

CONTESTING EARLY CHILDHOOD ●●●



Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood

An Introduction for Students
and Practitioners

Peter Moss



Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood

Challenging dominant discourses in the field of early childhood education, this book provides an accessible introduction to some of the alternative narratives and diverse perspectives that are increasingly to be heard in this field, as well as discussing the importance of paradigm, politics and ethics.

Peter Moss draws on material published in the groundbreaking *Contesting Early Childhood* series to introduce readers to thinking that questions the mainstream approach to early childhood education and to offer rich examples to illustrate how this thinking is being put to work in practice. Key topics addressed include:

- dominant discourses in today's early childhood education – and what is meant by 'dominant discourse'
- why politics and ethics are the starting points for early childhood education
- Reggio Emilia as an example of an alternative narrative
- the relevance to early childhood education of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze and of theoretical positions such as posthumanism.

An enlightening read for students and practitioners, as well as policymakers, academics and parents, this book is intended for anyone who wants to think more about early childhood education and delve deeper into new perspectives and debates in this field.

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Contesting Early Childhood

Series Editors: Liselott Mariett Olsson and Michel Vandenbroeck

This groundbreaking series questions the current dominant discourses surrounding early childhood and offers instead alternative narratives of an area that is now made up of a multitude of perspectives and debates.

The series examines the possibilities and risks arising from the accelerated development of early childhood services and policies and illustrates how it has become increasingly steeped in regulation and control. Insightfully, this collection of books shows how early childhood services can in fact contribute to ethical and democratic practices. The authors explore new ideas taken from alternative working practices in both the western and developing world, and from other academic disciplines such as developmental psychology. Current theories and best practice are placed in relation to the major processes of political, social, economic, cultural and technological change occurring in the world today.

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Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood

An Introduction for Students and Practitioners
Moss

Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible

Penn

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Contesting-Early-Childhood/book-series/SE0623

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Practitioners

Peter Moss

First published 2019

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-29154-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-29155-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-26524-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Garamond

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
1 Dominant discourses, alternative narratives and resistance movements	1
2 The importance of paradigm	27
3 Politics and ethics as first practice	48
4 Reggio Emilia: a story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality	65
5 Michel Foucault: power, knowledge and truth	89
6 Gilles Deleuze: thought, movement and (more) experimentation	109
7 Posthumanism, the posthuman child and intra-active pedagogy	141
8 What next?	170
<i>References</i>	178
<i>Index</i>	185

Acknowledgements

In writing this book, I have been informed and inspired by the authors who have contributed to the *Contesting Early Childhood* book series and whose work I refer to throughout. I would also like to thank a number of colleagues in the early childhood field, far more experienced than myself in working with students and practitioners, and who read and commented on earlier drafts; they include Alison Clark, Jeanne Iorio, Liz Jones, Karin Murris, Will Parnell and Guy Roberts-Holmes. Their comments and suggestions were always thought provoking and to the point. However, I take full responsibility for the final text as it appears here.

Dominant discourses, alternative narratives and resistance movements

This groundbreaking new series questions the current dominant discourses surrounding early childhood and offers instead alternative narratives of an area that is now made up of a multitude of perspectives and debates.

Some years ago, I was invited to edit a new book series, along with my Swedish colleague, Gunilla Dahlberg. The book series was called *Contesting Early Childhood*, and we co-edited it for ten years before handing it over to the new editors, Michel Vandenbroeck from Belgium and Liselott Mariett Olsson from Sweden. At the time of writing, *Contesting Early Childhood* includes 17 titles (you can find a list of these at <https://www.routledge.com/Contesting-Early-Childhood/book-series/SE0623>). I have started this book with the stated aim of the series because my purpose is to explain this aim, to argue for its importance and to illustrate what it means in practice. I will introduce you to the ‘current dominant discourses’ and how and why they are questioned, as well as to a few of the ‘alternative narratives’ and some of the ‘multitude of perspectives and debates’ currently on offer in early childhood education.

