

Researching Early Childhood Policy and Practice. A Critical Ecology

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Introduction

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

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

The questions we ask as researchers depend on how we position ourselves in the *micro-* and *macro-politics* of early childhood (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). They are shaped by our personal and professional backgrounds and histories (and biases) and shape the image of the child and the possible, desirable, imaginable practices and policies.

In this article, I analyse the questions we might ask in early childhood research and how they relate to the constructions of the child and to our understandings of

the role of research. The article begins with a brief examination of recent European policy documents that have been influential in promoting a particularly important, but, as I argue narrow, view of children and early childhood education in a changing European policy context. I then discuss current research in early childhood in relation to the policy analysis and argue for a much broader understanding of the challenges we are facing and the implications for doing research in our field. The final two sections make the case for a radical reconceptualisation of research as a democratic, transformative and inevitably political practice.

ECEC in a Changing European Policy Context

Since the 1992 Council Recommendations on Childcare (Council of the European Communities, 1992), Early Childhood Education and Care have been a recurring topic on European policy agendas. Reasons for the interest in services for the youngest European citizens and their families have varied widely and have often been contradictory. The 1992 Recommendations urge EU Member States to 'take and/or progressively encourage initiatives to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children' (*ibid*, article 1). This requires coherent policies addressing the *provision of childcare services, matching parental leave arrangements, organisation and structure of work in order to meet the needs of workers with children* and a general commitment to gender equality: 'the sharing of occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children between women and men' (*ibid*, article 2). The document then specifies the characteristics of each of the above policy areas: 'childcare services should be affordable and accessible to all children and families and offer reliable care of high quality combined with pedagogical approaches. There is further emphasis on initial and continuous training of staff, close collaboration with local communities and appropriate public funding for services. The provision of childcare services needs to be complemented by much greater flexibility in the workplace in general, which take[s] into account the needs of all working parents with responsibility for the care and upbringing of children' (*ibid*, article 5). Member States are asked to ensure that 'due recognition' is given to childcare workers, their working conditions and 'the social value of their work' (*ibid*, see also Peter Moss in this issue).

Following the Maastricht Treaty (1993), the EU saw the development of an ambitious socio-economic policy agenda. It culminated in 2000 in a set of policies known as the Lisbon Strategy. The orientation of the EU in the first decade of the new millennium was to become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Council, 2000). Hence, childcare was now increasingly seen as an *investment* and a tool to achieve the ambitious policy goals. However, come 2010, it was obvious that Europe was far from being the 'most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world'. Even from the perspective of its architects, the Lisbon Strategy had to be considered a failure. In June 2009, the then Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt stated: 'Even if progress has been made it must be said that the Lisbon Agenda, with only a year remaining before it is to be evaluated, has been a failure' (www.euractiv.com/priorities/sweden-admits-lisbon-agenda-fail-news-221962).

The changes in the role given to early childhood are particularly visible in the successor to the Lisbon Strategy and the policy documents that have been

developed in its context. *Europe 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* (European Commission, 2010) provides the current strategic orientation for the EU. It builds on a rather bleak analysis of the state of the EU at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. Two terms that feature most prominently in the EU 2020 strategy are *crisis* and *transformation*:

Europe faces a moment of transformation. The crisis has wiped out years of economic and social progress and exposed structural weaknesses in Europe's economy. In the meantime, the world is moving fast and long-term challenges — globalisation, pressure on resources, ageing — intensify. The EU must now take charge of its future.
 (European Commission, 2010, p. 3)

Crisis — What Crisis?

