



## **Beyond Early Childhood Education and Care**

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We have met in Stockholm for the last 2 days to discuss the final report of the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care. But also to celebrate what has been an important undertaking and, for those of us who have had the privilege to take part, a stimulating and enjoyable project. This review is the latest in a number of cross-national studies of early childhood services and policies. These studies have paid particular attention to structures and technologies and certain aspects of national context. The OECD review has built on those earlier studies, but added some important new elements, for example the use of review teams drawn from a range of countries.

What I want to do in this final session is to open up for discussion what directions future cross-national studies in this field might take. What might we study? how might we conduct the studies? Why might we want to undertake these studies? This is a personal view, offered as someone who has been involved, to a greater or lesser extent, on three of these recent cross-national studies. I offer one perspective. I hope that I will provoke others to voice their perspectives, so that we can begin a discussion about future possibilities.

Although I want to suggest that we might move beyond a focus on structures and technologies, I am not suggesting that these are not important or that we cease paying them attention. They do matter. There are many structural and technical issues that we need to continue studying, most raised in the OECD report. What I want to suggest is that we might want to broaden our interests, to find other important areas which have received less attention. Not *no* attention - because many of the points I want to make today are

raised in the OECD report. I also want to suggest that we might want to rethink how we conceptualise the subject of study. In particular, I want to suggest the time has come to move beyond 'early childhood education and care'.

I shall organise the rest of my presentation around five questions:

- Where and who is the child?
- How do we understand early childhood institutions?
- Why focus on 'early childhood'?
- What perspectives will we use?
- How do I relate to the Other?

### **Where and who is the child?**

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

The idea of a universal child, an essential child, objectively knowable irrespective of time or place, context or perspective has been increasingly questioned. What has emerged instead is the idea of many possible childhoods, always constructed within particular social and historical contexts. In their book *Constructing and Deconstructing Childhood*, Alan Prout and Alison James put it this way:

The immaturity of children is a biological fact, the way in which that immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture. The facts of culture vary making childhood a social institution. Childhood is constructed and reconstructed for and by children

Carlina Rinaldi, from Reggio Emilia, makes the same point when she says: “childhood does not exist, we create it as a society, as a public subject. It is a social, political and historical construction”.

An interesting feature of the OECD review has been its recognition of the social construction of childhood in some of the national notes and, indeed in the final report – a recognition not only that there are different understandings or social constructions of childhood and different images of the child, but that these are productive of policy, provision and practice. One reason for doing cross-national work is that we can make the familiar strange and the invisible visible. Taken for granted assumptions and understandings of childhood can become visible, and so subject to deliberation and confrontation. In this way, for example, cross-national work can contribute to making childhood contestable. But for this to happen, the starting point for cross-national work needs to be ‘how is childhood constructed here? what is the image of the child here?’

This presents us with at least two major challenges for the future of cross-national work. First, the need to develop methods for the study of the social constructions of childhood in different societies, communities and other groups. How can we identify and describe influential constructions? How can we analyse the process by which these constructions have been produced within particular spatial and historical contexts? In what ways have these constructions shaped policy, provision and practice?

Second, how to address diversity within the social group of children, recognising that the ‘child’ is not homogeneously constructed. The universal term ‘child’ should not blind us to the multiple social constructions that attach to any particular child and that, for the individual child, are in interaction with each other. Pat Petrie observes that:

Within the minority group known as ‘children’ there are differentiated positions and further minorities. Children have different social class positions, they differ as to age, gender, ethnicity – and there are interactions between these....A particular disabled child is not an abstraction whose life is to be seen purely within the

context of disability. A disabled child may be Black or White, male or female, with parents employed or unemployed

If we choose to understand children as social actors, indeed as experts in their own lives, then future cross-national work needs to make those lives visible through listening to young children: they need to participate in these studies. Having done recent work in this area myself, I recognise that ‘participation’ and ‘listening’ are very complex and problematic concepts. However, there are ways in which we can arrive at some understandings of children’s experience in early childhood services – their lived lives.

I don’t think this is just an optional extra. Modern childhood is increasingly institutionalised. We, as adults, have an increasing responsibility to explore children’s perspectives when undertaking future cross-national studies. We can no longer talk *about* children. We have to talk *with* children and listen, using the many languages available, and recognising that listening is an active, emotional and interpretative activity.

