INVITED PAPER

Quality Assurance
Whose Quality and Whose Assurance?

MARI LYNN FLEER
University of Canberra

and

ANNE KENNEDY
Monash University

ABSTRACT: Government involvement in quality assurance is becoming the trend in many countries, including New Zealand. What values underpin the systems that evolve in each country, and who has given legitimacy to them? In the context of the prevailing ideology of early childhood, this paper unpacks quality assurance in Australia and comments on the assumptions, taken for granted premises and values which are implicit within such a process, with a view to providing valuable lessons for others who are considering going down this path.

Introduction

There is a predominance of terms such as quality measures, excellence, best practice and benchmarking in the education and care community within English speaking countries. A rationalist discourse has not just stimulated measurement activity, it has also led to calls for accountability. Early childhood education has not escaped these changes (Farquhar, 1999a, b). As such, it is important to unpack not just the accountability processes, but the values underpinning them. What do we mean by quality assurance? Whose quality are we talking about? In the process of developing quality assurance guidelines and processes, we have distanced ourselves from these issues and as such, we have come to believe that:

…facts can be split from values, we hope to treat definitions and choices as technical issues and leave them to expert technicians, without the need to question how and why they are arrived at.
The ‘discourse of quality’ offers us confidence and reassurance by holding out the prospect that a certain score or just the very use of the word quality means that something is to be trusted, that it really is good (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 92).

In the process of developing quality assurance programmes such as the Australian Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS), not only have we distanced ourselves from the values that underpin the guidelines that become sanctioned, we also view these guidelines as universally relevant:

Quality is presented as a universal truth that is value and culture free and applicable equally anywhere in the field under consideration: in short, quality is a decontextualized concept (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 94).

This paper seeks to critically examine quality assurance in early childhood through a case study of the QIAS in Australia, revealing the underlying assumptions, taken for granted premises and the values implicit within the support material. QIAS material developed in 1993 has been used for this analysis. It is acknowledged that the review process for QIAS is currently underway, and it is likely that some of the issues discussed in this paper may have been dealt with in the re-development of new QIAS support material.

The QIAS in Australia

Shifts in Government childcare policy in Australia in 1990 saw the establishment of a accreditation consultative committee in Australia. This Committee recommended that a national council be formed to oversee the establishment of an accreditation process and the development of a two-phase approach to accreditation, involving voluntary accreditation and accreditation linked to fee relief (childcare subsidy). In 1991 one million Australian dollars was budgeted for the establishment of an Interim National Accreditation Council.

Whilst state and territory licensing and regulation procedures in Australia monitor such things as “staff/child rations, group size, staff training, physical space requirements” (Wangman, 1992, p. 12) accreditation procedures were to examine the quality of the experience for the child. Wangman (1992) states that the accreditation process is designed to examine quality in relation to “interactions that occur between staff and children, the developmental appropriateness of the curriculum, and the implementation of appropriate health and safety procedures” (p.12).
The National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc. was established in 1993 as an incorporated association. “There are 7 members of Council appointed by the Minister for Family and Community Services who make decisions about whether centres should be accredited or not, and the period of accreditation (the period between reviews)” (www.nacac.gov.au/aboutus.htm; 17.2.2000). Although the Council is the major decision making body, it is supported by office staff, peer reviewers from the field (childcare workers and directors) and moderators (often, but not always academic staff) throughout Australia.

In brief, centres that wish to become accredited in Australia must participate in the QIAS process. In order to participate centres must purchase three documents from the National Childcare Accreditation Council, including the appropriate handbook (1993), workbook and self-study report.

The handbook outlines the 52 Principles of quality care. It details indicators of the different levels of quality that can be expected (basic, good quality and high quality). The workbook is a step-by-step guide to help staff in examining their practices and policies. It also contains parent questionnaires and staff observation record sheets. The final document is a self-study report. One report is for submission to the Council, the other is for centre use only. Staff in centres examine each of the 52 Principles and rate themselves against each as well as providing any comments or explanations. A review of the Principles is currently being conducted (Commonwealth Child Care Advisory Council, 2000).