Clearly, what the European Commission has in mind when it re-draws the picture of the present and future Union is an economic and financial crisis: the dramatic failure of global capitalism to provide and maintain the sound foundation for social and political progress, and its disastrous capacity to ‘wipe out’ social achievements built on previous economic prosperity. Again, it is not within the remit of this article to speculate why, despite the dysfunctionality of our global economic system, the authors of the Strategy hold on to the primacy of the economy over every other aspect of life. Could it be that, despite the ubiquitous talk of *transformation* and *change*, the architects of the future EU are unable to question the dominance of the ‘neoliberal imaginary’ (Ball, 2012)? A more critical analysis of the situation in which we find ourselves, I want to argue with Stephen Ball (*ibid*) and Aihwa Ong (2007), would focus on the complex relationships between *micro-* and *macro-politics* of everyday neo-liberalism in our societies. It would question an economic system that perpetuates the economisation of every aspect of social life and its need to constantly create opportunities for profit and address the fundamental dependence of this system on individuals who are ‘willing’, ‘self-governing’ and ‘entrepreneurial’ — a Foucauldian mindset of *governmentality* (Foucault, 1982; Lemke, n.d.). Ong (2007, p. 4) refers to the former as neo-liberalism with a big ‘N’, to the latter as neo-liberalism with a small ‘n’ (Ball, 2012).

Choosing the frame of analysis is critical, as it orients the questions we ask (*research!*) and the ways forward we suggest in order to deal with the crisis (*policy!*).

Defining the situation in which we find ourselves as an ‘economic’ or ‘financial’ crisis is likely to lead to economic questions and answers. In other words, it contributes to further the neo-liberal assumption that everything, including the upbringing of young children, can and should first be understood in economic terms. Putting Europe ‘back on track’ (European Commission, 2010) means putting the European economy back on track. And, like the much more enthusiastic feel of the Lisbon Strategy, early childhood education and care has its role to play. Already, influential EU policy documents depict it as a powerful means to achieve economic progress, both individually and collectively. ECEC can remedy ‘socio-economic disadvantage’, break the ‘cycle of poverty’ (European Commission, 2010, p. 4) and increase children’s ‘employability when they become adults’ (p. 1). The language used in recent policy documents can be confident about the

outcomes of children participating in ‘high quality’ ECEC because the far reaching claims are backed up by research findings (Barnett, 2010).

However, defining both the ‘crisis’ and the ‘solution’ as economic prevents us from taking other views into account. Edgar Morin in his ‘Manifesto for the new millennium’ (Morin & Kern, 1999) insists that, on a global scale, we can no longer pretend to identify *one* key problem, the solution to which would miraculously lead to ending the ‘crisis’:

‘One is at loss to single out a number one problem to which all others would be subordinated. There is no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem.’ (Morin & Kern, 1999, p. 74)

We are indeed facing global challenges and life-threatening catastrophes, including, but not limited to:

- the increasing danger posed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons
- the global climate crisis, threatening, among others, to unleash unrest, conflict and mass-migration due to growing shortages of water, food and fuel
- the threat to biodiversity
- the impossibility of unlimited economic growth
- the dysfunctional economic and financial system.

(Moss & Urban, 2010, p. 15).

These ‘challenges’ should provoke radical new approaches to education and to early childhood education in particular, as we have argued in ‘Democracy and Experimentation’ (Moss & Urban, 2010):

All of these challenges mean we cannot continue as we are, and they should provoke major democratic debate in all countries. In relation to education, the question of its purpose becomes even more critical and urgent. The dangers we face require spreading and deepening democratic values and practices, collaborative action and a willingness to think and act differently, trying new approaches: “more of the same” is no longer an option (p. 16).

This view finds support from José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission. He writes in his preface to the Europe 2020 strategy document:

The crisis is a wake-up call, the moment where we recognise that “business as usual” would consign us to a gradual decline, to the second rank of the new global order. This is Europe’s moment of truth. It is the time to be bold and ambitious. (European Commission, 2010, p. 3).

However, the question in early childhood policy and practice is not so much whether we can continue with ‘business as usual’. It is, much more fundamentally, whether ‘business’ is an appropriate concept for the societal engagement with the youngest children *at all*.