Put another way, this book is an introduction to critical thinking about early childhood, and in particular early childhood education. Critical thinking, as understood here, has two sides to it. There is the process of identifying, questioning and challenging those views and opinions that forget they are just one of many possible ways of thinking and talking about a subject – say, early childhood education, and instead insist that they are the one and only way: we can call these ‘dominant discourses’, of which more in a moment. The other side to critical thinking is to construct, present and explore alternatives, to demonstrate there are other ways of thinking and talking about a subject. So, critical thinking and this book are about both deconstruction and reconstruction, about scepticism and hope.

The book, then, is a beginner’s guide to contesting early childhood education. It is intended to serve as a bridge that leads readers away from more familiar ground to encounter new ways of thinking about and doing early childhood

education. I hope it will encourage some to travel further into an exciting and provocative world 'made up of a multitude of perspectives and debates'. But I recognise that the world of alternative perspectives and debates, exciting and provocative as it may be once encountered, can also seem on occasion rather forbidding and unwelcoming, shrouded sometimes in the mists of puzzling jargon and abstract writing, a place where it can be hard to make out what is going on. I've felt that way myself. My intention, therefore, is to disperse these mists as far as possible by plain writing and frequent examples of how people are actually putting new thinking, alternative perspectives and debates to work in early childhood education – not just theorising but doing. I will also tackle some of the questions that come up when dominant discourses are questioned and alternatives proposed, one of which is 'What to do next?'

Who is this book for? The intention is to reach out and appeal to a wide readership: students and practitioners; but I also hope to engage with some policymakers, academics and parents – in fact, anyone who wants to think more about and delve deeper into early childhood education. Some readers may just be curious, wanting to find out what is going on in parts of early childhood education outside the mainstream and so broaden their understanding of the field. Others may be driven by disquiet with that mainstream, harbouring a sense of unease or distaste about the way things are going that makes them seek out critiques and alternatives that can help them to better understand and articulate their disenchantment.

Some may already have turned away from the mainstream and be heading towards what Stephen Ball, a British sociologist of education and critical voice in the world of education, calls a 'politics of refusal'. This requires self-questioning, asking 'What kind of self, what kind of subject have we become, and how might we be otherwise?' (Ball, 2016, p. 5). This is a questioning of personal identity that involves the care of the self: 'a continuous process of introspection, which is at the same time attuned to a critique of the world outside. . . . [This is] the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility' (ibid., p. 8). For all those struggling with such questions of identity in relation to early childhood education, all those asking themselves (like Alice in Wonderland) 'Who am I then?', all those who want to become less accepting and more questioning – I hope this book will help in formulating some answers and casting off lingering feelings of servitude or docility.

But it is important to establish from the start that being critical – to be someone who chooses 'reflective indocility' as an integral part of their professional identity, an answer to the 'Who am I then?' question – is a choice and not a necessity. It's been my choice as an academic, for reasons that will become evident as the book progresses. However, it was not always so; I only made the turn to a critical identity well into middle age. But you may not agree with such a choice of professional identity. You may prefer instead to choose another identity, to be, for example, a proficient manager or skilled technician of early childhood education, someone who is very competent at

applying established best practice. You may choose the mainstream rather than alternative perspectives.

I also want to make something very clear from the start. It is not the intention of this book to condemn such a chosen identity, this 'kind of self', or to rubbish anyone who decides that the story she or he likes best about early childhood education is the 'dominant discourse', the mainstream narrative that I will introduce shortly. What matters is not so much the choice itself but realising that a choice exists and must be made: a choice about identity, 'what kind of subject' you become, constructing an identity that feels right to you and that you can justify, both to yourself and others – and accompanying this, a choice too about which narratives you choose to assist you in making meaning of early childhood education, a choice made in the full knowledge that other narratives exist, that there are alternatives. So I can accept and respect those who have made a choice of the position they take and the identity they assume, acknowledging that it has been a choice carefully made from among alternatives; what I find harder to accept is the taking of a position and the assuming of an identity as if this involved no choice, as if both position and identity are self-evident, as if there are no alternatives.

