Stronach argued that he was not a ‘keynote speaker’ for two reasons. The first was that he was not an expert in ‘quality’ approaches to educational improvement. The second was that he wanted to see his job as that of a ‘keynote listener’. His aim had been and would be to listen to the various contributions – from Slovenia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Finland etc. – and to encourage everyone to look for patterns. What were the common convictions about ‘quality’? What different assumptions, starting-points, and values were apparent? What were the issues arising for educational development and research?

He suggested that there were critical questions that we needed to address, like: does ‘quality’ lead to better, or to more? Are attempts to quantify quality doomed to self-contradiction – the equivalent of ‘hot ice-cream’?

His overall suggestion for a learning strategy for the conference was that we needed to think conceptually (philosophically, culturally) as well as practically (institutionally, professionally) about ‘quality’ issues in order to encourage learning about ‘quality’ in very different education systems. This would involve thinking critically about what the Kazakhstan delegate had referred to as the ‘World Education System’, relating that to individual and national aspirations and working out some sort of local/global agreement of our own. Anything less might be cultural imperialism, as Andrej Koren had seemed to imply in his introduction to the Slovenian ‘quality’ debate.

[Conference discussions as well as papers took the ‘global’ economy for granted, regarded globalisation as a ‘key regulator’ (Zgaga), and assumed that an education for that ‘worldwide intellectual competition’ was essential, to quote a Croatian speaker.]

THE CONCEPT OF ‘QUALITY’

Stronach began his own exploration of the cultural and philosophical aspects of ‘quality’ by returning to the title of the conference: ‘Ways towards quality in education’. Most speakers and writers so far had referred to the search for different ‘ways’ for achieving ‘quality’: how to get there was the key problematic. Stronach claimed that 20 years ago English-speakers would have found that title perplexing: the notion of ‘quality’ would have been a
problem. They would have argued, then, that ‘education’ (in order to be a philosophically defensible construct) must represent or promote a notion of ‘worthwhile knowledge’ in terms of the ‘Good’ or some notion of virtue. That would be its defining quality. The idea, therefore, of inserting ‘quality’ into ‘education’ would have seemed strange, an alienation pretending to be an improvement. One way of conceptualising that change was to see it as the displacement of educational philosophy by business management. ‘Good’, ‘better’ and ‘worse’ had lost their philosophical anchors and were now being dragged into normative discourses where they reflected league table positions, regionally, nationally or internationally. These league tables, to continue the analogy, suggested that education had become something of a political football.

So another tough question for ‘quality’ might be: has ‘quality’ led to the accidental death of educational philosophy, which in turn is the only way by which issues of quality in education can be judged? Stronach set up a polarity between education as a philosophical enterprise or a cultural practice, and a new language that centred on words like ‘quality’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘efficiency’, ‘accountability’, ‘standards’, ‘assurance’, ‘control’, and ‘improvement’. He suggested, after Power (1994) and Strathern (1997), that we might regard this new discourse as introducing the ‘audit culture’, wherein the Good was replaced by the Effective, where Quality set out to measure relative degrees of the Effective against notions of Standards, indicating where Good Practice could ‘drive up’ Standards via Improvements.

[It was clear to this writer that Stronach was nostalgic about the death of educational philosophy and sceptical about a new ‘audit culture’ based on vague borrowings from capitalist business. His scepticism was most vigorously expressed in his final philosophically oriented question: if you read Aristotle on the nature of the Good and School Improvers on the nature of the Effective, you might well conclude that civilisation had come a long way – but would that be forwards or backwards?]

**CULTURE AND ‘QUALITY’**

Having briefly addressed ‘quality’ as a conceptual issue, Stronach turned to a more anthropological or cultural perspective. Quality was ‘an emergent cultural value . . . which is creating a new social phenomenon, a class of professionals devoted to quality control’. It amounted to a ‘global revolution’ (Strathern 1997, 305). Quality mechanisms locked the professional – whether nurse, teacher or doctor – into new forms of administrative control located outside the profession. The question here for the conference was whether such new forms of professional control added to or subtracted
from the role of the professional in different political and cultural contexts? Crudely, did the global audit culture deprofessionalise or reprofessionalise educational discourse? Was it appropriate to refer simply and positively to the phenomenon as a ‘global reform movement’ – as a Canadian presenter had done?

