Reggio Emilia has excellent preschools. But the first irony I want to point out is that so do many other preschools in other Italian regions and in other countries, preschools that receive little or no outside attention. This raises the question of what has made the early childhood education system of Reggio Emilia so exportable while interesting and potentially useful early childhood educational ideas from other regions of Italy and from France, Japan, and China have failed to catch on internationally? I will not attempt to give an adequate answer to this complicated question; rather, I will suggest that reasons that contribute to the success of “Reggio” abroad (as the Reggio Emilia early care and education approach is commonly called in the U.S.) include the following: (a) Italy has a tradition recognized internationally of having great ideas about early childhood education (think Montessori); (b) tourists like visiting that part of Italy, which is beautiful and has appetizing food (think Multi Mario on the food channel and Under the Tuscan Sun); and (c) Reggio Emilia’s curriculum emphasizes aesthetic tastes that are highly consistent with those of the mostly middle class educators who visit. I do not

mean to come across as critical of Reggio Emilia, which for many reasons I admire. My concerns about the way Reggio Emilia travels are shared by some Italian educators, including some intimately involved with Reggio. My colleague Rebecca New, who knows Reggio as well or better than any other non-Italian, points out that the Italian take on all this foreign excitement about Reggio Emilia is that Reggio has great preschools, but so do many other Italian cities. She argues that Italians in other cities would no more try to copy Reggio Emilia's preschools than they would give up their local cheeses or wines for those made in Parma or Umbria. What makes Reggio Emilia's system of child care and education so special is the same thing that makes Italian wines and cheeses so special—each reflects the locale where they are made. This does not mean that they cannot be consumed or enjoyed outside their region. But it does mean they cannot be mass consumed without risking losing what makes them special in the first place and that they should be consumed alongside of rather than in place of locally made products. New (2001) writes, "Each of these interpretations—whether of a good cheese, a good wine, or the proper way to make a certain pasta dish—is associated with a particular place and its people, with both the benefits and the burdens of responsibility shared by the stakeholders" (p. 212).

This brings me to the other great irony about Reggio Emilia (which again I take from New): One core, perhaps the core, idea behind the Reggio Emilia preschools is that they are based on a deep connection between the school staff and the larger community. Parent and community involvement is key and ongoing. And this involvement reflects the socialist political beliefs of the city, the parents, and the teachers and administrators. But what happens to the socialist principles that provide the moral foundation to Reggio Emilia's approach when Reggio comes to the U.S? Reggio Emilia gets stripped of its politics, of its socialism, of the elements that are objectionable to many Americans, and what gets embraced are those parts of Reggio Emilia most attractive to American middle-class sensibilities.

Quality standards that aspire to be universal, or at least national in a nation as large as the U.S., inevitably are either, in Latour's terms, universalizing standards (like Linnean botany) or, like Reggio Emilia, standards that have been stripped of their localness and their context. These context-less standards, when backed by national organizations, academic authority, and political mandates, inevitably spread. In many ways, this spread is a good thing. It introduces standards of quality in locales where there have been none and pressures communities to invest more heavily in improving early childhood education. But this approach carries the cost of a loss of local specificity and national diversity. Fuller and Clarke make a similar argument in their contrast of "policy mechanics," who seek educational improvement through uniformity, and "classroom culturalists," who emphasize the importance of cultural fit. A useful analogy can be made here to biodiversity—the spread of universal standards of quality has the negative effects of replacing local standards, which may be a better fit to local conditions, with national ones and of thereby depleting the diversity of educational approaches to be found in the nation.

### *Colonialism*

Education has long been an important tool of colonialism. The introduction of a system of education by a colonizing power to a colonized people is an act of magnanimity from the perspective of the colonizer and of disempowerment from the perspective of the colonized. Education is a strategy employed by colonizers to inculcate their values. As recent scholarship in postcolonialism and the working of globalization make clear, the introduction of educational values and practices by a colonizing or globally dominating force presents a less powerful country with a difficult dilemma. In order to win approval (and secure bank loans) from the global power, countries are compelled to adapt reform initiatives that often include grafting foreign notions of quality on to their education systems. To the degree they have already incorporated the worldview of the core nations, intellectuals and bureaucrats in peripheral

nations will tend to view these reform initiatives as valuable and salutary pressures on their people and government.