I hope this book will leave you with a clearer idea of *some* of the 'alternative narratives' and 'multitude of perspectives' in early childhood education today, of the different ways of thinking, talking and doing early childhood education that are out there; 'some', note, not 'all', as I do not claim to know, understand and therefore cover the whole rich diversity of narratives and perspectives that are out there. I hope, too, that this book will leave you feeling unsettled and uncertain, questioning things you had previously taken for granted; more ready and able to be critical; but also excited, optimistic and more ready and able to explore new perspectives on early childhood education. Last but not least, I hope this book will encourage you to read further into the rich literature of books and articles that contest early childhood education and offer alternative narratives.

In the following chapters I will introduce you to two broad issues that are basic to contesting early childhood education: the importance of paradigm and the importance of politics and ethics. I will then look in some detail at four examples that very much question the current dominant discourses in early childhood education: first, the municipal schools in Reggio Emilia, which practice a very distinctive early childhood education far removed from the mainstream dominant discourse, offering a prime example of an alternative narrative; then some theoretical perspectives that though not specifically addressing early childhood education are being put to work in innovative and productive ways by researchers and practitioners in the field – just a sample of the 'multitude of perspectives' available to enrich early childhood education and that can help to create alternative narratives. In the final chapter, I look to the future, both for readers of this introductory book and for early childhood education.

But first things first. I want to start by unpicking some of the ideas underpinning the stated aim of the *Contesting Early Childhood* series, with which I started this chapter. I need to explain what that statement of intent is about and why it uses the language that it does – and one of the recurrent themes of this book is the importance of language, how it shapes the way we construct understandings of life.

Narratives, dominant discourses and alternatives

The stated aim of the *Contesting Early Childhood* series connects three important ideas: the importance of narratives or stories (I use the two terms interchangeably); the power of certain narratives – or dominant discourses; and the existence of other narratives, alternatives that resist or contest dominant discourses. I will attempt to explain these ideas more clearly.

First, the *importance of narratives*, that is the stories we hear and tell, for how we interpret or make meaning – of ourselves and our lives, of our families and other relationships, and about what goes on in the world around us. As a species, mankind has an innate tendency to communicate and to make sense of existence through stories (Bruner, 1990). Stories are, in short, the way in which we make meaning of our world and our place in it, rendering our existence meaningful. This idea is captured by the Dark Mountain Project, an American environmental group of writers, artists and thinkers, who write that they ‘believe that the roots of [the converging crises of our times] lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. . . . We will reassert the role of story-telling as more than mere entertainment. It is through stories that we weave reality’ (Dark Mountain Project, 2009a).

Stories, then, construct or weave reality for us and, as such, have consequences, sometimes bad ones, for example justifying the destructive relationship that mankind has developed with the environment (and other exploitative relationships). Confronting this, the Dark Mountain Project has

stopped believing the stories our civilization tells itself . . . [as the world enters] an age of ecological collapse, material contraction and social and political unravelling. . . . [Stories that] tell us that humanity is separate from all other life and destined to control it; that the ecological and economic crises we face are mere technical glitches; that anything which cannot be measured cannot matter. But these stories are losing their power. We see them falling apart before our eyes.

(Dark Mountain Project, 2009b)

Stories, then, are ubiquitous. They are how all of us ‘weave reality’; they help us explain and justify what we think and do. Depending on your perspective or viewpoint, stories can be good or bad, enchanting or disenchanting, can have beneficial or harmful consequences, can trap us in dysfunctional

positions or help us to move on. But whatever their consequence, they are stories which we tell ourselves and others. Perhaps the biggest danger of all is when we forget that our stories are just that – stories – and come to believe instead that they are some revelatory and fundamental truth.

