

# Power and resistance in early childhood education: From dominant discourse to democratic experimentalism

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*Abstract:* The field of early childhood education is increasingly dominated by a strongly positivistic and regulatory discourse, the story of quality and high returns, which has spread from its local origins in the favourable environment provided by a global regime of neoliberalism. But though dominant, this is not the only discourse in early childhood education, there are alternatives that are varied, vibrant and vocal; not silenced but readily heard by those who listen and forming a resistance movement. The article argues that this movement needs to confront a number of questions. Do its members want to influence and shape policy and practice? If so, what might a transformed and commensurate policy and practice look like? What are the possibilities that such transformation might be achieved, especially given the apparent unassailability of the current dominant discourse, and the force of the power relations that have enabled this discourse, local in origin and parochial in outlook, to aspire to global hegemony? And if such transformation were to occur, is it possible to avoid simply replacing one dominant discourse with another? Some partial and provisional answers are offered to these questions.

*Keywords:* early childhood education; dominant discourse; neoliberalism; transformation.

## Introduction

The theme of this special issue of the Journal of Pedagogy is ‘dominant and silenced ECEC discourses’. This article subscribes to the concept of a ‘dominant discourse’ in the field, a regime of truth that seeks and expects

to exercise power over our thoughts and actions, directing or governing what we see as the 'truth' and how we construct the world. But it takes issue, in a collegial manner, with the concept of 'silenced discourses'; for while agreeing that there are other, alternative discourses in early childhood, I contend that these have not been silenced, on the contrary are varied, vibrant and vocal, readily heard by those who listen. The problem rests with the dominant discourse, which is congenitally hard of hearing, indeed totally deaf to other voices. Of course, it could be said that that is a problem for the dominant discourse, and for those who only hear its narrow, technical and controlling narrative. But I want to argue that the problem extends to everyone who desires an early childhood education that welcomes, values and thrives on complexity and plurality, inclusion and democracy, experimentation and creativity. For the dominance of the current dominant discourse acts as a barrier to realising such a vision.

This impasse – of a stifling, unhearing and regulatory dominant discourse existing alongside other discourses that, though lively and dynamic, make little impact on policy and have but very limited influence on actual services – raises urgent questions. What, apart from intellectual curiosity, is the purpose of alternative discourses? Do those of us in what I will describe later as the 'resistance movement' to the dominant discourse actually want to influence and shape policy and practice? If so, what might a transformed and commensurate policy and practice look like? What are the possibilities that such transformation might be achieved, especially given the apparent unassailability of the current dominant discourse, and the force of the power relations that have enabled this discourse, local in origin and parochial in outlook, to aspire to global hegemony? And if such transformation were to occur, is it possible to avoid simply replacing one dominant discourse with another?

Put rather differently, I want to ask if contesting and reconceptualising is enough, if talking amongst ourselves is enough, if resistance is enough. All of these are important and necessary. But, I will argue, they are no longer sufficient. Faced by the implacable ambition of the dominant discourse, and the pernicious effects of that ambition on children and adults, communities and wider societies, it is time for the resistance movement to envision alternative futures, to discuss and design conditions that might enable these futures to come into being, and to think strategically about their role in processes of wider transformation and their relationship to other resistance movements also seeking transformation.

Before getting underway, I want to contest one other term in the theme for this special issues: ECEC or 'early childhood education and care'. 'Care' is an important concept, but its importance lies in its ethical nature, in the need for early childhood services to be inscribed with an 'ethics of care', which involves both particular acts of caring and a general habit of mind that should inform all aspects of life and includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness (Tronto, 1993). But care as an ethic is not, or should not be, confined to services for young children; it should be present in all services and organisations, from compulsory schools to universities, from hospitals to prisons. It may not always be so, but in my view it should; we should not, therefore, encourage a view that 'care' is of exclusive or even particular relevance to young children by including it in the term we use to describe the field –after all, we would not talk about 'elementary education and care' or 'higher education and care'. (For a fuller discussion of the problems associated with conceptualising and naming services in terms of 'care', see Cameron & Moss, 2007).

Of course one reason we now speak of 'early childhood education and care' is in an attempt to bridge the divide between early childhood education and childcare for working parents, two traditions and strands in early childhood that have resulted in split, incoherent and dysfunctional systems in many countries (Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010). Clearly all educational services for children should take account of the fact that most parents are employed and need their children to be in a safe and secure environment whilst at work. This need matters and should be accommodated. But it should not be a defining feature of early childhood services, else we risk distorting the identity of these services by giving too much prominence to 'childcare for working parents', which is just one of many purposes that early childhood services provide, and not one of the more salient and interesting ones.

