

**Bringing Politics into the Nursery:
Early Childhood Education as a democratic practice**

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility that early childhood institutions can be, first and foremost, places of political practice – and specifically of democratic political practice. The case for the primacy of democratic political practice in early childhood institutions is made more urgent by two developments apparent in many countries today: the growth of policy interest in early childhood education, leading to an expansion of services; and the need to revive democratic politics. As well as bringing democratic practice into the nursery, what this would mean and what conditions might enable it, the paper also considers democratic practice at other levels: not just the institutional, but also the national or federal, the regional and the local, and how each level can create 'democratic space' at other levels. The paper ends by considering four issues related to democracy in early childhood education including paradigmatic diversity and the European level.

Bringing Politics into the Nursery: Early Childhood Education as a democratic practice

A recently published a book, titled *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*, begins with the following words:

This book is about a possibility for institutions for children and young people...The possibility is that these institutions can be understood, first and foremost, as forums, spaces or sites for ethical and political practice (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005:1-2).

This paper explores part of this proposition: the possibility that institutions for children and young people can be, first and foremost, places of political practice – and specifically of democratic political practice. It focuses on one set of institutions, those for children below compulsory school age. But the argument applies equally to other types of institution, including schools for older children. The paper also uses the term ‘early childhood education’ as shorthand for a wide range of institutions providing education and care for young children, including nurseries, nursery schools, kindergartens, pre-schools and children’s and family centres. In other words, ‘education’ is treated as a broad concept that encompasses learning, care and upbringing – ‘education in its broadest sense’.

When I say that that there is a *possibility* that institutions for children and young people can be, first and foremost, places of democratic political practice, I say ‘possibility’ to emphasise that this understanding is a choice we, as citizens, can make. There is nothing inevitable about it: there is more than one way in which we can think about and provide these institutions. It is possible for them to be understood as places of democratic practice. But there are other possibilities.

Early childhood institutions can, for example, be thought of as places, first and foremost, for technical practice: places where society can apply powerful human technologies to children to produce predetermined

outcomes. In this respect they form part of what Allan Luke describes as an “internationally rampant vision of schooling, teaching and learning based solely on systemic efficacy at the measurable technical production of human capital” (Luke, 2005:12). Or, to take another example, they can be thought of as businesses competing in a private market, offering a commodity to parents-as-consumers.

These understandings are both very prominent in England. The key question asked of early childhood education is the supremely technical one: ‘what works?’ While the government’s recent action plan for implementing its ten-year strategy for childcare is explicitly based on a market approach (English Department for Education and Skills/ Department for Work and Pensions, 2006a). It speaks of the need “to develop in every area a thriving childcare market which will respond to parents’ needs”; of “delivery through the market” and of how local authorities will have “to play an active role in understanding the way the local childcare market is working” and help “the market work more effectively”. There is no reference to ‘democracy’.

The case for democratic practice

Why is democratic practice so important, generally and in early childhood education? The case can be put in a nutshell. Democratic participation is an important criterion of citizenship: it is a means by which children and adults can participate with others in shaping decisions affecting themselves, groups of which they are members and the wider society. It is also a means of resisting power and its will to govern, and the forms of oppression and injustice that arise from the unrestrained exercise of power. Last but not least, democracy creates the possibility for diversity to flourish. By so doing, it offers the best environment for the production of new thinking and new practice.

The case for the primacy of democratic political practice in early childhood institutions is, in my opinion, made more urgent by two developments apparent in many countries today. First, there is the growth of policy interest in early childhood education, leading to an expansion of services.

The question, therefore, of what we think early childhood institutions are for, what purposes they serve in our societies, is becoming very pressing.

Especially in the English-language world, the answer – the rationale for action – is predominantly technical and consumerist. As already mentioned, early childhood institutions are readily seen as places to govern children through applying increasingly powerful human technologies and as suppliers of a commodity to be traded in a childcare market. This understanding of early childhood services is produced by what has been termed by Dahlberg and Moss (2005) an Anglo-American discourse, a discourse that is instrumental in rationality, technical in practice and inscribed with certain values: individual choice and competitiveness, certainty and universality. This discourse has another feature that is at odds with an idea of democratic practice: it is inherently totalizing. It cannot understand that it may be just one way of seeing and understanding, that there could be other ways of practicing and evaluating early childhood, that there might be more than one right answer to any question, that it is just one of many perspectives.

