

What is your image of the early childhood centre?

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Real world... possible childhoods

Increasing institutionalisation of childhood

- More and longer school
- More early childhood centres

‘Everything is dangerous’ – EC centre as a place for governing and technical practice

Everything has possibilities – EC centre as a place of potentialities and democratic practice

The critical questions in ECEC are not technical, about means and methods, e.g. ‘what works?’

But....

political and ethical, about understandings and purposes e.g. ‘what are ECEC services for?’

There are alternatives requiring democratic and collective political choices

“A democratic society is precisely one in which the purpose of education is not given but is a constant topic for discussion and deliberation...The current climate in many Western countries has made it increasingly difficult to have a democratic discussion about the purposes of education...What is needed is an acknowledgement that education is a moral practice, rather than a technical one”

(Biersta, 2007)

ECEC as a place for governing and technical practice

- **Fragmentation** - ‘Childcare’ (working parents) // ‘early education’ (3 / 4 years+) // targeted services (poor families)
 - **Marketisation** – purchaser (parent)/provider relationship; competition & individual choice
- +
- **Standardisation** – detailed procedures to deliver detailed goals

Technical practice

- Ends/purposes are known – services are producers of predetermined outcomes
- Focus on means (‘human technologies’) to produce outcomes
- ‘Quality’ as “language of evaluation”- conformity to standards
- Research is about improving means and quality (‘evidence-based practice’)

“On the research side, evidence-based education seems to favor a technocratic model in which it is assumed the only relevant research questions are questions about the effectiveness of educational means and techniques, forgetting that what counts as ‘effective’ crucially depends on judgements about what is educationally desirable”

(Biersta, 2007)

One possibility

The child...as knowledge reproducer, object of care and development, redemptive agent ('human capital')

The practitioner...as technician, applying effective technologies

EC centre...as factory and business

Personal research programme

Researching the early childhood centre/other children's services in post-industrial societies: to understand what it has become and what it might be

1999: *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education: Postmodern Perspectives* (Gunilla Dahlberg & Alan Pence)

2002: *From Children's Services to Children's Spaces* (Pat Petrie)

2005: *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education* (Gunilla Dahlberg)

Disenchantment with dominant understandings – EC centre as factory and business

Dangers facing us today: survival; inequality; diversity at risk; democracy in poor health

Inspiration from people and places – another EC centre is possible...and from other theorists – we can think differently

Other understandings of the EC centre are possible

ECEC as a place for democratic practice and experimentation

- Integration - concept and structure
- Socialisation - citizens (children & adults)/society relationships; solidarity & collective choice
- Diversity – thought, practice, outcome; stimulated by experimentation
- Democratic political practice

Democracy

“To aspire towards ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy...The vision of early childhood services as a life space where educators and families work together to promote the well-being, participation and learning of young children is based on the principle of democratic participation”

(OECD, 2006)

Democracy

“Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason, all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values”

(Swedish pre-school curriculum)

Democracy as a fundamental value

EC centres are *not* preparing children for democracy –
they are democratically organised and practice
democracy

Democracy is understood as a way of life and relating –
not a subject to be taught

“Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working
faith in the possibilities of human nature...[and] faith
in the capacity of human beings for intelligent
judgement and action if proper conditions are
furnished”

(Dewey, 1939)

Democracy in the EC centre

Some possibilities for democratic practice
including children, parents, educators

1. Decision-making: purposes, practices, environments

“All those who are affected by social institutions must
have a share in producing and managing them”

(Dewey, 1937)

e.g. Mosaic approach, multi-method tool for enabling children’s
participation...in ‘Living Spaces’ project, young children work
with architects on design of new centres

Democracy in the EC centre

2. **Production** : co-construction of knowledges, values, identities
3. **Evaluation**: participatory methods ►► collective deliberation on evidence and its meaning (pedagogical documentation)

Diversity (and coherence)

- Strong decentralisation to local communities and services
- National framework of common entitlements, values and goals
- Encourage and support local interpretation and democratic experimentation