My own preferred term would be 'early childhood education', both to bring early childhood onto a par with other education sectors and to give priority to the educational project of these services. I admit that term has problems: for example, a false impression may arise from narrowly instrumental understandings of 'education' (education-in-its-narrowest-sense) and from an image of services so termed as mono-purpose, concerned only with education, when my image of the early childhood service is of a multi-purpose public space, with a potential for many projects – an image I will return to. For the moment though, and aware of these and other qualifications, I will keep to the term 'early childhood education' (ECE), and begin with a discussion of dominant and alternative discourses in ECE.

## Dominant Discourses

*Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth, that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p.131)*

This section's heading is intentionally plural. In any field in any society, there may well be a number of dominant discourses, those regimes of truth that so shape and determine what is thought, spoken and done that they render "assumptions and values invisible, turn subjective perspectives and understandings into apparently objective truths, and determine that some things are self-evident and realistic while others are dubious and impractical" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p.17). Such dominant discourses provide the mechanism for rendering reality amenable to certain kinds of actions (Miller & Rose, 1993) – and by so doing, they also exclude other ways of understanding and interpreting the world, marginalising other stories that could be told.

In my own country, England, for example, one dominant discourse in early childhood education today is what I have termed 'the story of markets' (Moss, 2014), a belief (for that is what it boils down to) that the best way to provide services and allocate resources is through a marketised system in which businesses compete for the custom of parent-consumers, each acting as *homo economicus* and calculating how to achieve best value for money. The hold that this story of markets has taken is not confined to England (it is also strong in other Anglophone countries), but is not yet as widespread and insistent as another dominant discourse, what I have termed 'the story of quality and high returns' (ibid.) and to which I will pay most attention. For it is this story that underlies today's global policy interest in ECE, this story that has given early childhood (in the words of the Call for Papers for this special issue of the Journal of Pedagogy) "its current global political legitimacy". Indeed, for those of us who value ECE but dislike the story of quality and high returns, the awkward fact is that the contemporary expansion of early childhood education would not have happened without this discourse gaining dominance.

What is the story of quality and high returns? Elsewhere I have described it like this.

Find, invest in and apply the correct human technologies – aka ‘quality’ – during early childhood and you will get high returns on investment including improved education, employment and earnings and reduced social problems. A simple equation beckons and beguiles: ‘early intervention’ + ‘quality’ = increased ‘human capital’ + national success (or at least survival) in a cut-throat global economy. Invest early and invest smartly and we will all live happily ever after in a world of more of the same – only more so. (ibid., p.3)

This is a dominant discourse that values (and assumes the possibility of) certainty, replication, mastery, objectivity and universality, and bestows on experts a privileged epistemic role of discovering and applying objective and universal theories and laws. It desires the closure that such ‘evidence-based’ outcomes and practice seem to offer, the end of early childhood education in the triumph of one discourse, and a ‘prophetic pedagogy’ which “knows everything beforehand, knows everything that will happen, knows everything, does not have one uncertainty, is absolutely imperturbable” (Malaguzzi, 2016, p.421). It is a discourse of great instrumentality, with education’s supreme purpose being children’s performance of predefined outcomes determined by a select cadre of adults; of technical practice as first practice, responding to the supremely technical question of ‘what works?’; and of economic thinking and language, with ECE reduced to the achievement of a rate of return on investment. It is a discourse that draws on a restricted range of theoretical perspectives, in particular developmental psychology and human capital economics. And it is a discourse situated in and suffused by a particular paradigmatic perspective, what might be termed regulatory modernity or (neo)positivism, with its four basic assumptions, summarised by Patti Lather:

1) The aims, concepts and methods of the natural sciences are applicable to the social sciences; 2) the correspondence theory of truth which holds that reality is knowable through correct measurement methods is adequate for the social sciences; 3) the goal of social research is to create universal laws of human behaviour which transcend culture and history; and 4) the fact/value dichotomy, the denial of both the theory-laden dimensions of observation and the value-laden dimensions of theory create the grounds for an ‘objective’ social science. (Lather, 1991, p.172)

Neopositivism is a closed system, that believes in the possibility, indeed the necessity, of objective and true knowledge. The idea of alternative positions and perspectives, of inescapable subjectivity, of truths not truth is anathema. The only scope for difference is technical, about the aptness, validity and reliability of methods, measurements and analyses. Infused with this paradigm, the dominant discourse in ECE recognises no other paradigmatic positions, closing its ears to alternative discourses that from its perspective are intrinsically untrue and neither interesting nor relevant. Consequently, you will search in vain in the mountain of publications imbued with the dominant discourse – whether in academic journal articles, think tank or NGO reports or government policy documents – for any mention of other perspectives, any hint of the contested nature of the dominant discourse, any acknowledgement that a position has been taken. The dominant discourse, and this of course is one way of telling a dominant discourse, speaks as if it is natural, self-evident and neutral, a truth that is universally acknowledged.