If this discourse was limited to the English-speaking world, it would be serious. But its aspirations are wider: it is increasingly dominant elsewhere, as can be judged by the spread of its favoured vocabulary, terms like 'quality' and 'outcomes'. It is an example of what Santos (2004) refers to as "hegemonic globalisation" that is "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). What enables this discourse to aspire to global dominance is the spread of the English-language and of neo-liberal values and beliefs.

Neo-liberalism seeks to de-politicise life, to reduce everything to questions of money value and calculation, management and technical practice. It prefers technical to critical questions and, under its influence, we are seeing the emergence of what Clarke refers to as 'managerialised politics' in a 'managerial state':

The problems which the managerial state is intended to resolve derive from contradictions and conflicts in the political, economic and social realms. But what we have seen is the managerialisation of these contradictions: they are redefined as 'problems to be managed'. Terms such as 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness', 'performance' and 'quality' depoliticise a series of social issues...and thus displace real political and policy choices into managerial imperatives (Clarke, 1998: 174).

This leads to my second argument for the contemporary importance of democratic practice for early childhood institutions. The process of depoliticisation in public life can be seen as part of a wider process: democracy, or I should say the established institutions and practices of representative democracy, is in a sickly state. Fewer people vote, elected representatives are held in low esteem, whole sections of the community feel estranged from mainstream politics while many others feel cynical or disinterested, and undemocratic political forces are on the rise. Yet at the same time, all is not gloom and doom; there are reasons for hope. Alienation from more traditional and formal democratic politics – politicians, political parties and political institutions - is matched by growing interest and engagement in other forms of democratic politics, including direct engagement in movements active on particular issues, such as the environment or globalisation.

The challenge is both to revive traditional or formal democratic politics *and* to exploit the interest in alternative forms of democratic politics through developing new places and new subjects for the practice of democratic politics – including, early childhood institutions and issues that are central to the everyday lives of the children and adults who participate in these institutions.

Democracy at many levels

The first part of this article's title refers to 'bringing politics into the nursery'. But the second part - 'early childhood education as democratic practice' -implies democratic practice at several levels: not just the institutional, the nursery, but also the national or federal, the regional and the local. Each level has responsibility for certain choices: and it is important to make clear at this point that I use the word 'choice' to mean the democratic process of collective decision-making, to reclaim it from the neo-liberals' usage of 'choice' as decision-making by individual consumers. As a recent report into Britain's democracy – the Power Inquiry - puts it:

We do not believe that the consumer and the citizen are one and the same, as the new market-driven technocracy seems to assume. Consumers act as individuals, making decisions largely on how an issue will affect themselves and their families. Citizenship implies membership of a collective where decisions are taken not just in the interest of the individual but for the collective as a whole or for a significant part of that collective (Power Inquiry, 2006: 169)

The choices made at each level should be democratic, the consequence of democratic political practice. But each level should also support democratic practice at more local levels, ensuring those more local levels have important decisions to make and are supported in so doing – in other words, creating 'democratic space' and conditions for active democratic practice.

What is the democratic space at national or federal level? What democratic choices should be made there? The task here is to provide a *national framework* of entitlements, expectations and values that express democratically agreed national objectives and beliefs; and to provide the material conditions to make these a reality and to enable other levels to implement them and to practice democracy. This framework needs to be both clear and strong, without smothering regional or local diversity. To take some examples, it means: a clear entitlement to access to services for children as citizens (in my view from 12 months of age), together with

a funding system that enables all children to exercise their entitlement; a clear statement that early childhood services are a public good and responsibility, not a private commodity; a framework curriculum that defines broad values and goals but allows local interpretation; a fully integrated early childhood policy, the responsibility of one government department; a well educated and well paid workforce for all young children (at least half of whom are graduates); and active policies to reduce poverty and inequality.

An interesting contrast can be made here between my own country, England, and the Nordic countries. Since 1997, government in England has taken early childhood far more seriously than ever before. A number of important developments have taken place, including the integration of responsibility for all early childhood services within the Department for Education and the development of Children's Centres, an integrated form of provision. A curriculum has also been introduced.