Researching Complexity

The policy arguments for early childhood education and care brought forward in recent EU policy documents seem to be strangely at odds with Barroso’s ‘wake-up call’. Instead of opening the debate for radically new questions (and actors), they

seem to rely on and ask for ever ‘more of the same’ evidence to legitimate the most effective interventions, e.g. to ‘close the gap’ by promoting early literacy and numeracy, especially for children from the most ‘disadvantaged’ communities.

In fields of research other than education, the complex ‘problématiques’ (as the Club of Rome refers to the interwoven crises of the planet (Max-Neef, 2005)) have raised questions of transdisciplinarity and critical epistemology: how can we collaborate to understand the complexity and bring in many different perspectives? How can we come to new understandings of *knowledge* and how (and by whom) it is produced? There are, transdisciplinary thinkers suggest, at least five dimensions shaping the complex realities we address as researchers:

1. **Multi-dimensional** — complex problems straddle different levels of reality at the same time and therefore imply a thorough understanding of the simultaneity of both the discontinuity *and* coexistence of natural and social systems;
2. **Systemic** — complex problems are interconnected — it is not so much the individual problem areas that are complex, but rather the sets of overlapping relationships between them that define and constitute the bigger, planetary, nexus of problems;
3. **Emergence** — complex problems tend to reveal new or different sides as our perceptions of them change — understanding complex problems therefore implies a multi-referential epistemology with its point of departure in a non-separable subject-object relationship which involves all our faculties of knowing and understanding — the mind, body and feelings / intuition;
4. **Global-local context** — complex problems do not manifest themselves exclusively at either the macro-, meso- or micro-levels — they are not restricted to a particular ‘scale’ or ‘level’, neither are they limited to a specific geographical place or region — complex problems are, by definition, planetary, which means that their presence is observed and experienced both *globally* and *locally*;
5. **Long-term consequences** — complex problems pose severe/adverse implications for the continued existence of the human species if left unattended or unresolved — this implies the urgency of sustainability or finding sustainable solutions to these problems.

(Swilling & van Breda, 2005, pp. 3–4)

All this implies that we can no longer study and interpret the world with concepts of *certainty* (e.g. linearity, local causality, predictability), but need to embrace concepts of *uncertainty* instead (e.g. non-linearity, global causality, unpredictability). The implications for research methodology and for the questions we ask are far reaching, but rewarding: ‘Using these new lenses not only changes our *perceptions* of reality, but they allow us to observe a radically different ‘reality’ (*ibid*, p. 5). Beyond ‘limited situations’, writes Paulo Freire, lies ‘untested feasibility’ — and hope (Freire, 2004).

European research in early childhood tends to fall into two categories. On the one hand, there are large-scale, often international studies with a strong element of comparison and/or evaluation (between countries, programmes, groups of children, etc.). They include landmark studies such as the first two ‘Starting Strong’ reports (OECD, 2001, 2006), SEEPRO (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010), EPPE (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) or the Roma Early Childhood Inclusion (RECI) study (Bennett, 2012), to name but a few. On the other hand, there is an increasing volume of

small-scale, mainly qualitative (and often unfunded) local research, e.g. documenting the experiences in a particular setting, programme or community. Many of these studies are conducted by practitioner-researchers who are closely involved with their specific enquiry. There is also a small but growing body of small-scale qualitative research that pushes the boundaries of traditional ECEC research and introduces new theoretical frameworks, e.g. using the work of Deleuze and Guattari as a basis for analysis and interpretation (Mozère, 2007; Olsson, 2009). Only a few studies seek to bridge the 'global' and the 'local', not by adding up distinct local experiences into a comparative picture, but by creating spaces for encounter and collaborative enquiry between the macro-, meso-, and micro-aspects of early childhood policy and practice. In our CoRe project (Urban *et al.*, 2011, see also in this issue, pp. 508–526) we attempted this by systematically connecting local case studies (and the local researchers who conducted them) with the overarching European policy environment.