The importance of storytelling has been extended to the realm of policy making. Australian educator Allan Luke puts this idea eloquently when he says that ‘policies – successful and unsuccessful – are ultimately epic poems or stories, with problems to be solved, heroic agents, participants, false starts and dead ends, and with endings, at times happy and at times tragic’ (Luke, 2011, p. 17). Rather than policy making being a process of dispassionate technocrats carefully weighing up evidence to arrive at the best course of action, this view sees policy making as a contest between conflicting stories, different ways of weaving or viewing reality, with storytellers trying to persuade others of the virtues of their narratives.

This leads me to a second idea: the existence of *dominant discourses*. We live in a world of stories, or discourses, ways of thinking and talking about things: when I use the term ‘discursive’ later on, I refer to the way we make meaning of life through stories or discourses. But within the multitude of stories or discourses, certain ones can become particularly influential. For the Dark Mountain Project, as crises multiply and worsen, stories of human separation from and mastery over the environment become increasingly incredible and lose their power to convince. But they have been and still (at least in some quarters) remain potent – they have wielded great influence, shaping economies, societies and how many people think and act, in short weaving reality. They have become, in the words of Michel Foucault (a French philosopher who will figure prominently in this book), ‘dominant discourses’, a term you will recall that appears in the aim of the *Contesting Early Childhood* book series as something to be questioned.

‘Dominant discourses’ are stories that have a decisive influence on a particular subject, for example early childhood education, by insisting that they are the only way to think, talk and behave, that they are the only reality. They seek to impose, in Foucault’s words, a ‘regime of truth’ through exercising power over our thoughts and actions, directing or governing what we see as ‘the truth’ and how we construct the world or weave reality. Typical of dominant discourses is how they make ‘assumptions and values invisible, turn subjective perspectives and understandings into apparently objective truths, and determine that some things are self-evident and realistic while others are dubious and impractical’ (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p. 17). In dominant discourses, fictional stories claim to be non-fictional statements, presenting themselves as natural, unquestionable and inevitable. This is simply how things are, the dominant discourse asserts: no need to add any qualifications, to say ‘in my opinion’ or ‘it seems to me’ or ‘from my perspective’.

By behaving in this way, by insisting they are the one and only truth, dominant discourses also stifle alternative discourses or stories. They exclude, or

attempt to, other ways of understanding and interpreting the world, of weaving reality, marginalising or drowning out other stories. A person putting forward an alternative view or story is treated as out of touch with reality, to be living in the past, to not know what they are taking about, or some other put down that insists their position is irrelevant or absurd. Put another way, and this time using the powerful image offered by the Brazilian philosopher Roberto Unger (2005a), dominant discourses seek to impose a 'dictatorship of no alternative' – there is no alternative, they assert or imply, this is the only reality there can possibly be.

Shortly I will introduce what I think is the most dominant discourse in today's early childhood education, but for the moment let me offer a simple and very different example, the story of 'The Emperor's New Clothes', told by Hans Christian Andersen, a 19th century Danish writer best remembered for his fairy tales. This is a story about how two dishonest weavers attempt to weave reality – in this case by weaving a reality about weaving! They promise an arrogant and foolish emperor that, for a large sum of money, they will make him a wonderful new suit of clothes; these clothes, they say, will be invisible to those who are unfit for their positions, stupid or incompetent. The king is persuaded, telling himself that 'if I wore them I would be able to discover which men in my empire are unfit for their posts. And I could tell the wise men from the fools'. In actual fact, the two weavers do nothing, pocket the money and proffer the Emperor a non-existent set of clothes. When the Emperor parades before his subjects in his 'new clothes', which are of course non-existent and leave him stark naked, no one dares say that they don't see any clothes on him for fear they will be decried as unfit, stupid or incompetent. It is left to a child to challenge this charade and to cry out in the crowd, 'But he hasn't got anything on!'