The speaker then approached the emerging issue of global prescription and local interpretation by means of an anthropological analogy. He recalled Lewis’s ‘Day of Shining Red’ wherein a remote people had first encountered traders from the outside world and tried to make sense of their offerings: ‘The old men in the village remember when first they saw some “Malay” hunters after birds of paradise . . . they carried guns and showed the Gnau salt (the Gnau mistook it for their semen). [They also offered] tin plates which to the Gnau, shone like the moon, and they called them “fingernails of the moon” ’ (1980, 200). In that context salt was mistaken for semen, tinplates for the fingernails of the moon. Clearly, what the Malay hunters took to be trade was a much more spiritual and fundamental encounter for the Gnau. It was a shared situation with no shared meanings.

Earlier, Stronach had played a word association game with the audience concerning the notion of ‘quality’: what did the word evoke? His analysis of their responses indicated a similar lack of shared meanings in the conference’s collective sense of ‘quality’. It was variously seen as the key to educational reconstruction, a focus for political resistance, an aspect of progressive ideology, as a guarantor of global economic effectiveness, a ‘multi-perspective concept’, or as something ‘desirable but as yet unknown’, as one delegate suggested. More negatively it had been described as an empty slogan, as a blank space waiting to be filled. As one participant concluded: ‘Quality has many faces.’ [I see from his notes that Stronach had drawn a parallel between the negative descriptors and the central event – or non-event – in Robert Musil’s classic European novel ‘The Man without Qualities’. The ‘blank space’ in that case was a campaign that never really got defined but that was somehow to rescue the country from decline. It was called the Parallel Campaign. Its objective was to install a new ‘quality’ into civic life. As far as I recall, the analogy was not made during the presentation.]

If the first anthropological analogy was about the uncertainty of meanings in cultural collisions of one kind or another, the second analogy was about the relationship of the qualitative to the quantitative in such encounters. Rappaport (1968) apparently offered a relevant account of a people whose meanings and values were tied to the breeding and keeping of pigs. When money was introduced to their economy, it altered the way they thought, ecologically, mythologically and genealogically:
But the application of a common monetary metric to dissimilar things has a troublesome semantic consequence. It reduces their qualitative distinctiveness to the status of mere quantitative difference. . . . Ecological distinctions (not to mention those between correct and erroneous, good and bad, right and wrong, perhaps even true and false) are dissolved by the logic of more or less, . . . and thus the world’s information is reduced (Rappaport 1968, 328).

Now the audit culture, with its interest in expressing education in terms of measurable outputs, quantified indicators of quality, comparisons of effectiveness, and so on, offers an interesting analogy to the above. We need to ask – as that tribe called educationists or educational researchers – are there ways educationally in which our ‘world’s information is reduced’ by this new discourse of normative comparison? Our world, in the case of this conference, consisted of 22 countries so that when one of us spoke there were always 21 possibilities for misunderstanding – an awesome arena for cultural misunderstanding even if we each spoke only once . . . 442 possibilities. On the other hand, the audit culture offered us a possibly rather dangerous reductionism, with a world of education reduced at the student level to attainment targets, test scores and exam grades. At the institutional level, the holistic ambitions of education might be reduced to league tables, aggregate scores and effectiveness indicators. And national systems were no less normatively condensed through international test comparisons like TIMSS, which inaugurated education as a global competition. There is a danger, then, that the audit culture introduces its own ‘common monetary metric’, to recall Rappaport’s phrase, and that we forget – as one conference participant said – that ‘uniformity is the exception, variability is the rule’. And it is in variability that we have our differences and therefore our identity.

MAKING ‘QUALITY’ EXOTIC

The intellectual strategy in Stronach’s paper seemed to have been to read the ‘normal’ (our own education systems and goals) through the eyes of the ‘exotic’ (far-away peoples in time or culture). Metaphorically, education was a primitive in unfortunate collision with the modern, and in both morals and meanings it lost out. But another way of bringing anthropology ‘home’ is to re-examine those things that we take to be normal through the apparently exotic concepts of anthropology: to realise the ‘normal’ as exotic in ways we had not anticipated. It is to this ambition that Stronach now turned, asking the following question:
Quality is the key, but is education the lock?