There are obvious problems of perspective and vantage point in both large-scale transnational and small-scale local studies in early childhood. Researchers, like cartographers, must find the right scale for their representations of the world (how these differ fundamentally in different *knowledge* systems is discussed by David Turnbull (2003) in *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers*). The larger the scale, the less detail can be included in the map, the smaller the scale, the less likely it is to see the big picture. Peter Moss, in his contribution to the launch of the first *Starting Strong* report (OECD, 2001) in Stockholm in 2001 reminds us of the dilemma in early childhood research:

Cross-national studies of early childhood can lose sight of the child. Or rather, their focus on structures and technologies runs the risk of producing an image of the child as a universal and passive object, to be shaped by early childhood services — to be developed, to be prepared, to be educated, to be cared for. There may be little sense for the child as a social actor, situated in a particular historical and spatial context, living a childhood in these services, and making her own meanings from the experience. (Moss, 2001)

The problem with the studies that produce the type of data that are most appealing to those committed to 'evidence-based' policy making is not just one of scale, proximity or distance. The concept of 'comparison' itself is problematic, as it is often linked to the number one question in evidence-based policy making: what works? Posed in contexts of policy making and *governance*, the underlying question of comparative studies tends to be one of transferability: How can what works *there* be made to work *here*? Pursuing this rationale inevitably shapes the *what?* and *how?* of research: the questions we ask of the complex, diverse, multifaceted and often contradictory worlds of children, families, practitioners and communities and the approaches we take to explore and understand the 'swampy lowland [of] messy, confusing problems' (Schön, 1987, p. 28) that constitutes the reality of early childhood practices. It also runs the risk of restricting the *who?* — the participants in the enquiry into, analysis, interpretation and transformation of the world — to those on the 'high ground' (Schön, 1987), the experts and academic researchers. The focus on 'what works', obscures the fundamental *democratic deficit* in educational research argues Gert Biesta because it 'makes it difficult, if not impossible to ask questions of what it should work for and who should have a say in determining the latter' (Biesta, 2007, p. 5).

As I have discussed elsewhere (Urban & Dalli, 2011), researchers such as Robert Stake (Stake, 2003) remind us that 'comparison is a grand epistemological strategy, a powerful conceptual mechanism' (p. 148). The problem with this grand and powerful strategy is, he argues, that it systematically obscures any knowledge that fails to facilitate comparison. Complexity, the 'thick of things', is not only lost; it becomes threatening as it undermines the imposing edifices constructed from comparative data. Instead, 'comparability' must be constructed proactively by systematically eradicating from the picture anything that is juicy, contradictory, puzzling, alive, in short meaningful. The result, too often, is pieces of decontextualised information — 'evidence nuggets', as recently found on the web (www.whatworksforchildren.org.uk/).

It must be mentioned that, unlike policy makers who see comparative data as a basic commodity, comparative educational researchers have long been aware of the simplification trap. Joe Tobin, visiting and re-visiting 'pre-schools in three cultures' (Tobin *et al.*, 2009, 1989), removes the comparative *inter-* from his conceptual framework and argues for negotiation as a process of meaning-making. Robin Alexander, in his seminal 'culture and pedagogy' (Alexander, 2000), urges us to 'bite the methodological bullet and progress beyond policy and structure to the classroom' (p. 3). The authors of the first OECD *Starting Strong* reports (OECD, 2001) are also well aware that is impossible to decontextualise early childhood without losing meaning:

[. . .] ECEC policy and the quality of services are deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff? (OECD, 2001, p. 63)

While my depiction of the European early childhood research 'landscape' is sketchy at best, it does point to some critical issues that require urgent attention if we want to overcome the limitations of a research environment in which the perceived *problems*, the resulting *research questions* and *methodologies* and the desirable (imaginable?) *solutions* are caught in the same paradigm.