Yet its beginnings were local. The story of quality and high returns emerges from a particular spatial and temporal context, to be precise from parts of the English-speaking world in the 1980s, subsequently crossing borders and gaining international credibility in a process of hegemonic globalisation, “the successful globalisation of a particular local and culturally-specific discourse to the point that it makes universal truth claims and ‘localises’ all rival discourses” (Santos, 2004, p. 149). A local story has thus gone viral, becoming an international success. Now all sorts of people, from politicians to practitioners, academics to media commentators, talk the same talk around the world, telling themselves and others the same story over and over and over again.

What enabled this local story to spread and progress towards its current dominance? One important factor has been a much more ambitious story, another local and culturally-specific discourse that has successfully globalised and gained even greater dominance, entering into the political, economic and social fabric of many societies: the story of neoliberalism, which emerged in the 1970s, and gathered momentum and power in the 1980s and 1990s. With its reduction of human life to economic transactions and relationships, enacted through competition, calculation, choice and contract, and its avid commitment to the spread of supposedly ‘efficient’ markets to all fields of human activity, this meta-narrative has created a perfect environment for the story of quality and high returns to take root and flourish. If the story of quality and high returns legitimises the current policy priority

for ECE, then the story of neoliberalism (together with its paradigmatic bed-fellow of positivism) legitimises the story of quality and high returns.

As Foucault reminds us, there are always power relations. None of us can either escape them or pretend not to be complicit in them, for in human relations “power is always present: I mean the relationship in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another” (Foucault, 1987, p.11). But the dominant discourse in ECE, the story of quality and high returns, has gained influence through an exceptionally strong nexus of power relations. In particular, the story has been amplified, normalised and spread through a partnership of institutional actors: international organisations (e.g. IMF, OECD, UNESCO, European Union); national think tanks and other NGOs; and a band of positivistic academic researchers, all wedded to a ‘social science of variables’ that claims an accurate, stable and ultimate representation of reality (Lather, 2006, p.788). A large and costly body of research, a mountain of reports and endlessly repetitious recommendations, all advancing the story of quality and high returns, have fed into each other, being constantly recycled and cross-referenced, and building into a regime of truth that insists on the necessity of its case: there is no conceivable alternative way of thinking, speaking or doing.

## Other discourses, Other Truths

*I believe too much in truth not to suppose that there are different truths and different ways of speaking the truth. (Foucault, 1988, p.51)*

This dominant discourse – the story of quality and high returns - has been the subject of considerable and extensive critique. Let us put to one side issues of epistemology, in particular those involving the discourse’s positivistic paradigm, issues such as its belief in a unified field of knowledge encompassing natural and social sciences, the correspondence theory of truth, the possibility of finding universal laws of human behaviour that transcend culture and history; and the fact/value dichotomy. These could be acknowledged as legitimate differences of opinion, on which we can all agree to disagree – that is if all sides were to acknowledge that there are legitimate differences of perspective leading to legitimate differences in understandings of what constitutes knowledge.

But critique goes far beyond such differences. The story of quality and high returns places much reliance on “iconic studies” (NESSE, 2009, p.29), which have been, in Helen Penn’s words, “endlessly recycled in the liter-

ature” (Penn, 2011, p.39) These and most other cited studies come from just one society, the United States. To give a recent example, a study titled a ‘Universal Child Care and Children’s Outcomes: meta-analysis of evidence from natural experiments’ extracts 253 “estimates of children’s outcomes” from 30 studies, two-thirds of which American or Canadian, the remainder coming from four very disparate European countries (France, Germany, Norway, Spain) (van Huizen & Plantenga, 2015)<sup>1</sup>. Yet the US (and indeed Canada) has a poor reputation in ECE<sup>2</sup>, and suffers from extreme inequality and discrimination, reflected in consistently poor showings in international comparisons of the health and well-being of both children and adults (Moss, 2014). The research edifice for the story of quality and high returns is built on such partial foundations; not surprisingly, a review of the three most commonly cited studies (all from the US) concludes that their “findings cannot be assumed to be generalisable elsewhere...[and] should not be used as justification for investment in similar enterprises in different populations and locations and time periods”. (Penn et al., 2006, p.1)

This is symptomatic of the way the story of quality and high returns ignores context, despite the importance attached to it by leading scholars of comparative education. Robin Alexander, for example, concludes that “no educational policy or practice can be properly understood except by reference to the web of inherited ideas and values, habits and customs, institutions and world views, that make one country distinct from another” (Alexander, 2001, p.5). He warns of the dangers of stripping “a country of the complexities of culture, values, social structure, politics and demography... [though] these are the very features with which we must engage if we are to understand education elsewhere, explain why one country outperforms others” (Alexander, 2012, p.2). Yet rather than engage with context and its complexities, the story of quality and high returns seeks instead for universal conclusions and laws to inform universal action based on ‘meta-analysis’ of disparate studies from disparate places, abandoning depth for a superficial veneer of general applicability.