I have suggested that we need to pay more attention to constructions of childhood and to listening to children. A third and final point is that we need to locate our cross-national studies within analyses of the societies that children live in and of what it means to live childhoods in those societies. In other words, we need to explore the relationship between childhood and the historical and spatial context within which childhood is lived. This means going beyond a description of contexts which consists of assembling demographic, social and economic indicators. We need to theorize the conditions of the society and the changes underway, and to consider how these relate to early childhood institutions and to children’s experience in them. Just to offer some examples, out of many possibilities, of how societies might be theorized: we might work with theories of post-industrialism and post-modernity; or with theories about different forms of capitalism and welfare regime; or with theories of liberalism; or with theories of power and government, such as Deleuze’s concept of emergent ‘societies of control’. In short, I am suggesting that we must start treating children as a part of the world, in all its economic, political, social and cultural complexity.

### **How do we understand early childhood institutions?**

The purposes of early childhood institutions are not self-evident. Like childhood, they can be viewed as social constructions “[embodying] (in the words of Gunilla Dahlberg) thoughts, conceptions and ethics which prevail at a given moment in a given society”. In my recent writing I have explored what seem to me to be two of many possible constructions. One, which I have described as ‘children’s services’, understands early childhood institutions as places for the efficient production of predetermined outcomes, through the application of effective technologies. An other understanding, which I have described as ‘children’s spaces’, understands early childhood institutions as physical and discursive spaces, which provide opportunities for many projects involving children and adults, the consequences of which may be unknown. Gunilla Dahlberg captures some of the sense of children’s spaces when she writes about Reggio Emilia “turning away from the modernist idea of organic unity and encouraging multiple languages, confrontation, ambiguity and ambivalence”.

As I have just indicated, an understanding of early childhood institutions as ‘children’s spaces’ suggests that they can be seen as sites for many possibilities, many projects. These projects can be of many kinds: social, economic, cultural, political, aesthetic, ethical. What the projects actually are will be determined by adults and children, and once again are contestable – there is nothing inevitable about what happens in children’s spaces.

One implication of an understanding of early childhood institutions as ‘children’s spaces’ is that the term ‘education and care’ is too restricting. It does not do justice to what happens in institutions – or what could happen. It can blinker our vision when looking at institutions, so we do not see a lot of what is going on and do not imagine a lot of what could be going on. To use the term ‘education and care’ is to prejudge the issue.

I realise that the use of this term does represent an important step forward: recognition that early childhood institutions can offer both education and care. But we now need to go beyond to view them as sites or spaces for much else besides. In fact the final OECD report, though keeping to the terminology of 'early childhood education and care', recognises that much else is already going on in many early childhood institutions. It refers to the 'multiple objectives' of early childhood policy in most countries, which go beyond child care for working parents and early education, and include supporting families and maintaining social integration. Let me add to the pot of possibilities by throwing in some more projects by way of further example, but there could of course be many more. Early childhood institutions can be spaces for: children's culture and relationships; for economic and social regeneration of local communities; for social control; for the practice of ethics, a point to which I will return; for the co-construction of identities, both children's and adults'; and for the conduct of what Nikolas Rose refers to as 'minor politics', a creative process he describes as arising from contestation between people engaged in particular and local activities and relations:

These minor engagements do not have the arrogance of programmatic politics...They are cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative... They frequently arise in 'cramped' spaces...And, in relation to these little territories of the everyday, they seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action...[But] such a molecular and minor engagement can connect up with a whole series of other circuits and cause them to fluctuate, waver and reconfigure in wholly unexpected ways

Even if we choose to focus on the two projects of 'education' and 'care', we also need to question the meanings of these concepts. How are they understood in different countries? How might they be understood? I want to dwell on 'care' today, because it has received less attention than 'education'. At least in the English-language world, 'care' has often become shorthand for one particular project of the early childhood institution, a project whose full name is something like 'child care for working parents'. This means providing a safe environment for children while their parents are out at work.

