

Early Childhood Institutions as Loci of Ethical and Political Practice

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Institutionalisation of Childhood: Possibilities and Risks

We are at a historical moment where it becomes urgent to raise the question: What are the possibilities for institutions created for children and young people? The historical process of the institutionalisation of childhood is in a period of intensification, as children enter institutions at ever earlier ages and remain in them for longer periods. This intensification presents great opportunities but also involves many risks since, as Foucault reminds us, everything is dangerous. A particular set of risks are produced from the increasing dominance of a particular discourse about early childhood. The dominant discourse threatens us with what Santos (2004) refers to as 'hegemonic globalisation', that is 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.

What Is This Dominant Discourse?

The early childhood field is increasingly dominated by one particularly strong narrative, an Anglo-American narrative spoken in the

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English language, located in a liberal political and economic context, and dominated by certain disciplinary perspectives, in particular psychology, management and economics. This narrative has a distinct vocabulary, in which terms such as 'development,' 'quality' and 'outcomes' are prominent. Such terms generate particular problems, questions, and methods. The narrative is inscribed with the values and assumptions of modernity, for example objectivity, mastery, and universality, and with particular understandings of childhood, learning, evaluation, and so on.

The Anglo-American narrative is, if you will, a regime of truth about early childhood education and care as a technology for social stability and economic success. Early childhood institutions are understood first and foremost, as places of technical practice. Their workforce is seen as technicians, and young children as redemptive agents to be programmed to become a solution to certain problems arising from highly competitive market capitalism. This truth regime is highly instrumental and calculative in rationality, demonstrating a will to know or grasp the child by placing her within totalising systems of scientific theory and their attendant technologies and classifications. As a result of the dominant narrative, a public policy is produced which (as Prout observes) emphasises control, regulation, and surveillance (Prout, 2000).

Proliferating Discourses

It seems to me that the task confronting critical thinkers in early childhood today is to put a stutter in this dominant discourse, by denaturalising it and showing that it is not a necessity but a choice, or in Foucault's words,

to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that which is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such...since as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible. (1988: p.155)

An important part of the denaturalisation process is to offer other possibilities, other ways of thinking about institutions and the children within them, and other ways of practicing pedagogical work: in short, to proliferate a multiplicity of discourses.

The Rich Child and Children's Spaces: An Other Discourse

In my work over the last 10 years with a number of colleagues, I have been trying to create an other discourse through imagining an other

possibility. I stress 'an' other, since it is important to try and resist replacing one dominant discourse, one narrative of necessity with another. That possibility starts from an image of the child: as an active subject, a multi-lingual creator of knowledge and identity from birth, connected in relations of interdependency with other children and adults, a citizen with rights, overall what Malaguzzi termed a 'rich child.' The possibility continues with the image of a worker who is a learner, a researcher, a critical thinker, and a reflexive as well as dialogic practitioner. This child and this worker come together in an institution understood as a 'children's space,' a forum or public place of collective responsibility and encounter between citizens in a community from which many possibilities can flow—cultural, aesthetic, political, social, ethical, and economic. Some of these possibilities may be predictable and predetermined but many are not (For a fuller discussion of the concept, see Moss and Petrie, 2002).

Ethics and Politics as First Practice in Early Childhood Institutions

Institutions understood as children's spaces are emancipatory in the sense that they create possibilities for individuals—always in relationship with others—to think for themselves through creating knowledge, identity, and values by challenging dominant discourses. Children's spaces are also distinguished by replacing the primacy currently given to instrumental rationality and technical practice, in what I term the dominant discourse, by making ethics and politics first practice. This reconceptualisation transforms our understanding of children's institutions from enclosures for the application of technical practice to forums, spaces, or loci for ethical and political practice. Technical practice is not dispensed with, but rather put in its place, as servant rather than master, and technology is recognised as never neutral but always permeated by values.

What Ethics?

Gunilla Dahlberg and I (2005) have explored the possibility that early childhood institutions could be understood as, first and foremost, sites for ethical and political practice. Ethics are always present even when not recognised. Foregrounding them is not a question of more ethics but of *what* ethics. We are drawn toward three ethical approaches or perspectives that have come to prominence recently, postmodern ethics, the ethics of care, and most important to us, the ethics of an encounter.