<sup>1</sup> The title is (unselfconsciously) problematic. For example, the use of ‘universal’ is inscribed with positivistic assumptions and, in any case, is based on studies from just 6 out of more than 200 countries in the world; while use of the term ‘Child care’ reflects the authors’ national and disciplinary context, and in any case is factually incorrect as many of the studies included refer to the experience of children in educational or social pedagogical settings.

<sup>2</sup> The study referred to here looks into the relationship between ‘quality’ in ECE and children’s outcomes. Putting to one side the authors’ uncritical use of a problematic concept, ‘quality’, and the narrow definition applied (staff qualifications and adult: child ratios), the authors find that 82% of US and Canadian early childhood settings in the selected studies rate as ‘low quality’ compared to just 3% in the four European countries.



But the criticisms go further. The story of quality and high returns employs a narrow concept of education and learning, focused as it is on assessing children's performance on standardised tests of developmental or learning outcomes. Elsewhere (Moss, 2014) I have further argued that the 'story of quality and high returns' is both unconvincing, lacking credibility even in its own terms, and disturbing, leading as it does to the ever-increasing governing of children and adults in an attempt to achieve the control that story-tellers believe is needed to ensure high returns on investment. Disturbing, too, because it smacks of a stratagem to distract demands for social justice by offering a quick technical fix; far simpler and cheaper to introduce 'evidence-based' early intervention programmes than to undertake the political heavy-lifting involved in tackling deep-seated social and economic injustices. Last but not least, disturbing because it insists on the primacy of technical practice, when education is first and foremost a political and ethical practice, pressing for scientific answers to technical questions rather than democratic answers to political questions.

I conclude, therefore, that this dominant discourse, the story of quality and high returns, is dangerous; though bearing in mind Foucault's warning that 'everything is dangerous' (Foucault, 1983, p.232), I would qualify this conclusion by saying that the story of quality and high returns is *especially* dangerous, for three reasons. First, because of its attempt to substitute the technical for the political, and so defuse demands for substantive social change and democratic deliberation on alternative perspectives; second, because it is a closed system that cannot comprehend, let alone listen to and engage with, other paradigmatic positions; and following on from that, third, because it cannot therefore welcome, value and engage with a world of multiple perspectives, complexities and uncertainties, viewing them instead as threats that must be controlled out of existence. In sum, the dominant discourse, this story of quality and high returns, is an instance of the dictatorship of no alternative, and incommensurate with any prospect of a democratic politics of education.

## The Resistance Movement

*Where there is power, there is resistance.* (Foucault, 1978, p.95)

Those who tell and subscribe to the story of quality and high returns do not hear other stories, "different ways of speaking the truth" – or if they are aware of them, choose not to listen. But they do not and cannot silence them. The story of quality and high returns may be dominant for the moment, but it does not have the early childhood field to itself. There are many

different stories and many different story tellers, who form in effect a resistance movement.

The term ‘resistance movement’ can be understood in at least two complementary ways, both of which speak to its importance and value. First, and exemplifying Foucault’s contention that “where power resist, there is resistance”, the resistance movement is a network of protagonists who contest the dominant discourse, resisting its truth claims and keeping spaces open for alternative thought and action. In so doing, it serves the valuable function of sustaining those who want to refuse the identity or subjectivity that the dominant discourse, that story of quality and high returns, seeks to impose on early childhood education and those who work in it. Stephen Ball, a leading critical educationalist, makes this point when he says that “subjectivity is a key site of political struggle in the contexts of neoliberalism” and goes on to speak of a “politics of refusal” (Ball, 2015, pp.1-2). So confronted by a dominant discourse that insists there is only one way for early childhood education to go, and therefore only one way for those involved in the field to think, act and be, the question becomes: “what kind of self, what kind of subject have we become, and how might we be otherwise?” (ibid., p.5). Or put slightly differently, how can we struggle to think differently and so refuse the subjectivity that the dominant discourse seeks to impose on us? The resistance movement provides a partial answer.