It would be wrong to claim that this story is a perfect example of a dominant discourse. Those who subscribe to and tell such discourses or stories are not in general foolish, deluded or dishonest and may well believe what they say and that what they say is for the common good. But Andersen's tale does capture the idea of how a dominant discourse, by determining what can and can't be said, closes down other views or perspectives, other stories. Those with doubts about the dominant discourse are often reluctant or unable either to voice their doubts or to suggest alternatives, afraid of the reaction, while others have no doubts but simply accept the story as true.

Andersen also illustrates how a dominant discourse is closely bound up with power. Such a story finds favour for some reason among those in power, who help ensure its dominance by endorsing it; having first been told the story, they constantly re-tell it through privileged channels of communication, increasing its reach and impact. And because the powerful – the Emperor in Andersen's story or, in early childhood education today, those who make policies and disperse funding – adopt the story, those dependent on them

do so also. In this way, through such mutual reinforcement, *a* story gathers momentum and influence, becoming *the* story on everyone's lips.

Which brings me to the third idea: ***the existence of other narratives resisting or contesting dominant discourses***. A discourse may be dominant, yet it never manages totally to silence other discourses or stories. Some, like the small boy, will always speak out and contest the dominant discourse, for, as Foucault contends, 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Put another way, if there was to be no resistance, the relationship would no longer be one of power but simply of slavery, and we are not reduced to that relationship, certainly not in education. Developing this theme, Stephen Ball adds that '[l]ike power itself, resistance is manifold and operates at a multiplicity of points in different forms, in many small acts and passing moments' (Ball, 2013, p. 32).

Resistance, therefore, is to be found in many shapes and sizes. It finds expression in many alternative stories that give voice to the 'multitude of perspectives and debates' to which the stated aim of the *Contesting Early Childhood* book series refers. These stories may be unheard by power and consigned to the margins, for the time being at least, but they are out there to be heard by those who choose to listen. One of them is told in a later chapter. But for the moment, I will suggest that we can speak of a resistance movement, diverse and global, contesting the dominant discourses in early childhood and exploring alternatives; I will return later in the chapter to discuss this resistance movement in more detail.

These three ideas – the importance of narratives or stories, the dominance of some and the possibility of resistance to such dominance – explain the title for the book series, *Contesting Early Childhood*. The basic premise of the series is simple. Early childhood education can be viewed from many different perspectives: there is no one objectively true viewpoint; rather, there are many ways of thinking about, talking about and doing early childhood (or any) education. Therefore, there are many stories to be told, each one of which deserves listening to and each one of which can be questioned or contested – and in particular those that become dominant discourses.

Some may find this an unsettling prospect, a source of anxiety and uncertainty. From my perspective, the 'alternative narratives' and the 'multitude of perspectives and debates' from which they are derived are not only inevitable but something to be welcomed, reflecting a world rich in diversity; it is invigorating, since encounters with difference can provoke experimentation, movement and new thinking. It is, moreover, a necessary condition for a democratic politics of education, since democracy requires the creation, articulation and valuing of alternatives and confrontation and contestation between them. In healthy and vibrant democracies, 'contesting early childhood', meaning confrontation and debate between 'a multitude of perspectives', should be an everyday and everywhere occurrence, whether in services

themselves, in their surrounding communities, in the academy, or among policymakers and politicians. It is both sad and worrying that this is not happening today, or not nearly enough, leaving a democratic politics of education that is in the same moribund state as democracy in general.¹ Rather than vibrant and exciting debates about diverse contemporary projects and different visions for the future, education like so much else has come to be dominated by one or two stories and how best to manage things to ensure their enactment – a stultifying dictatorship of no alternative.

Two dominant discourses in early childhood education

I have talked a lot about ‘dominant discourses’ and even offered an example of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’, though one that has nothing to do with early childhood education. I turn now to give more relevant examples. But before I do so, I want to reiterate an earlier point. I am very critical of today’s dominant discourses in early childhood education; as I shall explain, I neither believe nor like them and prefer other stories. However, just because they don’t appeal to me does not mean you too must find them unappealing. It’s your choice, but recognise you have a choice and have made a choice. If you do so, that’s fine and I respect your decision.

