

Researching early childhood policy and practice. A critical ecology^[1]

Urban, M. (2012), Researching Early Childhood Policy and Practice. A Critical Ecology. *European Journal of Education*, 47: 494-507.

Author: Urban, Mathias

Source: *European Journal of Education*

Format: Article

Publication Date: 4 Nov 2012

AVAILABILITY

- Full text in PDF^[2]

Related

- Research webpage of Mathias Urban^[3] (many full-text papers available)

Abstract

This article examines the renewed interest in early childhood education and care in European politics, and the implications for research in changing policy contexts. Based on the policy analysis, it argues for a radical reconceptualisation of how, with and for whom, and to what end we design, conduct and interpret research in early childhood in present-day Europe. The article argues that the role of research in these contexts is much more than that of a provider of data and information that underpin evidence-based policies. Instead, as part of a critical ecology of research, practice and policy, it is an inherently political practice.

Introduction

Our societies' engagement with the upbringing and education of the youngest children has finally become a highly political issue. At least this is the impression one could get by browsing through the rapidly increasing collection of international policy documents concerned with early childhood education and care. The World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UNICEF have been hugely influential in promoting systematic investment in services for children below compulsory school age and in outlining and underpinning early childhood policies in many countries (OECD, 2001, 2006; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008; World Bank, 2003). Childcare and early education have played a role in EU policies for some time, with the 1992 Council Recommendations on Childcare being an early example of a EU policy document emphasising the need for coherent policy making across several areas that are seen as affecting families with young children: child care services, parental leave, labour regulations and gender equality (Council of the European Communities, 1992). More recently, the EU policy interest in early childhood has increased significantly. This is manifest in the publication of high level policy documents linking early childhood and the services set up by Member States to support young children and families to the framework strategy for the EU for this decade (European Commission, 2010). These documents, including the 2011 EU Commission communication 'Early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow' (European Commission, 2011) are discussed in many of the contributions to this issue. The renewed interest in early childhood has created a growing demand in research to inform, orient and legitimate the policies promoted by the EU.

There is a second approach to the relationship between policy and practice in early childhood. Caring for and educating young children lie at the core of any society. Child rearing practices and the institutions and professions we establish around them are the most fundamental manifestations of the relationship between the private and the public which is not static, universal or uncontested. Due to unequal distribution of private and public resources, they are more favourable for some than for others. There are growing numbers of children and families for whom this most basic relationship has become precarious. Approached from this perspective, early childhood education and care has always been a 'res publica', a political issue.

The questions we ask as researchers depend on how we position ourselves in the micro- and macro-politics of early childhood (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). They are shaped by our personal and professional backgrounds and histories (and biases) and shape the image of the child and the possible, desirable, imaginable practices and policies. In this article, I analyse the questions we might ask in early childhood research and how they relate to the constructions of the child and to our understandings of the role of research. The article begins with a brief examination of recent European policy documents that have been influential in promoting a particularly important, but, as I argue narrow, view of children and early childhood education in a changing European policy context. I then discuss current research in early childhood in relation to the policy analysis and argue for a much broader understanding of the challenges we are facing and the implications for doing research in our field. The final two sections make the case for a radical reconceptualisation of research as a democratic, transformative and inevitably political practice.

Region: Europe ^[4]

Tags: public management ^[5]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/14/08/researching-early-childhood-policy-and-practice-critical>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/14/08/researching-early-childhood-policy-and-practice-critical> [2]

https://www.academia.edu/2166063/Researching_Early_Childhood_Policy_and_Practice_A_critical_ecology [3] <http://dcu.academia.edu/MathiasUrban> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8166>