In June 1995 the Federal Government commissioned the evaluation of QIAS and found that “the system was having substantial perceived benefits for service quality, and that most of the study’s participants had a positive attitude towards accreditation” (Murray, 1996, p. 12). Murray (1996) notes in her analysis of the report that serious methodological flaws preclude the full acceptance of the report. She states that the response rate to the questionnaire was only 21 percent, and of those who responded only 25 percent indicated that they had examined the Principles. She concluded that most respondents had not been engaged in the accreditation process long enough to make informed comments on the questionnaire (e.g. 1-2 months only), thus indicating that the evaluation was conducted prematurely.

Independent studies have also been carried out on QIAS. For example, Jackson (1996) surveyed staff in 50 long day care centres across all areas of the Sydney region and found that most

… agreed that accreditation ensures high quality care but they found the process difficult, mainly due to lack of time. Work
conditions over all had not changed as almost half of the respondents do not have allocated time for written work” (p.17).

Whilst others (See MacNaughton, 1996, p. 29) have argued that improvements in quality are likely when ‘fourth generation’ action research is used in research ‘for’ quality improvement in early childhood services as opposed to research ‘about’ quality improvement. Unfortunately only a few Australian journal publications on accreditation and quality improvement in long day care centres could be found, and as such, there appears to be no comprehensive scholarly research on QIAS.

**Quality: Whose Quality?**

With the exception of MacNaughton’s work, published works in Australia on QIAS have taken the concept of quality as a given and known phenomenon. This is not a uniquely Australian orientation. Concerns for quality have been expressed elsewhere. For example, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) state:

> … the concept (of quality) itself has achieved such dominance that it is hardly questioned. For the most part it is taken for granted that there is some thing – objective, real, knowable – called quality (p.4).

They argue that the term quality has become an embedded construct within thinking in many areas, including early childhood education:

> …it now plays a dominant role in our thinking, our language and practices. The ‘age of quality’ is now well and truly upon us, and not just in relation to early childhood institutions, but every conceivable type of product and services (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 4).

Farquhar (1999a) has also commented on these trends, and warns against a one-word-fits-all construct. Her thoughtful critique of the research literature and her analysis of quality related documentation in New Zealand provide further evidence for the need to introduce “more precise terminology focused on what we actually mean and are interested in” (p. 7).

Unfortunately, the precisioning of quality is not the focus of attention in systems which are examining quality within services. On the whole, the issue of quality is taken for granted. For instance, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) note:
It has been assumed that both indicator and outcomes are universal and objective, identifiable through the application of expert knowledge and reducible to accurate measurement given the right techniques (p. 5).

And as a result, they argue that:

Rather than discovering the truth, and with certainty, we encounter multiple perspectives and ambivalence (p. 6).

Ochiltree (1994, p. 21) in summarising the different approaches to research on quality in early childhood services notes that: “…quality is a complex concept and can be defined in many ways depending on the objectives of the care and the perspective taken”. Farquhar (1990) identified that these perspectives include:

- Child development
- Government or regulatory
- Welfare or social service
- Parent

Farquhar (1990) provides additional perspectives including:

- The child
- Social policy
- Funding
- Staff
- Cultural

Katz (1993) discusses four perspectives for assessing quality in early childhood programmes:

- Top-down
- Outside-inside
- Bottom-up
- Inside

These perspectives address the notion of quality both as the various stakeholders experience it: children (bottom-up), families (outside-inside), staff (inside), and according to the characteristics of the service (top-down). QIAS encourages centres to ascertain the family and staff perspectives on the childcare experience but like most quality assurance mechanisms there is no requirement to ascertain the children’s perspective. Philosophical, ethical or pragmatic perspectives could also be used in research examining quality in early childhood services/programmes.
Whilst Ochiltree (1994) describes a perspective which she calls the “values approach”, we would argue that each of the perspectives listed is based on a value position which may or may not be explicitly articulated. For example, the value of pluralism underpins the cultural perspective and democratic values may be found in the “bottom-up” perspective.

