

Bringing politics into the nursery

Early childhood education as a democratic practice

by Peter Moss



About the paper

Care and education for young children is often understood primarily as a commodity to be provided in the marketplace, or as a kind of factory to produce human capital. But institutions for children and young people can also serve a very different role. They can be understood as forums for democratic political practice. This is a choice that we, as citizens, can make. This paper applies the idea of democracy to a wide range of institutions providing education and care for young children.

Observing that democracy is in a sickly state in neo-liberal societies, the author discusses the importance of democratic participation as a right of citizenship, a bulwark against oppression and injustice, and a means for fostering diversity in society. He then looks at what it means to have democracy in early childhood settings, distinguishing between a democratic ethos that values the sharing of opinions and perspectives, and democracy in the form of management structures that involve elected representatives of parents and educators. He looks at what we can learn from practices around Europe, especially in the Nordic countries, and at what conditions are necessary to foster the establishment of democratic participation in early childhood settings.

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Early Childhood Development

*Bringing politics into the
nursery*

*Early childhood education as a
democratic practice*

By Peter Moss

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Introduction

This paper explores a proposition that Gunilla Dahlberg and I put forward in our book *Ethics and politics in early childhood education*: that institutions for children and young people can be understood, first and foremost, as forums, spaces or sites for political practice, and specifically for democratic political practice (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). 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 that 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.

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. Understood this way, nurseries and other institutions for young children 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). Or, to take another example, early childhood institutions can be thought of as businesses competing in a private market, offering a commodity, childcare, to parents-as-consumers.

These understandings are both very prominent in some countries, including my own country, 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” (3); of “delivery through the market” (38) and of how local authorities will have “to play an active role in understanding the way the local childcare market is working” (36) and help “the market work more effectively” (38). There is no reference to ‘democracy’.



Chapter 1: The case for democratic practice

Why is democratic practice so important, both in general and in early childhood education in particular? The case can be put briefly. First, democratic participation is an important criterion and right of citizenship: it is a means by which children and adults can participate collectively in shaping decisions affecting themselves, groups of which they are members and the wider society. Today such participation is recognised as a right of children in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
(Article 12)

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment 7, emphasised that “article 12 applies both to younger and to older children” and that “as holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views, which should be “given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (art. 12.1) (UNICEF et al, 2006). The Committee reminds us that these children “make choices and communicate their feelings,

ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language.” Second, democracy provides means for resisting power and its will to govern, and the forms of oppression and injustice that arise from the unfettered and unaccountable exercise of power. Democracy is the best defence against totalitarianism, whether in government or other institutions.

Third, 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, and so for society to enable and value cultural and paradigmatic pluralism¹. Furthermore, democracy provides the best opportunity for society as a whole to benefit from such diversity.

There is a strong trend for work and production in post-industrial societies to be ‘immaterial’ (most obviously knowledge and information), which is “produced not by individuals but collectively in collaboration...[through] the common, social nature of production” (Hardt and Negri, 2006).

Democratic practice, for example in education, should not only underpin a “collaborative,

¹ By *paradigm*, a term I use in several places in this paper, I refer to an overarching system of ideas, values and beliefs by which people see and organise the world in a coherent way, a mindset for making sense of the world and our place in it. None of us can step outside of paradigm, but we can be aware of its effect and choose in which paradigm to situate ourselves.

communicative, common process of knowledge production” (Hardt and Negri, 2006); it should also ensure that this production benefits the common good, rather than being treated and siphoned off purely as private property. So what I am arguing here is that institutions for education, including early childhood education, have the *possibility* to be places for the production of new knowledge (they can also be places for the reproduction of old knowledge); and that democracy is important for determining how the benefits of that new knowledge are distributed. I shall return to what this might mean in practice when I discuss later the process of pedagogical documentation.

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 a worldwide growth of policy interest in early childhood education, leading to an expansion of services in many countries. The question, therefore, of what we think early childhood institutions are for, what purposes they serve in our societies, and how their benefits are distributed, 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. It seeks effectiveness and efficiency in performance, measured in terms of the achievement of predetermined outcomes. 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’, ‘programme’ 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”. 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 reduces everything to instrumental questions of money value and calculation, management and technical practice. It prefers technical to critical questions. Nikolas

Rose describes this process as follows:

All aspects of social behaviour are now reconceptualised along economic lines – as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice. Choice is to be seen as dependent upon a relative assessment of costs and benefits of ‘investment’ . . . All manner of social undertakings – health, welfare, education, insurance – can be reconstrued in terms of their contribution to the development of human capital. (Rose, 1999)