What Counts? Who Counts? The Case for a Democratic Turn in Research

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire, 2000b, p. 53)

I argue for a radical democratic turn in early childhood research. I do so not out of naïve sympathies with *participation* or out of a belief in the importance of *giving a voice* to children, parents and practitioners (a deeply *undemocratic* concept, I would argue, as it implies that the power to grant or withhold the possibility to speak lies with the researcher). A democratic reconceptualisation of *how*, with *whom*, and for *what purpose* we conduct research is a necessary step towards the needed shift of paradigms to break the cycle where more-of-the-same research leads to more-of-the-same 'solutions'. Early childhood research (in its established, funded, listened to variants) has become what Thomas Kuhn (1962) called a

'normal science'. It has adopted forms of enquiry that remain safely within the boundaries of the dominant world view and serve to 'solve' the accepted problems within that paradigm. It is widely accepted and supported by research, for instance, that children from poor and marginalised communities are disadvantaged in the education system and therefore fare considerably worse in life than their privileged peers. Research has identified 'the gap', provided the 'evidence' for policy makers, and is now offering 'solutions' and interventions that 'work' to close 'the gap'. The problem here is that the question implies the solution (e.g. greater participation in early childhood education and care in order to raise children's literacy and numeracy levels). Once the 'problem' is identified as one of lacking educational attainment, 'more' education is offered as a solution.

But what if the situation is not as straightforward as it seems through the educational lens? What if the question of educational attainment is tangled up with structural injustice, systemic inequality, oppression or blatant racism (see Colette Murray's contribution in this issue, pp. 569–583 and Murray & Urban, 2012)? How is it possible to reframe the question of who does well in education as a question of dominant and widely accepted knowledge versus other knowledges, e.g. indigenous, that are ignored, seen as irrelevant or openly suppressed? What if, as Paulo Freire (2000a; 2000b) argues, the education system itself, its preschools, schools and universities, played an active role in perpetuating the oppressive situation? How do poor housing, poverty, exclusion come together with educational experience in multifaceted '*problématiques*', an 'intersolidarity of crises' (Morin) in the lived experience of 'disadvantaged' children and communities? Access to 'high quality' early childhood education has an important role to play, but on its own it certainly does not provide a 'solution'.

'Normal' scientists, argues Kuhn (1962, p. 46), 'do not usually ask or debate what makes a particular problem or solution legitimate'. In other words, they do not question the *rules of the game* where the problems are framed by those who define what counts as problems to be solved. This is the argument John and Jill Schostak make in their book on 'Radical Research' (Schostak & Schostak, 2008). In it, they argue that, in order to bring about the kind of paradigmatic change Kuhn talked about in his 'Structure of Scientific Revolutions', 'normal' research will have to be challenged by questions raised 'by people face to face with issues in their everyday lives' (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, p. 8).

What does current 'normal research' in early childhood look like? An example can be found in a recent programme of a seminar with 'internationally renowned scientists' for early childhood PhD students. It was hosted by a Foundation committed to counter the 'foreseeable dearth of qualified young academics' in our field, and firmly grounded in the conviction that the 'importance of education in early childhood for an individual's personal development is uncontested' (www.boschstiftung.de/content/language2/html/25076.asp). Lectures were given on topics such as *emotional and behavioral self-regulation and learning skills*, *Quality assessment in early childhood care and education (ECE) using the ECERS and the CLASS* and *Promoting literacy and numeracy development: the role of curriculum and teacher in ECE*.

I have no intention to belittle the importance of the initiative or to question the motives of the funders and participants. My argument is, however, where, in 'normal research' in early childhood, the importance of the early years of life is largely uncontested, so are the questions, the procedures, and the answers. *What*

counts, the researchable topics (e.g. self-regulation and learning skills, quality assessment, curriculum), is clearly defined by those *who count* (internationally renowned scientists), rarely by those *who are counted*. The solutions to be suggested by this research are already implied in the questions: programmes and interventions to support children's 'self-regulation' in order to increase their 'learning skills', to measure 'quality' using externally defined criteria, and to support teachers to 'deliver' effective curricula. Assumed is a normality of the individual child (behaviour, skills), the environment (quality) and the content (curriculum) that remains unquestioned. But if 'behaviour' and lack of learning skills are a general problem (to pick just one of the issues as an exemplar), how then is it that ADHD diagnosis rates for children from marginalised groups in society (e.g. Roma in Europe and indigenous children in Canada and Australia) are regularly 'significantly higher than expected based on prevalence rates in the general population' (Baydala *et al.*, 2006)? What *other* questions could we ask if we turned the focus of our attention from the child to the relationship between the marginalised and the dominant and their privileges to define what behaviour is acceptable in educational settings?