The government/regulatory perspective could provide support for government involvement in quality regulatory or assurance activity in early childhood education because such an involvement may confirm their moral commitment and responsibility to child and family well-being from the basis of ‘public good’ provision. However, in the current climate of economic rationalism government involvement in quality assurance may be compromised by an even stronger commitment to market driven economies where services are privatised; the user pays; accountability is seen in terms of quantifiable outcomes and education has an instrumental value as a means to a pre-determined end.

Sylva and Nabuco (1996) cite the work of Munton et al. (1995) who argue against attempts to find a common definition of quality and recommend instead the use of dimensions when considering quality. These dimensions include effectiveness, acceptability, efficiency, access, equity and relevance. For each of the perspectives we have listed there would be different dimensions to consider. While the focus for much of the American quality research has been on quantifiable outcomes for children which reflects valuing of the effectiveness dimension, there is scope for research into quality in early childhood services which values dimensions such as equity or relevance.

Williams (1995) distinguishes between three types of approaches to quality and their underlying objectives or values:

- Total quality
- Quality assurance
- Quality control

Total quality is where programmes move forward from their current levels, through a process of involving all parties (including parents, children and staff). Total quality is a dynamic approach that stresses outcomes for everyone and involves a rich process of consultation and participation. Total quality sits at one end of a continuum (See Figure 1). At the other end is quality control. Quality control is a static approach focussed on objective standards. It is ideal for checking achievement, comparing standards and for enforcing requirements. In the middle of these two extremes is Quality assurance. Quality assurance is also a static approach, but has some dynamic aspects. It concentrates upon objective or measurable standards and includes elements such as evidence, monitoring and self-assessment. Quality assurance is useful for maintaining
standards and to manage quality upwards. QIAS in Australia sits firmly in the Quality assurance category. Although it would be desirable for reviewers of QIAS to reframe the system from quality assurance to total quality, little evidence exists of progress towards such a change. Williams’ (1995) continuum is useful for positioning QIAS and providing other ways of thinking about quality measures and processes in Australia, but also elsewhere.

**FIGURE 1: Williams’ (1995) Continuum of Quality Processes**

| Total Quality | Quality Assurance | Quality Control |

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**Dominant Discourse in Care and Education**

Universal truths regarding quality are grounded in the dominant ideology of the day. When professionals come together to assess quality, they bring to the table their inherent belief system about what is good practice or best practice in early childhood education and care. Here we see the multiple perspectives, but also the dominant discourses of early childhood articulated. Dominant discourses are often traditional agreed upon understandings.

As the definition of quality is taken for granted and treated as a given the main focus of the ‘discourse of quality’ is the achievement and evaluation of this expert-defined specification, rather than the construction (or deconstruction) of the specification (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 94). In this section, expert-defined specifications inherent in quality assurance, notably the traditional ideology of early childhood education will be examined for its underlying assumptions.

The first broad concern regarding quality assurance relates to the notion that specified indicators or Principles are theory free. In developing and agreeing to sets of Principles, particular theoretical orientations are positioned above others. The issue here is that this is not made explicit in the documentation. When one theory is followed, others are excluded and in this process some things are sanctioned and others are absent. Serious omissions regarding culture, gender and race are more likely to occur.
The second broad issue relates to the dominance of developmental psychology in early childhood education in Australia and in many other English speaking countries. Although the rhetoric of developmentally appropriate practice has been critiqued from a range of perspectives (Cullen, 1996), including a gender perspective (MacNaughton, 1995) and a cultural perspective (Fleer, 1995a, b), QIAS still encapsulates this theoretical orientation. The link between developmental psychology and quality assurance documents is not coincidental, as Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) note:

Developmental psychology has established a dominant position in the field of early childhood in America, including the search of quality in early childhood institutions; many researchers of quality in early childhood institutions have been developmental psychologists, developmental psychology has provided outcomes for quality work, and the two endeavours have shared assumptions, perspectives and methods (p. 13).

