

Learning and Teaching in a Neoliberal Era: The Tensions of Engaging in Froebelian-Informed Pedagogy while Encountering Quality Standards

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Abstract

Contemporary Froebelian-inspired early childhood education in the United States is challenged by government regulation and accreditation requirements that have arisen alongside neoliberalism in education. Using Critical Policy Analysis and case study examples from a preschool in Atlanta, Georgia, this paper examines the influence of neoliberalism on school readiness discourse, parental expectations **for children's education, and teacher preparation programs in early childhood education. For early childhood centers that are inspired by Friedrich Froebel's philosophies of teaching and learning,** remaining true to his vision of development and education is increasingly challenged by neoliberal regimes that reify accountability, assessment, and competition. Possibilities for resistance to the **neoliberal ideology that regulates early childhood education are described and contextualized by Froebel's** writings.

Keywords

Friedrich Froebel, neoliberalism, early childhood education, quality, school readiness, parents, teacher education

Learning and Teaching in a Neoliberal Era: Challenges to Froebel's Pedagogical Vision for Early Childhood Education

Friedrich Froebel may be well-known to early childhood educators and some philosophers of education, but it is unclear if his influential theories about education and child development are well-known to contemporary policy makers and education leaders in the United States. Froebel introduced innovative approaches to early learning and teaching, which reflected the significance he placed on organic

human development. His philosophy of education, which was actualized with the creation of the first Kindergarten in 1837, has had implications for schools around the globe. **This paper highlights a few of Froebel's** significant contributions to early childhood education and poses critical questions regarding how these might contribute to current conversations about education in general. By **detailing how resistance to Froebel's ideas in the** 19th century might be even more complicated in the 21st century, we offer historical anecdotes and philosophical distinctions as a precis to a

more detailed Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) and practical case study of the challenges neoliberalism raises for contemporary early childhood settings that remain committed to education that is grounded in a Froebelian philosophy of education.

Methodologically, CPA is a tool to examine and critique how dominant education policy discourse influences early childhood education. The CPA framework allows us to examine complex systems and environments in which policy is constructed and implemented (Diem et al., 2014; Fairclough, 2013). CPA is normative critique. It identifies and describes what a policy is or means. CPA also evaluates **policy and “assesses the extent to which they match up to values that are taken (contentiously) to be fundamental for just or decent societies” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 178; Neely and Boyles, 2020).** We extend CPA with case study examples and illustrations from experiences at The Neighborhood Nursery School, an early childhood school in Atlanta, Georgia. A case study is a useful method because it allows us to **“thematize our participation in the world we study [and ground] ourselves in theory that guides our dialogue with participants” (Burawoy, 1998, p. 5).** Case study is also helpful **because it provides “exemplars” and illustrations** that, while not generalizable, clarify themes for further application (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242). We suggest that exemplars that emerge from the experiences of The Neighborhood Nursery School are useful for demonstrating how **Froebel’s views of children and teaching can be influential in contemporary early childhood centers.** We caution, however, that educators within these settings demonstrate critical awareness of and resistance to the broader neoliberal context in which early childhood education is situated.

Historical and Philosophical Precip

In a chance meeting while vacationing in Liebenstein, Germany, in 1849, Bertha von Marenholtz-Bülow came upon Froebel leading children up a hill (Marenholtz-Bülow, 2007). She observed Froebel singing with them and interacting with them while they played. Impressed by what she witnessed, she engaged in conversation with Froebel about the implications of his work. One obvious consequence was the education of children, **where education was not rote, and children’s inquiry was not subordinated to rigid routines of order and imposition.** Another implication related to the preparation of teachers to teach young learners. If children were not subordinated to imposition, what changes were necessary to educate the educators of these children? Further implications included philosophical assumptions entailed by a naturalistic and developmental understanding of human *being*. Without unity between the philosophy of early education, the preparation of teachers, and the freedom to carry out his vision, **Froebel’s reach would be limited.**

Yet another implication was in the **techniques, the “gifts,” associated with Froebel’s understanding of children’s innate curiosity.** These gifts included balls, cylinders, and cubes (including cubes divided into smaller cubes) (Bruce, 2008). By extension, Froebel also encouraged drawing, clay modeling, weaving, and the entailing inquiry and engagement that **followed. Such “manipulatives” arguably are taken for granted in 2021, but what Froebel demonstrated was a different purpose for the use of the gifts.** Drawing was not narrowly linked to procedural preparation for writing. Trying to stack balls, and failing, was not about training future engineers. In contemporary terms, **learning is not restricted to “school readiness.”** The gifts might aid in those functions, but they

were more generically means or outlets for inquiry—the unfolding of potential that Froebel understood as manifestly natural and instinctive in children.

The problem Froebel faced, even though he was helped by aristocrats like Marenholtz-Bülow and the Grand Duke and Duchess of Weimar, was a misunderstanding and misapplication of his educational ideas.