Schostak and Schostak (2008) ask 'why so much research contributes so little to democratic questioning of the powerful' (p. 1). They outline a programme for research that is 'radical' in at least two respects: first, the etymology of 'radical' (roots) implies a focus on the essential assumptions, foundations, values and ethics that frame our perspective on the world. It is concerned with identity, race, class, gender, religion and politics. The question of the radical, they write, 'emerges in conflict, where fundamental approaches to life, to ways of thinking, to ways of seeing the world are in dispute' (p. 6). Research, conceptualised from this 'radical' vantage point, insists on asking *why?* questions.

Second, reframing research as 'radical' implies a political dimension. Not to accept the social reality as a given, but to ask *why* things are the way they are implies there are *other* ways of seeing and doing things. Questioning the taken-for-granted may not in itself 'effect the transformation of the world, as Freire (2004) wrote about the practice of education, 'but it implies it' (p. 23). The political dimension of 'radical' research lies in its suggestion that it is possible to 'overthrow [...] a previously stable or at least dominant order of ways of knowing, thinking believing, acting' (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, p. 1).

Radical, transformative research and radical democracy (Moss & Urban, 2010) go hand in hand because the questions that matter (*what counts?*) are not exclusive, they cannot be defined by the academic researcher alone (*who counts?*). On the contrary, with 'faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished' (Dewey, 1939, p. 227), everyone is capable of asking questions such as:

- Why do things have to be like this?
 - Why am I considered to be inferior to them?
 - Why do they have more than me?
 - So, what is actually going on here? Who benefits from these circumstances and who loses?
 - Why can't I do just whatever I want?
 - How do I stop them from doing whatever they like and hurt me in the process?
 - Why can't we all just get on with each other?
- (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, p. 1).

Research that enables asking these and other questions cannot be designed and 'conducted' within the boundaries of traditional disciplines. It implies transdisciplinary approaches (Fairclough, 2005), a 'refocusing of research and action on the political, the cultural [the educational, M.U.] and the social without splitting them up into separate disciplines' (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, p. 8).

Researching ECEC in Europe as Political Practice

My discourse in favor of dreaming, of utopia, of freedom, of democracy is the discourse of those who refuse to settle and do not allow the taste for being human, which fatalism deteriorates, to die within themselves. (Freire, 2007, p. 26)

Mainstream research in early childhood has not yet embraced the transdisciplinary, transformative and radically democratic challenge (and possibility!) arising from the complex and often contradictory realities of children, families and communities. Despite debates taking place in other fields of social science, humanities and beyond (Fairclough, 2005; Nicolescu, 2002; 2008), early childhood appears to be stuck in a dated paradigm where the subjects and objects of research are constructed from limited perspectives without them taking an active role in that process. Mono-dimensional constructions of children (e.g. in relation to their *learning skills*), families and communities (e.g. in relation to their ethnicity) contradict a fast growing body of knowledge and professional experience that confirm children's holistic and multi-dimensional ways of learning, developing their multi-faceted identities, and making sense of the world. Hilary Lenz-Taguchi (2009), exploring this puzzling theory-practice divide, suspects a 'desire to control' as a leitmotif:

the more we seem to know about the complexity of learning, children's diverse strategies and multiple theories [of] knowledge, the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities and diversities of learning and knowing. The more complex things become the more we seem to desire processes of reduction and thus control, but such reduction strategies might simultaneously shut out the inclusion and justice we want to achieve. (Lenz-Taguchi, 2009, p. 8)

Returning to the EU's research-informed approach to early childhood education and care, we find a conspicuous 'construction' of children from a very specific perspective. The importance of 'high-quality' early childhood education and care is clearly stated: ECEC can 'close the gap in social development and numeracy and literacy skills between children from socially advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds (European Commission, 2011, p. 4), and generate future 'employability' (p. 1). While the value placed on early childhood education and care is to be welcomed, this perspective seems to be based on two fundamental assumptions:

- children (especially from 'disadvantaged' communities) are *deficient*
- children (in general) are potential *future contributors* to the economy.