One reason why the discourse of quality has been taken up so readily, and unquestioningly, in the early childhood field is because it shares so many of the perspectives and methods of this dominant discipline (p. 100).

As such, the QIAS system, contrary to the rhetoric of improving practice, further entrenches the traditional paradigm. In this sense, QIAS in Australia has become a double-edged sword. QIAS is about improving practices, yet the framework does not easily allow other ways of thinking about the world to emerge. The sanctioning of the dominant discourse makes it difficult for other perspectives to be introduced. Under this system, change is very difficult and thinking cannot easily move forward. Similarly, it foregrounds mainstream or dominant worldviews. For example, Penn (1997 cited in Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999, p. 14) state:

Insisting on a common standard and common practices of educare (in South Africa) is highly problematic, not least for cultural reasons. As a number of commentators have pointed out, indigenous African cultures differ significantly from Anglo-American in their conceptions of child-rearing, and the enthusiastic transmission of ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ and Western models of nursery education or ‘educare’, far from enhancing competency in young children, maybe damaging to those who use it. Put at its bleakest, it is a form of cultural intimidation.
When quality assurance examines developmentally appropriate practices in centres, whose development and whose practices are being used as the benchmark for such assessment? Are other cultural worldviews considered in the assessment process? How are differing cultural worldviews of children and families considered within the assessment framework being espoused? Developmentally appropriate practice or indeed any curriculum or pedagogical model is always mediated through the teacher’s value system, experience and ability/skills as well as the constraints of the particular early childhood service such as staff continuity, planning and preparation time or resource provision.

The QIAS Principles

Structure of the QIAS Handbook

The QIAS Handbook consists of 52 Principles divided into sections that address interactions, the programme, nutrition, health and safety and centre management and staff development. Each of the principles and sections has a preamble which provides an overview of the meaning of the principle as well as particular aspects of the principle as it might apply to infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Following this overview, descriptors or exemplars are provided to indicate what the practice of this principle might look like at an unsatisfactory, basic, good and high quality standard. There are several problems with this type of format, as the following discussion will outline.

Firstly, centres may consider the high quality descriptors without giving sufficient consideration to the overall intent of a particular principle. For example, in Principle 21: “The program fosters creative development and aesthetic awareness”, one of the descriptors for high quality says the programme would have many different creative experiences “including the music, dance and art of Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders”. Centres could well include these aspects (appropriately or inappropriately) into their programme without any serious reflection on what it means to respect and acknowledge other cultures in appropriate ways.

In addition, some of the descriptors put the onus for responsibility for quality provision on the employment or use of outside experts or resource people. While accessing specialists may be appropriate and necessary at times, there is a danger as Sims (1995) asserts that by emphasising this aspect staff and management may not accept that the major responsibility for high quality care and education is their concern. Sims believes that the QIAS principle 32 which states: “The program provides for children with special needs”, reflects values inherent in mainstreaming and integration policies and practices rather than the
value of inclusivity where adaptation is unnecessary as every child is included in the first place.

Thirdly, providing very specific descriptors for each principle works against the notion of centres developing their own ethos, tone and atmosphere. Reports from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups have argued that the QIAS is too rigid for their communities to develop services that reflect their particular social and cultural perspectives (Lawton, 1996; Gollagher & Roche, 1996). Clearly the worldview being depicted in QIAS is Western and other cultural groups must respond to SSR documentation from within a Western framework. Whilst Principle 2 (e.g. Staff treat all children equally and try to accommodate their individual needs; They respect diversity of background) asks staff to cater for diversity, the Western orientation of QIAS is at a deeper level working against this outcome.