Froebel's explanations of what he was doing added to the confusion surrounding his work because he used terms and phrases that were unusual in conversations about children and **learning at the time. "Play," for Froebel, meant generative and expansive learning—not fanciful breaks to expend "extra energy" so "real learning" could then take place (Tovey, 2013).** As in other epochs, Froebel (with Pestalozzi) was viewed with suspicion because his work contradicted taken-for-granted assumptions about childhood, the purpose of schooling, and **what qualified as "education."** In fact, Froebel was accused of being an atheist, a subversive, and worse, by those whose power was **threatened by Froebel's advocacy (Hayward, 1904; Bruce, 2015).** We face similar problems, as we show below, when speaking with parents and navigating regulatory and accreditation requirements in contemporary early childhood education settings. Neoliberalism reductively limits what is imaginable for children and their schooling because neoliberalism promotes a meta-narrative of narrow training and preparation for economic interests over the interests of young learners themselves (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; W. Brown, 2015).

From Froebel to the "Superchild": The Emergence of Neoliberalism in Early Childhood Education

Kašćák and Pupala (2013) outline a historical progression in early childhood

education, characterized by three distinct eras. In each of these eras, a dominant ideology was used to frame early childhood education practice and policy. Each era is also characterized by a common influential image of children that was specific to the era. The first of these eras began in the mid-1850s **and was marked by Froebel's** influence. Froebelian ideology, as interpreted by Marenholtz-Bülow, was the predominate theoretical foundation for early childhood education for decades. By the 1930s, a second **era had begun to emerge "when Froebel was replaced by psychology" (Hultqvist, 1997, p. 102).** Piaget-influenced developmentalism dominated the discourse around children and **childhood. By the time Bredekamp's influential *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education Serving Children Birth through Age 8* was published in 1987, Piaget's** developmental theories had become taken-for-granted in early childhood education and in Western society.

A third era in early childhood education **began with criticisms of Bredekamp's *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* for its** lack of recognition of and sensitivity towards children as individuals, whose experiences originate in the context of their unique familial and social contexts. At the heart of the criticisms **was an insistence that the "norms" of developmentalism were at odds with individualism and potentiality.** These criticisms, which had become so prevalent they were impossible to ignore by the mid-1990s, **originated in a "humanist psychology linked with the later *human potential movement* against the backdrop of...the economic rationality of the information revolution...[in which] caring for self-actualisation started to be linked to intellectual competitiveness of the child" (Kašćák & Pupala, 2013 p. 325, emphasis in original).** The concept of developmentally

appropriate practices underwent a revision in 1997 with the publication of the second edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Bredekamp & Copple). The new edition of the prominent publication privileged individualism over the norm of development. It was within this historical circumstance that neoliberalism found a foothold in early childhood education.

Neoliberal ideology has been used to emphasize accountancy, outcomes, and efficiency in schooling, teaching, and learning. In early childhood education, a particular vocabulary has emerged to name concepts that are the heart of this neoliberal sensibility, **including “quality,” “assessment,” “efficiency,” and “returns on investment.”** While the term *neoliberalism* may be unfamiliar or unclear to early childhood educators in the United States, the language of neoliberalism is repeatedly used to describe education in economic terms (Saltman, 2000; Fendler, 2009; Lindblad & Lindblad, 2009; C. Brown, 2015; and Starr, 2019).

One way in which neoliberal ideology has taken hold in early childhood education in the United States is the rapid proliferation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). As of January 2017, every state in the United States (except Mississippi) was in some stage of creating a QRIS, a system intended to identify and encourage the development of specific factors associated with the concept of “quality” (Workman, 2017). QRIS are built on a foundation of program evaluation data, which are used to issue rewards, ratings, and reports that purport to inform parents which centers offer the highest quality care and education. For an increasing number of early childhood educators, the concept of “high-quality” as a state-mandated aspirational goal is unquestioned, as are the metrics used to determine and designate quality.

Similarly, there is an assuredness to the stories that are told and the research that is **presented about the “return on investment”** of childcare, another concept rooted in neoliberalism, which holds sway in early childhood education in the United States. James Heckman has emerged as a preeminent researcher of the economics of early childhood education. Heckman offers evidence for the measurement, assessment, and evaluation of all aspects of early childhood education, which is used to generate data supportive of the quality narrative (Heckman, 2011; Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2013). Through quality-improvement efforts, early childhood is envisioned as having an unusually high return on investment. Ultimately, the emphasis on return on investment in early childhood education has created a system in which preschools are increasingly competition-driven and hyper-regulated. In the process, early childhood settings run the risk of becoming places where neoliberal concepts like markets, quality, and investment are given priority over the needs of children, families, and educators.

We argue that contemporary early childhood education is overly influenced by a neoliberal ideology that has marginalized the conceptualization of children upon which Froebel constructed his vision for their education. The transformative path described by **Kašćák and Pupala, from “universal child” [a Froebelian perspective] to “autonomous child” [a Piagetian perspective] and to “superchild” [a neoliberal perspective]**, is the result of the transformation of the discursive regimes on the child and childhood in the twentieth century. Later in this paper, we use **Kašćák and Pupala’s historic discursive conceptions of childhood** in our analysis of the influence of the QRIS rating systems on early childhood settings throughout the United States. Our focus is on

neoliberal bureaucratic regulation and compliance that alters, if not restricts, the possibility of Froebelian education.