This form of capitalism also seeks to depoliticise life. 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)

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 as citizens increasingly disengage from formal democratic politics (Bentley, 2005; Power Inquiry, 2006). 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 threefold. First, traditional or formal democratic politics and institutions need to be supported and revived; there is no substitute for elected parliaments and more local assemblies where a wide range of different interests and needs, parties and perspectives can be represented, where political agreements can be hammered out, and where governments can be held to account and the wings of power can be clipped. Second, the interest in alternative forms of democratic politics needs to be exploited further 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. Bentley recognises the importance of both types of democratic practice:

Democracy cannot flourish without being guaranteed and practiced by the state. But in open, networked societies, the interaction between public and private goods goes far beyond what the state can directly control. Building everyday democracy therefore depends on applying its principles to everyday institutions through which people make their choices and develop their identities. Its basis is the idea that power and responsibility must be aligned with each other – and widely distributed – if societies are to exercise shared responsibility through social, economic and institutional diversity. (Bentley, 2005)

Among those ‘everyday institutions’ Bentley includes what he terms ‘childcare’ and I would term ‘early childhood education’.

Third, underpinning these institutional forms of democracy, democracy as a form of living together needs to be widely nurtured, a Deweyan idea of democracy as maximum opportunities for sharing and exchanging perspectives and opinions. In this sense, democracy is a way of relating, that can and should pervade all aspects of everyday life: “a way of being, of thinking of oneself in relation to others and the world . . . a fundamental educational value and form of educational activity” (Rinaldi, 2005).

Langsted, writing of an early example of listening to young children, also makes the point clearly, when he argued that more important than, and preceding, structures and procedures for listening, is the desire to listen: “more important [than structures and procedures] is the cultural climate which shapes the ideas that the adults in a particular society hold about children. The wish to listen to and involve children originates in this cultural climate”. (Langsted, 1994)

Chapter 2: Democracy at many levels

The first part of this paper's title refers to 'bringing politics into the nursery'. But the second part – 'early childhood education as a democratic practice' – implies that democratic practice needs to be considered 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.

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 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)

Bentley makes a similar distinction and blames a shift from collective to individual choice making for the contemporary crisis of democracy:

Liberal democracy combined with market capitalism has reinforced the tendency of

individuals to act in ways that reduce our ability to make collective choices. This is the underlying reason for the crisis in democracy . . . Not enough people see democratic politics as part of their own personal identity to sustain the cultures and institutions through which political legitimacy is created. The result is that our preoccupation with making individual choices is undermining our ability to make collective choices. Our democracy is suffocating itself. (Bentley 2005)

Different levels of government, therefore, have responsibility for different democratic choices, the consequence of democratic political practices. 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 and standards that expresses democratically agreed national values, expectations and objectives; and to identify and ensure the material conditions needed to make these entitlements and standards a reality, enabling other levels to play an active role in implementation. This framework needs to be both clear and

strong, without smothering regional or local diversity; it needs to leave space for the practice of democracy at more local levels. 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.

The final report of the OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care, a landmark cross-national study conducted in 20 countries between 1996 and 2006, proposes a similar relationship: a strong central framework and strong decentralisation, all within an explicitly democratic context:

The decentralisation of management functions to local authorities is a gauge of participatory democracy. At the same time, the experience of ECEC policy reviews suggests that central governments have a pivotal role in creating strong and equitable early childhood systems, and in co-constructing and ensuring programme standards. In sum, there is a strong case to be made for ministries in-charge to retain

significant influence over both legislation and financing within a framework of partnership. Through these instruments, democratic governments can ensure that wider societal interests are reflected in early childhood systems, including social values such as democracy, human rights and enhanced access for children with special and additional learning needs. In this vision the state can become the guarantor of democratic discussion and experimentation at local level, instead of simply applying policies from the centre. (OECD, 2006)

In addition to strong decentralisation of responsibility, the national level can encourage and support democracy by making this an explicit and important value for the whole system of early childhood education. This is identified as one of 10 areas for policy consideration in the recent OECD report. Sharing some of the concerns outlined above about the corrosive impact on democracy and social cohesion of growing consumerism and marketisation of services, the report proposes that ECEC systems should be “founded on democratic values”, support “broad learning, participation and democracy”, and that “in addition to learning and the acquisition of knowledge, an abiding purpose of public education is to enhance understanding of society and encourage democratic reflexes in children” (OECD, 2006).

