

Early Childhood Education: profitable investment or democratic potential

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Theme and argument today

- Theme: power and unequal relations for children and families in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services
- Context : increasing policy interest and ECEC provision → increasing institutionalisation of early childhood
- Perspective: ECEC has great potential...BUT “*power is always present*” and “*everything is dangerous*” [Michel Foucault]

Theme and argument today

- Dangerous discourse dominates ECEC today –
‘story of quality and high returns’
- There are other discourses, or stories to tell –
some more hopeful and emancipatory, e.g.
‘the story of democracy, experimentation and
potentiality’

Draw inspiration from 'resistance movement'...

- *'Contesting early childhood'* series...questions dominant discourses and offers alternative narratives
- *'Loris Malaguzzi and the schools of Reggio Emilia: a selection of his writings and speeches, 1945-1993'*: great 20th century Italian educator...example of democratic public education in a network of municipal schools for young children

...and from narrative and story telling

We believe that the roots [of the converging crises of our times] lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves...

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, *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*]

The dangerous dominant
discourse:
The Story of
Quality and High Returns

The Story of Quality and High Returns

Apply the correct *human technologies* (aka 'quality') at the correct time to get high returns on investment including improved education, employment & earnings and reduced social problems

'early intervention' + 'quality' ►►
↑ 'human capital' + ↓ dysfunction ►►
survival in the 'global race'

'Human technologies'

*Technologies of government...imbued with aspirations for the **shaping of conduct** in the hope of producing certain **desired effects** and averting certain **undesired events** (Rose, 1999), e.g.*

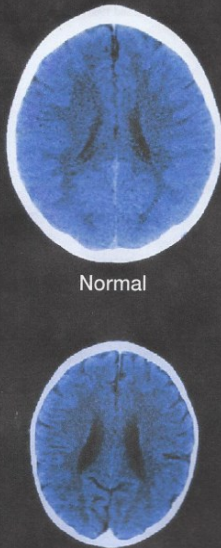
Child development concepts and knowledge...
developmental and learning goals...prescriptive
curricula...pedagogical programmes...child observation
techniques and normative assessment methods...
regulatory and inspection regimes...payment by
results...technical (positivistic) research...

UK government report 2011

**Early Intervention:
Smart Investment, Massive Savings**


The Second Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government
Graham Allen MP

3 Year old children Costs to taxpayer



Normal

Extreme neglect



Early Intervention

Low attainment

Benefits

Failed relationships

Poor parenting

Drink & drug abuse

Teen pregnancy

Violent crime

Shorter life

Poor mental health

July 2011

HM Government

Obama White House, 2013

*Research has shown that taxpayers receive a high average **return on investments** in **high-quality** early childhood education, with savings in areas like improved educational outcomes, increased labor productivity, and a reduction in crime*

Liz Truss, 2013

*By driving up standards and focusing on **quality**, I want every child in the country to be given... the best possible start in life...*

*The 21st century will belong to those countries that win the **global race** for jobs and economic advantage. In order for every adult to fulfil their potential, they need to be properly equipped with **essential skills from the very beginning of their lives***

The moral of the story

‘Quality’ ECEC is

- a best buy for the ‘social investment’ state...
- the answer to individual and national survival in a competitive, ‘winner takes all’ world...
- the means to ‘future proof’ children for an inevitable future of more of the same: hyper-market capitalism with intensifying competition, endless growth, increasing consumption, flexible workers, calculating consumers

A story that leads to 'prophetic pedagogy' ...

...knows everything beforehand, knows everything that will happen, does not have one uncertainty, is absolutely imperturbable. It prophesies everything, sees everything to the point that it is capable of giving you recipes for little bits of actions, minute by minute, hour by hour...This is something so coarse, so cowardly, so humiliating of teachers' ingenuity, a complete humiliation for children's ingenuity and potential [Loris Malaguzzi, 1992]

A story that leads to (Anglo-Saxon) 'testology' ...