Research is an inevitably political *praxis* (Freire) as it requires the researchers to position themselves in relation to the world they are engaging with. A central question here is whether we choose to maintain and support the status quo, or commit ourselves to questioning the accepted and to enquiries that aim at transformation and more just and equitable experiences for all. Transformative, 'radical' research would challenge the assumptions made about children, families and

communities. The first questions it would ask would not be about how to treat the deficiency or how to ensure ‘best practices’ for future outcomes. Rather, it would start with questions about *here and now*:

- What are the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990) of children, families and communities, e.g. in and with the education system?
- What knowledges other than the dominant worldview do marginalised and oppressed children, families and communities use to make sense of the world?
- What are their *capabilities* (Nussbaum, 2000); what contributions could they make *now* if ‘proper conditions were furnished’ (Dewey, 1939)?

In early childhood education and care, such questions extend beyond the immediate classroom, programme or early childhood setting to the relationship between children and adults, between the private and the public, and the governance of the institutions and systems we establish around this relationship. They challenge the position of the researcher-as-expert, as they require a radically different understanding of the nature of the body of knowledge underpinning our policies and practices and of those who contribute to it (Murray & Urban, 2012). Elsewhere, I have argued that the ‘epistemological hierarchy’, the top-down structure of knowledge-production-and-application in our field can be replaced by much more reciprocal and inclusive ways of understanding, orienting and theorising early childhood practices as a ‘critical ecology’ (Miller *et al.*, 2011; Urban, 2007; 2008). Recent European research has taken this approach as a vantage point and has shown how a ‘competent system’ in early childhood depends on the systematic and reciprocal relationship between individuals, institutions, research, professional preparation and governance (Urban *et al.*, 2011 and in this issue, pp. 508–526). However, to fully engage with the diversity of children’s, families and communities experiences in Europe, and especially experiences of dominance, marginalisation, exclusion (see Murray and Herczog in this issue), I suggest that more radical steps are necessary to reconceptualise research, policy and practice in early childhood. But how, for instance, could we re-frame the relationship between the ‘advantaged’ and ‘disadvantaged’ communities (e.g. Roma, Travellers, Immigrants) in a more equal and respectful way and move beyond the deficit model of early childhood intervention?

Could we learn from experiences outside Europe in the ‘majority world’? (e.g. from ECD interventions in Africa that ‘are more successful when built on local knowledge’ (Pence & Schafer, 2006, p. 2)). Referring to cross-cultural psychologists, Judith Evans and Robert Myer, Pence and Schafer point to the value of indigenous knowledge and child rearing practices not only from an ethical and philosophical perspective. They are ‘intrinsically sound and valuable’, and important to ‘understand, support, and improve child-rearing; respond to diversity; respect cultural values; and provide continuity during times of rapid change (Evans & Myers, 1994, pp. 2–3 cited in Pence & Schafer, 2006, p. 2).

Alan Pence and colleagues have applied the recognition that there are multiple ways of knowing that can mutually enrich each other to develop an early childhood curriculum jointly with First Nations communities in Canada, a process they refer to as ‘generative curriculum’ (Ball & Pence, 2000). Their experiences with the effectiveness of including indigenous knowledge in ECD curricula have informed successful professional development and capacity building initiatives in Canada

and, in particular, the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU) in Africa (Pence & Marfo, 2004).

In Europe, policy interest in early childhood education and care is to be welcomed. The dominant research paradigm, however, carries the risk of perpetuating rather than countering exclusion and marginalisation. In order to challenge this, we need to learn from and engage with experiences from the margins.

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