Beyond quality to ethics and politics in early childhood education[1]

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Early childhood education and care services are growing throughout the affluent world (OECD 2001, 2006), and beyond too. Increasing investment in these services is accompanied by an increasingly dominant discourse that constructs a very particular understanding about these services and the children for whom they are provided. This discourse is culturally and paradigmatically specific. It is Anglo-American in origin, expressed primarily through English language and concepts and is situated in a paradigm that might be termed positivistic or modernistic. In recent years though this regime of truth has been subjected to mounting criticism, which, as Jo Tobin describes in his chapter, has drawn heavily on French social and philosophical thinkers.

Jo Tobin has also described some facets of this resistance, including the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education movement and his own worké; in this chapter, we outline some others, including our own contribution to the resistance movement. But resistance has not only consisted of critical thinking, 'putting a stutter' (to use the striking metaphor of Nikolas Rose (1999)) in the dominant discourse. Foucault argues a close relation between thought and action: "as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible". This has been the case in early childhood, where the ideas of thinkers like Foucault himself, Levinas, Derrida and Deleuze have been increasingly put to work, demonstrating through action that we have choices about early childhood institutions and the pedagogical practice that takes place within them.

This is both a great opportunity and a great dilemma for the resistance movement. The will to resist, in action as well as thought, is a reason to be hopeful, 'to believe in the world' again in the words of Deleuze. But

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should and can resistance move from the margins, where it currently comfortably exists, and attempt to participate in mainstream early childhood politics? Should it move from creating islands of dissensus to confronting the wider system?

The dominant discourse

The dominant Anglo-American discourse about early childhood education and care provides an example of what Santos (2004) has termed 'hegemonic globalisation': "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" (149). At its heart is a particular rationality, the "cognitive-instrumental performative-utilitarian rationality of science" (Santos, 1995: 23). This instrumental rationality is inscribed with a desire to order the world and dominate nature, an optimism that this is possible (Beck, 1994), and a preoccupation with calculation and quantification: with what Lyotard (1984) terms 'performativity'.

This rationality understands children as redemptive agents. Through the application of particular human technologies (Rose, 1999) in conditions specified to achieve predetermined ends, they can become adults who will save our societies by functioning effectively in the competitive and atomised conditions of hyper-capitalism[2]. The purpose is not just to inculcate particular skills and competencies, but to create subjects who are 'fit for purpose' in a neo-liberal world: subjects who are autonomous, taking responsibility for their own risks, able to exercise the choice and freedom of the informed consumer, and ever flexible, always ready to adapt to the needs of a rapidly changing market place. To take just one example, Fendler (2001) has explored the relation between technologies and subjectification, arguing that three popular pedagogical practices – whole child education, developmentally appropriate curricula and interactive pedagogy - constitute "a particular form of subjective

[2] Space precludes a discussion of the importance we attach to the analysis of economic conditions for understanding early childhood policy and practice. Such analysis plays an important role in our books, including the relationship between the Anglo-American discourse and the growing hegemony of a form of capitalism variously termed hyper, market, neo-liberal or Anglo-Saxon.

flexibility", flexibility being "vaunted as the cutting-edge solution to the challenges of productivity in a fast-moving global economy and the goals and objectives of education reinscribe the values of flexibility through curricular and pedagogical practices" (119-120). Viewed from this perspective, early childhood institutions are, first and foremost, places for the application of technical practices, not only Fendler's three pedagogical practices but also various forms of surveillance and normative assessment.

Researching the early childhood institution

For over a decade, we have collaborated in a project that might be described as researching the early childhood institution in post-industrial societies: seeking to understand what it has become and what it might be. The results of our project can be found in two of a planned trilogy of books: *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives* (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999) and *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education* (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). We are both critical and hopeful: the growth of early childhood services presents great risks, especially of governing children and families in ever more intensive and intrusive ways; but it also offers great opportunities, for children, parents and the wider society, if we can bring new thinking and practices to these institutions.

Rationalities

Our project has engaged with three central features of the Anglo-American discourse. First, we have questioned the pervasive instrumental rationality, suggesting other forms of rationality with which early childhood services might be inscribed, in particular an ethico-political rationality. Rather than primarily for technical practice and governing children to predetermined ends, early childhood institutions could be, first and foremost, loci for ethical and political practice. We have further explored what type of ethics and what type of politics and particular possibilities that we find important: in ethics, the ethics of an encounter (discussed further below); and in politics, a democratic 'minor politics'.

The concept of 'minor politics' has its origins in the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Its minor engagements are cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative, 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 territories of the everyday, they seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action" (Rose, 1999: 280). Though 'minor politics' do not have the arrogance of programmatic ('major') politics – perhaps even refuses the designation of politics at all – the two forms of politics should not be seen as in opposition. Each can provoke the other into creativity; minor politics may, for example, connect up with a whole series of other circuits and cause them to fluctuate, waver and reconfigure in wholly unexpected ways.