The story of markets

Some ‘dominant discourses’ have a more local sphere of influence, in other words they dominate in some places, but not in others. For instance, one that is commonly heard in my own country, England, and also in other English-speaking countries, though perhaps less elsewhere (for the moment anyway), is ‘the story of markets’. This is a narrative about how early childhood education should be provided by businesses competing within a marketplace for the custom of parent-consumers. This, the story goes, is the best way to deliver early childhood education because a marketized system based on incessant competition between service providers guarantees the most efficiency, the most innovation and the most quality at the lowest price and enables each individual consumer (i.e., parent) to choose the service provider (e.g. a nursery, kindergarten or school) best suited to their preferences and pocket. ‘Parent choice’ is a recurring theme in this story, considered a pre-eminent value. In fact, the story mostly speaks of ‘childcare’ rather than ‘early childhood education’, with the main aim of the market being to provide parents with safe minding for their young children while they are out at work. In this scenario, ‘childcare’ is a commodity, a product, for parent-consumers to choose and pay for from service providers competing in the childcare marketplace.

Here are some excerpts from the story which give an idea of the storyline and of just how unquestioningly the story is told in a country like England.

In a 2013 report titled 'More Great Childcare: raising quality and giving parents more choice', the English government speaks about wanting 'to give parents more choice of early education. . . . We will achieve this by making it easier for new providers to enter the market and for existing providers to expand' (Department for Education (England) (2013, p. 13). Two years later, the same government department commissioned Deloitte, a US-based multinational corporation and one of the 'Big Four' global accountancy firms, to undertake 'An economic assessment of the early education and childcare market' in England. Deloitte's report has a section setting out 'current market strengths and weaknesses', which concludes that 'close examination of "typical" business practices suggest [sic] considerable potential for efficiency across the market as a whole' (Department for Education (England), 2015, p. 9).

Meanwhile, a business that describes itself as 'the UK's leading healthcare market intelligence company' produces a 'UK nursery market report', the 13th edition of which was published in 2014. This offers (for those able to pay the report's price of more than £1,000) 'unique data on UK market values, covering capacity, occupancy, nursery fees and market spending, staffing pay rates, and corporate penetration', 'insight on nursery market prosperity now as the economy has turned a corner', and the identification of 'new strategic developments and key business and structural activity trends in the nursery marketplace'. The report, its publishers assure us, is 'essential business reading for all organisations involved in the provision of children's daycare services in the UK, including nursery businesses, investors, local authorities and childcare policymakers/planners, regulators, trade associations and market valuers' (LaingBuisson, 2014).

This is not the only business services company profiting from a burgeoning childcare market in England. Another describes itself as 'the leading specialist advisor for buying and selling businesses' in a variety of sectors, including childcare. In an item posted on the website for the Childcare Expo, held in Manchester in June 2017 ('Where early years means business'), this company assures readers that

[f]or Christie & Co's Childcare and Education team the first quarter of 2017 has seen a hive of activity from both sellers and new entrants to the market. As a company we are now seeing worldwide interest in the UK childcare market from smaller asset owners to the larger groups which have already or are in the process of being transacted.

There has been increased interest from Far East investors who look to the British education sector as the 'gold standard' and this is creating ample opportunities for UK operators to either expand their day nurseries in Asia, or to work closely with Chinese developers to create nursery settings. With the fall in the pound on the back of Brexit there are also plenty of opportunities for foreign investors who can take advantage of

the monetary gains to move into the British market, and with the opening up of entrepreneurial visas there is more scope for these investors.