The Rise of Quality Rated Improvement Systems in the United States: Reifying Neoliberal Policy and Practice in Early Childhood Education

The nation's first QRIS were developed in the 1990s. Since then, QRIS have proliferated nationwide. Participation in QRIS is often a requirement for childcare centers to be eligible recipients of federal subsidies and grants. In Georgia, the state in which The Neighborhood Nursery School is located, the QRIS is known as **Quality Rated (QR)**. **“Similar to rating systems** for other service-related industries, Quality Rated assigns a quality rating (one star, two stars, or three stars) to early education and school-age care centers that meet a set of defined **program standards”** (Department of Early Care and Learning, n.d.c). **Georgia's perception of early childhood education as a “service-related industry” indicates the neoliberal influence on** early childhood education policy development, which Peter Moss (2019) has termed *the quality agenda*. By setting the parameters of early childhood education in industrial terms, the language codifies—literally—neoliberalism in early childhood education.

Georgia adopted the Quality Rated system in 2012. **According to the Governor's** Office of Student Achievement, QR is designed to improve the quality of early care and education programs as well as provide families with clear information on these programs. Many states have implemented tiered quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) initiatives **similar to Georgia's, with the goals of raising the** quality of early care and education and positively impacting child outcomes. (Ogbu, 2014)

Georgia's Quality Rated initiative

highlights five elements: quality standards; a process for monitoring or assigning ratings based on quality standards; a process for supporting providers in quality improvement; financial incentives; and dissemination of ratings to parents and other consumers (Ogbu, 2014). As part of the QRIS process in Georgia, the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (ECERS) is used for program assessment (for children under age 3, the *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale* [ITERS] is used). The ECERS, first published in 1980, is in its third edition. According to the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill **(2021), the ECERS is “the most widely used early** childhood environment quality assessment instrument in the United States and worldwide—used in more than 20 countries and formally published in 16 of those countries, with **additional translations currently underway.”**

The year-long QR process includes the creation of a program portfolio, a series of classroom observations, program evaluations (using the ECERS/ITERS), and state-approved professional development plans for all educators. At the end of the QR assessment period, the early childhood education center is awarded a number of stars, based on an overall score, ranging from one-, two-, or three-stars; one-star indicates the lowest quality. These ratings are made available to anyone seeking **childcare through Georgia's childcare database.**

In the last 30 years, the image of the **“superchild” that was described by Kaščák and** Pupala has emerged alongside neoliberal school readiness discourse. QRIS have become increasingly dominant in the early childhood **landscape and Froebel's notions of the “natural** child” and the teacher as a guide have become increasingly less influential. **In 2021, Froebel's**

theories of education and child development have fallen so far from fashion in the United States as to be considered a form of “outsider education.” Without promises to prioritize college and career readiness over other attributes that might be cultivated in children, Froebelian-inspired schools often struggle to reassure parents that their children will be “ready” to thrive in an accountability-oriented public education system and beyond.

The Neighborhood Nursery School: A Case Study of Froebelian-Inspired Early Childhood Education in a Neoliberal Society

We have chosen case study as a method for our research because it allows us to develop exemplars and illustrations, and clarify themes that emerge in the examination of the case. As Scholz & Tietje (2002) note, “A case could be a university department, a railway company, a city, or even a child. A case is considered from a **specified perspective and with a special interest**” (p. 1). The case for our research is The Neighborhood Nursery School and we use experiences from the school to elucidate some challenges that a preschool with a Froebelian-inspired pedagogy has encountered while navigating a state regulatory system that is neoliberal in orientation and expectation.

The Neighborhood Nursery School was founded in 2011 and is located in a neighborhood approximately 2 miles from Atlanta, Georgia. The Neighborhood Nursery School is a private, nonprofit preschool. Children who attend The Neighborhood Nursery School range in age from 3 months to 5 years old; most of them live with their families in the surrounding community. Families who enroll at the school are dual-income and require full-time childcare for employment. The Neighborhood Nursery School is funded entirely by tuition. As

of 2021, there were 50 children enrolled and 15 educators employed at the school. There is a large demand for childcare in the surrounding community, and the school has maintained a waitlist since it opened.