Social constructions

This exploration of rationality has led us, in turn, to question a second feature of the Anglo-American discourse: its construction of the early childhood institution as an enclosure for the application of technologies to achieve predetermined outcomes. Again, we have explored an other possibility (we say 'an other' to emphasise our struggle to avoid binary either/or thinking and instead to open up to the plurality of many possibilities). That possibility is to construct an understanding of early childhood institutions as public spaces or "forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance" (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 73). While some of these projects may be predetermined by the wider society and by adults, our construction leaves room for other projects that are not predetermined, emerging through the democratic life of the institution and the participation of children and adults. Understood in this way, the early childhood institution is a place of 'uncertain possibilities', not 'predefined outcomes', where the unexpected, the surprising, the unique and the new are all valued, not rendered invisible by an adult gaze fixed on the attainment of the prescribed norm.

This construction of the institution is connected to other constructions or understandings. As in the new sociology of childhood, that Berry Mayall writes about in her chapter, we are interested in social constructions of childhood and children. We have written about constructions of the child that dominate the hegemonic Anglo-American discourse: the child as knowledge reproducer, the child as nature (the scientific child of biological stages), the child as redemptive agent. But we have also explored constructions of the child that are conducive to our local discourse: the child as co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture, the child as active citizen and subject of rights, Malaguzzi's 'rich' child', "rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent[3] and, most of all, connected to adults and other children" (Malaguzzi, 1993: 10).

The worker, in the Anglo-American discourse, is constructed as a technician, trained to effectively apply human technologies to achieve prescribed outcomes, valuing objectivity, certainty and closure, and disciplined by developmental psychology (or, at least, the simplified versions in common circulation, to which Berry Mayall refers). In our local discourse, the worker is a co-constructor of knowledge, a critical thinker and a researcher, valuing subjectivity and difference, uncertainty and provisionality. Aldo Fortunati (2005) offers a vivid image of this worker as:

> 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. [She must be able] to free

[3] Strong, powerful and competent, as used here, does not refer to the child as an autonomous being, independent and without need of care, but to the child as a being who from birth actively seeks to make sense of the world and to engage in relationships: "The search for the meaning of life and of the self in life is born with the child and is desired by the child. This is why we [in Reggio Emilia] talk about a child who is competent and strong - a child who has the right to hope and the right to be valued, not a predefined child seen as fragile, needy, incapable…[A child] we view as an active subject with us to explore, to try day by day to understand something, to find a meaning, a piece of life." (Rinaldi, 2005a: 64)

> herself from an outcome different from that which the children come up with as they construct their own experience.

Such constructions connect with new constructions of knowledge and learning itself. The image of knowledge as *a rhizome* transgresses notions such as universality, question and answer patterns, simple judgements, recognition and correct ideas. It is not like a staircase, where you have to take one step after another, which is similar to the tree metaphor of knowledge that remains so prominent in education. In a rhizome there is no hierarchy of root, trunk and branch. Rather the *rhizome* is something which 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.

Learning is a process of co-constructing meaning, always in relationship with others:

> For adults and children alike, understanding means being able to develop an interpretive 'theory', a narration that gives meaning to events and objects of the world. Our theories are provisional, offering a satisfactory explanation that can be continuously reworked; but they represent something more than simply an idea or a group of ideas. They must please us and convince us, be useful, and satisfy our intellectual, affective, and aesthetic needs (the aesthetics of knowledge). In representing the world, our theories represent us.
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> Moreover, if possible, our theories must please and be attractive to others. Our theories need to be listened to by others. Expressing our theories to others makes it possible to transform a world not intrinsically ours into something shared. Sharing theories is a response to uncertainty (Rinaldi, 2005a: 64).

Learning, therefore, involves a pedagogy of relationships and listening. It is a matter of experimentation and problematization - *a line of flight* and an exploration of *becoming* - and it thrives in an encounter with difference. It does not proceed "in a linear way, determined and deterministic, by progressive and predictable stages, but rather is constructed through contemporaneous advances, standstills, and 'retreats' that take many directions" (*ibid*.: 131-132).

Getting beyond quality

As well as rationalities and constructions, we have problematised the technologies that are so central to the Anglo-American discourse. In particular, we have researched the concept of quality. No word is more frequently used today in Anglo-American early childhood circles than 'quality'; it is considered the key to success, the *sine qua non* for achieving the normalised outcomes for children so central to the dominant discourse. It has achieved the status of being taken entirely for granted, reified as natural, self-evident and value-free: the only issues for discussion are how best to define and measure 'quality', a subject to which much time and energy is given.