But this is very far from the framework type referred to above, and adopted in Nordic countries: it does not support democratic practice. The existing curriculum for 3 to 5 year olds, running to 128 pages, is highly prescriptive, taking up 130 pages and linked to more than 60 early learning goals (QCA, 2000). A new curriculum, to cover children from birth to 5, has been published in draft form and is the subject of consultation (English Department for Education and Skills/ Department for Work and Pensions, 2006b). This is again long, detailed and prescriptive. It contains, one overseas commentator has calculated, over 1500 pieces of specific advice to teachers, some in the form of directives, others pointing out specific developmental milestones that workers should attend to. Rather than broad principles, values and goals, open to interpretation by trusted professionals, as in the Nordic countries, the draft curriculum comes across as a manual for technicians: it creates no 'democratic space' and gives no encouragement to democratic practice.

Another contrast is apparent between the curricula in England and the Nordic states. Wagner (2006) argues that democracy is central to the

Nordic concept of the good childhood and notes, in support of this contention, that “official policy documents and curriculum guidelines in the Nordic countries acknowledge a central expectation that preschools and schools will exemplify democratic principles and that children will be active participants in these democratic environments” (292). Some national examples illustrate the point. Near its beginning, the Swedish pre-school curricula (just 19 pages in its English translation) discusses ‘fundamental values’ of the pre-school, beginning this section with a clear statement: “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 Ministry of Education and Science, 1998:). The new Norwegian curriculum (... Pages) speaks of kindergartens laying “the foundation for...active participation in democratic society” (Norwegian Ministry.....). This objective is echoed in the Icelandic national curriculum guide for pre-schools (47 pages), which asserts that one of the principle objectives of pre-school education is “to lay the foundations to enable [children] to be independent, reflective, active and responsible citizens in a democratic society”; the guide adds later that “a child should be taught democratic practices in preschool” ((Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2003: 7, 18).

Yet the existing or recently drafted English early years curricula contain no reference to democracy, despite their much greater length. Thus while the Nordic curricula explicitly recognise democracy as a value, the English curricula do not. Here are clear examples of how national level decision-making can support democracy at other levels, through policy documents that state unequivocally that democracy is a nationally-agreed value – and that create ‘democratic space’ at more local levels for democratic interpretation of national policy, in this case of national curricula. Of course in England, there are many instances of individual institutions that practice democracy. But the absence of democracy from key national policy documents reflects the priority given to technical practice and managerialised politics and the consequences of understanding large swathes of early childhood education as businesses selling a commodity.

I shall move now to the local level of government. In doing so, I am conscious of omitting a level of provincial, state or regional government that is important in many countries, for example Australia, Canada, Germany, Spain and the United States. A full discussion of democratic practice in early childhood education would need to take account of this level of government, located between national and local. However, this article will skirt around it on grounds of space but also lack of personal knowledge coming, as I do, from the most centralised country in Europe.

I have already suggested that a democratic system involves each level leaving space for democratic practice at other levels. This means strong decentralisation to the local level (Power Inquiry, 2006). What does democratic practice in early childhood institutions involve at this level?

Some years ago, I visited an Italian city with a rich experience in early childhood education. The head of the services in this city – *not*, as it happens, Reggio Emilia – described their work over 30 years as a 'local cultural project of childhood'. This term has stayed with me, because it captures what democratic practice at its best and most active can mean and achieve in a local authority or commune or municipality. It captures that idea of political commitment, citizen participation and collective decision-making that may enable a community to take responsibility for its children and their education (in its broadest sense): responsibility not just for providing services but for how they are understood, for the purposes they serve in that community and for the pedagogical practice that goes on within them. Some other Italian communes (including, but not only, Reggio) have undertaken such collective, democratic ventures, and no doubt there are examples in other countries.

There are other ways of thinking about such local projects: as Utopian action or social experimentation or community research and action. What these terms all have in common is an idea of the commune creating a space for democratic enquiry and dialogue from which a collective view of the child and her relationship to the community is produced and local policy, practice and knowledge develops. This in turn is always open to

democratic evaluation and new thinking. In some cases, such projects may be actively encouraged by national levels of government; in others, such as Italy, they may be made possible by a weak national government and local governments with strong democratic traditions, willing and able to use space made available to them by default not intention.