Educators at The Neighborhood Nursery School intentionally challenge the neoliberal status quo for early childhood education in the United States, with a pedagogical approach that is influenced by the educational experiences in the infant/toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. In describing the principles of the Reggio Emilia, Lella Gandini (1993) articulates an image of children that is central to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, and that has guided educational practices at The Neighborhood Nursery School:

All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity; they have interest in relationship, in constructing their own learning, and in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them. Children should be considered as active citizens with rights, as contributing members, with their families, of their local community. (p. 5)

The influence of Froebel on the development of an early educational philosophy in northern Italy is well-documented: “...in 1913, a municipal *asilo d’infanzia* [kindergarten] was opened in the village of Villa Gaida...combining care with a strong commitment to progressive and secular education, working with the pedagogical ideas of Friedrich Froebel” (Moss, 2016, p. 3). While Mussolini’s totalitarian rule suspended publicly funded early childhood education in Italy for decades, the commitment to *asilo d’infanzia* re-emerged in northern Italy almost immediately following the liberation of Italy in 1945. Early childhood education was envisioned as a means to confront, address, and

eliminate Italy's legacy of fascism (Barazonni, 2000). The legacy of Froebelian principles, which were so influential to the earliest early childhood education curricula in Italy, served as foundational theories in the development of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. In turn, through ongoing study of Reggio Emilia, Froebelian ideas have influenced the educational practices at The Neighborhood Nursery School.

Froebel at The Neighborhood Nursery School: Theory, Practice, and Policy

Early childhood education centers that continue to look towards a Froebelian view of education are often **seen as “play-based,” as opposed to “academics-based” like those sponsored by Georgia’s state**-funded pre-kindergarten (PreK) program. The first of its **kind in the United States, Georgia’s PreK** program has provided free early childhood education since 1992 to children who meet age requirements and, in cases where there is more demand than availability, are selected in local school district lotteries (Department of Early Care and Learning, n.d.a).

The Neighborhood Nursery School **eschews PreK’s academic orientation** in favor of one that emphasizes play-based learning and group experiences. Despite the philosophical differences in the assumptions made about early childhood education (some of which are described below), The Neighborhood Nursery School is **mandated to participate in Georgia’s QRIS initiative**, in order to continue to receive federal grants through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The CACFP subsidy represents several thousand dollars annually in grant funding, which is essential to the **school’s** operating budget, making the QR process a nonvoluntary mandate for The Neighborhood Nursery School. Similarly, eligibility for

Georgia’s childcare subsidy for low-income families is contingent on QR participation.

Not only is there less room, space, and time allowed in contemporary early childhood education for the kind of childhood experiences that Froebel found educative, the policies and practices that are enacted in early childhood education challenge the assumptions about human development that are at the heart of **Froebel’s theories of education.** In *The Education of Man* (2005), Froebel describes the child that has been conditioned to believe, through the disregard of his earliest stages of development, that

...it is possible for him to do wholly without the instruction and training of the preceding stage of **development...[and who] is much** injured and weakened by having placed before himself, at an early period, an extraneous aim for imitation and exertion, such as preparation for a certain calling or sphere of activity. (p. 30)

While the contemporary discourse about school readiness would have been unfamiliar to Froebel, one might deduce from this quote his reaction to contemporary school readiness discourse (a concept which is described in more detail below), with its focus on extraneous aims, imitation, and preparation.

Piagetian developmentalism and neoliberal-oriented values are inherent to QR visions of children and teaching. At The Neighborhood Nursery School, maintaining a Froebelian-inspired approach to early childhood education while undergoing the QR process has been challenging. The next section of this paper illuminates these challenges by examining three areas in which this balancing act has proven

difficult: confronting the school readiness narrative, assuaging the fears of parents about **their children's early education, and hiring early childhood educators** who have remained relatively untouched by the neoliberal perspective on education, childhood, and teaching.

Froebel at The Neighborhood Nursery School: Theory, Practice, and Policy

School readiness is a concept that gained prominence in the United States following the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Central to NCLB was the idea that learning must be ordered and sequential and relentlessly assessed. The response from various testing and textbook companies in the United States (e.g., Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Houghton-Mifflin) was the development of early childhood-oriented pre-packaged curriculum, assessments, and curriculum-centered professional development. **As the "school readiness" discourse emerged, it "legitimated as truth...the notion that, in order to function in neo-liberal society – that is, to be governable – a child must be normalized" (Lee, 2019, p. 7).** With NCLB, the push for standardization and normalization in early childhood education was unremitting, including ongoing program assessment and student evaluation.

In 2017, the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS), with the support of the Georgia Departments of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), Education (GaDOE), and Public Health (DPH), published a **report entitled "A Framework for School Readiness in Georgia."** According to the document:

Over the course of the last several years, agencies and organizations across

Georgia have stated commitments to **"school readiness," with a number of initiatives** featuring kindergarten readiness as a critical milestone or **component of strategic frameworks...** the vision of GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students is that by 2020, all Georgia students will enter kindergarten prepared to succeed. (p. 2)

The idea of early childhood being a preparatory stage for later schooling is contrary to Froebel, who wrote of the importance of **recognizing and respecting children's natural inclinations** for learning. He also warned of the dangers for children when these inclinations are ignored.