*... [With] its rush to categorise...where it is enough to do some tests on an individual and immediately the individual has been defined and measured in some way...which is nothing but a **ridiculous simplification** of knowledge, and a **robbing of meaning** from individual histories* [Loris

Malaguzzi, 1988]

Why the story of Quality and
High Returns is dangerous

1. Technical fix to a political issue

Children attending 'good quality' early childhood education are better prepared for compulsory schooling and perform somewhat better, both before and after entry, when assessed against certain developmental or educational norms

BUT

- Home has more influence than ECEC
- 'Advantaged' families ensure their children stay ahead...inequalities remain
- Early intervention has little impact on the big picture e.g. United States...

1. Technical fix to a political issue

US as home of story of QHR...decades of targeted early interventions and research

BUT NO HIGH RETURNS

- child poverty same in 2012 as in 1965 (21%) - when Head Start began
 - the worst score out of 21 affluent countries for social and health problems [Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009]
 - 26 out of 29 countries for child well-being in rich countries [UNICEF, 2013]
- etc. etc. ect.

1. Technical fix to a political issue

Why no 'high returns' in the US? Adverse political, social and economic context has far greater impact than early intervention, e.g. growing inequality since late 1970s - 'the Great Divergence' [Paul Krugman]

- The US *“has the fourth-highest inequality level in the OECD, after Chile, Mexico and Turkey. Inequality among working-age people has risen steadily since 1980, in total by 25%”* [OECD, 2011]
- Inequality *“seems to make countries socially dysfunctional across a wide range of outcomes”* [Wilkinson & Pickett]

1. Technical fix to a political issue

Lessons of Sure Start

*The most important lesson for me from the last 11 years is the need to address inequality as well as poverty and low attainment . . . **The expectation that early years services, however wonderful, could affect overall inequality was unrealistic. This shift will come from wider social reforms** [Naomi Eisenstadt, 2011]*

1. Technical fix to a political issue!

The Story of Quality and High Returns is naive, reductionist and ignores the bigger picture...

It assumes a technical fix can solve problems of injustice and inequality that are structural and systemic and require major economic, environmental and political changes

It is no co-incidence that the Story of Quality and High Returns is told more and more as inequality rises under a regime of neoliberalism

2. Governing the child – and others

Story of QHR calls for prescribed and standardised human **technologies** + prescribed and standardised **application** ►► prescribed and standardised **outcomes**

“Very tightly defined programmes [produce] good results” [Edward Melhuish, 2010]

Desire for high returns ►► ever stronger governing of children and adults to produce results ►► an education with no place for surprise & wonder, diversity & complexity

2. Governing the child – and others

*[T]he more we seem to know about the complexity of learning, children's diverse strategies and multiple theories of knowledge, the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities of this learning and knowing...In fact, **the more complex things become the more we seem to desire processes of reduction and thus increase control** [Hillevi Lenz Taguchi]*

3.Dictatorship of no Alternative

The Story of Quality and High Returns does not hear or listen to other stories...believes it is the only true story, that there is no alternative!

But there are alternatives!

A growing movement of resistance in ECEC to the 'dictatorship of no alternative'

Resistance movement

- **Situated in other paradigmatic positions:** e.g. post-foundationalist
- **Working with wide range of disciplines:** e.g. sociology, philosophy, political science, human geography, feminist studies etc
- **Working with wide range of theoretical perspectives:** e.g. Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Barad

Resistance movement telling stories with different vocabularies

Story of QHR

child development
developmentally
appropriate practice
early intervention...pro-
grammes
assessment scales
investment...outcomes...
returns...human capital
quality

Other stories

projects
potentialities...possibilities
uncertainty...wonder...
surprise
in-between
lines of flight...rhizomes
images...interpretations...
meaning-making
democracy...experiment-
ation

Resistance movement

- Bringing critical thought to bear – making dominant discourse ‘stutter’
- Making power and unequal relations visible
- Exploring how to put new theoretical perspectives to work – *‘Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies’*
- Telling new stories

An other story:
Democracy, Experimentation and
Potentialities (DEP)

(‘Transformative Change and Real Utopias in
Early Childhood Education’)

The story of DEP

Story of QHR treats ECEC as first and foremost a **technical practice** – asks technical questions, e.g. ‘what works?’