Our research project has investigated 'quality' as a socially constructed concept, with a particular meaning and inscribed with particular values and assumptions. The concept of quality, we have argued, values certainty, objectivity, universality and closure. It assumes the desirability and the possibility of defining universal and stable expert-derived norms and of objectively assessing the achievement of these norms using a set of criteria. Quality then is a measurement (often expressed as a number) of the extent to which services or practices conform to externally prescribed norms, a measurement that offers closure through providing one definitively correct answer. It is an example of a human technology, powerful and multi-purpose: a technology of normalisation, establishing norms against which performance should be assessed, so shaping policy and practice; a technology of distance, claiming to compare performance anywhere, irrespective of context; and a technology of regulation,

providing a powerful tool for management to govern at a distance through the setting and measurement of norms of performance.

This critique is developed in the book we wrote with our Canadian colleague, Alan Pence: *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives*. This book has subsequently been translated into seven other languages (though not, sadly, French), and has become one of the most cited English-language early childhood books of the last decade. We say this not to brag, but because it is another sign of the desire of many in the early childhood field to question the dominant discourse and to find other, more local discourses that lay no claim to hegemony.

The Italian version of *Beyond Quality*, published by Reggio Children, altered the sub-title from 'Postmodern Perspectives' to 'Languages of Evaluation'. We liked the change, so much so that the second edition of the book retains this sub-title (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007). For it captures the argument at the heart of the book: that the concept of quality is one particular way of practicing evaluation. In the book, we offer an other language of evaluation, what we term 'meaning making', though it could go by other names, for example participatory or dialogic evaluation.

Like 'quality', 'meaning making' is inscribed with values and assumptions, though very different: meaning making welcomes contextuality, values, subjectivity, uncertainty, and provisionality. Meaning making understands evaluation not as a technical procedure but as a democratic process of interpretation and judgement. This process involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and argumentation, leading to a judgement of value that is contextualised, perspectival and provisional, thus always subject to contestation. Quality claims to make a statement of fact, meaning making a judgement of value; quality involves a process of scientific measurement, meaning making philosophical and democratic deliberation.

These two approaches to evaluation – quality and meaning making - work with very different methods and tools. Quality relies on applying templates consisting of criteria for the measurement of predefined norms. Rating scales, check lists, standardised protocols, detailed systems of inspection – these are the methods and tools of quality.

Meaning making works with pedagogical documentation. This tool requires, first of all, making practice visible through many forms of documentation: written or recorded notes, the work produced by children, photographs or videos, the possibilities are many. Then it requires a collective process of interpretation, critique and evaluation, involving dialogue, listening and reflection. In contrast to the methods of quality, which are authoritarian (i.e. reliant on the unquestioned use of external authority), pedagogical documentation is democratic. For Loris Malaguzzi, the first director of the municipal early childhood services in Reggio Emilia (of which more below),

> documentation in all its different forms also represents an extraordinary tool for dialogue, for exchange, for sharing. For Malaguzzi it means the possibility to discuss and to dialogue 'everything with everyone' (teachers, auxiliary staff, cooks, families, administrators and citizens)…In fact sharing opinions by means of documentation presupposes being able to discuss real, concrete things – not just theories or words about which it is possible to reach easy and naïve agreement (Hoyeulos, 2004: 7).

This last point we find very important. Meaning making through documentation involves contextualised interpretations of actual practices and actual environments; quality involves the decontextualised application of abstract criteria. In meaning making through documentation, diversity, complexity and uncertainty are both inescapable and valued; in quality they are problems to be controlled. Meaning making through documentation is a process of research; quality a process of classification.

Nothing shows more clearly the dominance of the Anglo-American discourse, the way it has become naturalised, than the difficulty that our argument in *Beyond Quality* seems to present to many people. Reference is often made to how the book shows quality to be a value-laden, relative concept, as if we are offering a new meaning for quality. But this was the starting point of the book, not where the book ended up going. We begin by recognising an emerging 'problem with quality', as an increasing number of writers in the 1990s argued that quality is "subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic, so questioning the idea of quality as a universal and knowable entity, waiting 'out there' to be discovered and measured by experts" (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 5). But we come to the position that quality cannot be turned into something it is not, for it is a concept with a very particular meaning, saturated by particular values and assumptions:

> Is [quality] an empty vessel which we can fill and refill with different meanings? Or is it a filled vessel, with a very particular and immutable content of meaning? It seems to us that the concept of quality does have a very particular meaning, that of a universal, knowable and objective standard…Quality cannot be conceptualized to accommodate complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives, and other features of a world understood to be both uncertain and diverse. The 'problem with quality' cannot be addressed by struggling to reconstruct the concept in ways it was never intended to go (105).