The child...indeed, should know no other endeavor but to be at every stage of development wholly what this stage calls for. Then will each successive stage spring like a new shoot from a healthy bud...for only the adequate development of man at each preceding stage can effect and bring about adequate development at each succeeding later stage." (Froebel, 2005, p. 30, emphasis in original)

While Froebel preceded the influential **"developmentalism revolution" that emerged** with Piaget, he understood that children proceed along a unique yet predictable path towards maturity. For Froebel, this path was necessarily predicated on the belief that children learn by doing, by playing, and by being in relationship with others. Froebelian-inspired educators see **the ways in which formal, academic "training" is inappropriate for young children, even as they battle the metanarrative of "school readiness."**

The term *school readiness* first appeared in early childhood education legislation in the United States in the 1980s (Lewit & Baker, 1995). In the ensuing decades, the meaning of school readiness has been debated by policymakers, legislators, educators, and parents. As Biggar and Pizzolongo (2004) describe it,

...what does it really mean for a child to be ready for school? The current focus on school readiness provides a welcome opportunity to examine that question from pedagogical, re- search, and policy perspectives, with the hope that we can come to consensus on what has become a controversial issue. For some, school readiness means entering school with a knowledge of the ABCs and 1,2,3s. Although children's academic development is without question very important, it is only one piece of a set of interconnected factors that determine school readiness. (p. 64)

Biggar and Pizzolongo suggest five factors that are used by schools to assess children's school readiness, including "physical well-being and muscle control and coordination; healthy social and emotional development; positive approaches to learning, such as curiosity and motivation; adequate language development; and a foundation in cognition and **general knowledge**" (p. 64). Yet, even if there were consensus that this list represents the five indicators of school readiness, a challenge would still lie in how to assess these factors in children and what meaning can be made of such assessment.

Over time, neoliberal-influenced school readiness discourse has resulted in what Michael Apple (2006) calls a *reconstruction of common sense*, which has created and re-created

knowledge about young children and their education, in service to a neoliberal agenda. A school readiness narrative constructs a specific view of young children and their education that emphasizes the acquisition of foundational academic skills and knowledge in anticipation of elementary school. Froebelian-inspired educators envision early childhood education differently, with a focus on the inherent **importance of the child's present experiences.**

Froebel described an educational environment that is connected to daily home and **community life. Based on Froebel's conception** of unity as necessary for healthy development, he recommended an environment that encouraged autonomy, free-will, and the "all-sided use of [children's] powers":

...the child should be neither partly chained, fettered, nor swathed; nor, later on, spoiled by too much assistance. **The child should learn early how...to** move freely and be active, to grasp and hold with his own hands, to stand and walk with his own feet, to find and **observe with his own eyes... At an early** period, the child should learn, apply, and practice the most difficult of all arts – to hold fast the center and fulcrum of his life in spite of all digressions, disturbances, and hindrances. (2005, p. 21)

W. N. Hailmann recounts Froebel's plans for constructing a public school in the town of Helba, Germany; while the school never **materialized, Froebel's description of it provides** insight into his vision of an ideal educational **environment for young children. "The institution will be fundamental...it will rest on life itself and** on creative effort, on the union and interdependence of *doing* and *thinking*, *representation* and *knowledge*, *art* and *science*"

(Froebel, 2005, p. 38, emphasis in original). Froebel described various activities that should take place in the school, which he referred to as *occupations*. Among the occupations, Froebel included experiences like chopping wood for cooking, weaving mats, binding books, gardening, caring for animals, whittling wood, modeling with clay, drawing, and painting. Froebel also emphasized the educative potential of familiar spaces beyond the walls of the school, including the home and the community. Froebel (2005) understood that the child would be most influenced by those spaces that have in their being some reference to home. These are the things of his nearest surroundings – the things of the sitting-room, the house, the garden, the farm, the village (or city), the meadow, the field, **the forest, the plain... which thus proceeds from the near and known to the less near and less known, and becomes... a real subject of school instruction.** (p. 251)

In 2021, school readiness discourse insists that education should immerse even the youngest child in a rigorous science, math, and technology curriculum, in anticipation of a **future as “college and career ready” citizens.** The early academicization of young children has become not only permissible but preferred. Decades of research demonstrate the validity of **Froebel’s theories of child development and learning** – through play (Wohlwend & Pepler, 2015) and multisensory experiences (National Research Council, 2000) in educational spaces that allow for constant hands-on exploration (Stephens, 2012) and alongside opportunities for authentic interactions that can be used to reinforce positive social/emotional behaviors (Denham & Brown, 2017). In a neoliberal society, however, there is little patience for preschools that favor an emergent pedagogy that is oriented towards Froebelian beliefs about learning and teaching, despite research evidence

that supports this approach to early childhood education. Instead, Froebelian-inspired pedagogy is challenged by state regulatory and assessment requirements that favor pre-packaged curriculum and other approaches that both emphasize and capitalize on the economic and consumeristic potential of the child. The school readiness discourse demonstrates a specific view of children at the earliest moments of their education, in which they are little more than human capital with earning potential.