How local cultural projects of childhood can be actively encouraged, what other conditions they need to flourish and what structures and processes may sustain them are all important subjects for research into democratic practice in early childhood education. Nor should we expect that these projects can happen in all local areas – you cannot legislate for them. But even where they do not happen, democratic practice can still play an important part at local government level. Local authorities should have an important role to play in interpreting national frameworks such as curricula documents. They can affirm the importance of democracy as a value, and they can support democracy in the nursery. They can also foster other conditions favourable to democracy: for example, actively building up collaboration between services – networks not markets; or, providing a documentation archive, the importance of documentation in democratic practice being a theme discussed below.

Finally, I want to consider democratic practice in the early childhood institution itself: bringing politics into the nursery – or the crèche, preschool, kindergarten, nursery school or any of the other terms we use to describe settings for collective early childhood education. The starting point needs to be how we imagine, construct or understand this institution: what do we think the nursery is? I have already mentioned two common understandings, at least in the English-speaking world: the early childhood institution as an enclosure where technology can be applied to produce predetermined outcomes (the metaphor is the factory); and the early childhood institution as business, selling a commodity to consumers.

But there are many other understandings, some of which are more productive of democratic practice: in particular, the early childhood

institution as a public forum in civil society or as a place of encounter and dialogue between citizens, from which many possibilities can emerge, some expected, others not, and most productive when relationships are governed by democratic practice. This image is richly expressed in *For a New Public Education System*, a declaration launched in summer 2005 at the 40th Rosa Sensat Summer School in Barcelona: the term 'school' here is used as a generic term to cover institutions for all children, both of and under compulsory school age.

In the new public education system, the school must be a place for everyone, a meeting place in the physical and also social, cultural and political sense of the word. A forum or site for meeting and relating, where children and adults meet and commit to something, where they can dialogue, listen and discuss, in order to share meanings: it is a place of infinite cultural, linguistic, social, aesthetic, ethical, political and economic possibilities. A place of ethical and political praxis, a space for democratic learning. A place for research and creativity, coexistence and pleasure, critical thought and emancipation (Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat, 2005: 10).

The early childhood institution in which democratic politics, along with ethics, is first practice creates one of the new spaces that is needed if democracy is to be renewed. In particular, it offers democratic practice that is not representative (through electing representatives) but direct: the rule of all by all. This space offers opportunities for all citizens, younger and older, to participate – be they children or parents, practitioners or politicians, or indeed any other local citizen. Topics ignored or neglected in traditional politics can be made the subjects of democratic practice.

Bringing democratic politics into the nursery means citizens engaging in at least four types of activity. First, *decision-making* about the purposes, the practices and the environment of the nursery. Second, *evaluation* of pedagogical work through participatory methods. In the book *Beyond*

Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), the authors contrast 'quality' as a technical language of evaluation with a democratic language: 'meaning making'. Third, *contesting dominant discourses*, what Foucault terms regimes of truth, which seek to shape our subjectivities and practices through their universal truth claims and their relationship with power. This political activity seeks to make core assumptions and values contestable.

Yeatman (1994) refers to this third activity as 'postmodern politics' and offers some examples: a politics of epistemology, contesting modernity's idea of knowledge; a politics of representation, about whose perspectives have legitimacy; and a politics of difference, which contests those groups claiming a privileged position of objectivity on a contested subject. But we could extend the areas opened up to politics, that are re-politicised as legitimate subjects for inclusive political dialogue and contestation: the image of the child, the good life and what we want for our children; what education can and should be; gender in the nursery and home – these and many other subjects can be the subject of democratic engagement within the early childhood institution, examples of bringing politics into the nursery.

It is through contesting dominant discourses that the fourth political activity can emerge: opening up for *change*, through envisioning utopias and turning them into utopian action. For as Foucault also notes, there is a close connection between contesting dominant discourses, thinking differently and change: "as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible"

Conditions for democracy

The early childhood institution as a site for democratic practice is unlikely to occur by chance. It needs intention – a choice must be made. And it needs supportive conditions. I have already referred to the importance of

the image of the institution. But other images or understandings are also important for bringing politics into the nursery, for example the image of the child, parents and workers. The child is understood as a competent citizen, an expert in her own life, having opinions that are worth listening to and having the right and competence to participate in collective decision-making. It is important to recognise, too, that children (and adults) have a hundred languages to express themselves, and democratic practice means being able to 'listen' to these many languages. Parents too are seen as competent citizens "because they have and develop their own experience, points of view, interpretation and ideas...which are the fruits of their experience as parents and citizens" (Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici, 2004: 30). Workers assume what Oberhuemer (2005) has termed 'democratic professionalism', understanding their role as practitioners of democracy. While recognising that they bring an important perspective and a relevant local knowledge to the democratic forum, they also recognise that they do not have *the* truth nor privileged access to knowledge.