Rather than redefining quality, in *Beyond Quality* we relativise it. Quality, we suggest, is a choice not a necessity. By all means use the concept: but if you do, then recognise that you have made an ethical and political choice. Recognise, too, that there are other ways to evaluate and improve pedagogical work. Or put another way, life without quality is possible!

Inspirations

Paradigm

Our research project on early childhood institutions has been inspired by various sources that from our perspective are inter-connected. Most broadly is the paradigm in which we choose to situate ourselves. By paradigm we refer to an overarching system of ideas, values and beliefs by which people see and organize the world in a coherent way, a mindset for making sense of the world and our place in it. Discourses are borne and bred within paradigms, embodying the ideas and beliefs of the paradigm. None of us can step outside of paradigm. But we can be aware of its effect and choose in which paradigm to situate ourselves. (Though to us one of the main problems about the education of workers in early childhood services is the absence of paradigm. We are not arguing for indoctrination in our favoured paradigm, but for an education that raises awareness of different paradigms and, therefore, that there are important choices confronting students, workers and institutions about in which paradigm they choose to situate themselves. These choices have profound and wide-ranging implications for thought and practice).

The Anglo-American discourse on early childhood, so also the concept of quality, is produced within a particular paradigm, what some would term the paradigm or project of modernity. The discourse is inscribed with the values and assumptions of that paradigm, some of which have already cropped up: for example, the value given to certainty and mastery, linearity and predetermined outcomes, objectivity and universality. This paradigm has a further distinctive feature: believing in objectivity and the ability of science to reveal the true nature of a real world, modernity cannot recognise that it is a paradigm, a particular way of understanding the world produced within a particular historical and cultural context. It is unable to see itself as offering just one perspective, one way of thinking and practicing.

There are other paradigms. Our work has been situated in a paradigm that might be termed 'postfoundationalism', encompassing a variety of perspectives – for example, postmodernisms, poststructualisms and

postcolonialisms'. This paradigm challenges the basic tenets, or foundations, of the paradigm of modernity: the possibility of objective, stable and value-free knowledge, and of universal laws escaping context; the transparency and neutrality of language; linear progress ending in closure; dualistic – either/or - ways of thinking and relating to the world. It values what the paradigm of modernity finds problematic: complexity and multiplicity, subjectivity and context, provisionality and uncertainty. It recognises a close relationship between power and knowledge, in which power functions through knowledge and what is deemed knowledge is a function of power. 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.

French thinkers

We have been inspired by a number of French thinkers. Michel Foucault has provided many insights, about power relations in general, and more specifically about the role of dominant discourses (regimes of truth), the relationship between power and knowledge and modes of governing the self (e.g. through his theories of governmentality, subjectification and the exercise of disciplinary power). Working with Foucault, we see practices that are much in vogue today – such as listening and observation – having the potential to govern children more strongly through increased surveillance and normalisation. While we see pedagogical documentation, if worked with rigorously and critically, as having the potential to reveal the workings of dominant discourses and open them to democratic reflection.

Jacques Derrida, and his examination of the foundational in Western metaphysical thought, has also been important. He has helped us to analyse how, since Aristotle, the construction of an origin or an absolute foundation has governed us into a dualistic way of thinking with conceptual oppositions such as man/women, nature/culture, true/false, form/content, subject/object. Making displacements, as well as reconstructions of concepts, processes and events, make possible new perspectives and new questions.

Especially important has been Derrida's 'deconstructive readings', where he recognises the necessity of putting under erasure (*sous rature*) the sign and its dominant meaning, so removing it from its metaphysical interpretation as presence, as essence: to think, for example, a child that is not an essence, not an identifiable totality that receives its meaning and determination from a transcendental signified, such as race, birth, gender. By this 'erasure' of the sign, one can temporarily cross out the sign and new possible readings are made possible. The original/traditional meaning is not actually erased, it remains legible/readable through the displaced reading in the movement of 'sous rature' (Derrida, 1976: xiv, see also Spivak, 1976). One affirms both the need to write and the need to cross out the child.

For us, for the pedagogues with whom we have worked and for Derrida, deconstruction has functioned as a kind of affirmation, a listening and engagement. It can be seen as a form of hospitality which means a welcoming of the Other. For each question one has to open oneself to difference – to welcome the stranger- which is an affirmation, a yes, yes , yes to the Other, as well as an affirmation of the alterity of existence.

Derrida's thought relates closely to another source of inspiration, Emmanual Levinas. Lithuanian by origin but living most of his life in France, Levinas has provoked our thinking about ethics, in particular his work on the ethics of an encounter. Levinas challenges a strong Western philosophical tradition that gives primacy to knowing. Through this will to know, we 'grasp' the other and make the other into the same. An example is developmental stages, a system of classification that gives us as educators or researchers possibilities to possess and 'comprehend' the child. When we grasp, alterity disappears and singularity and novelty are excluded, to be replaced by 'the totalitarianism of the same'.