Ultimately, the neoliberal school readiness discourse echoes the *deficit model of the disadvantaged child*, around which much early early childhood education policy in the United States was constructed. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) describe how the deficit model continues to frame the view of children in neoliberal-influenced discourse:

The concept of early childhood as a *foundation* for lifelong learning or the view that the early childhood institution contributes to children being *ready to learn* by the time they start school, **produces a “poor” child in need of preparation before they can be expected to learn, rather than a “rich” child capable of learning from birth.** (p. 83, emphasis in the original)

When Froebel’s vision of children and childhood guided beliefs about early childhood education, play-centered schools were the **“common sense” approach in early childhood education.** With the rise of school readiness narratives, play-based learning is no longer a common-sense approach to educating young children. A *reconstructed common sense* has emerged that couches play as a waste of **children’s time that only serves to delay their inevitable development into economic units of human capital.** A culturewide fear has emerged

that children who are not prepared for the assembly line of schooling by age 5 have uncertain futures as workers, producers, consumers, and buyers. In a culture that is predominated by neoliberal ideology, the implications of a perceived lack of school readiness are especially troubling for the parents of young children.

Challenging the School Readiness Discourse with Parents

Pushing back at the “school readiness” narrative in early childhood education has proven difficult with parents, who often are motivated by the anxiety and fear that are natural by-products of a rising emphasis on accountability and assessment. The school readiness narrative creates an anxiety in parents that can result in compulsively comparing their **child’s academic skills with those of the child** who lives next-door, or their niece, or their coworker who posts their **4-year old’s graded** worksheets on the walls by their desk. Some have become convinced that the inoculation against this anxiety is assessment. Until recently, very young children and their education had remained an untapped market for the testing and curriculum companies, until NCLB policy encouraged them to infiltrate early childhood education with child assessments, testing preparation materials, teacher professional development, and pre-packaged curriculum. **Kaščák and Pupala (2013) describe an educational system that has grown out of “the emergence of the ‘superchild’, assessed on the basis of his/her relationship to the established norms, and [is] linked to the fact that parents were starting to desire something more...a norm to exceed the norm” (p. 324).**

The QR rating system in Georgia was designed, in part, to give parents information

that can be used to choose among childcare options. As described on the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning **(DECAL)’s website**, Parents and families need an independent, trustworthy resource to help them find high-quality childcare, preschool, and Pre-K **programs. That’s where Georgia’s Quality Rated** comes in. Quality Rated has an online tool that helps families find childcare in their area that have been evaluated by credentialed early childhood experts and deemed high-quality. Families can have peace of mind knowing that any participating childcare program is committed to providing children an environment and experience that is best for their development. (Department of Early Care and Learning, n.d.c)

While Froebel envisioned the Kindergarten as a specially designed space **“where the child could congregate with peers** outside the restraints of the family and the **school” (Shapiro, 1983, p. 22), he also saw mothers’ undeniable influence on their children. Froebel’s earliest works focused on activities and** songs that mothers could use to engage their children. School was offered as another setting in which children could experience growth, in familial community with others. The school readiness discourse has made this vision seem naïve and precious, a niche approach to early childhood education.

A local elementary school principal, in a conversation with one of the co-founders of The Neighborhood Nursery School, described the school as a *play to learn preschool*. While he spoke favorably of how preschools like this prepared children socially and emotionally for elementary school, he was less impressed by the academic-oriented school readiness skills that these same children demonstrated as they began Kindergarten. For this principal, it seemed that school readiness was evidenced almost entirely

by a child's knowledge of letters, letter sounds, and numeracy.

As they transition from preschool into a new educational space with their children, parents are confronted with a stark disconnect between two visions of school. First, they have encountered a preschool that envisions children as necessary participants in the daily life of the school; then they contend with a different kind of school, in which the natural inclinations of children to learn through negotiated relationships with people, materials, and environment is incidental to the academic outcomes that are expected. Mustering empathy for the parents of young children as they make the transition from a preschool like The Neighborhood Nursery School into public elementary school is not difficult. The parental concerns and confusions about this disconnect is **evident, as in this parent's response to an April 2017 family survey at The Neighborhood Nursery School: "I still wonder if there's more we need to do for the 'pre-school' aspect.... a tad more focus on the basics of literacy, letters and repetition would be helpful...even if still implemented in the Reggio way."** Another parent comment from the same survey similarly anticipated a disconnect between The **Neighborhood Nursery School's philosophy of education** and those she expected to encounter as her child transitioned to Kindergarten at a local elementary school.

I really like how [The Neighborhood Nursery School] makes learning fun, it is about hands-on experiences and social-emotional well-being. To me, it is what preschool should be like (and Kindergarten as well, but that's a different topic). The kids are getting exposure to all of the necessary academic content, but in a fun and meaningful way.

