What is your image of the child? Critical questions in early childhood, provision and practice

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The minority world lives in a culture where we are constantly being offered solutions, before we have asked the critical questions (Carlo Ginsberg)

[With the regression of democracy] all problems, having become technical, elude the grasp of citizens to the profit of experts...[T]he primacy of the economic brings about a soft consensus that weakens the role, necessary to democratic life, played by the conflict of ideas (Edgar Morin)

ECEC today dominated by economic narrative and technical solutions

- ECEC as a good investment offering high economic returns by…

- Applying proven human technologies at early ages, to produce predetermined and normative outcomes, supplied by…

- 'Neutral' experts who can supply right answers on the basis of objective knowledge and evidence

Argue for reclaiming the primacy of

- The political, ethical and social – rescuing them from their collapse into the economic

- Diversity of ideas and perspectives – no right answer, knowledge (evidence) is perspectival, partial and provisional…must be interpreted

- Critical questions – technical questions ('what works?') matter, but first ask critical questions

I want to argue the need to step back from offering solutions - 'what works?'...

to step forward to asking critical questions, as a necessary condition for a democratic and creative politics of early childhood...

in which real alternatives call for debate, deliberation and collective choices about things that matter

Some critical questions for ECEC (/education)

- What paradigm - how do we see the world?
- What is the state we are in – the world we live in today? What kind of world do we want? What do we want for our children?
- What is ECEC for?
- What is our image of the child?
- What is our image of the EC centre and educator?
- What values? What ethics?

What are your critical questions?

What paradigm – how do we see the world?

Paradigm: the invisible issue

- overarching system of ideas, values and beliefs by which people see and organize the world in a coherent way

- technicians, experts, policy-makers have a paradigm, but don't acknowledge it...modernist/positivist paradigm
  - belief: in ability of science to reveal the true nature of a real world
  - value: certainty and mastery, linearity and **predetermined** outcomes, objectivity and universality
  - hope: one right answer for every question...escape complexity and context

There are other paradigms...
'Post-foundational paradigm'

The postmodern paradigm] values what the paradigm of modernity finds problematic: complexity and multiplicity, subjectivity and context, provisionality and uncertainty...This paradigm recognises that any phenomenon – early childhood education and care, for example - has multiple meanings, any knowledge is perspectival, all experience is subject to interpretation (Dahlberg & Moss, 2008)

- The world and our knowledge of it are socially constructed
- No objective, neutral position possible
- Power and knowledge in a close relationship

There are other paradigms... 'Post-foundational paradigm'

- Growing interest in 'post-foundational' paradigm in ECEC – research and practice
- 'Reconceptualist movement'...'Contesting early childhood' series...working with new theoretical perspectives – Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze etc...?Reggio Emilia?
- But 'paradigmatic divide' – no recognition by positivists of other paradigms, no dialogue

The question is not 'which paradigm is right?' – but 'what paradigm do you choose'

Is Reggio Emilia in a 'post foundational' paradigm?

Elements of 'postmodern' practice and understanding:

- Adopt a social constructionist approach
- Challenge and deconstruct dominant discourses(power) …construct new discourses, including the rich child
- Reject prescriptions of rules, goals, methods, standards…risk (and value) uncertainty, complexity
- Built a new pedagogical project foregrounding relationships, dialogue, critical thinking
- Border cross disciplines and perspectives
- Understand dynamic and contextualised nature of practice (Dahlberg et al., 2007)

Is Reggio Emilia in a 'post-foundational' paradigm?

Learning, as we have come to understand it in Reggio Emilia, does not proceed in a linear way, following progressive and predictable stages to predetermined outcomes. Rather, it is constructed through advances, standstills, and 'retreats' that take many directions and often lead to unexpected places. It is a process of constructing, testing and reconstructing theories, which are our interpretive models of the world (Rinaldi, 2005)

Reggio may be postmodern in its perspectives, [but] we are not for postmodernism, because 'isms' are risky...they simplify and lock you in prison (Rinaldi, 2006)

What is the state we are in?

- Unsustainable and harmful economic model - hyper-consumerism, endless growth, neo-liberal

  A world in which things simply go on as usual is already inconceivable (Jackson, 2009)

- Global warming, resource depletion, nuclear proliferation – *Damocletian phase of deadly global threats* (Morin, 1999)...the Doomsday clock at 23.55!

- Diversity threatened – of species, among people

- Massive inequality

- Democracy in poor state of health

  Multiple crises that put our future at issue

Diversity threatened

The 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 and diversities of this learning and knowledge (Lenz Taguchi 2009)

Multiple crises that threaten our future

There is no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem
(Morin, 1999)

What kind of world do we want? What do we want for our children?

- What do we hope for?

- How can ECEC (/education) contribute to deliberation and realisation?
  - ECEC (/education) as places for utopian thinking and for prefigurative practices that *anticipate and help bring about a quite different way of being in the world* (Fielding & Moss 2010)

Some changes have to start now or there is no beginning for us (Rowbotham, 1979)

What is ECEC (/education) for?