The ethics of an encounter attempts to counter this grasping through respect for the absolute alterity of the Other, the Other's absolute otherness or singularity: this is an Other whom I cannot represent and classify into a category, whom I cannot seek to understand by imposing my framework of thought. This means I have to abandon the security and certainty that comes from making the Other into the Same. The implications for education are 'seismic':

> Putting everything 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 and not taken-for-granted has to be overcome…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: 270).

Gilles Deleuze opens other windows of thought - to the concept and image of the rhizome, to the creation of thought through provocation and exposure to what is unfamiliar and how, therefore, such events might be brought about: "if you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume" (Deleuze 1990:176). He talks about constructing assemblages, border crossing, transformations and encounters, all of which involve making connections, which multiply the potential for precipitating events through creating life-giving confrontations and provocations, while undermining techniques of normalisation and totalising systems of classification and representation. His desire for connections, multiplicity, the unexpected and new confront the binaries of Western thought – reason/intuition, cognition/emotion, body/soul, logic/fantasy – that have created a world of separation and categorisation.

Reggio Emilia

The third source of inspiration is a place, though it is also the community of people, children and adults, working together in that place. The Northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia has become the subject of world-wide attention for its network of 'municipal schools', centres for children from birth to six years, run by or for the municipality. There are many reasons that draw people to Reggio, and many interpretations of what the theories and practices of Reggio are about (indeed, Carlina Rinaldi, a key figure in Reggio Emilia, observes that "Reggio itself is an interpretation of Reggio!" (Rinaldi, 2005a: 197)).

Our interpretation – 'our Reggio' – has been that Reggio's work is situated within a philosophical perspective or paradigm that in many respects seems to us to be postmodern[4]. We cite in support elements of their theory and practice:

> Choosing to adopt a social constructionist approach; challenging and deconstructing dominant discourses; realizing the power of these discourses in shaping and governing our thoughts and actions…; rejecting the prescription of rules, goals, methods and standards, and in so doing risking uncertainty and complexity; having the courage to think for themselves in constructing new discourses, and in so doing daring to make the choice of understanding the child as a rich child, a child of infinite capabilities, a child born with a hundred languages; building a new pedagogical project, foregrounding relations and encounters, dialogue and negotiation, reflection and critical thinking; border crossing disciplines and perspectives, replacing either/or positions with an and/also openness; and understanding the contextualised and dynamic nature of pedagogical practice, which problematizes

[4] On this subject Rinaldi observes: "Although Reggio may be postmodern in its perspectives, we are not for postmodernism, because 'isms' are risky. Because they simplify and lock you in prison again. Instead your freedom is to challenge… You are being postmodern. Because to be postmodern means to challenge." (Rinaldi, 2005a: 182)

> the idea of a transferable 'programme' (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 122).

For us Reggio is an inspiration, not only for its social construction of the 'rich' child and the early childhood institution as a place of encounter, interaction and connections among citizens in a community; but for the very fact that it recognises the importance of social construction for policy, provision and practice. Their starting point, their first critical question is 'what is your image of the child?'. It is an inspiration, too, for its understandings of learning and knowledge. Loris Malaguzzi talked about their idea of knowledge as a "tangle of spaghetti", having much in common with the Deleuzian-inspired idea of knowledge as rhizomatic; while their concept of learning, theorized as a pedagogy of relationships and listening, seems to us to be inscribed with the ethics of an encounter.

But as important as theory has been the practices that Reggio has constructed, providing important examples of how – given time, political commitment and democratic engagement by local communities – it is possible for different ways of thinking to produce different forms of practice. Their municipal schools do not dismiss technical practices, nor do they ignore matters of organisation and structure. But they put them in their place: as means to support an educational project that understands the school as first and foremost a public space and a site for ethical and political practice. We never forget, says Rinaldi, that "behind every solution and every organisation, this means behind every school, there is a choice of values and ethics".

Doing Foucault: from theory to practice

Reggio Emilia is part of the good news: that the technologies of the Anglo-American discourse are not the only practices available. Reggio Emilia, in its pedagogical work, adopts (we would say) a postmodern sensibility. Even if that interpretation is not accepted, they certainly work with values, assumptions and methods that are very different to those that imbue the Anglo-American discourse.

Their pedagogy of relationships and listening is the basis of their daily practice, organised around project work that supports a rhizomatic idea of knowledge and a co-constructive approach to learning. This project work - *progettazione* in Italian – has a very particular meaning:

> [It] evokes the idea of a dynamic process, a journey that involves the uncertainty and chance that always arises in relationships with others. Project work grows in many directions with no predefined progression, no outcomes decided before the journey begins. It means being sensitive to the unpredictable results of children's investigation and research (Rinaldi, 2005b: 19).