What is a ‘normal’ expression of educational quality? Not tin-plates, not pigs, but our own everyday stuff.

[Here he displayed TIMSS tables of comparative national attainment, contrasting for example Scottish, Slovenian and English results in Mathematics and Science.] He illustrated the political discourses engendered by such international spectacles as involving a series of predictable moves, at least in terms of the responses from his own country and the US.

MOVE 1 [Invite national recrimination.] Poor results in TIMSS provoke the following sorts of ‘quality’ statements:

US 12th grader scored below the international average [Maths and Science] and among the lowest of the 21 nations that participated in the assessment of general knowledge (TIMSS 1998, 1).

MOVE 2 [Invoke the implications for economic necessity – a theme much present in the conference deliberations.] Education is ‘increasingly essential for national economic competitiveness in a global market’ (Green 1997, 19). The world operates now as a ‘global auction for investment’ (Brown and Lauder 1996, 2). Thus a neo-darwinianism applies: only the fittest will survive in the globalised competitions of the future. Such a view, for example, is embedded even in curricula designed for young children in England. ‘Numeracy Matters’ declares:

It is important to raise standards both for the sake of the life-chances of the individual children, and for international competitiveness [Stronach’s emphasis]. This is the familiar theme of pupils cast in the role of future economic warriors (Stronach 1999).

MOVE 3 [Start a moral panic about low standards: follow up with a bout of policy hysteria.] Following just such a sequence of naming and shaming, US educators declared:

Our national goal, as stated in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, is stated in terms of comparing education in this country against other countries. Our goal is to lead all other nations in the achievement of our pupils in maths and science. (TIMMS 1998, 9.)

We can see how dramatically these moves set in train a quality agenda. That agenda involves – once again – the accidental death of philosophy. If
educational goals are normatively derived (be first!) there is no need to think further about the purposes of education. Nor indeed about a sociology of education, since all issues of values, means and ends are encompassed in an Effectiveness discourse and its apparent implications for Improvement. Such theory is highly individualistic in nature, each having an equal opportunity to improve, and so issues of poverty, class, race etc are backgrounded — in this ‘sociology’ the individual is all and problems are technical rather than structural in nature. Finally, there is an inevitable ‘back-to-the-basics’ agenda in all such examination obsessions. The best way to prepare for such tests is to confine the curriculum to the tests, to make sure that what is not measurable in education is neglected, and to reward or punish teachers for their performances, whether directly through performance–related pay, or indirectly through media campaigns that acknowledge or decry their work.

Stronach recalled an earlier Slovenian speaker who had claimed that if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it (and ‘Quality is, first of all, a managerial problem’). In that light, he said, we can look at these international developments positively and say: at last a management science of educational performance! These international comparisons are statistically correlated, they compare matched samples, results are normatively ordered according to merit, and reported in a suitably objective and scientific way. Accompanying this global display, we have also a universal language of quality with which to remedy deficits in performance. And the discourse of quality improvement also looks like a science — as Fullan’s formula $E = ma^2$, where $E$ = efficacy, $m$ = motivation, $c$ = capacity and $a^2$ = assistance and accountability. [It was suggested to Stronach by a member of the audience at the conference that these international league tables are ways for new nations to establish their identities, to begin to place themselves in the world. Previously only events like the Olympic Games had identified such peoples. He disagreed, but found the analogy interesting for reasons that we will come to.]