Finally, the framing of the QIAS Principles is more about assurance of quality systems and practices in centres, rather than about quality for children as members of their culture and society. The difficulty lies in that staff concentrate upon improving the setting, with the assumption that this will in turn mean improved quality for children. However, there is very little research evidence to establish this causal link.

Values

We take the view that the entire QIAS process is a value-laden exercise whether or not the values are explicitly stated or are implicit within the documentation. A brief discussion about values might be useful at this point. Values, beliefs and attitudes are terms that are used frequently and sometimes interchangeably but they are rarely defined. Parjares (1992, p. 203) acknowledges the difficulty in understanding their meaning when he writes of “clearing up a messy construct” in reference to his examination of teacher beliefs. He suggests that values are the substructures of beliefs and that clusters of beliefs become attitudes. In his “neat” definition Parjares provides a surface explanation of the these terms and the way they connect to each other but he fails to unpack the terms in any depth. Aspin (1999) provides a more thorough account. Values as Aspin explains are not absolute or relative; they are action guiding and objective in that we can agree on their meaning at the interpersonal level even though we might place weight on different ones. Beliefs involve an emotional commitment to a proposition and can be shared with others but their truth cannot be warranted. Attitudes are associated with a disposition towards something and reflect a personal and affective perspective. The emotional commitment involved in beliefs and attitudes make them difficult constructs to change.
This explanation on values confirms the position described earlier that rejects the notion of quality being defined as criteria of a fixed nature (absolutes) as well as rejecting the position of the post structuralists whose thinking at its extreme leads inevitably to value relativism. We do accept that shared understandings of core values concerned with children’s wellbeing are possible across diverse cultural and social contexts (for example, the United Nations convention on the rights of the child). Without such agreement about what ought to be for children and families we are unable to condemn policies and practices that demean, exploit or damage these people. In a childcare context value relativism could mean that a requirement that all the girls and boys in the centre were required to be circumcised would be considered on a par with the requirement that all the children need to wear hats outside during the summer months. The nonsense inherent in such a position of value relativity needs to be vigorously guarded against.

The argument is not that a quality framework can not be successfully developed and implemented, but rather that we set about finding how best to do this in a way that reflects the complexity of the issues. We need to become more explicit in recognising the values embedded in the process, thereby helping to avoid discrimination, contradictions, rigidity, domination and relativism. In the process of foregrounding the values implicit within QIAS we are also in a better position to evaluate the worth of the documentation in the light of what we know about how children think, learn and develop, and what we come to understand in the future about these areas. In this sense we can move theory and practice forward, and are not locked within one framework.

Values Embedded in the QIAS Principles

In the introduction section of the QIAS Handbook (1993) four values underpinning the system are discussed. Central in these values is the child-centred nature of the QIAS process. The notion of child-centred practice places an emphasis on the value of the individual: “Good quality care must appreciate the individuality of every child and treat all children equally” (QIAS Handbook, 1993, no page).

This individualism has been expressed through child-centeredness in rhetoric and in practice. Yet many critiques of child-centeredness have highlighted the limitations of this orientation and more recent theories have positioned the child as learner in relation to culture, community and context. For example, socially constructed learning models have demonstrated that learning occurs not as the ‘lone child’ but in conjunction with adults or more capable peers (Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, 1988).
In early childhood institutions, we often say that we are taking the perspective of the child and that our pedagogical practice is child-centred. What do we mean by that? Child-centredness seems to be such a concrete and unproblematic concept. But in practice it is very abstract and rather problematic. The very term child-centred might be thought to embody a particular modernist understanding of the child, as a unified, reified and essentialized subject – at the centre of the world – that can be viewed and treated apart from relationships and context. The postmodern perspective, in contrast, would decentre the child, viewing the child as existing through its relations with others and always in a particular context (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 42).