(www.childcareexpo.co.uk/the-state-of-the-uk-childcare-market-by-christie-co/)

I could continue with other examples of how early childhood education, or rather ‘childcare’, in England today is matter-of-factly treated as a marketized business, with the owners of these services viewed as entrepreneurs and the services themselves as investment opportunities, and all without any apparent awareness that this narrative is contestable and might need to be justified. But I hope the point is made. The story of markets in early childhood education is a dominant discourse in England, widely treated as self-evident and inevitable, as if (in the hubristic words of a senior civil servant) it was ‘the only show in town’ (Archer, 2008).

There are indeed some critical voices around, arguing not only against the principle of early childhood education as a marketized business but showing how the story of markets is not convincing even in its own terms; I will come back to these voices shortly. But these voices are not easily heard and find no place in the torrent of documents that pour out not only from government but from think tanks, academic researchers, businesses and others who make a living from furthering this dominant discourse. To mix my metaphors somewhat, a dominant discourse is also like a band wagon on to which many people jump for fear of missing out or being accused of irrelevance.

The story of quality and high returns

I turn now to what I consider to be the most dominant of dominant discourses in early childhood education today. This claim is based on the volume at which it is broadcast and its extensive reach, being told insistently and assertively not only in individual countries but amplified through the regional and global reach of influential international organisations, bodies such as the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union. I refer to what I call ‘the story of quality and high returns’.

There are many examples of this story being told, both by academic researchers and in policy documents from governments and by those who seek to influence them. You are probably familiar with a number of them. Here is just one example, a short pamphlet titled ‘Investing in high-quality early childhood education and care’, published online by the OECD, a very influential international organisation.

Looking at ECEC [early childhood education and care] as an *investment* makes sense because the costs today generate many benefits in the future.

And the benefits are not only economic: benefits can be in the form of social well-being for individuals and society as a whole. *Economists* such as Nobel prize-winner, James Heckman have shown how early learning is a good *investment* because it provides the foundation for later learning. The big insight from these economists is that a dollar, euro or yen spent on preschool programmes generates a *higher return on investment* than the same spending on schooling. . . . [But] early childhood education and care needs to be of sufficient *quality* to achieve beneficial child-outcomes and yield longer term social and economic gains. . . . The OECD is now developing an Online Policy Toolbox for identifying how to improve quality. . . . The toolbox will include checklists, self-assessment sheets, research briefs, lists of strategy options etc.

(OECD, 2011a, pp. 1, 7, 8; emphasis added)

This is an apparently simple story with a clear beginning, middle and end. The beginning is a world full of problems, including national survival in a fiercely competitive, dog-eats-dog global marketplace and a host of economic and social troubles, including a current failure to fully realise the nation's 'human capital'. The middle is the application of the correct mix of 'human technologies' to young children (I will say more about 'human capital' and 'human technologies' shortly, but for the moment we can equate them, respectively, with realising individuals' economic potential and the idea of 'quality'), while the end is the promise of large returns on the investment made in early intervention, many pounds, euros or dollars flowing back for every one initially committed. The moral of the story is that if only early intervention is done right, with 'quality', education and employment outcomes will improve, social problems will diminish, and survival in the 'global race', that vortex of ever increasing competition in the global marketplace, will be assured.

The range of problems solved in the story can be quite awesome, as exemplified by this excerpt from another OECD document, which lays out the 'Quality Toolbox' promised in the earlier report.

A growing body of research recognises that early childhood education and care (ECEC) brings a wide range of benefits, for example, better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased inter-generational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large.

(OECD, 2012, p. 9)

Equally awesome are the claimed rates of financial return. A UK report, for instance, concludes that '[t]he consensus among. . . American approaches and reviews, including even the most cautious and circumspect in its recommendations, have suggested returns on investment on well-designed early

years interventions [that] significantly exceed both their costs and stock market returns', with rates of return for every dollar invested ranging from \$1.26 to \$17.92 (Wave Trust, 2013, p. 38). An appealing prospect encapsulated in the title of a 2011 report for the English government: 'Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings', and whose cover design that is full of gold ingots adds more allure to the message (Allen, 2011). What's not to like in this story! Intervene early and add the special ingredient 'quality', and, in the story, everyone lives happily ever after.