To help parents gain a perspective, teachers at The Neighborhood Nursery School make a request during preliminary schoolwide meetings with parents. Parents are invited to look around the room, at all the adults who surround them, and to identify who read first as a child, who walked first, who spoke first. When parents indicate the impossibility of this task, teachers introduce the idea that in human development, being first is irrelevant and does not, in any substantive way, correlate with happiness or success in adulthood. This gives educators and parents an organic opportunity to begin discussing Froebelian-inspired principles of learning and development, including the value of autonomy for children, the role of the teacher as a guide in the classroom, and the **essentialness of play for children's learning.**

Another strategy that is used to combat the neoliberal emphasis on accountability and assessment is regularly sharing documentation **of children's learning processes** with their parents. As anxiety around school readiness continues to escalate, it is reassuring to see what (and how much) children already know in these first years of their lives, and to see how experiences at school have helped them build knowledge – about themselves, the world, their friends, their families, materials, animals, nature, their community, artistic expression, emotions, and thinking. An important undertaking for educators at The Neighborhood Nursery School is advocating for the rights of children and the value of childhood. One of the best and most reassuring ways to do this for parents is to make visible the experiences of children, their strengths and competencies, and the excitement they *already* bring to their learning and knowledge-building.

Creating environments for young children that encourage their growth in natural and respectful ways is one of the privileges of

working in early childhood education. Maintaining this focus among educators in the face of school readiness discourse is only difficult, it has ethical implications for teachers as they work alongside parents to unpack the implications of school readiness discourse, and to see the places where QR protocols require schools to compromise a Froebelian-informed philosophy of education. Undertaking these two fundamental tasks – creating a rich environment for children and supporting their parents in challenging academic-focused expectations for children as they transition into Kindergarten – requires teachers who are able to see neoliberalism in action, to name it, and to resist **its urgent insistence about what is “right” for young children**. Recruiting and hiring educators with this disposition has proven difficult. The Neighborhood Nursery School was founded in 2011.

The Preschool Teacher in the Neoliberal Age

As a school readiness discourse drives neoliberal education reform, deficit language about early childhood education teachers is sometimes used to make the case for quality improvement initiatives. In other cases, early childhood teachers are invisible in state policy conversations, as evidenced by the mission of **Georgia’s Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL)**.

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning **enhances children’s early education experience to promote their academic, social-emotional, and physical development in partnership with families, communities, the early care and education industry, and stakeholders.** (Department of Early Care and Learning, n.d.c)

Rather than use the mission statement to emphasize the humanity of education, DECAL emphasizes a vision of education as an *industry*. It is worth noting that DECAL does not mention educators or caregivers in their mission statement, even though these are the people who do the work of early childhood education. Early childhood educators build experiences and environments every day with children, and it is under their watch that children grow. The lack of **visibility given to their work by Georgia’s regulatory and governing bodies** may be both disrespectful and demoralizing for educators.

Despite the invisibility of early **childhood educators in DECAL’s mission statement**, the agency focuses a great deal of its resources on regulating teachers. For example, in order to get the highest possible points on a QR profile in Georgia, there are stipulated educational requirements for teachers, as **outlined in the “Quality Rated Child Care Program Manual” (2019)**. These include

- At least seventy-five percent (75%) of all lead teachers and fifty percent (50%) of assistant teachers meet the criteria for **Career Level 5 or higher...**
- **...at least fifty percent** (50%) of all lead and assistant teachers have an annual Professional Learning Plan that includes training three different ECE Competencies in one or more of the following areas: inclusion, cultural responsiveness, supporting dual language learners, family engagement, and/or implementation of the Georgia Early Learning and Development **Standards (GELDS)...**

- Seventy-five percent (75%) of all lead and assistant teachers have completed 18 hours of DECAL-approved training during the past 12 months prior to portfolio **submission...**

- Note: Program employees who have not met the minimum educational requirement for Child Care Licensing should be enrolled in a program of study leading to the award of a credential or degree in early childhood education. (p. 31-32)

One of the challenges with the QR process at The Neighborhood Nursery School **has been the school's practice of hiring** teachers who were not educated in teacher preparation programs. Many teachers who have studied traditional teacher training programs in the United States demonstrate an intractable influence of both Piagetian developmentalism and neoliberal values; as they begin teaching at The Neighborhood Nursery School, they often face a disconnect between these values and those imbedded in a more child interest-driven, Froebelian-inspired pedagogy. Since The Neighborhood Nursery School opened, like-minded educators have been most successfully recruited from professional backgrounds that include art, creative writing, the humanities, and other fields that are unrelated to education. Adopting such a cross-disciplinarian approach to teacher recruitment has given rise to an educational environment that is richer, more open-ended, and more empathetic to unique points of view and perspectives among educators, children, and families. The Neighborhood Nursery School also looks for teachers who demonstrate a disposition towards **the school community's ethos, in which** experimentation, empathy, relationships, and joy are integral to educative experiences.