In a society concerned with ensuring its labour supply and with gender equality there is a need for this project: that is self evident. But it seems to me that this project comes under the heading of “essential but uninteresting”. For those societies not yet able to guarantee ‘child care for working parents’, the project has high priority. It takes up a lot of energy. But those countries, like Sweden, which have implemented the project, can move on to explore much more interesting projects.

But I also think we should *not* confuse ‘child care for working parents’ with ‘care’, which is a concept both more interesting and complex. One way of understanding ‘care’ is as an ethic. In recent years, the concept of an ‘ethic of care’ has received a lot of attention, especially from feminist thinkers such as Joan Tronto and Selma Sevenhuijsen. Tronto writes that an ethics of care is about “a practice rather than a set of rules or principles...It involves particular acts of caring and a ‘general habit of mind’ to care that should inform all aspects of moral life”. She defines caring as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so we can live in it as well as possible”. Care itself consists of four elements - caring about, taking care of, care giving and care receiving. An ethic of care has a further four elements – responsibility, competence, integrity, and responsiveness. Echoing Levinas, responsiveness for Tronto involves finding a relation to the Other based on responsibility and the recognition of difference: “responsiveness suggests a different way to understand the needs of others rather than to put ourselves into their position...[O]ne is engaged from the standpoint of the other, but not by presuming that the other is exactly like the self”.

It seems to me that ‘care’ can be understood as an ethic that can be adopted for all projects, practices and relationships within the early childhood institution, including ‘education’. Bill Readings provides an example of how care-as-ethic might be applied to education-as-project. For him, pedagogy should be permeated by an ethical approach which lays emphasis on responsiveness to otherness, through ‘listening to thought’: “[for] doing justice to thought means trying to hear that which cannot be said but which tries to make itself heard”. Readings considers teaching and learning as “sites of obligation, loci

of ethical practices and not means of transmission of knowledge”. The condition of pedagogical practice is “an infinite attention to the other”.

Readings is writing about universities. But there are similarities with the early childhood services of Reggio Emilia, which provides another example of how care-as-ethic can permeate education-as-project. For they talk about a ‘pedagogy of listening’, which emphasises an openness to difference, otherness and listening, as well as the interpretive process that listening involves. Here is Carlina Rinaldi, formerly pedagogical director of the municipal early childhood centres in Reggio Emilia:

The most important verb is not to explain or transmit, but to listen, to hear and be open to others...’Listen’ is a real, active verb, it is not just recording but interpreting, with the final message made by us...Messages gain meaning when you receive, interpret and construct. Listening means being open to and recognising differences, to legitimate them

I shall return to the concept of an ‘ethic of care’ later. For the moment, though, I want to emphasise the need to look critically in future cross-national work at the meanings attached to such concepts as ‘care’.

### **Why focus on ‘early childhood’?**

Having suggested that ‘education and care’ is too narrow for future cross-national studies, I also want to question the term ‘early childhood’ – why focus on early childhood? The OECD report says that ‘early childhood is commonly defined as birth to age 8’. However, the focus of the OECD review has been on children below compulsory school age, although with attention paid to the transition to compulsory schooling.

I am increasingly drawn to the conclusion that future cross-national studies need to take a broader look at policies and provisions for children and young people, covering the period from birth up to the end of compulsory schooling at least. This means including, at the

minimum, not only provisions for children below compulsory school age, but also schools and free-time centres. I say this for several reasons.

First, there is a gradual but significant shift towards closer structural relationships between the early childhood system and the education system. This has reached its furthest development in Sweden, Scotland and England, where responsibility for early childhood and free time provisions have been brought within the education system, alongside schools. We need to be able to describe and monitor these changing relationships.

Second, we need to be able to question the consequences of the closer relationship between compulsory schooling and other service. Some of these questions are technical, for example about the management of transitions from nursery to school. Others are more political, for example concerning the power relations between the early childhood and school systems, and to what extent the former is there to meet the needs of the latter.

Third, by taking a broader view, compulsory schooling itself can be problematised in new ways. Many issues in the field of 'early childhood education and care', as for example detailed in the OECD Final report, might very profitably be extended not only to older children but also to that predominant institution of childhood: the school.