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 3–5-year olds, running to 128 pages, is highly prescriptive and linked to more than 60 early learning goals (QCA, 2000). A new curriculum, this time 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". 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-school², 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 (34 pages) speaks of kindergartens laying "the foundation for . . . active participation in democratic society" (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). 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).

² 'Pre-school' – *forskolen* in Swedish – is the term Swedes use for the centres that provide early childhood education for most 1–5-year olds.

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 both state unequivocally that democracy is a nationally agreed value and create ‘democratic space’ at more local levels for democratic interpretation of national policy, in this case 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 more local levels of government. In so doing, I am very conscious of skimming over a level of **provincial, state or regional government** that is important in many countries, for example Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Spain and the USA. 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, coming, as I do, from the most centralised country in Europe, I feel somewhat ill-equipped to go in any depth into issues of federalism and regionalisation.

Some of the opportunities and dilemmas that arise in federal systems are discussed in

the country note on Germany prepared as part of the OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care. That identifies decentralisation and local autonomy – both at state (regional) and local levels – as a “strength of the German system” (OECD, 2004). But at the same time, the country note identifies two conditions as being needed if these features are to be a strength rather than a weakness: a practice of diversity that involves a rigorous and critical process of development and evaluation; and “certain common, national standards, in particular in those areas that concern equity between families, and the right of children to provision and quality”. But in reality, such standards in Germany are very limited:

Only access to kindergarten is covered by a national norm, taking the form of a limited entitlement to part-time kindergarten for children from 3 upwards. Otherwise there are large differences between *Länder* in levels of provision. Similarly, funding arrangements vary between *Länder*, including what parents are required to pay. In the long-term, such diversity seems unacceptable and not in the interests either of children or families. ECEC services operate under different regulations and now with different education plans, albeit defined within a broad common frame. Where to draw the line between diversity and standardisation here is a difficult issue, but the review team find it difficult to understand why there should be such different expectations concerning access to non-kindergarten services or, in the kindergarten field, such different norms in basic structural

matters as group size, staff:child ratios and in-service training. (OECD, 2004)

The early years field needs to pay more attention to the situation of federal states (and those states that, though not federal, devolve power over education to regional governments, such as the Autonomous Communities in Spain). The issues, it could be argued, are similar to those in other states, particularly those that practice strong local decentralisation: the relationship between central and local responsibilities, between coherence and diversity, between citizen rights and local perspectives. But another layer of government does, undoubtedly, make things more complex, and may introduce qualitatively different issues. Not least, does a regionalised system weaken the next level of government, the local level? It is to this level that I now move.

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* (OECD, 2006; 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 there are examples in other countries (for an example of a local cultural project on the participation of young children, in Stirling in Scotland, see Kinney, 2005).

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 his or 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 early childhood research. We perhaps need rather fewer studies of the effectiveness of this or that technical programme, and rather more studies on how and why certain centres or communities have managed to become local cultural projects. 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.

Chapter 3: Democracy in the nursery

Finally, I want to consider democratic practice at its most local level, 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. It is necessary to start by re-iterating an earlier distinction: between democracy as a principle of government and democracy as a form of living together. I do not want to set them into opposition; it is possible to imagine a nursery that had both very democratic structures (for example, management by elected representatives of parents and educators) and a strong democratic ethos that placed high value on sharing and exchanging perspectives and opinions. But the two need not go together; or they may overlap but by no means fully. Moreover, even with democratic structures of government involving full representation from all adults involved in a centre, it is unlikely that children would play an equal role in these decision-making structures – though they could have influence on decisions through a democratic ethos of listening and dialogue.

So democratic practice covers a large area of possibilities, and democracy in the nursery can take many forms. It might, perhaps, be more useful to think of the ‘democratic profile’ of a nursery, which would give an indication of in what areas, in what ways and with whom democracy was practiced.

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 or meeting place 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. The recent OECD report on early childhood education and care captures this idea when it proposes how, in neighbourhoods with diverse populations, “it is helpful to conceptualise the early childhood centre as a space for participation and interculturalism . . . based on the principle of democratic participation” (OECD, 2006). This image or understanding of how the early childhood institution might be is most richly expressed in *For a New Public Education System*, a declaration launched in summer 2005 at the 40th Rosa Sensat Summer School in Barcelona: ‘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)

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 Bentley's term, it can be a place for 'everyday democracy'. 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 having opportunities to

participation in one or more of at least four types of activity; and following the earlier discussion of a 'democratic profile', the extent and form of that participation can vary considerably. First, *decision making* about the purposes, the practices and the environment of the nursery. This is closest to the idea of democracy as a principle of government, in which either representatives or all members of certain groups have some involvement in decisions in specified areas; models here might be nurseries run as cooperatives by a staff or parent group or nurseries run by a community of some form. Another example would be the elected boards of parents that all early childhood centres in Denmark must have, which are involved in pedagogical, budgetary and staffing issues (Hansen, 2002). How much power, in theory or practice, is exercised by such bodies may vary considerably.