Turkey is an excellent case in point for the interplay between colonialism, globalization, and early childhood education. I take the argument that follows from the work of my doctoral student, Fikriye Kurban (forthcoming). The Turkish government has made a commitment to getting Turkey into the European Union. One of the conditions the EU put to Turkey for admission was to install a Western system of early childhood education. Until recently, most Turkish parents, especially those living outside of Istanbul and Ankara, have preferred to not enroll their young children in preschools. Officials of the European Union, the World Bank, and other centers of global power see early childhood education of a certain type as crucial to the development of Western/European/global/capitalist values. The reasoning is complicated, but includes the promotion of secularism, a focus on economic development through the production of a pliable labor market, and the introduction of mothers of young children to the labor force.

A strategy being employed to leverage change in Turkey towards a Western system of early childhood education is that funds from the World Bank and other sources are being used to send a cohort of young Turks to earn doctoral degrees in early childhood education at American and European universities with the understanding that they will return to lead reform of early childhood teacher preparation in the nation's universities.

Many Turkish citizens, firm believers in Republicanism, support this effort as a desirable and necessary step toward further modernization and participation in Europe and in the global economy. But many others resent the pressure to adopt American and European practices of child socialization and education. Traditional Turkish beliefs about what young children should know and how they should be cared for and taught are very different those held by progressive educators in Europe and the United States.

These dynamics present a complicated moral and epistemological challenge to those of us American early childhood education experts asked to mentor a Turkish doctoral student, to speak about best practice at a meeting in Turkey, or to participate as a consultant in the introduction of American early childhood curricula and quality standards to the Turkish context. An invitation to share what we know and believe about early childhood education with government experts and early childhood educators in Turkey is flattering and hard to resist. But we must consider how in doing so we get caught up in processes of globalization and the circulations of knowledge and cultural capital that date back to the era of high colonialism, as articulated in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. As with the problem with the spread of a decontextualized version of Reggio Emilia discussed above, we must balance the value of the dissemination of cutting-edge notions of quality in early childhood education with the dangers of participating in a decline of global diversity in approaches to early childhood education and of contributing to the loss of fit between a community's beliefs and needs and their system of early childhood education and care.

Turkey, of course, is by no means the only site where these struggles are taking place. My recent research in China shows a similar determination by the government to use reform of early childhood education as a tool for producing a labor force able to compete more effectively in the global economy. Many American early childhood educators would no doubt welcome the spread of learning centers, self-expression, and the project approach in Chinese preschools. But as an educational anthropologist I worry about how these approaches will be integrated with Chinese cultural values and be made responsive to the concerns and conditions of local Chinese communities. Many countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia that are much poorer than Turkey and China have much less ability to stand up to pressure to introduce a Western approach to early childhood education. Help from North Americans in

developing their systems of early childhood education is welcomed by many poor countries, but it is important that they do so on their own terms, in ways that respect their local cultures.

### *Internal colonialism*

Colonialism does not only occur abroad. Cultural variation within the United States means that it is critical that early childhood quality standards be responsive to the concerns and perspectives of local communities, who often hold beliefs about child development and goals for their children that are significantly unlike those of middle class white Americans. In the absence of such responsiveness there exists a condition of internal colonialism, in which the perspectives and interests of some are imposed on others.