Broadening the scope of study in this way might require new strategies for cross-national work. For example, it might be productive to develop a two-track strategy. This would mean undertaking general overviews from time to time, involving a wide range of countries, such as the OECD review. But these would be interspersed with case studies, each involving a small number of theoretically sampled countries, each focused on deepening understanding of a particular issue.

### **What perspectives will we use?**

My fourth question is about the perspectives from which early childhood provision is, or will be, viewed in cross-national studies. By talking about perspectives, I am emphasising that any cross-national study is conducted from a particular perspective or perspectives: it

is necessarily partial and interpretative. This is unavoidable. What is important is to be aware of what perspectives are employed and which are not, and of the consequences of choosing certain perspectives and not others.

I have already raised the question of how to bring the child's perspective into our work, and I shall finish by raising the question of national and linguistic perspectives. Here I want to touch on the question of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Future cross-national studies might ask which disciplinary and theoretical perspectives have most influence in the discourses, constructions and policies of different countries. Indeed, going even further, we might ask in which paradigms policy, practice and research are situated, and which paradigms are dominant.

To take one example, Marianne Bloch, speaking of America, has referred to the "century-long domination of psychological and child development perspectives in the field of early childhood education". She points to "the growth of research using symbolic or interpretivist, critical and, most recently, post-modern paradigms in schools of education, while early education, as a separate institution, typically in different university disciplines, (has) remained tied to psychology, child development, and largely positivist and empirical-analytic paradigms in theory and method".

The point I am making is not that psychological and child development perspectives are invalid or wrong. What I am saying is that, like any other discipline, they produce (in Foucault's terms) a particular 'regime of truth', organising our everyday experience of the world, governing our ideas, thoughts and action, determining what can be said and not said, what we consider normal or not normal, appropriate or inappropriate. We need to take account of this in our cross-national studies.

But there is another way in which disciplinary perspectives might be taken more into account. In undertaking cross-national work, which disciplines are chosen? And why? And how do these choices shape what is seen and the interpretation of what is seen? We need to be aware that the cross-national researcher is partial and is involved in a meaning making process, using his or her favoured collection of theories and perspectives. We also

need to consider what disciplinary perspectives are *not* being brought to the work and what the consequences might be. For example, what might a historian see? Or a political scientist? Or a sociologist of childhood? Or an anthropologist? Or a student of ethics?

I want to dwell on the last perspective, the ethical, because ethics has not featured, to the best of my knowledge, in any cross-national studies. This invisibility is not confined to cross-national studies. Thomas Schwandt notes that “there is a modernist tendency in social science and management practice to convert what are essentially moral and ethical problems to technical and administrative ones”.

Ethics is one of a range of perspectives that might be applied to cross-national work. I do not mean that we should be making ethical judgement between countries, using ethics to decide who are the good guys and the bad guys. What I am suggesting is that ethics might provide a useful tool for analysing and understanding national policy, provision and practice, through exploring underlying ethical approaches or assumptions.

To take an example, from my own country, one of the ‘early learning goals’ set by government in England is that children should ‘understand what is right, what is wrong and why’. We also have a strong discourse which uses normalising concepts such as ‘quality’, ‘excellence’ and ‘best practice’. Both are evidence of an approach to policy which is strongly influenced by what might be called universalist or Kantian ethics. Ethical judgement is derived from human reason in the form of universal and impartial: “(ethics is) conceived of as a totality of rules, norms, principles equally applicable to everyone and acceptable to every rational thinking person”. Neutrality, impartiality, rationality, abstraction and objectivity are valued as means to establish and apply correct and general criteria: to give a rational judgement is to “find the universal, the one principle, the law to cover the phenomena to be accounted for”.

Once again, I must emphasise that I am not saying that this is an invalid ethical position. I am arguing, however, that it is a position, and that to understand the English early childhood system you would need to understand that ethical position. You might then go

further to explore contradictions between this universal ethical position, and the emphasis given in much political discourse in England, including early childhood, to diversity. How does a universalist ethic embrace diversity? Is there another ethical position being taken here? Are there contradictions between positions?