Second, *evaluation* of pedagogical work through participatory methods. In the book *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care* (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999, 2006), the authors contrast 'quality' as a technical language of evaluation with a democratic language: 'meaning making'. The language of 'quality' involves a supposedly objective observer applying externally determined norms to an institution, to assess conformity to these norms. The language of 'meaning making', by contrast, speaks of evaluation as a democratic process of interpretation, a process that involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and argumentation, leading to an assessment that is contextualised

and provisional because always subject to contestation. ‘Quality’ offers a ‘statement of fact’, ‘quality’ a ‘judgement of value’. The two languages work with very different tools; I shall return to the role of pedagogical documentation as a tool in meaning making.

Third, *contesting dominant discourses*, confronting 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 visible and contestable. Yeatman (1994) refers to it as ‘postmodern politics’ and offers some examples: a politics of epistemology, contesting modernity’s idea of knowledge³; 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 politics of childhood, about the image of the child, the good life and what we want for our children; the politics of education, about what education can and should be; and the politics of 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 developing a critical approach to what exists and 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.”

³ *Modernity’s idea of knowledge “aims at formulating laws in the light of observed regularities and with a view to foreseeing future behaviour of phenomena” (Santos, 1995); it adopts values such as objectivity, order, stability and universality. A postmodern idea of knowledge would emphasise knowledge as always partial, perspectival and provisional, “local knowledge created and disseminated through argumentative discourse”.*

Chapter 4: Conditions for democracy

Understandings

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, providing a rich environment in which democracy can flourish. I have already referred to two of these conditions: a commitment to and support of democracy by all levels of government and the image of the institution. Democracy is unlikely to thrive where, for example, government prioritises consumer over collective choice and early childhood institutions are seen and understood as if they were businesses selling commodities or factories for producing predetermined outcomes.

But other images or understandings are also important for bringing politics into the nursery, for example the image of the child, of parents and of workers. The **child**, in a democratic institution, is understood as a competent citizen, an expert in his or her own life, having opinions that are worth listening to and having the right and competence to participate in collective decision making. There is recognition, too, that children have, in the words of Malaguzzi, a hundred languages in

which to express themselves⁴, and democratic practice means being able to ‘listen’ to these many languages. The importance of such multilingualism is highlighted in the already quoted General Comment by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that young children can “make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes *in numerous ways*, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language”.

Parents in a democratic institution 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). While **workers** are understood 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. This understanding of the worker is embodied in what Oberhuemer (2005) has termed ‘democratic professionalism’:

[I]t is a concept based on participatory relationships and alliances. It foregrounds

⁴ Rinaldi describes the theory of the hundred languages as “one of Malaguzzi’s most important works”: “The hundred languages of children is not only a metaphor for crediting children and adults with a hundred, a thousand creative and communicative potentials . . . But above all it is a declaration of the equal dignity and importance of all languages, not only writing, reading and counting, which has become more and more obviously necessary for the construction of knowledge” (Rinaldi, 2005).

collaborative, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders. It emphasises engaging and networking with the local community . . . [T]here is a growing body of literature which questions traditional notions of professionalism, notions which distance professionals from those they serve and prioritise one group's knowledge over another.

Values

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

- **Respect for diversity**, through adopting a relational ethics that gives the highest value to diversity. Gunilla Dahlberg and I have explored such an ethics – the ethics of an encounter – in our discussion of ethics in early childhood education (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). The ethics of an encounter, associated with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, starts from Levinas's challenge to a strong Western philosophical tradition that gives primacy to knowing and leads us to 'grasp' the other, in our desire to know: by 'grasping', we make the other into the same. An example is developmental stages, a system of classification that gives adults possibilities to 'grasp' – possess and comprehend – the child. The ethics of an

encounter attempts to counter this grasping through respect for the absolute alterity of the Other, his or her absolute otherness or singularity: this is another whom I cannot represent and classify into my system of categories, whom I cannot seek to know by imposing my framework of thought and understanding⁵;

- **recognition of multiple perspectives and paradigms**, acknowledging and welcoming 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 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).