But if this understanding of ‘resistance movement’ places greater emphasis on ‘resistance’, the second understanding accentuates ‘movement’, through the creation of new thought, new projects and new practices that maintain ECE as a dynamic field, in contrast to the ambition of the dominant discourse for closure and stasis. Such movement comes from encounters with complexity and difference and an openness to uncertainty, unpredictability and wonder. Combined with resistance, such movement counterpoints critique with hope. For necessary as critique is, and it is very necessary, it is not enough; there must also be hope.

The resistance movement in ECE is diverse and complex, with many actors impelled by many different desires, perspectives, values and interests. It occupies many different spaces, and finds expression in many different forums. Some members are inspired by the work of previous educators, people such as Froebel, Montessori and Malaguzzi; others by contemporary projects, such as the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia. Cultural diversity plays an important part, through the contribution of educators from or working with, for example, First Nations in Canada or Maori communities in

New Zealand, whose socio-cultural approaches to early childhood education recognise, value and celebrate the traditions, singularities and knowledges of such diverse communities. Yet others are enthused by a diversity of disciplines (for example, philosophy, sociology, political science, feminist and childhood studies) and theorists (for example, Bakhtin, Foucault, Derrida, Levinas, Deleuze, Barad<sup>3</sup>); and, more generally, find new thinking opening up from situating themselves in new paradigmatic positions, for example, what St.Pierre calls, for the sake of argument, ‘postmodernism’<sup>4</sup>.

The different truths so told, the alternative stories spoken, are not hidden away or silenced. On the contrary, they are not hard to hear if you want to hear them; they can be heard clearly in many open forums. These include: the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education group with its annual international conference (Tobin, 2007; Bloch, 2013) and the AERA’s Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood Education SIG; many books, for example in the *Contesting Early Childhood* book series, and many academic articles, for example in this journal and *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*; networks for those interested in past pedagogical traditions or current pedagogical projects, for example the many national networks for people interested in Reggio Emilia; and, to take a final example, a growing body of doctoral theses undertaken by students who are attracted by alternative stories.

So there are many ECE discourses to be heard in many places, and while one (and more in some places) crave to dominate, the others are far from silenced. The resistance movement is diverse, vibrant and dynamic, not just exploring alternatives in an abstract way, but constantly demonstrating how they may be put to work in the nursery, pre-school, kindergarten or school. Resisters are ‘doing’ Foucault<sup>5</sup> (and other theoretical perspectives) in early childhood studies, services and research.

<sup>3</sup> Writing a decade ago, Joseph Tobin commented that “although post-structural theorists such as Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Judith Butler, Frederic Jameson, Michel de Certeau, Jean Baidrillard, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha have written little or nothing about young children, their theories beg to be applied to early childhood education” (Tobin, 2007, p.29). Increasingly, though, they are being applied.

<sup>4</sup> St.Pierre uses the term postmodern “because I believe...it became the codeword for any social science approach that is not positivist...scholars labelled postmodern or post-structural resist providing an alternative, a cure, a fix, a more comfortable structure in which we might secure ourselves and our work” (2012, p.496). Another broad term that has been used to describe a non-positivist paradigmatic position is post-foundational. As St. Pierre makes clear, both umbrella terms cover a range of more specific positions.

<sup>5</sup> I refer here to the title of a book in the *Contesting Early Childhood* series, ‘Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies: Applying poststructural ideas’, in which Glenda MacNaughton and some of her students show “how teachers and researchers have brought poststructuralism to the classroom” (MacNaughton, 2005).

However, while it is important to acknowledge much that is encouraging for those wanting to see an early childhood education of diversity and democracy, there is also much that is concerning. In particular, the dominant discourse is still rolling, like a juggernaut, over the field, deploying ever more powerful technologies to try and ensure those high returns that its economic rationale calls for, and bringing ever-increasing standardisation and uniformity through its commitment to a narrow range of sanctioned 'early learning outcomes' and its will to govern. New technologies are being added to its already formidable toolkit, the latest being the cross-national assessment of 'early learning outcomes', currently being developed and piloted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, one of the most prominent international actors spreading the story of quality and high returns (Moss et al., 2016).

Faced by this juggernaut, which is determining the direction taken by the expansion of ECE, members of the resistance movement need to ask some questions, about future direction and strategy. At the heart of this self-questioning, in my opinion, should be whether the resistance movement engages with and seeks to influence the world of policy; in other words, does it wish to shape the future development of early childhood provision and practice. If the answer is yes, then the next question is what might this require and, equally important, what is the prospect of success, given the current dominance of the dominant discourse, and the powerful structural forces and strong power relations that have, to date, underpinned that dominance. In the next section, I want to attempt some provisional answers to these strategic questions, hoping to stimulate debate and, ultimately, the creation of an agreed platform that many members of the current resistance movement, and others not yet committed, might feel they could share.