The authors of recent versions of Developmentally Appropriate Practice and of NAEYC quality standards for early childhood education are to be congratulated for producing documents that are much more sensitive to cultural differences than were earlier versions. NAEYC accredited programs must demonstrate that they are responsive to the cultures of the children they serve and that these cultures are made visible in the classroom and in the curriculum. But as the above discussion of French Republicanism suggests, the aggressive multicultural approach found in most American quality standards is itself culture-bound, in the sense of being reflective of the values and beliefs of the culture of American progressive education. This progressive position is questioned by many groups of Americans uncomfortable with multiculturalism, bilingualism, child-centered pedagogy, constructivism, and other hallmarks of quality in American early childhood education. There are many parents of children in preschools in the U.S., both white and of color, working class and middle class, long time residents as well as recent immigrants, who have deep and fundamental disagreements with the core beliefs and values of progressive early childhood education (see Delpit, 1996). One possibility is to view these dissenting groups as being misinformed or ignorant—if they understood DAP, bilingual education, and constructivism, they would support them. But this position is deeply self-serving and problematic, as it implies a hierarchical relationship between progressive early childhood educators and the communities they aim to serve (a problem Marxists refer to as “vanguardism”). A better approach is to enter into a dialogue about quality standards with parents and teachers in local settings in which the starting assumption is one of respect for all positions held, viewing critiques of progressive positions not as ignorance but as difference.

I can provide an example from my own work. Three years ago, as part of a sequel to *Preschool in Three Cultures*, we made a videotape of a typical day at Alhambra Preschool in Phoenix, a preschool run by the Alhambra School District for children identified, by virtue of their parents' low income, as being at-risk. At the time we made the videotape, about two-thirds of the children in this “Early Childhood Block Grant” preschool were of Mexican background, many children of recent immigrants.

In January of 2002, at the opening session of the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education conference we hosted here in Tempe, I held a premiere screening of the Alhambra and the new Japanese and Chinese videotapes. After the screening, we held a discussion where I was surprised by the critiques leveled at the Alhambra program by my fellow reconceptualizers. There were criticisms of the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance (Alhambra Preschool at the time was located within a middle school within a school district where the Pledge is the routine opening to the day); of the morning calendar time (which included some letter and number recognition activities and sounding out of the first letter of the month and in children's names); and of the absence of an explicit multicultural curriculum. Positive comments noted the evident kindness and good spirit of the teachers and the presence of Spanish in the classroom—children spoke English and Spanish to the teachers, one of whom responded mostly in English and the other according to the language the child used.

And yet even those commentators who expressed pleasure to hear children and teachers speaking Spanish wished that the program were more explicitly bilingual, rather than privileging English as the language of instruction.

I was a bit surprised and taken aback by the criticisms because my take on Alhambra Preschool was that it was providing quality service to children and their families, that its curriculum and routines were typical of preschools located within public schools, and that it was attuned to its local context and particularly to the values and wishes of its parents. Indeed, expecting the reactions to be more positive, I had invited the Alhambra teachers and director to the screening, failing to anticipate that they would be placed in a situation where they would feel compelled to defend their practice to an audience of professors. I left the discussion that followed the screening feeling a bit annoyed with my fellow reconceptualizers for being so critical (which is an odd reaction on my part given that the organizing principle of our group is to be critical) and also guilty that the videotape we had made at Alhambra failed to communicate the great strengths of the program, which provides caring, thoughtful, culturally appropriate and welcomed services to children and their families while operating under considerable fiscal and bureaucratic constraints.

Several months later, I showed the Alhambra videotape to a meeting of the directors of Arizona Early Childhood Block Grant Preschools, a gathering that included directors of programs that like Alhambra are NAEYC accredited and several NAEYC accreditation validators. The comments were at first more positive than those made by the reconceptualizers, but as the discussion progressed criticisms were made of Alhambra Preschool for being a bit too teacher-centered, for the Pledge and calendar activities, and for a series of more specific complaints about room set up, food service, and the language used by teachers in mediating disputes.

Surprised that NAEYC directors and validators and the reconceptualizers would have such similar critiques of Alhambra Preschool (surprised because the reconceptualizing movement has historically been critical of NAEYC and DAP), I found myself feeling defensive both for myself and for Alhambra, and determined to do a better job of demonstrating in my subsequent presentations and writings what I see as Alhambra's considerable strengths. Believing that the most important of these strengths is the responsiveness of Alhambra Preschool to the parents it serves, I organized a screening of the videotape we had made in 2001 to the parents of children at Alhambra in 2003. In the intervening years, the percentage of children of Mexican background in the program had risen from about two-thirds to nearly 90%.