A major plot line in the story of quality and high returns is *human capital theory* (HCT), which provides an explanation for the relationship between early intervention with correct 'human technologies' and some of the most profitable later returns. HCT 'has developed into one of the most powerful theories in modern economics . . . [and] lays considerable stress on the education of individuals as the key means by which both the individual accrues material advantage and by which the economy as a whole progresses' (Gillies, 2011, pp. 224–225). Formally introduced in the 1950s and developed mainly by economists in the Chicago School of Economics, HCT is based on certain assumptions about human behaviour:

Individuals are assumed to seek to maximise their own economic interests . . . [through for example investing] in education and training in the hope of getting a higher income in the future. . . . This approach is closely associated with *methodological individualism* . . . the doctrine that the roots of all social phenomena could be found in the individual's behaviour.

(Tan, 2014, pp. 1, 2)

Working with these assumptions, HCT argues that education and training increase human capital through the acquisition of knowledge and skills, which increases productivity, brings about higher earnings and is the key to competitive success in a global marketplace. Leading HCT academics, such as James Heckman from the University of Chicago (one of the characters in the OECD story quoted earlier), contend that the early years offer the best time to invest in education – but since young children can hardly be expected to think and act as rational, economic decision-makers and make calculated investment choices for themselves, government and parents must necessarily do this for them by funding early childhood education, with children and society reaping later rewards from the subsequent realisation of enhanced human capital. The young child, in this scenario, is viewed as a unit of economic potential, a potential to be realised only through the application of correct technical practice-or 'human technologies'-at a young age.

Let me further digress to explain this term '*human technologies*'. When hearing the term 'technology', it is understandable to think of machines and gadgets; but the concept of technology can be extended to processes and methods of working applied by people to people with the aim of better controlling

or governing them. In the words of the English sociologist Nikolas Rose, human technologies are 'technologies of government . . . imbued with aspirations for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired events'. Their purpose is to understand and act upon human capacities so as 'to achieve certain forms of outcome on the part of the governed'. They cover numerous and varied technical means, some quite mundane, others more sophisticated, such as 'forms of practical knowledge, with modes of perception, practices of calculation, vocabularies, types of authority, forms of judgement, architectural forms, human capacities, non-human objects and devices' (Rose, 1999, p. 52).

What does that look like in practice? Think a moment about today's early childhood education and examples of such technologies come readily to mind: child development knowledge, including concepts and vocabularies that we use to discuss what children should be like; developmental and learning goals, which set targets to be achieved; early years curricula, especially those that are tightly defined and specify what children and adults should be doing; pedagogical and other programmes, such as developmentally appropriate practice, which lay down how education should be done; the authority of various expert groups, who define targets, curricula and programmes; child observation techniques and normative assessment methods, which measure the performance of children against the demands of programmes and goals; regulatory and inspection regimes, which rate the performance of adults and institutions; payment of workers by results, which reward that same performance; and some kinds of research, often of the 'What works?' variety, which provide ways of refining and improving technologies.

One of the more recent and most powerful 'human technologies' to emerge in early childhood education is what has been termed 'datafication' or 'data-veillance', the collection and analysis of data on children based on standardised assessments, so as to monitor and manage children and staff in ever greater detail – in short, data to ensure compliance to prescribed standards and targets. In a study of three English early childhood settings, Guy Roberts-Holmes and Alice Bradbury report on this latest technology, with the teachers describing

how they were increasingly subjected to the demands of data production. . . . For the early years teachers in this study, the focus of assessment data was the concept of constant progress through the Early Years Foundation Stage [the early years curriculum in England]; everyone must be tracked to ensure they are moving forwards. This requires ever more detailed data, to show the incremental progress of the children. . . . [A the head of a nursery school said]:

Where do you stop with it because there is so much of it! Health data, education data, family support data and well-being data and to be