To contribute to:

- **survival**...to learn to live well and within limits...care for planet, others and selves

- **well-being/flourishing**...of planet, societies and selves

- **creating good society**...democratic, just, caring, collaborative, critical, creative

ECEC/education is no magic potion for our problems...it can contribute as part of a regime of values and measures, e.g measures to reduce inequality

'The spirit level: why more equal countries almost always do better '

The evidence shows that reducing inequality is the best way of improving the quality of the social environment, and so the real quality of life, for all of us (including the better-off)...

It is clear that greater equality, as well as improving the wellbeing of the whole population, is also the key to national standards of achievement and how countries perform in lots of different fields....

And if, for instance, a country wants higher average levels of educational achievement among its school children, it must address the underlying inequality which creates a steeper social gradient in educational achievement
(Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009)

What is our image of the child? (A social constructionist question)

Competent (making meaning/learning from birth)...multi-lingual (100 languages)... constructor of knowledge and identity...in relation with children and adults...citizen and subject of rights...Malaguzzi's 'rich' child

Our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and, most of all, connected to adults and other children (cited in Dahlberg et al., 2007)

What is our image of the EC centre (/school)?

A public space…a forum or place of encounter for all citizens (children & adults)…a collaborative workshop for communities

- expressing the community's responsibility for its children and for their education and well-being
- expressing an entitlement to participate
- expressing the potential of EC centres for many purposes and projects – some predefined, others not

What is our image of the EC centre (/school)?

Many purposes and projects including:
- Constructing knowledge (learning), identities, values
- Providing family support
- Building community solidarity
- Sustaining cultures and languages
- Developing economy (including 'childcare')
- Promoting gender and other equalities
- Practicing democracy and active citizenship
- *???? Please add yours*

An image of ***potentiality***…
that values ***unpredicted*** outcomes
that surprise and amaze

What is our image of the educator?

As a co-constructor of knowledge...a researcher and experimenter...a critical thinker...a border crosser...a reflective practitioner who is:

more attentive to creating possibilities than pursuing predefined goals...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)

What values?

- Democracy
- Solidarity and collaboration
- Experimentation
- Dialogue
- Subjectivity
- Respect for diversity

Democracy as a fundamental value in ECEC (/education)

Democracy is multi-dimensional:

- representative and procedural...participatory and everyday

  *Democratic values and practices shape not just the formal sphere of politics but the informal sphere of everyday life (*Skidmore & Bound, Everyday Democracy Index, 2008)

- a way of governing...a way of life **and** relating: learn by doing, not a subject to be taught

Democracy as a fundamental value in ECEC (/education)

Democracy...

[is] primarily a mode of associated living *embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life*

[as] a way of personal life *controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished*

must be reborn in each generation *and* education is the midwife *(John Dewey)*

Democracy as a fundamental value in ECEC (/education)

Democracy and day nursery are two terms that are not immediately associated with each other. But where and when does democracy start? In pre-school? In day care? In school? Or only when people are old enough to vote? Knowledge and insights gained from the evaluation of the project 'Living democracy in day care centres' show that the basis for an everyday democratic culture can indeed already be formed in the day nursery (George, 2009)

Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school... all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values (Swedish Pre-school Curriculum, 1998)

What ethics?

- Ethics of care (Joan Tronto, Selma Sevenhuijsen)
- Ethics of an encounter (Emmanuel Levinas)

Ethical approaches that are about:

- Relations: how people relate to each other
- Responsibility: for world and others, for decisions
- Respect for otherness
- Rejecting calculative and rational thinking

Ethics of care

A practice, not a set of rules...

Involving particular acts of care and a 'general habit of mind' that informs all aspects of moral life and includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness...

Caring as "everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so we can live in it as well as possible"...

How to interpret and fulfil responsibility to others

Calls for ethical agency, making situated judgements – not following the rule book

Ethics of an encounter

- How can we avoid 'grasping' relationships with others, where we try to know the other by making the Other into the Same? How can we respect the absolute alterity (otherness) of the Other?

  This is an Other whom I cannot represent and classify into a category; this is an Other whom I cannot grasp, that is, seek to understand through a framework of thought I impose on the Other (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005)

- Absolute and infinite responsibility for the Other...*a total negation of the independent free subject and of the instrumental rationality of modernity*

Ethics of an encounter
A challenge for ECEC (/education)

Putting everything which one encounters into pre-made categories implies we make the other into the Same, as everything which does not fit into these categories, which is unfamiliar has to be overcome. Hence, alterity disappears. This betrays the complexity in children's lives…

To think another whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy. It poses other questions to us pedagogues. Questions such as how the encounter with Otherness, with difference, can take place as responsibly as possible (Dahlberg, 2003)

Many other critical questions

- How do we understand 'education'...'care'... 'learning'...'knowledge'?

What are your questions?

From critical to technical questions?

From our (provisional) answers to critical questions, we can then ask more technical questions...

- How should we organise and structure our services? (admin., regulation, access, funding, workforce, type of provision etc)
- How should we practice education? What pedagogy?
- How should we evaluate?
- What 'pedagogical tools' are useful?
- What relationship between ECEC and...parental leave... school...?

Only by asking critical questions and searching for answers through democratic deliberation that values diversity and resists the dictatorship of no alternative, can we construct rationales, structures and practices in ECEC that

- recognise its great potential whilst acknowledging its limitations
- value its important but contingent role in a democratic, solidaristic and just society
- provides the pleasures of wonder and amazement rather than the dangers of predetermined outcomes

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