The importance of such values for fostering democratic practice is captured in these words by three *pedagogistas* from Reggio Emilia (the role of the *pedagogista* is explained below on

⁵ *The implications for education are very great: “Putting everything one encounters into pre-made categories implies we make the Other into the Same, as everything that does not fit into these categories, which is unfamiliar and not taken-for-granted has to be overcome . . . To think another whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy” (Dahlberg, 2003).*

page 21), 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)

Tools

As well as shared understandings and values, democratic practice in early childhood institutions needs certain material conditions and tools. Of particular importance is pedagogical documentation, by which practice and learning processes are made visible⁶ and then subject – in relationship with others – to critical thought, dialogue, reflection, interpretation and, if necessary, democratic evaluation and decision making: so key features are visibility, multiple perspectives and the co-construction of meanings (for fuller discussions of pedagogical documentation see Dahlberg et al., 1999; Rinaldi, 2005). Originating in early childhood centres in Northern Italy, particularly in the city of Reggio Emilia, pedagogical documentation has since been taken up in many countries, both in Europe and beyond.

Pedagogical documentation has a central role to play in many facets of the early childhood institution. I have already referred to some, including providing a means for ensuring that new knowledge is shared as a common good and as a tool in evaluation as meaning making. But it also has other uses, for example in planning pedagogical work, in professional development, in research by children and adults. Cross-cutting these particular uses is the contribution of pedagogical documentation to democratic practice in the early childhood institution.

Loris Malaguzzi, one of the great pedagogical thinkers of the last century and the first director of the early childhood services in Reggio Emilia, saw documentation 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

⁶ *Visibility can be achieved in many ways: through notes or observation of children's work, videos or photographs, taped conversations, children's drawings or constructions in different materials – the possibilities are almost endless.*

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)

Carlina Rinaldi, Malaguzzi's successor as director of Reggio's services, 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).

As indicated above, documentation today is widely practiced in various forms and for various purposes. An example with which I am particularly familiar is the Mosaic approach developed by my colleague Alison Clark to give voice to the perspectives of young children. This approach uses a variety of methods to generate documentation with children: these methods include observation, child interviewing, photography (by children themselves) and book making, tours and map making. The documentation so generated is then subject to review, reflection and discussion by children and adults – a process of interpretation or meaning making. Inspired by pedagogical documentation, the Mosaic approach has been used for a range of purposes, including to understand better how children experience life in the nursery (what does it mean to be in this place?) and 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, and would never claim to be, a means of getting a true picture of what children can do nor a technology of normalisation, a method of assessing a child's conformity to some developmental norm. 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.

Educated workers

Not only does democracy in the nursery require workers who are understood, both by themselves and others, as practitioners of democracy. It also requires a qualified workforce whose initial education and continuous professional development supports them in this role. This requires a capacity to work with uncertainty and to be open to the possibility of other perspectives and knowledges – of the otherness of others. Aldo Fortunati, working in another local cultural project in another Italian

town, describes the early childhood worker as needing to be

removed from the fallacy of certainties, [assuming instead] responsibility to choose, experiment, discuss, reflect and change, focusing on the organisation of opportunities rather than the anxiety of pursuing outcomes, and maintaining in her work the pleasure of amazement and wonder. [She must be able] to free herself from an outcome different from that which the children come up with as they construct their own experience. (Rinaldi, 2005)

Important also is the ability to discuss, exchange, reflect and argue, in short to be able to dialogue:

[Dialogue] is of absolute importance. It is an idea of dialogue not as an exchange but as a process of transformation where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result. And it goes to infinity, it goes to the universe, you can get lost. And for human beings nowadays, and for women particularly, to get lost is a possibility and a risk, you know? (Rinaldi, 2005)

An important role in supporting a democratic workforce is that of critical friend or mentor, for example the *pedagogista* of northern Italy, an experienced educator working with a small number of centres to support dialogue, critical thought and pedagogical documentation. Working in a democratic way with children and adults in these centres, especially with

pedagogical documentation, the *pedagogista* can make an important contribution to the continuous professional development of practitioners of democracy and to democracy in the nursery.

Time

Before finishing this discussion, I want to flag up what seems to me both a major issue and an issue that is particularly difficult to get to grips with: 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 and employment is endlessly seeking to extract more productivity from parents and other workers; while at the same time, policy values parents being involved in their children’s education and the services they attend, as well as endlessly (and rather tritely) emphasising their role as ‘first’ educators. 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 (parents as assistants): involvement understood as critical democratic practice (parents as citizens) 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, in particular to enable parents to participate in a democratic early childhood institution without having to forego participation in paid employment. 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) and suggests various ways of paying for public work. Nor is the need for time confined to parents; nursery workers also need space in their working lives to devote to documentation and dialogue, not just to prepare future work but to be able to reflect upon, interpret, exchange and evaluate past practice.