Values concerned with the rights of the individual child and his/her autonomy and independence dominate the QIAS principles and reflect a focus on minority world values that conflict with majority world views that may value community, dependency and interdependence (Gonzales-Mena, 1998; Santrock, 1996).

Closely associated with the focus on the individual is the way the QIAS principles associate quality programming with the values inherent in developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). Elsewhere in this paper we have noted that DAP has been criticised for its acceptance of universals in child development that transcend class, culture and ethnicity and for its lack of recognition of the complex ecological systems which surround and are influenced by children, families and early childhood services. The QIAS principles reflect the influence of Piagetian theory on DAP. For example, in Principle 29, “The program foster intellectual development”, staff and children’s roles are described predominantly in Piagetian terms rather than that of co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge and understanding. The child’s own agency, learning style, disposition and learning agenda, and the powerful role of the child’s peers and the notion of “collective knowledge” is ignored. Indeed there is a paucity of information about the child in this Principle with the emphasis clearly on staff responsibilities:

Staff do not take over from the child, and they step back whenever appropriate.

Staff closely observe all children’s development to establish their current level of intellectual development.

Staff set specific goals for further learning and development in each child.
Omissions in the QIAS Principles

By dividing up the quality framework into separate principles with the focus on the individual and his or her development as the unifying theme, the QIAS Handbook reinforces the notion that quality is about working on separate elements as opposed to viewing quality as complex interweaving of many dynamic factors located in a particular context. Further, the separation of quality into separate criteria may result, as indicated previously, in serious omissions which may be deliberately excluded or omitted by default or oversight. For example, the decision by the NCAC to exclude criteria of quality concerned with factors such as staff qualifications and size of group, both of which have been identified as relevant to quality in early childhood programmes, was based on the politics of state versus commonwealth powers and the economic imperative of privatisation (Wangman, 1994).

Other omissions including the role of leadership in the overall provision of a quality service and environmental and conservation issues may reflect the value judgements of the Council members as well the particular time when the QIAS was being developed. The decision in 1999 to review the entire QIAS may provide an opportunity to consider the omissions in the light of current research and theoretical discourse as well as to invite contributions from previously silent voices.

The QIAS Handbook provides quality indicators for standards associated with meeting the needs of children and families from diverse backgrounds however there seems to be a limited view of this diversity and how services might respond to the challenges involved. There is scant recognition for example for the diversity within cultures, and the diversity of family lifestyles and children’s life-chances in Australia. The values concerned with diversity in the QIAS documents seem to be similar to those embodied in multiculturalism. In multiculturalism there is a tendency to value cultural pluralism and equity but there is less concern with commitment to action for change and the deeper recognition of where our bias and intolerance of difference stems from. As Milne et al., (1998, p.57) asserts:

So, there we humans are, oscillating between an unconscious evolutionary pressure to react to difference with wariness or fear, and an equal need to value diversity as having a strong evolutionary value. We are always tempted to foreclose, to look for the simple answer so as to relieve the tension…[tolerance] has to be taught, it must be taught anew, again and again. Our place to begin is early childhood.
The QIAS pluralistic values are positioned at a particular point in the history of how we deal with issues concerned with diversity. They need to be re-examined and debated so that they do not lead to complacency or simplistic solutions the end result of which would be a failure to do anything that might make a difference.

**Lessons to be Gained**

It could be argued that whilst the QIAS may be based on incomplete/flawed theories of child development, and pedagogy it has made three significant contributions. First, it provided tangible evidence to Australian society that government at a national level does have a moral obligation and is committed to action on behalf of children and families in Australia through its involvement in QIAS. Second, it provided the field of early childhood, and particularly the child care sector, with public recognition that it is engaged in moral activity grounded in the notion of change (what ought to be for children) and relationships with and between parents, children, staff, management and the community (Kennedy, 2000; Kennedy, in progress). Lastly, it initiated professional discussions on existing practices and policies by staff in many childcare centres around Australia. These discussions featured not only interpreting what the Principles meant, but also whether or not staff demonstrated practices which could be deemed as meeting the benchmarks of QIAS. In this process, it can be argued that staff are likely to consolidate and/or acquire new understandings, which can only benefit young children.