Democratic practice needs certain values to be shared among the community of the early childhood institution, for example:

- Respect for diversity, which relates to the ethics of an encounter, a relational ethics foregrounded by Dahlberg and Moss (2005) in their discussion of ethics in early childhood education;
- Recognition of multiple perspectives and diverse paradigms – that there is more than one answer to most questions and that there are many ways of viewing and understanding the world, a point to which I shall return;
- Welcoming curiosity, uncertainty and subjectivity – and the responsibility that they require of us;
- Critical thinking, which in the words of Nikolas Rose is "a matter of introducing a critical attitude towards those things that are given to our present experience as if they were timeless, natural, unquestionable: to stand against the maxims of one's time, against the

spirit of one's age, against the current of received wisdom...[it is a matter] of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter" (Rose, 1999: 20).

The importance of such values for fostering democratic practice is captured in these words by three pedagogistas from Reggio Emilia, on the subject of participation in their municipal schools:

Participation is based on the idea that reality is not objective, that culture is a constantly evolving product of society, that individual knowledge is only partial; and that in order to construct a project, everyone's point of view is relevant in dialogue with those of others, within a framework of shared values. The idea of participation is founded on these concepts: and in our opinion, so, too, is democracy itself (Cagliari et al., 2004: 29).

As well as shared understandings and values, democratic practice in early childhood institutions needs certain material conditions and tools. A well qualified workforce, educated to be democratic professionals, is one important example. Another may be the role of critical friend, such as the pedagogista of northern Italy, an experienced educator working with a small number of centres to support dialogue and critical thought about pedagogical practice. A third example is pedagogical documentation, by which practice and learning processes are made visible and then subject to critical thought, dialogue, reflection, interpretation and, if necessary, democratic evaluation and decision making.

Pedagogical documentation has a central role to play in many facets of the early childhood institution: evaluation, professional development, research - and democratic practice. Malaguzzi saw it in this democratic light, as his biographer Alfredo Hoyuelos writes:

[Documentation] is one of the keys to Malaguzzi's philosophy. Behind this practice, I believe, is the ideological and ethical concept of a transparent school and transparent education...A political idea

also emerges, which is that what schools do must have public visibility...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...[S]haring 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 (Hoyuelos, 2004: 7).

Carlina Rinaldi also speaks of documentation as democratic practice: "Sharing the documentation means participation in a true act of democracy, sustaining the culture and visibility of childhood, both inside and outside the school: democratic participation, or 'participant democracy', that is a product of exchange and visibility" (Rinaldi, 2005: 59).

Documentation today is widely practiced in various forms and for various purposes. An example with which I am very familiar is the Mosaic approach developed by my colleague Alison Clark. Inspired by pedagogical documentation, the Mosaic approach has been used for a range of purposes, including to enable the participation by young children in the design of new buildings and outdoor spaces. Here is yet another example of how pedagogical documentation is a key tool for democratic practice, in this case young children's contribution to decision-making (Clark and Moss, 2005; Clark, 2005).

It is important to keep in mind that pedagogical documentation is *not* child observation; it is not a means of getting a true picture of what children can do nor a technology of normalisation. It does not, for example, assume an objective, external truth about the child that can be recorded and accurately represented. It adopts instead the values of subjectivity and multiplicity: it can never be neutral, being always perspectival (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Understood in this way, as a means for exploring and contesting different perspectives, pedagogical

documentation not only becomes a means of resisting power, including dominant discourses, but also a means of fostering democratic practice.

Time precludes discussing other conditions and tools for democratic practice, apart from flagging up what seems to me a major issue: time. Democratic practice in the nursery, indeed anywhere, takes time – and time is in short supply today when we are so unceasingly busy. A strange feature of English policy in early childhood, but also in compulsory schooling, is the emphasis given to ‘parental involvement’ when parents appear never to have been busier. So on the one hand, policy values employment for fathers and mothers; while at the same time, policy values parents being involved in their children’s education and the services they attend. There is an interesting tension here – though less so than might at first appear as involvement is primarily understood in policy in terms of parents reinforcing taken-for-granted objectives and targets: involvement understood as critical democratic practice is likely to make more demands on time. So far more thought needs to be given to the question of time, and how we might be able to redistribute it across a range of activities and relationships. Ulrich Beck, for example, addresses this when he raises the concept of ‘public work’ that would provide “a new focus of activity and identity that will revitalize the democratic way of life” (Beck, 1998: 60) and suggests various ways of paying for public work.