## Weaving a New Reality

*We will reassert the role of story-telling as more than mere entertainment. It is through stories that we weave reality.* (Dark Mountain Project, 2009)

The resistance movement is currently doing important work by (in the words of the remit for the Contesting Early Childhood book series) "question[ing] dominant discourses surrounding early childhood, and offer[ing] alternative narratives of an area that is now made up of a multitude of perspectives and debates". This work of questioning and offering, and the attendant politics of refusal, need to continue, indeed increase. But

I believe strongly that this is not enough. The stories we tell should weave the reality of provision and practice, not just for a fortunate few where local circumstances have created possibilities for radical change, but for the many. Which means the resistance movement actively engaging with policy, not leaving the field to the dominant discourse. I am arguing, therefore, for enacting an alternative discourse to create what Erik Olin Wright terms a 'real utopia', which involves not only envisioning an alternative world, but also paying attention to the re-design of institutions that will enable movement towards that destination, so combining Wright's three criteria for 'real utopias': not only desirability, but also viability and achievability (Wright, 2010).

The dominant discourse, I have argued, tells a story of quality and high returns, in which the immediate purpose of ECE is to provide sites for deploying an assemblage of human technologies that can ensure the delivery of certain predefined, tightly prescribed and externally determined outcomes; all to further the wider and overriding purpose of attaining high economic returns on public and private investment in early childhood services, through increasing current (parental) employment, reducing social problems supposedly mitigated by 'early intervention', and through maximising the exploitation of 'human capital' in the long term to ensure a more productive, more competitive and more flexible future workforce.. What is valued is conformity (to technologies and outcomes), control (of children and adults to ensure outcomes) and predictability (of performance and returns). What is assumed is a future of more of the same, only more so, for which children have to be prepared or 'future-proofed', ensuring their readiness to respond to every changing demand of the market. Policy in this context requires the definition of outcomes, the selection of technologies and the specification of conditions for ensuring delivery.

I want to propose *an* alternative, not (please note) *the* alternative story - what I have termed a discourse or 'story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality' (Moss, 2014). I offer this here to exemplify my argument about the need for the resistance movement to engage with policy, but also to provoke debate about different 'real utopias', and how they might be achieved. My alternative story envisions a common policy framework applied to a country, state/region or even to a wider entity such as the European Union, and constituted by certain shared and democratically-determined entitlements, images (or social constructions), purposes, values, goals and structures. This framework would provide a necessary degree of coherence, equality and accessibility to early childhood services; but equally important, it would

provide the conditions needed for diversity and experimentation of ideas, projects and practices in services themselves – a plethora of local stories.

The purpose or rationale for early childhood education, in this scenario, would be to create public spaces and public resources, open to all citizens as of right, for realising potentiality through a wide range of projects – aesthetic, cultural, economic, political, social – understanding the full potentiality of citizens, spaces and resources to be unknown and unknowable, quite simply incalculable. Education, broadly understood, would be one of these projects, with ECE services providing a rich environment for the creation of new thought and knowledge, and with learning flourishing through the nurturing of the ‘hundred languages of childhood’. But, and I want to emphasise this point, education would be just one of the projects that early childhood services would support, many others being possible to the benefit not only of children but also parents and other family members, other local citizens and the community as a whole. (To get some idea of the range of projects that can emerge from an early childhood service operating as a multi-purpose public space and resource, see Broadhead, Meleady & Delgado, 2008).

So the goal of policy is not only to realise the rich potentiality of children, adults and communities, through the public space provided by early childhood services, but also to welcome, encourage and sustain experimentation – the enacting of different stories, with people working on a diversity of projects inspired by different ideas, desires and circumstances. Combined with commitment to democracy as a fundamental value, early childhood services would be sites of what Roberto Unger terms democratic experimentalism, “the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below” providing opportunities to try out different ways of doing things – “different forms of life, as well as experiments in the lives of people and in the activities of groups” (Unger, 2004, p.civ).

This is an early childhood education that does not presume a future of more of the same, a future of intensifying consumption, competition and calculation that is neither desirable nor feasible (in a world of climate change, pollution and resource depletion, and where nearly half of existing jobs are susceptible to automation). Rather it is an early childhood education that is committed to re-building the values of cooperation, mutuality, democracy and sustainability, and that rather than future-proofing children to be neoliberal subjects, works with these values to contribute towards ‘future building’. Assuming this role, early childhood services offer themselves as

one “democratic resource and public space that allows its young people and communities to contest the visions of the future that they are being presented with, and to work together through the spaces of traditional and emergent democratic practice, to fight for viable futures for all” (Facer, 2011, p.15).