Nevertheless, there are some lessons to be gained from this first entrée into quality assurance in Australia. The first is a need for multiple benchmarks of quality to ensure diversity and cultural inclusiveness. Second, there should be a clear articulation of the values and assumptions underpinning the benchmarks that are detailed under the banner of ‘quality’. Third, careful consideration is needed of how the process and indicators are framed so as to avoid presenting an atomistic and Western orientation to the material. Finally, due thought needs to be given to organising the documentation and process in ways which ensure that contemporary thinking on pedagogical practices are incorporated as new understandings and research emerges. One way is to incorporate key questions into the material that asks participants to not just simply examine their practices against agreed to benchmarks, but more importantly invites participants to question the material themselves. Key questions could be:

- What do we want to avert by setting standards?
- What are the omissions?
- Why these possibilities and not others?
- Whose interests are being served and how do we know (e.g. policymakers and practitioners always claim what they do is in the best interest of children, but how do we know this is true)?
- What are the possibilities when we position one value above another?
- What is the trade-off between these interests?
- How is the child positioned? What voice are they given?
- What voice is given to parents and families?
- Is the process atomistic and decontextualised or is it connected with the community?

It is only through the process of reflecting upon the documents themselves (and the processes that accompany them) that we can further the debate. When we simply take on board a quality assurance system and measure ourselves against predetermined benchmarks, we move from being professionals to becoming technicians. In essence we stop asking whose quality and whose assurance is being foregrounded in this process.

**Concluding Statement**

Woodhead (1996, p.10) in his report on the “pathways to quality in large-scale programmes for young disadvantaged children” argues that while “universal models of quality are both untenable and unhelpful” because they isolate the child from the diverse and dynamic contexts of childhood (decontextualise), the opposite extreme leads to the “self-defeating form of relativism”-that is, an open-endedness and acceptance of everything takes you nowhere either. The middle ground would then be the development of benchmarks and processes that recognise the social system within which the child resides (and the multiple constructions of this within Australia), but to make clear which social system, and therefore which values and assumptions are being used to construct the framework. In this process, users of QIAS or other quality assurance documentation can make informed decisions about the worth of the material. Users will then know whose quality is being used as the benchmark and overseers of the process can be assured that views on quality indicators can move forward with developments in pedagogical understandings. In essence, QIAS moves from being framed as simply being about a static process of quality assurance (Williams, 1995) to a dynamic process of total quality, in which values and assumptions are explicitly examined, and participants (families, children and staff) make decisions about the worth of the Principles in relation to their cultural and social context.
References


### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marilyn Fleer is an Associate Professor in Education at the University of Canberra, Australia. Currently she is a research fellow for the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Her research interests are broad, including indigenous education, science education and technology education. Her greatest passion is for the continual development of understandings about how children think and learn in a variety of early childhood contexts. In line with this, she has directed a great deal of energy to supporting early childhood professionals critically reflect upon their practices, beliefs and values about teacher-child interactions and how children think and learn.

Anne Kennedy is a Senior Lecturer at Monash University, Australia. Her interest in quality in early childhood services is closely linked to her work in early childhood teacher education where there is a continuous need to be aware of current research on quality and the way it links with practice. Her doctoral research into the notion of early childhood education as a moral concern has strengthened her belief in the need to consider the values embedded in early childhood education, which includes quality assurance mechanism such as the QIAS. As a moderator for QIAS, previous Director of a University Childcare Centre and as a parent-user of childcare, she is well placed to comment on quality assurance in Australia.