Progettazione, as used by Reggio educators, is very different to *programmazione*, which implies predefined curricula, programmes, stages, and so on. It has implications for how they approach evaluation, choosing to work with evaluation as meaning making, and using pedagogical documentation as an integral part of practice. Recognising documentation as a possible tool for evaluation provides them, in Carlina Rinaldi's words, with "an extremely strong 'antibody' to a proliferation of assessment/evaluation tools which are more and more anonymous, decontextualised and only apparently objective and democratic" (Rinaldi, 2005a: 62).

But if we should be cautious about applying postfoundational labels to the work in Reggio, others are explicitly using the work of poststructural theorists in their practice, showing it is possible to 'do Foucault'. 'Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies' is one of the books in the series *Contesting Early Childhood* that we edit. Written by Glenda MacNaughton (2005), at the University of Melbourne, the book shows how it is possible to bring poststructural theories, including Foucault's work, into early childhood institutions and practice. It includes first hand accounts from early childhood educators, studying and working with Glenda, "who are using the ideas of Foucault and poststructuralist to create and sustain critical reflection and activism in their everyday life".

Nor is Glenda's work the only example of explicitly applying the work of poststructural thinkers to the field of early childhood. There are an increasing number of instances, both in practice and practice-relevant research. One example, the Stockholm project, is presented in *Beyond Quality* (Dahlberg *et al.,* 1999: chapter 6). Further work in Sweden is being undertaken by Gunilla Dahlberg's research group at the Stockholm Institute of Education – on The Ethics and Aesthetics of Learning.

Working from a feminist poststructural perspective, Hillevi Lenz-Taguchi has examined pedagogical documentation as a practice of continuous resistance against dominating discourses with their taken-for-granted meanings (Lenz Taguchi, 2000). By using 'deconstructive cooperative talks', between the researcher and pre-school teachers or between the teachers themselves during their daily work together, teachers were able to question their work, by putting under erasure their interpretations of children's learning and trying instead to make multiple readings. By resisting taken-for-granted ways of understanding and opening up for multiple ways of understanding children's meaning making, it was possible for the teachers to support children's learning in new and unexpected ways. It opened up new possibilities for children's participation in the learning group and disrupted teachers' notions of learning, both in general and in relation to specific children and particular content (Lenz Taguchi, 2005).

Elisabeth Nordin Hultman has explored the relationship between normalization processes and the preschool environment. In doing so, she has contested the essentialising and 'naturalistic' pedagogy of the preschool, calling for a pedagogy that pays attention to the unique events of the here and now (Nordin-Hultman, 2004).

Ulla Lind has studied visual art discourses in Swedish preschools and schools (Lind, 2004). She shows how teachers rationalize the ways they govern children through appeals to explanations that are external to their own thinking and action – this child is tired, that one is not very well, he is a bad boy, she always behaves like that. Lind argues that it is the

principles of becoming behind practicing art work that are the interesting educational questions, not how to induce children to make art. In this, she is inspired by Deleuze when he says that "becoming foregrounds processes and processes are becomings, and aren't to be judged by some final result but by the way they proceed and their power to continue" (Deleuze, 1995: 146).

Liselotte Borgnon further investigates the potential contribution of Deleuze and Guattari for the field of early childhood education in her study, *A Virtual Child (*Borgnon, forthcoming*).* She points out that society puts great effort into taming learning, through predicting and preparing, supervising and evaluating. Like the other researchers in the Stockholm group, she calls for a different approach to learning and the very young children. For her, the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari seem to blow away completely all representations relying on the human subject's capacity to consciously tame itself and its learning processes, as well as any taken-for-granted common sense ideas of the status of subjects such as very young children. She proposes that the pedagogical relationship can be seen as 'events of encounters of desires', where desire is not seen as lack but as a positive force – a force that creates new compositions.

This body of research, making connections between poststructural thinkers and early childhood education, problematizes and contests a tradition of knowledge that has been preoccupied with the abstract, the general and the underlying causes. Instead of asking what a child *is*, this research focuses on what a child can *do* - or in the words of Deleuze what a body can do. This focus directs our attention towards the *and, and, and:* towards constructing assemblages, towards making connections, towards the play of forces, transformations and encounters. To connect is to work with possibilities, with unpredictable becomings, as a way of breaking with that which we take to be natural and necessary. This means that we have to direct attention to events – to pay attention to process, to doing, to the here and now.

This work embodies a strong element of pragmatism in Deleuzian thought. But this pragmatism is not related to instrumentality; it is not driven by a concern with predictive expertise and calculated outcomes. Rather what is important is to find ways to open up to the unpredictable and the new, to put experimentation before ontology, which also means an intensification of life.