About 30 parents came to the evening screening. After showing the video, we distributed response forms, asking parents to say what they liked best about the program and what they wished could be changed and then we held a discussion, in English and Spanish. Parents were uniformly supportive of the Alhambra program, the teachers, and the director and office staff, who were praised and thanked for being responsive and helpful, not just with questions and concerns relating directly to preschool, but also with helping parents fill out forms, directing them to social services, and creating a welcoming atmosphere. I then asked parents to discuss the specific features of the program critiqued by the reconceptualizers and the NAEYC program directors and validators. Parents expressed comfort with the saying of the Pledge: "We are in the United States so it is appropriate that our children should show respect to the flag. If we were in Mexico our children would be doing a lot more of this kind of patriotic activities." Some felt that the focus on pre-academic skills was just right; others wanted a little bit more academic emphasis. All praised the teachers, with some noting the respect Mexican parents expect children to show towards their *maestras*. Parents were satisfied with the mix of English and Spanish in the classroom, saying they appreciated having teachers who could talk to them and to their children in Spanish. There was an

interesting debate on the question of whether the preschool should give more emphasis to Mexican culture, with one father saying that it would be nice if his children were taught a bit about Mexican holidays and cultural traditions so they could talk more easily with relatives back in Mexico, but with most parents making the point that given the shortness of the school day (2.5 hours in either a morning or afternoon session) they wanted the school to emphasize academic and social readiness and the learning of English, saying teaching Spanish and Mexican culture is parents' responsibility. In discussing how the teachers dealt with children's misbehavior in the video, parents made an interesting distinction between *enseñar* and *educar*, both of which are usually translated into English as "to teach," but which in Spanish carry related but distinct meanings of "to point out or show" (*enseñar*) versus "to raise or bring up" (*educar*), some suggesting that the second responsibility is more theirs as parents than it is teachers', and thus their children misbehavior at school calls for intervention more from them than from the teachers.

I left this discussion pleased with the power of the videotape to catalyze a discussion among parents and impressed with the eloquence of the parents and the sophistication of their arguments about children, child rearing, culture, language, and education. I was also left with a sense of the divide between the perspectives of these first and second-generation Mexican-American parents and those of the reconceptualizers and NAEYCers (who are more or less on the same side of this issue).

### Conclusions

Where does this leave me as an anthropologist thinking about quality standards? First of all, I note the danger of over-generalizing and essentializing. The account I've presented here is more anecdotal than systematic and told in a way as to make a series of dramatic points. In real life, unlike in this paper, neither reconceptualizers, NAEYC validators, Mexican immigrant parents, nor French and Japanese educators are homogeneous groups made up of people who always see the world in the same way. Nevertheless, though the story I have told here is speculative, anecdotal, and over-generalizing, it presents an important challenge to how we think about quality standards in early childhood education. The implications of this story are not straightforward. The fact that many Mexican-American parents support pedagogical and curricular positions that are less progressive than those of reconceptualizers and NAEYC validators does not necessarily mean that programs that serve children of these parents should retreat from progressive practices. To be clear, I use "progressive" here to refer to practices such as multicultural education, constructivism, and child-centered curriculum, not to an inherently more advanced or superior position. Those of us who believe that these progressive practices represent the highest quality early childhood education have an obligation to offer our best practices to children and parents. But, at the same time, we also have an obligation to listen to parents, to not impose our notions of best practice on them or their children, and to consider the possibility that where we disagree they might be right and we wrong.

Cultural relativism is a useful but hard to apply concept here. Anthropologists believe that cultural differences should be respected and not treated as deficits. To do otherwise is to engage in colonialism, ethnocentrism, and intellectual provincialism. But it is not clear in discussions of best practice in multicultural contexts whose culture(s) are to be respected. For example, in the case of France's Republican approach to dealing with diversity, as an anthropologist I am inclined to not judge the French by my American cultural assumptions about diversity and to respect the French exception, the right of the French as a culture and a nation to pursue their own strategies for dealing with what is, after all, a thorny problem than no culture or nation can claim to have solved. And yet as an anthropologist I am disturbed by the thought that the French Republican approach does not acknowledge the cultural beliefs and concerns of its citizens who come from cultural backgrounds other than French.