The proposal I am making here is itself an example of future building, both contesting the vision of the future presented by the story of quality and high returns and working to create and fight for an alternative and viable future. But such future building requires, as Facer emphasises, working together, and here lies my question to the resistance movement. Are we prepared to work together to fight for viable and alternative futures? Are we prepared to work on building alternative policy proposals, that would enable early childhood education not only to continue its recent growth, but to take a different direction, encouraging and supporting a diversity of alternative narratives and an early childhood education of democracy, experimentation and potentiality, within a common, inclusive and supportive framework?

What might that work involve? I would suggest at least three strands: learning from the past and present, specifying conditions, and building alliances. By learning, I refer to studying and deepening understanding of instances where alternative story-tellers have had success in shaping or at least influencing policy. For the resistance movement should recognise, celebrate and investigate important instances of this kind, for example: the ‘municipal school revolution’ in Italy (including, but not only, the well-known example of Reggio Emilia); the evolution of a highly educated workforce, a socio-cultural curriculum and participatory forms of evaluation in New Zealand; and the spread of experimental projects in preschools within a national framework in Sweden, the instance that perhaps comes closest to the sort of policy that I am proposing here. What I am arguing for here are dialogues and exchanges (for example, at round tables and other forums) and research in the form of critical case studies, strategically chosen with the aim of fostering understanding, reflection and action and which “stay close to the complexities and contradictions of existence” (Lather, 2006, p.788).

By conditions, I refer to the work needed to specify what conditions would enable the story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality to be enacted as a viable and achievable real utopia. The current dominant discourse puts immense effort and resources into this task, identifying and implementing conditions (‘quality’) to ensure the panacea of high returns. The emphasis in its conditions is on strong governing to achieve conform-

ity, standardisation and predefined outcomes, through technologies such as prescribed curricula, systematic surveillance and summative assessment. An alternative policy approach, such as outlined here, will need to put similar effort into identifying and building conditions, but conditions that can both embody and support democracy, experimentation and potentiality. The ability to do this is one of the main reasons for the sustained success of the pedagogical project in Reggio Emilia, including the attention paid to the pay, conditions, organisation and continuous professional development of its workforce, to the material environment in its schools, and to participatory forms of management and evaluation<sup>6</sup>. It is on such essential conditions – workforce, environment, management, evaluation – that attention and thought must be lavished.

Finally, alliances. Early childhood education can never exist as a separate entity, divorced from the world around it. It is no magic cure-all and should never work in isolation. Most obviously it has relationships with other sectors of education, as well as with other areas of social policy. More broadly, if it acknowledges its contribution to future building, it must engage with other actors who also want to future build, for example organisations and movements working on issues such as sustainable development, participatory democracy, and social justice. This means, for example, creating what have been termed ‘pedagogical meeting places’ for early childhood, primary, secondary, higher and adult education, replacing the current obsession with ‘readiness’ (for the next stage of education) by opening up for dialogue and the creation of a new and shared ‘diagnosis of our times’, new and shared images of the child, new and shared understandings of education, learning and knowledge, and new and shared pedagogical practice (for a fuller discussion of the concept of ‘pedagogical meeting places’, see Moss, 2013). While more broadly, it means finding ways for early childhood (and other) education to participate in alliances, local and wider, to further holistic and emancipatory approaches to future building.

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<sup>6</sup> Loris Malaguzzi, who played such a major role in the evolution of Reggio Emilia’s municipal schools and early childhood education, recognised the importance of conditions from an early stage, writing in 1945 (nearly 20 years before his involvement in Reggio Emilia’s schools) that “we cannot create an artist at will, but it is equally true that the conditions for an artist to be born and to develop can be created from now on” (Malaguzzi, 2016, p.37)



## Why Engage with Policy?

*Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (Friedman, 1982, p. ix)*

I have argued that those who contest the dominant discourse, who wish instead to work with other discourses, to tell alternative stories, should engage with policy, developing ideas and proposals that would foster an ECE that can enact such stories. I recognise that this will not appeal to some, and do not suggest that it is something that all members of the resistance movement should or need take part in. The resistance movement can encompass many motives, interests and capabilities.

Another response will be that it is simply unrealistic to enter the policy field. Worse, it is a waste of precious time and effort that could better be devoted to exploring a world of new ideas and seeking opportunities to work with them in the small spaces of resistance that always occur even with the most dominant of discourses. Better, surely, to keep on the margins, to sustain refuges where alternative stories can be told to the likeminded, to focus on building networks of mutually supportive resisters? Better micro-politics than macro-politics.