Four concluding observations

I want to conclude by making four observations on my theme of early childhood education as a democratic practice – or that this is a possibility. First, establishing democracy as a central value in early childhood institutions is, in my view, incompatible with understanding these institutions as businesses and adopting a market approach to service development. Businesses, or at least those owned by an individual or company, may of course want to listen to their ‘customers’ and take their views into account; they may even exercise some social responsibility. But they cannot allow democratic practice to be first practice because their primary responsibility is to their owners or shareholders; business decisions cannot be made democratically. Similarly, a system of early

childhood services based on choices made by individual consumers is fundamentally at odds with one that values collective decision-making by citizens. The Power Inquiry draws the distinction clearly: "Individual decisions made on behalf of oneself and one's family cannot substitute for mass deliberation in the public realm – which is an absolutely crucial process in a democratic and open society" (Power Inquiry, 2006: 159).

Second, democracy is risky. It can pose a threat not only to the powerful but also to those who are weak. People come to the democratic process not only with different perspectives, but also with different interests and power; conflict is likely, in which the weaker may lose out. Inequality then may increase, not lessen. An argument against decentralisation, that the English government might well make in defence of a highly centralised and prescriptive approach to policy, is that strong central regulation of early childhood education is necessary to ensure equality of treatment for all children; without it, you open the floodgates to inequality, risking some children getting far worse provision than others – and with those from poorer backgrounds being most at risk. There is some truth in this, the case for less centralisation and more democratic practice being weaker in an unequal society where early childhood education and its workforce are less developed and have suffered from long-term public disinterest and underinvestment.

There is no final and definitive answer to this dilemma. The tense relationship between unity and decentralisation, standardisation and diversity is long-standing and never ultimately resolvable – it is an eternal dialectic, a relationship in constant flux and always a contestable political issue. As implied above, the relationship needs deciding in relation to current conditions – but also in relation to where you want to be. Even if you judge the current situation calls for strong centralisation, you may decide this is not where you want to be in the longer term. Then the question is what conditions are needed to move towards more decentralisation and democracy. This process of movement from centralisation to decentralisation can be observed in the history of early childhood education in Sweden, which has moved from a rather

centralised and standardised approach, to one today that is strongly decentralised. Even then, the relationship must always be under critical scrutiny. How is decentralisation working in practice? Who is benefiting and who is losing? How can democratic practice be better balanced with concerns for equitable treatment?

My third observation concerns the subject of paradigm. I proposed earlier that recognition of diverse paradigms is an important value for democratic practice. But such recognition is rare today. Instead the early childhood world faces a deeply troubling, but largely unspoken, issue: the paradigmatic divide between the majority (be they policy makers, practitioners or researchers) who are situated within a positivistic or modernistic paradigm, and the minority who situate themselves within a paradigm variously described as postmodern, postpositivist or postfoundational. The former espouse “the modern idea of truth as reflective of nature...[and believe] that the conflict of interpretations can be mediated or resolved in such a way as to provide a single coherent theory which corresponds to the way things are” (Babich, Bergoffen and Glynn, 1995: 1). While the latter adopt “postmodern questions of interpretation, valuation, and perspectivalism ...[and] an infinitely interpretable reality where diverse, divergent, complementary, contradictory, and incommensurable interpretations contest each other” (*ibid.*). For the former, early childhood education is progressing inexorably to its apotheosis, based on the increasing ability of modern science to provide indisputable evidence of what works. While for the latter, early childhood education offers the prospect of infinite possibilities informed by multiple perspectives, local knowledges, provisional truths.

Each side has little to do with the other. Communication is restricted because the modernists do not recognise paradigm, taking their paradigm and its assumptions and values for granted. While the postmodernists recognise paradigm but see little virtue in the paradigm of modernity or at least have made the choice not to situate themselves within that paradigm. The one group, therefore, see no choice to make; the other has made a choice, which involves situating themselves beyond modernity.

Communications issued from one camp are dismissed by the other as invalid, unintelligible, uninteresting or incredible.