But before we reach that positive conclusion, Stronach argued [I felt that he was beginning to become a little polemical by this stage], it might be wise to remind ourselves how fragile these apparently undeniable logics really are. The first point is that there is nothing more metaphorical than numbers. They stand for things that they cannot represent, as indeed does everything else in these spectacularised educational discourses. There is an inherent metonymic reduction in such numbers — ‘that which is measurable, standardizable, auditable is measured and is thought to stand for, to represent the phenomenon at hand’ (Tsoukas 1997, 831). (One of the Czech delegates was most insistent on the need for precise definition of the criteria for ‘quality’; in terms of the argument presented here he wanted to strip the
metaphors out of the discourse and achieve a scientifically precise definition of terms. But of course the discourse collapses without its metaphors because its numbers are metaphorical.) To exemplify the metaphorical nature of the discourse the pupil stands for the nation (the 9-year-old Slovenian, the US 12th grader). The indicator or test score stands for the whole purpose of education (as we have already shown). The child stands for the adult – that ‘pupil warrior’ theme. And finally, the education system stands for the economy, even although the match between the ability to do well in TIMSS tests as a child and subsequent economic performances in the global economy as an adult have absolutely no established correlation. Education as Fantasy Instrumentalism! The deeply ritualistic (rather than rationalistic) nature of these various substitutions points to these repeated competitions in global education having become a kind of spectacle akin to the Olympic Games. [I spoke later to Stronach about his parallel between global educational discourses like TIMSS and the Olympic Games. Labelling TIMSS as the Mathemythic Games, he claimed there was an odd cross-over between educational and economic goals. DeCoubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games, declared that the vision of the Games was ‘delivering man [sic] from the constituting vision of homo economicus’ (MacAlloon 1984, 257). The objective of the Quality movement was precisely the opposite, an effective education for a productive economy – and hence a spectacular celebration of ‘Economic Man’ (Stronach 1999, 185).]

TWO REGISTERS: ‘ECONOMY OF PERFORMANCE’ AND ‘ECOLOGIES OF PRACTICE’

In terms of the conference, that left us with a tension between two educational registers. The first was the economic one, usually expressed in ‘global terms’, an instrumental imperative approached through ‘business management’ practices in education, a realisation of education as a productive activity whose effectiveness could be measured and promoted by ‘quality assurance’ procedures. Typically, the league table was the cultural ‘norm’ of this discourse. In his polarising argument Stronach had somewhat ‘spectacularised’ that spectacle, though no doubt he might argue that he hoped for an educative caricature. He agreed with Tsoukas:

Pushing the logic of social engineering to the extreme, management becomes tantamount to keeping up appearances and fighting shadows: managing via league tables leads to managing the league tables themselves! (Tsoukas 1997, 839.)
It followed that Stronach was alarmed that so many delegates had referred to educational management practices with regard to ‘quality’ in England and Scotland: in his view these educational systems had tried to hide the consequences of under-investment with over-inspection. Their ‘economy of performance’ was a pathological one, and should be viewed warily by other countries.

A rather different educational register surfaced sporadically in the conference. For example, the speaker from Japan called for a more ‘emotional education’, a more ‘progressive’ re-specification of the notion of quality. The Lithuanian delegate spoke very strongly for a need to build education round national traditions and values. Others also spoke this more ‘local’ register of ‘identity’, ‘equity’, ‘national education’, and ‘traditional values’. Such aspects were not possible to quantify. As one delegate put it, ‘quality is like a beauty, something not catch-able’. In his conclusion Stronach sought to polarise these two registers. He characterised the first register as an ‘economy of performance’; the second he called an ‘ecology of practice’, referring in the latter instance to education as a form of national philosophy, incorporating central cultural values, local responsiveness to child and parental desires, and so on. His fear was that ‘quality’ approaches were a means of imposing the false imperative of ‘economy’ over that of ‘ecology’. And so his concluding questions asked if ‘quality’ procedures constituted a virtuous technology for educational progress, or an agent for the destruction of educational ‘ecologies’ and differences – harking back to the anthropological analogy he had drawn from Rappaport. Did TQM stand for Total Quality McDonaldisation? Were quality indicators a false surrogate for the educational world? And if they weren’t, how could the less measurable, intuitive, affective, locally cherished aspects of educational ‘performance’ be recognised, valued and preserved? The problem in the end was how these ‘local’ perspectives on education could prevail against the ‘global’ pressures that quality seemed to express.