Those who take this view might say that to engage with policy, to develop policy proposals and policy arguments is a waste of time because of the hopelessness of the present situation, given the admitted fact that the story of quality and high returns is supported and sustained by a powerful global regime of neoliberalism. In such circumstances, surely it is politically naïve and practically implausible to expect alternative discourses, not grounded in neoliberal values and beliefs, to have any hope of influencing policy. Surely, just a forlorn case of spitting in the wind.

But we should not, I think, give up hope. We should not let pessimism born of despair blind us to neoliberalism's inevitable ephemerality. Our world, both material and social, is in constant flux, and regimes come and go; neoliberalism is no exception. Like other regimes, it has its day, then will go into decline to be superseded, and its decline and fall will affect kindred discourses, such as the stories of markets and of quality and high returns. Indeed, neoliberalism has already shown signs of such degeneration, the financial

crisis of 2008/9 providing a clear indication of incipient decay and raising serious questions about the belief system underpinning neoliberalism; while a growing awareness of the unsustainability of an economic model based on endless growth and consumption adds further to a sense of impermanence. Some commentators would go further, arguing that “today neoliberal capitalism is busted, discredited and on life support” (Mason, 2016).

All things pass away and dominant regimes experience growing crisis. So the issue is to be ready for the new that will emerge from the decline and fall of the old. Milton Friedman, one of the key intellectual figures in the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s, understood this back in the 1960s, when a regime of Keynesian-inflected social democracy was still dominant, at least in the West, and there was as yet little support for the market fundamentalism of neoliberalism. As the quotation at the start of this section shows, from a book first published in 1962, Friedman had a clear idea of the role that he and his fellow resisters should be adopting: “our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.”

Engaging with policy matters, if not for immediate effect but to ensure alternatives are available when the time comes, and when the story of quality and high returns loses its contemporary hegemony, resuming its position as a local discourse, just one among many.

## Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire?

*My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.* (Foucault, 1983, p.232)

Friedman is important for his awareness of the cyclical nature of history and the importance of developing alternatives so as to be ready as the old regime enters its terminal phase and the new begins to emerge. But his experience also poses a dilemma and a warning. For, of course, what he contributed to was the replacement of one dominant discourse (social democracy) by another (neoliberalism)<sup>7</sup>. Might not a story, such as democracy, experimentation and potentiality, once enacted as policy become every bit as

<sup>7</sup> The same can be said about transitions in other parts of the world, for example the movement from a dominant discourse of statist communism to unregulated neoliberalism in the former Soviet Union.

much a dominant discourse in ECE as the story of quality and high returns? Might we not end up by jumping out of the frying pan into the fire? Or can we envisage moving into a society that eschews dominant discourses?

Foucault was surely right when he warned that everything is dangerous, so that even the best intentioned endeavours can have unexpected and undesirable consequences. We must, therefore, be constantly on our guard, ready and able to deconstruct all discourses to understand the dangers to which they can give rise. The story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality is no exception. Enacted as policy, it would risk developing a will to control; moreover, the relationship between a common framework and a local diversity of experience, so neat and re-assuring on paper, risks the development of tensions that are more destructive than productive.

Without wishing to appear complacent, for I take the issues here very seriously, there are reasons for believing that a story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality, enacted into policy, would avoid becoming a dominant discourse, at least in the sense of a regime of truth such as Foucault describes. Being postmodern or postfoundational in paradigm, it should be able to understand it represents just one position and perspective of many that are possible, and to acknowledge its understandings as partial, perspectival and provisional. It should, therefore, be less prone to sediment into a system that claims universality, stability and closure. Being permeated by democratic and experimental values should have a similar effect. It should, too, feel less threatened by diversity, complexity and uncertainty. Last, but not least, it should welcome and value critique, for example the constant questioning of key concepts such as 'democracy', 'experimentation' and 'potentiality'.

But there are a lot of 'shoulds' here. In the end, perhaps it is necessary to acknowledge both the dangers and the reasons for optimism; and to hope that the latter will decisively moderate the former, so that an influential discourse will not become a dominant discourse, shaping decisively what we can think, say and do. To work, too, on evolving practices that will enable a critical sensibility to spread widely and be put to work in the everyday life of early childhood services; we already have one such practice, pedagogical documentation, but as well as extending and deepening its use, other ways of critically reading and deconstructing pedagogical work are a priority.

To conclude. The dominant discourses in early childhood education are impoverished in aspiration, ineffectual in their own terms, and damaging in

their effects; they are the bitter fruits of a failing neoliberalism. But there are alternative discourses, flourishing if often very local. As we understand more about these stories and how they can be put to work, we can begin the task of building alternative visions of early childhood education, complete with policy proposals that make these visions not only desirable, but viable and achievable. So let's get to work on the transition from resistance movement to social movement.

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