Does this distant and non-communicative relationship matter? Is it not the role of the postfoundationalists to develop alternative discourses and critical thinking, rather than fraternise with those with whom they appear to have nothing in common? And shouldn't modernists focus their attentions on what they believe in, the production of true knowledge? I think it does matter. The absence of dialogue and debate impoverishes early childhood and weakens democratic politics. 'Mainstream' policy and practice are isolated from an important source of new and different thought, policy makers having little or no awareness of a growing movement that questions much of what they take (or have been advised to take) for granted. A dominant discourse is given too much uncritical space and increasingly undermines democracy by the process of depoliticisation already mentioned. Rather than such a discourse being regarded as a perspective privileging certain interests, it comes to be regarded as the only true account, the only questions being about the most effective methods of implementation. In this situation, policy and practice choices are reduced to narrow and impoverished technical questions of the 'what works?' variety (for a fuller discussion of this important issue, see Moss, forthcoming 2007).

Finally I want to mention one more level where democratic practice is needed, in addition to the national, regional, local and institutional: the European. The European Union has a long history of involvement in early childhood policy and provision, though it has tended to talk rather narrowly about 'childcare' since its interest has mainly arisen from labour market policy goals (including gender equality in employment). Here are two recent examples of this involvement, and a third where early childhood education should appear – but does not.

In 2002, EU governments agreed, at a meeting in Barcelona, that "Member States [should strive] to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and mandatory school age and at

least 33% of children under 3 years of age". This purely quantitative target says nothing about the organisation or content of these places; no reference, for example, is made to the criteria agreed 10 years earlier by member state governments when they adopted a Council Recommendation on Childcare, which set out a range of principles and objectives to guide the qualitative development of services. Instead, member states are left to pursue the Barcelona targets "in line with [national] patterns of provision".

In April 2006, the so-called Bolkestein Directive - or the Services Directive, to give it its proper name - was amended substantially by the European Council and the European Parliament, dropping the country of origin principle and excluding the health and social services sectors (including childcare). Without these amendments, this proposal for European legislation from the European Commission would have permitted private providers to set up nurseries in other countries, applying the regulatory standards from their own country, so risking a process of levelling down to the lowest common denominator (Szoc, 2006).

In July 2006, the European Commission issued a Communication *Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child*, in which it proposes "to establish a comprehensive EU strategy to effectively promote and safeguard the rights of the child in the European Union's internal and external policies". The good news is that the EU has recognised its obligation to respect children's rights. The bad news is that the Communication makes few concrete commitments and has nothing to say about children's rights in the EU's policies on 'childcare', such as the Barcelona targets outlined above, policies which until now have been mainly driven by policy goals concerned with employment and gender equality.

With some honourable exceptions, the early childhood community in Europe has failed to engage with these and other initiatives; we have created no European politics of early childhood, no 'democratic space' for discussing policy initiatives coming from the EU as well as creating

demands for new initiatives. I do not think it possible, nor would I want to see, a uniform European approach across all aspects of early childhood policy, provision and practice. But in my view it is both feasible and desirable to work, democratically, to identify a body of agreed values, principles and objectives for early childhood services: in short, to develop a European approach or policy on early childhood education. As evidence in support of this contention, I would refer you to *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children*, a report produced by a working group drawn from 12 member states through a democratic process of consultation, discussion and negotiation (EC Childcare Network, 1996). *Quality Targets* sets out 40 common goals achievable across Europe over a 10 year period, to implement the principles and objectives agreed by member state governments in the 1992 Council Recommendation on Childcare. Revisiting the document recently, I was struck by how well it has aged, but also how it shows the potential of democratic practice for defining a European framework for early childhood education.

During 2007, *Children in Europe*, the unique multi-national and multi-lingual magazine, intends to stimulate a democratic debate within EU member states on whether we should and can work towards defining a *European* approach to services for young children. The intention is to put forward, for discussion and contestation, a declaration proposing certain shared values and principles. *Children in Europe* will not be starting from scratch but building on existing European foundations such as the 1992 *Council Recommendation on Childcare* and the *Quality Targets*, as well as the invaluable OECD *Starting Strong* reports (OECD 2001, 2006). I hope that many others will participate in the democratic space that *Children in Europe* hopes to open up, so bringing European politics into the nursery – but also the nursery into European politics.

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