Chapter 5: Four concluding observations

I want to conclude by making four observations on my theme of early childhood education as a democratic practice – or that, at least, 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).

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, which might be made 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, especially in certain conditions: the case for less centralisation and more democratic practice is 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 uncommon 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). 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” (Babich, Bergoffen and Glynn, 1995). 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: each has its own reading (different journals, different books) and its own events to attend (different conferences), while policy documents typically ignore paradigmatic plurality recognising only one paradigm, invariably the positivistic or modernistic paradigm. 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 post-foundationalists 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 (i.e., it holds out the offer of technical answers to intrinsically political questions). Rather than this 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 of government where democratic practice is needed, in addition to the national, regional, local and institutional: the European. The European Union (EU), now with 27 member states, is a unique organisation, a supra-national political entity with policy and law-making powers. Those 27 member states are part of a level of government to which each has ceded some sovereignty, taking the view that certain needs can be better met through collective decision-making and implementation.

The EU 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. As long ago as the 1980s, the EU (or the European Community as it then was) was calling for more childcare provision to further gender equality through more employment opportunities for women. In 1992, the governments of the then 12 member state adopted a Council Recommendation on Child Care. Recognising that “it is essential to promote the well-being of children and families, ensuring that their various needs are met”, the Recommendation proposed principles that should guide the development of services: affordability; access in all areas, both urban and rural; access for children with special needs; combining safe and secure care with a pedagogical approach; close and responsive relations between services, parents and local communities; diversity and flexibility; increased choice for parents; coherence between different services.

Ten years later, 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, however, about the organisation or content of these places; no reference, for example, is made to the principles adopted in the Council Recommendation on Childcare. 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, intended to promote cross-border competition in the supply of services, 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 at the European level. 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 to support 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: for *Quality targets* was a product of many years of dialogue and negotiation between people from many countries, both within the Childcare Network (a working group of experts

from all 12 member states, reporting to the European Commission and that undertook a wide range of work from 1986 to 1996) and between Network members and fellow citizens of Europe.

Recently, *Children in Europe*, a magazine about services for young children and their families published in 10 countries and 10 languages⁷, has produced a discussion paper, *Young children and their services, developing a European approach*. The discussion paper sets out the case for a European approach to early childhood services, that goes well beyond the Barcelona targets, and proposes shared values and principles that might form the basis for this approach. These principles include:

- access: an entitlement to all children
- affordability: a free service
- pedagogical approach: holistic and multi-purpose
- participation
- coherence: a framework to support a common approach
- diversity and choice: conditions for democracy
- evaluation: participatory, democratic and transparent
- valuing the work: a 0–6 profession
- services for young children and compulsory

school: a strong and equal partnership

- cross-national partnership: learning with other countries.

In preparing this document, including these principles, *Children in Europe* has built 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). (A full version of the discussion paper can be accessed at www.childrenineurope.org/docs/eng_discpaper.pdf.)

The aim of the paper is to stimulate a democratic dialogue about European policy and the need for a European approach to services for young children. We see this as contributing to a European politics of childhood, taking place in a ‘democratic space’ at the European level. I hope that many others – organisations and individuals – will participate in this European politics of childhood, and recognise that some are already doing so⁸. Through such democratic process, I hope it will prove possible to bring European politics into the nursery – but also the nursery into European politics, and to do so in a way that combines a European framework of values and expectations with supporting local diversity and experimentation.

⁷ As editor of *Children in Europe*, I would like to acknowledge the financial support the magazine receives from the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

⁸ For example, Eurochild, a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people, and funded by the European Commission within the Community Action Programme to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion.

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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through “Strengthening the Care Environment” we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable

parents, families and communities to care for their children.

- Through “Successful Transitions: The Continuum from Home to School” we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school. Through “Social Inclusion and Respect for
- Diversity” we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

Information on the series

Working Papers in Early Childhood Development is a ‘work in progress’ series that presents relevant findings and reflection on issues relating to early childhood care and development. The series acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas, often arising out of field work, evaluations and training experiences. As ‘think pieces’ we hope these papers will evoke responses and lead to further information sharing from among the readership.

The findings, interpretations, conclusions and opinions expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

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