Similarly you might want to explore whether the much more decentralized approach to curriculum and other aspects of early childhood in, for example, Denmark and Sweden, is evidence of a different ethical approach: what has been called a postmodern ethics or an ethics of care, which emphasises the importance of more individual judgements. Selma Sevenhuijsen contrasts these two ethical approaches in this way:

The moral agent in the ethics of care stands with both feet in the real world. While the universalist ethicist will see this as a threat to his independence and impartiality, or as an obstacle to creating in his moral imaginary, the care ethicist sees this precisely as a crucial condition for being able to judge well...The ethics of care demands reflection on the best course of action in specific circumstances and the best way to express and interpret moral problems. Situatedness in concrete social practices is not seen as a threat to independent judgement. On the contrary it is assumed that this is exactly what will raise the quality of judgement

### **How do I relate to the Other?**

This discussion of ethics leads into my final question about the future of cross-national work: how do I – that is the cross-national researcher - relate to the Other? This is an important ethical question. It features prominently in the ethics of care, as well as in other recent ethical discourses. Emmanuel Levinas, in his ethics of an encounter, asks how can I relate to the Other in a way which respects the irreducible alterity of the other? How can I avoid grasping the Other, making the Other into the same, for example through applying totalizing systems of knowledge and classification.

This seems to me to be a critical problem in cross-national work. When I relate to another country, another institution, another person, how can I avoid trying to make them into the

same, trying to understand them through applying my own understandings, theories, knowledges, norms, truths? Does my very presence reduce their alterity? How do I make myself open to their otherness and avoid undermining that otherness? How can I enter into an ethical relationship with the other?

These questions, and the ethical issues underlying them, become even more important due to power relations. It seems to me that the early childhood field is increasingly dominated by one particularly strong narrative: an Anglo-American narrative spoken in the English language, located in a liberal political and economic context, and dominated by certain disciplinary perspectives, in particular psychology and economics. The narrative is inscribed with Enlightenment assumptions about objectivity, mastery and universality, and with particular understandings of childhood, learning, evaluation and so on. It offers a particular construction of childhood, and generates particular problems, questions and methods. It is, if you will, a regime of truth about early childhood education and care as a technology for social stability and economic progress, the young child as a redemptive vehicle to be programmed to become a solution to certain problems. It is instrumental in rationality, universalist in ethics, technical in its approach. It produces a public policy which (as Alan Prout observes) emphasises control, regulation and surveillance.

The issue facing cross-national work is not only how individual researchers relate to the Other. It is also whether and how to confront and problematise this strong narrative, with its powerful search for universal truths and solutions, and its propensity to make the Other into the same. Is it possible to reduce the influence of this narrative when it comes to setting agendas, defining questions, deciding what constitutes evaluation, and so on? Is it possible to avoid the English language grasping the otherness of theories, concepts and practices produced in other languages, so destroying their alterity?

This leads me to my concluding remarks. I want to return to the question of why we might want to do cross-national work. A member of one of the review teams suggested that members of these teams should have produced a book in which we wrote about our response to being part of the OECD review: she suggested the title ‘the pedagogical

tourist'. It would have been an opportunity to write personally about what reviewers saw from their perspective, what struck reviewers as strange and inexplicable, and how reviewers felt, the emotion of being in a different place, relating to the Other.

Thinking about the future of cross-national work, it is important to build on past work. It is important to look for commonalities: to identify common trends and issues, problems and solutions. It is important to look at how countries can be grouped because of certain similarities, and to explore the implications of these groupings for understanding national systems – how, for example, do early childhood systems relate to typologies developed for welfare states or types of capitalism? I have done this type of work myself, and expect to continue doing so.

But I also think that cross-national work should expose us to singularity and alterity, to difference and dissensus, to complexity and multiple perspectives, to amazement and surprise, to uncertainty and ambivalence. It should offer us the provocation of an encounter when, in the words of Deleuze, “something in the world forces us to think”. It should enable us think more critically, introducing (as Nikolas Rose puts it) “a critical attitude towards those things that are given to our present experience as if they were timeless, natural, unquestionable: to stand against the current of received wisdom. It is a matter of introducing a kind of awkwardness into the fabric of one’s experience, of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter”. There should, in short, be a tension in cross-national work between the search for laws and order, and an opening up to otherness, complexity and multiplicity.