In the case of the U.S., practices for dealing with diversity in early childhood education could not be more different than in France, and yet the epistemological and ethical dilemma is more or less the same. As an anthropologist, I am inclined to not judge or criticize early childhood educators in the United States for pursuing a strategy for dealing with diversity that reflects American culture values and traditions and beliefs of American early childhood experts about best practice. And yet, on the other hand, as an anthropologist, I am concerned that American multicultural, constructivist, child-centered approach to early childhood education may not reflect the cultural beliefs, concerns, and perspectives of some of the communities it serves.

The best answer I can give to this conundrum is to call for us to develop mechanisms and techniques for improved dialogue between early childhood educators and the diverse communities they serve. One important step is to give greater voice to the perspectives about early childhood educational quality of immigrant parents. My colleagues and I are conducting a literature review, and we have struggled to find research that presents the voices of immigrant parents saying what they want for their children in preschool. Lisa Delpit (1996) has presented a powerful challenge to notions of progressive practice from the point of view of a Black educator. Sally Lubeck and her team at the University of Michigan did important work on the role of culture and context in Head Start programs, with attention to the concerns of parents from different communities (Lubeck et al., 2001). Cindy Ballenger (1998) has presented an insightful look into the worldview of teachers from Haiti. Guadalupe Valdez (1996) presents the viewpoints of recent immigrants from Mexico about their children's education, but her focus begins with elementary school. Susan Holloway et al.'s 2000 *Through My Own Eyes: Single Mothers and the Culture of Poverty* is an eloquent account of cultural differences in beliefs about child rearing and education of African-American and Latino young single mothers. Systematic studies of immigrant parents' views about early childhood education remain a serious gap in the research literature.

In an attempt to address this gap, colleagues and I have just launched a major new study called *Children of Immigrants in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings in Five Countries (England, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States): Parent and Teacher Perspectives*. Using a variation of the *Preschool in Three Cultures* method, we are showing preschool teachers and immigrant parents videotapes of typical days in their preschools and then asking them to discuss what they see as the program's strengths and weaknesses. We are hopeful that this approach will serve not only to present how five countries are dealing with diversity in their preschools but also the heretofore missing voice of immigrant parents. If the videotapes work well to stimulate conversation, we hope to make them available as a tool for parent-staff conversation.

It is out of conversations between parents, staff, and directors that quality standards most meaningfully can arise. The suggestion that quality standards should be developed over and over again by local communities may seem whimsical or even paradoxical, as the very notion of standards implies a locus of authority and knowledge that transcends the local. But I would reply to this concern with another paradox—it is paradoxical to impose or proscribe constructivism and other progressive pedagogies onto local settings. If we believe in constructivism as the best pedagogical approach for young children and in the idea that knowledge is most meaningfully acquired when it is constructed rather than received, then why should we not we have the same belief about teachers and parents? If this logic is true for children, it is true also for their teachers: What they most need are not standards passed on from on high but instead an environment that facilitates the process of developing their own standards in collaboration with parents and their local community. This process can and should include experts sharing notions of best practice with teachers, but not the imposition

of these notions. The process of developing standards is in itself empowering. NAEYC implicitly endorses this point by emphasizing the production of a “self-study” document as a key step in the accreditation process. Quality standards developed collaboratively in local contexts have the advantage of being responsive to local conditions, consistent with the local culture, and understood and supported by teachers and parents.

Quality in early childhood education should be a process rather than a product, an ongoing conversation rather than a document. A good start would be to drop the word “standards,” which implies a one-size-fits-all solution to questions of practice. Or, if we must speak in terms of standards, two of them should be “has a process for involving parents in discussions of best practice,” and “shows evidence of adapting the standards to the needs and values of the local community.”

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