The approaches have much in common. Each reacts against an understanding of ethics as conformity to universal moral codes and a strong aggressive tendency in Western thought to grasp otherness and make it into the same in a will to know. They resist the calculative thinking and the autonomous subject at the heart of liberalism; they view ethics as strongly relational and value responsibility and inter-dependence. They foreground the issue of relating to otherness and doing so with respect for alterity. Emmanuel Levinas, one of the leading ethicists of the last century, bases his ethics—the ethics of an encounter—on absolute alterity and the unknowability of the Other: this means an Other whom I cannot represent and classify, whom I cannot totalise and grasp, whom I cannot seek to understand through the imposition of my framework of thought

The Ethics of an Encounter: Challenging the Whole Scene of Pedagogy

We contend that these ethical perspectives have profound implications for early childhood institutions—indeed for all institutions for children. For as Dahlberg has written:

To think an other whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy... From this perspective teaching and learning have to start with ethics—with receiving and welcoming—and it is the receiving from the Other beyond the capacity of the I which constructs the discourse of teaching, a teaching that interrupts the philosophical tradition of making ourselves the master over the child. (2003, p.273)

Or in the words of Readings, education is

... drawing out of the otherness of thought. Listening to Thought is not the spending of time in the production of the autonomous subject or of an autonomous body of knowledge...[rather] it is to explore an open network of obligations that keeps the question of meaning open as a locus for debate...[and] trying to hear that which cannot be said but that which tries to make itself heard. (1996, p.162)

Examples: The Rhizome, Listening, *Progettazione*, Pedagogical Documentation

I can mention four examples of how making such ethical approaches first practice challenges early childhood education:

Knowledge

The image of knowledge becomes the *rhizome* (or in Malaguzzi's phrase 'the tangle of spaghetti'). Here, thought and concepts can be seen as a consequence of the provocation of an encounter with difference. The *rhizome* shoots in all directions with no beginning and no end, but always *in between*, and with openings towards other directions and places. It is a *multiplicity* functioning by means of connections and heterogeneity, a multiplicity which is not given but constructed. The rhizomatic challenges the dominant idea of knowledge acquisition that remains so prominent in education, Mainstream knowledge acquisition is viewed as a form of recognition and linear progression, where the metaphor is a tree or a staircase, where you have to take the first step before you move to the next in order. In a rhizomatic approach, there is no hierarchy of root, trunk and branch.

Learning

Different forms of pedagogy are needed. An example is the pedagogy of listening, which is the basis of the pedagogical work in Reggio Emilia, and values respect for the alterity of the other:

... if we believe that children possess their own theories, interpretations and questions, and are protagonists in the knowledge-building processes, then the most important verbs in educational practice are no longer 'to talk,' 'to explain' or 'to transmit...' but 'to listen.' Listening means being open to others and what they have to say, listening to the hundred (and more) languages with all our senses. (Rinaldi, 2006, p.125-126)

Curriculum

When the mainstream idea of knowledge acquisition as a form of linear progression is challenged, so too is the concept and practice of curriculum. Again, in Reggio Emilia, knowledge as spaghetti and pedagogy as listening produce the concept and practice of *progettazione* which evokes a dynamic process. Learning is a journey with many uncertainties, new directions and unknown destinations; an openness to thought; and the need to be responsive to what is created in the dialogue between children and adults.

Evaluation

A different language of evaluation is needed that can offer an alternative discourse to the normative and technical language of 'quality.' This alternative discourse should treat evaluation as a judgement of

value not a statement of fact. The process of evaluation then becomes ethical rather than technical,, inherently subjective and provisional, a collective question that is both essential and unanswerable. Pedagogical documentation provides a tool for evaluation as democratic meaning making.

Early Childhood Institutions as Sites for Democratic 'Minor' Politics

If we can first transgress the idea of early childhood institutions as places of neutral, scientifically-legitimated technical practice, then we can open to another possibility that allows for discursive spaces where different perspectives and forms of expression encounter each other. In such a place there can be room for dialogue, confrontation, deliberation, and critical thinking. Gunilla Dahlberg and I argue that early childhood institutions understood in this way provide possibilities for democratic political practice through the exercise of what Rose (1999) calls 'minor' or 'minority' politics:

These minor engagements do not have the arrogance of programmatic politics—perhaps even refuse their designation as politics at all. They are cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative. They are concerned with the here and now, not with some fantasized future, with small concerns, petty details, the everyday and not the transcendental. They frequently arise in 'cramped spaces'...[and] in relation to these little territories of the everyday, they seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action. (p. 280)

Dahlberg and I (2005) offer a number of examples of how such democratic 'minor' politics can be practiced in early childhood institutions: Pedagogical documentation can be used to question the necessity of dominant discourses and to enable evaluation as a process of collective critical thinking. The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) can be used to make visible the perspective of young children and hence their inclusion in participatory politics. Parent involvement can be redefined as an opportunity to enhance democratic politics rather than a means to improve communication and govern behaviour. The critical reading of expert texts reveals the values and assumptions that masquerade as objective inevitabilities. A process of collective critical thinking needs to include argumentation around the many issues of difference and diversity that arise in the everyday lives of early childhood institutions.