Diversity (and coherence)

“The decentralisation of management functions to local authorities is a gauge of participatory democracy. At the same time, the experience of ECEC policy reviews suggests that central governments have a pivotal role in creating strong and equitable early childhood systems, and in co-constructing and ensuring programme standards.” (OECD, *Starting Strong II*)

‘Democratic experimentalism’

“The provision of public services must be *an innovative collective practice*, moving forward the qualitative provision of the services themselves. That can no longer happen by the mechanical transmission of innovation from the top. It 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”

(Unger, 2005)

EC centre as a
*public forum and
cooperative workshop*

- Public institution, responsibility and space for *all* children and families
- Forum or place of encounter between *all* citizens - younger and older
- Workshop of *many* purposes, projects and possibilities – social, cultural, political, ethical, economic, aesthetic etc etc.

Many purposes, projects and possibilities

- Collective production of knowledges, values and identities (education in its broadest sense)
- Collective researching, e.g. children's learning processes, 'outcomes'
- Build solidarity and offer support
- Cultural sustainability and renewal
- Economic development and activity
- Promote gender and other equalities
- Practice democracy and active citizenship
- +++

EC practitioner as a *democratic and reflective professional*

- a critical thinking
- a researcher
- an experimenter
- a co-constructor of meaning, identity and values – always in relation with others

“The education of young children as a community project”

“[The early childhood worker needs to be] more attentive to *creating possibilities* than pursuing predefined goals...

[to be] removed from *the fallacy of certainties*, [assuming instead] responsibility to choose, experiment, discuss, reflect and change, focusing on the organisation of opportunities rather than the *anxiety of pursuing outcomes*, and maintaining in her work *the pleasure of amazement and wonder.*”

(Fortunati, 2006)

Image of the rich child

- Competent learner and co-constructor of knowledge, identities and values
- Born with 100 languages
- Citizen & subject of rights
- Connected to other children and adults

Research and democratic experimentalism

Knowledge is acquired by reflective experimentation

“[Dewey argued] we should not only experiment with respect to means but also with respect to ends and the interpretation of the problems we address. It is only along these lines that inquiry in the social domain can help us find not only whether what we desire is achievable but also whether achieving it is desirable”

(Biersta, 2007)

Technical and cultural roles of research

Technical – research as producer of means and techniques to achieve given ends

Cultural – providing a different way of understanding and imagining social reality

“[Researchers and practitioners] should [not] only focus on the most effective means to bring about predetermined outcomes. [They] should also engage in inquiry about ends”

The EC centre and the compulsory school

- School: powerful, conservative institution
- Danger of ‘schoolification’ – the un-reformed school can dominate ECEC
- “Organisation, curriculum and decision-making in schools continue to resemble 19th century patterns” (OECD, 2006)
- Starting Strong: “strong and equal partnership”

Preschool and school: a strong and equal partnership

“[Announcing the transfer to education, prime minister Goran Persson stated] that the *pre-school should influence at least the early years of compulsory school*...Development work is focusing on the integration of pre-school pedagogy into primary schools and *creating pedagogical ‘meeting places’*”

(Korpi, 2005)

- Rethink relationship between EC centre and compulsory school
- Re-think the image of the school, the teacher and the school child
- Re-think the purpose of the school

“The new public education system organises its contents on the basis of that which is absolutely necessary in order for a person to exercise their citizenship:

- Communication
- Culture
- Science and technology
- Health, environment, sustainable development
- Creativity, imagination and curiosity
- Citizenship and democracy”

(Associacio de Mestres Rosa Sensat, 2005)

Are other images
possible in practice?

Yes, but we need to...

say the unsayable – ‘develop counter-narratives
that reconnect to our radical heritage’

foster an ‘ethics of resistance’ – question taken-
for-granted assumptions

put technical practice in its place - subsidiary to
political and ethical practice

record and research dissident images –
‘grounded evidence of possibility’

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