Story of DEP treats ECEC as first and foremost a **political and ethical practice** – technical practice matters but subject to politics and ethics

The story of DEP

Starts with **political questions**

*Not mere technical issues to be solved by experts...[but questions that] always involve decisions which require us to make **choices between conflicting alternatives*** [Chantal Mouffe, 2007]

The story of DEP

Political questions

Ontological: What is our image of the child...the educator...the school? How do we understand education? What is the '*diagnosis for our time*'?

Epistemological: What paradigm? What is knowledge?

Axiological: What are the purposes of education? What are its fundamental values? What ethics? What kind of society do we want? What do we want for our children, here and now and in the future?

Story of DEP is woven from one set of answers to these questions, e.g.

The story of DEP

What is your image of the child?

*A declaration [about the image of the child] is not only a necessary act of clarity and correctness, it is the **necessary premise for any pedagogical theory, and any pedagogical project...***

*The absurd thing is that this explicit **public declaration of the identity of the child**, which is the **proper and unavoidable premise on which to base our theoretical foundation when starting work**, is quite unusual [Loris Malaguzzi, 1990]*

The image of the child

What is your image of the child?

*There are rich children and poor children. We [in Reggio] say **all children are rich, there are no poor children**. All children whatever their culture, whatever their lives are rich, better equipped, more talented, stronger, and more intelligent than we can [Loris Malaguzzi]*

Instead of a story about

- quality and high returns...
- instrumental rationality and technical practice...
- the value of certainty, predictability, objectivity, universality and mastery...
- schools as factories for producing pre-determined outcomes and for taming, governing and standardising – places of closure...
- children following pre-determined pathways...
- ‘future-proofing’ children for an inevitable future – more of the same

DEP is a story about

- **democracy** as a fundamental value and practice...not just a way of governing but also a way of living and relating in the everyday

*Democracy is more than a form of government: it is primarily **a mode of associated living**, embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life [John Dewey]*

*Building **everyday democracy** depends on applying its principles to **everyday institutions** through which people make their choices and develop their identities [Tom Bentley]*

DEP is a story about

- **experimentation** as a fundamental value and practice...explore, try, research new theories, ways of working, projects
- **experimentation** as an everyday & democratic practice – ‘democratic experimentalism’

*an innovative collective practice...[that] can only happen through **the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below**...Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain [Roberto Unger]*

DEP is a story about

- the infinite and unpredictable **potentialities** of children...educators...parents...schools

[W]e never know in advance what a body can do

[Baruch Spinoza]

[T]he potential of the child is stunted when the endpoint of their learning is formulated in advance

[Carlina Rinaldi]

DEP is a story about

- EC centres as public spaces of infinite possibilities – of and, and, and
 - places of encounter between citizens and community workshops capable of infinite possibilities - social **AND** cultural **AND** political **AND** economic **AND** aesthetic **AND**...
 - places for ‘democratic experimentalism’
 - places for **future-building** at a time of deep crisis

The future building school

*The future-building school acts as a powerful platform within the community for creating **a conversation about the future**. It brings together students, parents, grandparents, community organizations and staff to ask what sorts of future are in development for the school's community, and to examine **what alternative futures** for their students and their neighbourhoods they might seek to create...*

The future building school

*...[Such schools act] as a powerful **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** [Keri Facer]*

In conclusion

- At a time when children and families are more exposed to institutions than ever before... when the capacity to govern through unequal power relations and assemblages of human technologies has never been greater
- We need to be critical and sceptical about these institutions...but that is not enough

In conclusion

- We also need to imagine, discuss and enact alternatives that might offer emancipatory opportunities to children, families and communities
- Unequal relationships call for resistance but also for affirmation