To believe in the world again

Postmodern and postfoundational thinking is often accused of 'anything goes' relativism and, therefore, of lacking ethics. However, in our view this is quite mistaken: this thinking demands strong ethical engagement. Instead of universalizing and totalizing discourses, that so often have lead to exclusions, violence and injustice, the non-totalizing perspective of postfoundational thought helps us to construct a space that makes it possible, in the words of Blanchot, to hear that which tries to make itself heard - to make the unheard heard. While recognising multiple perspectives and the provisionality of judgements does not mean we can or should avoid our responsibility for making ethical choices, a responsibility we must accept without the luxury of relying on experts and universal codes to tell us what to think and do.

Nor does working with poststructural thinkers mean ignoring structural issues of inequality and injustice. We can and must question the naïve way that so much of the English-speaking world has latched on to early education, seeking a technical fix that will avoid the need to address more directly the structural failings of neo-liberal economics and advanced liberal welfare states that have produced indicators of children's welfare that are shaming for affluent societies. We can and must question the values and assumptions that lead most of the English-speaking world to treat large swathes of early childhood education and care as private commodities, offered for sale in a private market to working parents and staffed by a workforce that is both poorly educated and appallingly paid. We can and must look equally hard and critically at the less obvious but equally damaging ways in which power operates through governing

children and families and treating political and ethical issues as technical and managerial matters.

But, important and needed as it is, we need to get beyond critique. We need to work for social change and to use poststructural theories for this purpose. For the present situation is truly alarming. We are confronted by an increasingly dominant discourse that offers a depressing and alienating view of life and society, in which a rhetoric of choice and diversity masks an actuality of control and uniformity; that stifles difference, experimentation and democracy by insisting on there being one objective and scientifically-determined truth, both about outcomes and methods; and that reduces children and adults to the position of units of human capital. So we need, in Deleuze's words, to believe in the world again, to find hope, to create new possibilities, and to undermine techniques of normalisation and systems of classification and representation.

As we have already discussed, there are increasing examples of local action, individuals and institutions experimenting with new theories and new practices. This is cause to be hopeful, as is the growing interest in different paradigmatic perspectives on early childhood education. But is this enough? Should we settle for slow and incremental growth, for a better organised and more active fringe, increasingly communicating with each other – but making no impression on the wider world and the dominant discourse. Or should we be more ambitious, aware of the dangers of not confronting the dominant discourse on its own, mainstream ground?

New paradigms and utopian thinking

We want to end by opening up for wider debate about whether and how new or different paradigmatic positions might find a place in mainstream policy and provision. We have no illusions. Engagement may dilute or completely distort alternative perspectives: neo-liberalism has a great capacity to absorb and tame ideas and practices that, in their original form, are inimical to its values and assumptions. The odds against success are long: the dominant discourse is dominant because of strong economic,

political and cultural forces. Moreover, the dominant discourse offers an apparently easier and more predictable way forward, because it offers solutions that (on paper at least) are simpler, more standardised and more easily regulated. The proposals emerging from the postfoundational paradigm are, by contrast, more diverse, messier and uncertain.

To take an example, working with the concept of quality is relatively straightforward: there are tools that can be applied to measure conformity to norm and training processes that will enhance conformity. Meaning making, by contrast, requires exacting conditions: an educated, committed and reflective workforce; support from wise counsellors such as the *pedagogistas* in Reggio Emilia who work closely with small groups of educators; an organisation that values and prioritises pedagogical documentation; close and participatory relationships between children, parents and educators, but also other citizens; being at ease with critical and argumentative dialogue; and sustained local political trust, support and engagement combined with decentralisation giving space for local practice and evaluation.

Most places are far from meeting such conditions. In much of the English-speaking world, for example, early childhood education and care includes large swathes of under-resourced 'childcare' services, often competing with each other in market conditions; combined with nursery education or kindergarten provision that is subject to increasingly strong regulation through prescriptive curricula, testing and inspection systems in order to ensure they produce children who are ready for school. The concept and practice of meaning making is not likely to work well in such conditions.

Moreover most of us have been schooled in educational systems dominated by positivism and modernity. So while post-foundationalists understand the positivist paradigm, most people are unfamiliar with postfoundational thinking, which is then open to the accusation that it is unintelligible. An example of this criticism is a paper by Constas (1998), who notes that "the field of educational enquiry finds itself in a state of transition caused by the increased activity and debates related to

postmodernism" (36). He finds it difficult to comprehend postmodernism in the context of educational research, referring to "the elusive nature of postmodernism" (36), and seeking to get at its "essential qualities" (40), and "to identify unifying elements" (36). Frustrated by the ill-defined nature of postmodernism, he asks those who "reject outright the very attempt to define postmodernism in a simplified scheme" to organise their responses into an "intelligible set of assertions that encourages constructive dialogue about the nature of postmodern inquiry" (41).