Encouraging unique perspectives at the **school contributes to educators' feelings of** meaning in their work. As a teacher at the The Neighborhood Nursery School described it in **November 2020 faculty survey, "This job and** being a part of this community is the first time in my life I feel valued as a whole human being capable of contributing in meaningful ways to and for a greater good." **Another teacher echoes this feeling in the same survey. "I love working** here and feel more respected than I ever have in **a job."**

Froebel wrote of a form of education in **which the role of adult "should necessarily be** *passive, following* (only guarding and protecting), *not prescriptive, categorical, interfering"* (Froebel, 2005, p. 7, **emphasis in original**). Educators at The Neighborhood Nursery School are committed to teaching and caring for young children in ways that echo **Froebel's envisioning of teachers as guides.** Teachers also embrace a Froebelian view of **development, in which "the relationship between** development and growth is understood in **circular terms" and the teacher's role is "to** return the child to its natural state, to something original that cannot be abandoned, and which is characteristic for the child" (Kaščák and Pupala, p. 322). Indeed, the child in their natural state is a key tenet of Froebelian ideology.

We grant space and time to young plants and animals because we know that, in accordance with; the laws that live in them, they will develop properly and grow well; young animals and plants are given rest, and arbitrary interference with their growth is avoided, because it is known that the opposite practice would disturb their pure unfolding and sound development; but the young human being is looked upon as a piece of wax, a lump of clay which man can mold into what he pleases. (Froebel, 2005, p. 8)

One of the ways in which teachers at The Neighborhood Nursery School reject neoliberal ideology is in the regular practice of reflecting with colleagues **on children's experiences, using** documentation of these experiences as a launching point for deeper thinking about what **Loris Malaguzzi termed "the what-to-do of teaching" (2104, p. 6). Eliciting multiple** perspectives on ongoing classroom experiences is useful as teachers develop projections for future classroom experiences. At The Neighborhood Nursery School, the term *projection* is used, rather than *plan*, to underscore an openness to emerging experiences, interests, and exploration as a hallmark of the **school's pedagogical approach. A** plan has a decisive, inflexibility to it; a projection implies a way to go that is responsive to the situation and context. While some planning is necessitated in the creation of a successful school community, The Neighborhood Nursery School maintains a preference for projecting. And as teachers share documentation of **children's experiences in their classrooms with** colleagues, they are encouraged to ask how these experiences might connect to a larger vision for society. **Teachers are not focused on children's** readiness to join a rigidly predetermined social and cultural milieu; instead, they guide children towards problem-solving, listening to others, and developing creative dispositions that will advantage them as they participate in the ongoing creation of society.

How does this attitude towards the role of the teacher align with the expectations that are promulgated by DECAL and QR in Georgia? In short, not well. By continuing to challenge the neoliberal image of young children, teachers at The Neighborhood Nursery School resist the taken-for-granted assumptions that situate the dominance of school readiness discourse with

intentional efforts to re-orient early childhood education towards a Froebelian pedagogy.

The Neighborhood Nursery School is but one instance of resistance to neoliberalism and standardization within early childhood education. The Neighborhood Nursery School is *not* offered as a model of Froebelian-inspired education to be replicated. We are not arguing for generalization and scaling-up. We are arguing, instead, that The Neighborhood Nursery School is one illustration of how **Froebel's ideas can be enacted, even in the face** of neoliberalism. Facing the threats of neoliberalism is not easy, as it requires a critical re-evaluation of many of the assumptions of modernity, including marketization and globalization. Mostly, however, challenging neoliberalism requires historical and philosophical knowledge—neither of which is privileged in school-readiness discourse. Nonetheless, we remain hopeful that parents and teachers will unite to critically analyze the language used in present-day schooling, the assumptions neoliberalism reinforces in early childhood education, and the multiple ways resistance can be demonstrated.

In a recent email, a parent at The Neighborhood Nursery School responded to the **decision to permanently decrease the preschool's** operating hours from 52.5 hours per week to 45 hours per week.

I'm ALL IN on shorter hours...I hope that little by little with decisions like this we as a society can reorient our lives away from the grind of work and to the **wellbeing of our families...[early childhood education] needs bold leadership and positive change.**

The hopeful sentiment that this parent expresses evinces the kind of resistance around which

families and educators could unite to reclaim child-centered, play-based, Froebelian-inspired early education from free market-inspired neoliberal ideology.

In *The Education of Man*, Froebel spoke of an essential union between families and educators.

...the school must link itself to the family. The union of the school and of life, of domestic and scholastic life, is the first and indispensable requisite of a perfect human education of this period. The union of family and school life is the indispensable requisite of the education of this period. (p. 230)

To confront neoliberalism's influence on early childhood education, schools for young children must become sites for such unity, places where "it is possible to start questioning and contesting the current dominant discourses...to ask that question, why?" (Moss, 2019, p. 18). When families and educators share a conviction that taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching and learning should be questioned and can be contested—especially those assumptions rooted in a neoliberal ideology that prioritizes profit and competition—a renewed vision of early childhood education can emerge, one that recognizes with appreciation the image of children that Bertha von Marenholtz-Bülow encountered as she watched Froebel lead a singing group of children up a hill.

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