Expansion of the Political Terrain

In these and other ways, early childhood institutions can expand the space in society for democratic politics. These rethought institutions can offer new environments, new methods, and new subjects for such practice, characterised by engagement with everyday concerns, by creativity, and by recognition of the value of an 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe, 2000) that does not believe it possible or even desirable to eradicate difference in a search for consensus. One way of characterising the complex political role of minor politics is as *resistance to power*, a politics that: confronts (1) 'regimes of truth' that govern what we can think and do; (2) processes of subjectification, by which we are created as a particular type of subject; and (3) certain dimensions or forms of injustice, in particular domination and oppression.

However, this 'minor' politics is not a substitute for 'major' or 'programmatically' politics. Traditional forms of democratic practice—operating nationally, regionally and locally determine a range of policies which shape early childhood institutions and their pedagogical practices. Both forms of politics are needed in democratic societies.

How Can We Resist?

I began this paper by arguing that there is an increasingly dominant Anglo-American discourse in early childhood. The dominance of this discourse is not accidental. It is the product of economic, cultural, and political forces that exert power in much of the world today—not least the long-established and immensely influential paradigm of modernity and the resurgence since the mid-1970s of neo-liberal capitalism and advanced liberal politics. At a time of growing insecurity, complexity and uncertainty, generated by these forms of liberalism, it claims to offer certainty and redemption. It is propagated through the influence of American research, the reach of the English language and the advocacy of international organisations.

Those of us who wish to contest the discourse and transgress its norms need to dialogue more about how this might be done. What processes could be used, which alliances formed, and what other forms of resistance are possible? How can we proliferate a multiplicity of discourses and avoid replacing one dominant discourse with another? There are no easy or certain answers because the dominant discourse draws strength from its denial of multiplicity and diversity. There is, according to this discourse, just one way of knowing, thinking, and practicing, the supreme task being to define and follow a particular way.

I would like to conclude by offering these thoughts as a contribution to a dialogue about how an effective resistance might be mounted to the dominant discourse, perhaps beginning by interrupting its fluency, making the discourse stutter.

Criticism and Vision

We need to combine critical analysis with envisioning alternatives – what might be termed utopian thought, the type of thought discussed by Santos: “the exploration by imagination of new modes of human possibility and styles of will, and the confrontation by imagination of the necessity of whatever exists—just because it exists—with something radically better that is worth fighting for” (1995, p.481).

Exploring Islands of Dissensus

We need to look for examples of otherness, utopian action if you will, in order to demonstrate the possibility of difference and potential. Utopian action can be highly subversive to dominant discourses. One of the reasons why the early childhood services in a small Italian city, Reggio Emilia, are so important is because they show that it is possible to think and act differently, and that the dominant discourse, therefore, is a choice not a necessity. As such, Reggio Emilia serves as one of the islands of dissensus that can disturb the complacent flow of the dominant discourse.

Making Connections

Resistance against hegemonic globalisation, represented by what I have termed the dominant early childhood discourse, can be organised through local, regional, and global linkages and networks involving individuals, institutions, and organisations. This journal is an example of this process; the global network of people and institutions in dialogue with Reggio Emilia is another. Perhaps resistance in the early childhood field needs to be more adventurous, more ready to border cross. This means opening up to other forms of ‘counter hegemonic globalisation’ that are seeking progressive social transformation and emancipatory political goals. Examples that run counter to hegemony are initiatives, organisations and movements concerned with children’s position in society, democratic education, economic justice, environmental sustainability and a range of diversity issues.

Contesting the Future of the Welfare State

There is a need to engage with debates about the future of the welfare

state. It is important to resist neo-liberal discourses that decouple individuality from solidarity, claim choice as an autonomous act of consumption rather than a collective process of democracy, value competition and calculation over mutuality and collaboration, and reduce public institutions to private commodities. But it is also important to argue for a welfare state that actively encourages local experimentation within a framework of strong universal social entitlements and that recognises the centrality of ethical and political practice. The argument for such a welfare state could combine common values and goals with the proliferation of discourses. It seems to me that this is most likely in countries or regions with strong democratic traditions, where political values combine respect for individuality with the importance of solidarity. This construction of the welfare state requires a clear idea of the relationship and boundaries between the social and the economic, as well as an inclusive concept of citizenship that encompasses children.

The dominant discourse in early childhood services today may be Anglo-American. Yet, the Anglo-American world has not done well by its young children. If we want to find societies with low levels of child poverty and inequality, universal entitlement to early childhood services and conditions for local experimentation we have to look elsewhere, for example, to the successful Nordic welfare states (Cohen et al., 2004). Here and in other pockets of resistance, Northern Italy being another, we can find other discourses and other possibilities. It may not be possible to copy them, indeed we may not want to do so. However, they affirm not only that we do have choices but also that other ways are possible.

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