By the end of the conference there seemed to be much talk of resolving those sorts of issues by adopting a ‘stakeholder’ approach – in the end it was up to those involved in the processes of ‘quality’ to arrive at a consensus through partnership, stakeholder approaches, dialogue and so on. [In later discussion Stronach feared that such talk was easy, but actually the distribution of power in many contexts of evaluation could make such hopes utopian. It was all very well to talk of ‘indicators for learning’ rather than indicators of learning as a Canadian delegate had done, but the performative nature of the discourse meant that indicators tended to be read normatively rather than formatively.]
There also apparently needed to be caution about the kind of universal welcome proposals for ‘self-evaluation’ had received, as in the Finnish adoption of the New Zealand model. The term was not as innocent as it looked. First, any specification of measures led to institutions over-concentrating on their achievement, on paper at least. As a Slovenian speaker pointed out, schools could ‘adjust their activities to what the indicators measure’. Underwood observed the same phenomenon in relation to Higher Education in the UK: ‘[T]he utility of such a system is likely to wane as institutions “learn” how to achieve high ratings’ (Underwood 2000). A second and related point was that every indicator was inherently self-corrupting: ‘when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure’ (Strathern 1997, 308). Third, audit measures of quality tended to be tautologous: ‘What is audited is whether there is a system which embodies standards and the standards of performance themselves are shaped by the need to be auditable . . . audit becomes a formal “loop” by which the system audits itself’ (Strathern 1997, 31). Fourth, indicators provoked people to defer to them, however reductive they were: ‘Seldom is there a challenge to a well measured indicator of quality, even when it is the sole indicator of highly complex performance’ (Stake 1999, 49). Fifth, all processes of audit reduced ‘real’ events to paper traces. In that process, much can be lost in terms of time, stress, and priority for the ‘real’ work of the institution: the ‘self-defeating specification of indicators’, as Strathern puts it (2000, 8). Finally, most systems of so-called ‘self-evaluation’ involved the prior specification of indicators by an outside agency. What kind of self was that? ‘[T]he “self” in the invitation to self-scrutiny turns out to be already a particular kind of self – to be judged by criteria that agree what the self is, that is, the type of agency that propels persons/institutions toward their stated goals.’ (Power in Strathern 1997, 313).

Stronach’s hope for the conference, and the follow-up national meetings, was that the debate about ‘quality’ would not be reduced merely to technical discussions of how-to issues, but would also include whether-to considerations located in philosophical and cultural discussion. As the Montenegro delegate had said, it was vital to ‘choose what is best for us’. It was necessary for the pragmatic, the cultural and the conceptual to be addressed as part of a dialectic out of which conference members might generate their own solutions, critically appraising rather than borrowing models, as Andrej Koren had said in his introduction to the conference. *In this hope Stronach seemed destined to be disappointed. In my reading of the delegates’ evaluation of the conference, most delegates were firmly focussed on issues of practical implementation.*
To the extent that there was an obvious tension built into the two presentations, Fullan had won the day.

NOTES

1. A ‘moral panic’ is an event engendered by media and government where a group or cause is identified and offered as a scapegoat for a more general problem. Such panics in the UK and elsewhere are usually followed by ‘policy hysteria’ – a welter of ill-thought-out and ephemeral initiatives designed to ‘respond’ to the problem (Stronach and Morris 1994).

2. Debord (1990) has written about the ‘society of the spectacle’. Along similar lines, it is argued here that international effectiveness discourses are ‘spectacles’ much more than they are science. Their numerous anomalies, reductions and distortions are smoothed out in an apparently undeniable series of league tables that indicate the alleged comparative qualities of different educational systems. Such a flattening of educational discourse, accompanied by the death of other educational discourses (eg philosophy), and the immense power of such discourses (as ‘performatives’) is an indication of their postmodern nature: ‘Such a mobilisation in the interests of a fantasy of educational and economic efficacy nevertheless carries with it, crucially, an unspoken acceptance of the underlying game, which is the game of global capitalism. No matter that there be winners and losers, just so long as all are obediently playing the game. Indeed, the spectacle makes the idea of competition as morally unassailable as it might be in the Olympic Games. Rather than fairness being a concern to set against the notion of competition, it becomes a quality of it.’ (Stronach 1999, 184)

3. In this connection it is important to note, however, that the Finnish speaker stressed that it was not the ‘model’ that mattered so much as the ‘philosophy under the portfolio’.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Quality is the key, but is education the lock?