St.Pierre (2000), in a riposte entitled 'The call for intelligibility in postmodern research', chides Constas for not doing his homework, critiquing an approach without studying the philosophy that produces it: "Postmodern educators…have explained their work for years… [and] those who have only cursorily examined postmodernism should [not] accuse those who have studied 'the original literature' of being unclear, incoherent, and unintelligible" (26). But she also puts forward several reasons why Constas's request is not as simple as it seems. Statements are discourse-specific, making sense within one discourse but not in another, and refers also to what Britzman (1995) calls "the limits of intelligibility", the boundary "where thought stops what it cannot bear to know, what it must shut out to think as it does" (156). St.Pierre goes on to suggest that a more interesting question than 'what is postmodern educational research?' would be

> how does one learn to hear and 'understand' a statement made within a different structure of intelligibility? At the least, this question shifts prevailing attitudes by assuming that the burden of intelligibility lies as much with the reader as with the writer, a position contrary to that of those who chide postmodernism for "deliberate obfuscation over clarification" (Constas, 1998, p.38). For some reason, these readers expect postmodernism to be readily accessible and coherent within a structure it works against (25).

Faced by these problems, postfoundationalists need to be willing to muster and present their perspectives in various public arenas – in

response to official consultations, before parliamentary committees and similar official review bodies, in responses to the media. At the very least, politicians, policy makers and the media should be left with no excuse for believing that there is only one perspective on early childhood education, only one narrative to be told. The argument needs to be made cogently and rigorously that there is not one self evident direction to take, based on objective scientific knowledge and irrefutable evidence, but many possibilities, each based on different knowledges and perspectives: even the clearest fact has no meaning without interpretation. One strand of this line of argument has already been raised: that postfoundationalism can and is being applied, producing policy and practice that can be recognised by all as worthy of serious attention.

At the same time we need to engage in utopian thinking: "the exploration by imagination of new modes of human possibility…and the confrontation by imagination of the necessity of whatever exists – just because it exists – of something radically better that is worth fighting for" (Santos, 1995: 481). Luke (2005), writing about curriculum, speaks of the "need for a critical postmodernism that actually begins to envision and 'dream' utopias once again", but goes on to add an important qualification: the need to engage with "the complexities and diversities that have to be entailed in such utopias, while understanding and retaining a self-skepticism towards the possible effects of such dreaming" (13).

Part of the complexity of such utopian thinking in early childhood education and care is the need to envisage a system that combines both equity for children and families with the possibility of radical diversity between services, not only permitting but positively supporting experimentation from within different paradigmatic positions and working with a variety of theories and constructions. The attention to equity is important in its own ethical right, but also to address a criticism of the modernists: that only a uniform and strongly regulated system of technical practices (e.g. prescriptive curriculum, standardised assessments of children's development and service quality) can ensure

equitable education for children, in particular for those who come from impoverished homes or are otherwise socially excluded.

One response to this equity argument is the need for strong redistributive income, fiscal and benefit policies that keep inequality in bounds by tackling it at source, rather than expecting early childhood services to reduce inequality once it has been allowed to take hold. Utopian thinking must, therefore, be prepared to address such general policy goals as well as structural features of early childhood services through a strong framework of funding, entitlement and worker education that includes all services. Not only would this framework ensure equal access to all children, it would provide a strong material basis for services to explore different ways of practising pedagogical work and to develop (in the words of the head of early childhood services in an Italian town, not Reggio) a 'local cultural project of childhood'. Sweden – with its strong framework of public funding, a well educated workforce and all children from 12 months entitled to a place, combined with strong decentralization – seems closer to achieving this relationship between coherence and diversity than either the United Kingdom or France.

Such utopian thinking has a long way to go, with many difficult issues to explore. How would the system respond to certain forms of diversity and experimentation (e.g. fundamentalist religious or neo-fascist groups)? What democratically decided national goals and priorities would all services need to accept (e.g. what sort of national curriculum would there be, assuming this was agreed to be necessary as part of the common framework)? Not all services will want to experiment, and experimentation and innovation cannot be legislated for – so what practices would these services adopt?

We will struggle with such questions in the last book in our trilogy: so far we have the title - *Contesting Early Childhood…and Opening for Change* – but we need to continue our research to arrive at some provisional answers that flesh out our utopian thinking. This research takes us into territory extending well beyond early childhood. For the issues we are

confronting in early childhood – possibilities for renewing democracy; sustaining diversity of perspective, thought and practice; the relationship between diversity and equity; resisting new forms of power that seek to govern our subjectivity and behaviour; creating an education that is truly emancipatory – affect all aspects of human life today. We look forward to a continuing relationship with French thinkers who, we confidently expect, will continue to provide new perspectives and continuing inspiration.

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