Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood, Or Why Contest Early Childhood?

by Peter Moss

Peter Moss is an emeritus professor at UCL Institute of Education, University College London. In recent years, he has helped to edit three books from Reggio Emilia, by Carlotta Rinaldi and Vea Vecchi, and a selection of the writings and speeches of Loris Malaguzzi. These three books are part of the Contesting Early Childhood Series of which there are presently 18 titles. For more information about books within this series, go to https://www.routledge.com/Contesting-Early-Childhood/book-series/SEO653.

His other interests include the comparative study of early childhood policies; the relationship between care, employment, and gender, in particular parental leave policies, and men working in early childhood; and the relationship between early childhood and compulsory education. He lives in London.

Contesting Early Childhood Book Series

At the start of each book in the series Contesting Early Childhood (CEC) these words are:

This ground breaking series questions the current dominant discourses in early childhood, and offers alternative narratives of an area that is now made up of a multitude of perspectives and debates.

The series, which started in 2005, now has 18 titles including three from Reggio Emilia. I had the privilege of being the first editor, along with my Swedish colleague Gunilla Dahlberg. Although we handed over the role in 2016 (to Michel Vandenbroeck and Liselott Dahlberg), I remain closely involved and have written one of the latest books to appear in the series: Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood (ANEC).

The book is an introduction, aimed at students and practitioners, to the series and some of the main ideas that appear in it. These ideas – concepts and theories – can open up new worlds. But they can also be daunting, difficult to grasp not least because they challenge the assumptions and beliefs that many people have become accustomed to and take for granted as self-evident. So, although the authors in the series ground the concepts and theories they write about in actual, concrete examples of practice, I have felt for some time the need to offer an accessible and enticing introduction, to assist more people to enter the exhilarating and liberating world of contesting early childhood.

In this article, I would like to introduce you to the new book, hoping you will want to dip deeper into it and that new world. Let me start by exploring two key terms: narratives and dominant discourses.

Narratives and Dominant Discourses

The stated aim of the Contesting Early Childhood series connects three important ideas: the importance of narratives or stories (I use the two terms interchangeably), the power of certain narratives – or dominant discourses; and the existence of other narratives, alternatives that resist or contest dominant discourses. I will attempt to explain these ideas more clearly. (For more on this, see Chapter 1 in ANEC.)

First, the importance of narratives, that is the stories we hear and tell, for how we interpret or make meaning – of ourselves and our lives, of our families and other relationships, and about what goes on around us. As Jerome Bruner recognised, mankind has an innate tendency to communicate and to make sense of existence through stories; they are how we make meaning of our world and our place in it, rendering our existence meaningful. This idea is captured by the Dark Mountain Project, an American environmental group, who write that they “believe that the roots of [the converging crises of our times] lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. … We will reassess the role of storytelling as more than mere entertainment. It is through stories that we weave reality” (Dark Mountain Project, 2009a).

Stories, then, construct or weave reality for us and, as such, have consequences, sometimes bad ones, for example justifying the destructive relationship that mankind has developed with the environment (and other exploitative relationships). Confronting this, the Dark Mountain Project is walking away from the stories that our societies like to tell themselves, the stories that prevent us seeing clearly the extent of the ecological, social and cultural unravelling that is now underway. We are making art that doesn’t take the centrality of humans for granted. We are tracing the deep cultural roots of the mess the world is in. And we are looking for other stories, ones that can help us make sense of a time of disruption and uncertainty (Dark Mountain Project, 2009a).

Stories, then, are how all of us weave reality; they help us explain and justify what we think and do. Depending on your perspective or viewpoint, stories can be good or bad, enchanting or disenchanting, have beneficial or harmful consequences, trap us in dysfunctional positions, or help us to move on. But whatever their consequence, they are stories. Perhaps the biggest danger of all is when we forget that our stories are just that – stories, believing instead that they are some revelatory and fundamentally true.

This leads me to a second idea: the existence of dominant discourses. We live in a world of stories, or discourses, ways of thinking and talking about things. Within this multitude of stories or discourses, certain ones can become particularly influential. For the Dark Mountain Project, as crises multiply and worsen, stories of human separation from and mastery over the environment become increasingly insecure and lose their power to convince. But they have and still wield great influence, shaping economies, societies, and how many people think and act, in short weaving reality. They have become, in the words of French philosopher Michel Foucault (the subject of Chapter 5 in ANEC), dominant discourses.

Dominant discourses become dominant when powerful institutions (e.g., governments, business, professional organisations, the academy) take them up and reproduce them in a symbiotic relationship between discourse and power. They become stories that have a decisive influence on a particular subject, for example early childhood education, by insisting that they are the only way to think, talk, and behave: that they are the only reality. They seek to impose, in Foucault’s words, a regime of truth, through exercising power over our thoughts and actions, directing or governing what we see as the truth and how we construct the world or weave reality. Typical of dominant discourses is that they “make assumptions and values invisible, turn subjective perspectives and understandings into apparently objective truths, and determine that some things are self-evident...
and realistic while others are dubious and impractical” (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p.17). This is simply how things are, the dominant discourse asserts: no need to add any qualifications, to say “in my opinion” or “it seems to me” or “from my perspective.”

By behaving in this way, by insisting they are the one and only truth, dominant discourses stifle alternative discourses and stories. They exclude, or attempt to, other ways of understanding and interpreting the world, of weaving reality, marginalising, or drowning out other stories. A person putting forward an alternative story is dismissed, as out of touch with reality, living in the past, not knowing what they are talking about, or some other put down. In short, dominant discourses seek to impose a “dictatorship of no alternative” (Unger, 2005a), or Mrs. Thatcher’s TINA – there is no alternative. Shortly, I will introduce what I think is the most dominant discourse in today’s early childhood education.

Which brings me to the third idea: the existence of other narratives, resisting or contesting dominant discourses. A discourse may be dominant, yet it never manages totally to silence other discourses, or stories. Some will always speak out and contest the dominant discourse for, as Foucault contends, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). For if there was to be no resistance, the relationship would no longer be one of power but simply of slavery, and we are not reduced to that relationship, certainly not in education. Resistance is to be found in many shapes and sizes. It finds expression in many alternative stories that give voice to the multiplicity of perspectives and debates from which they are derived are not only inevitable but something to be welcomed, reflecting a world rich in diversity. This prospect is invigorating, since encounters with difference can provoke experimentation, movement, and new thinking. It is, moreover, a necessary condition for a democratic politics of education, since democracy requires the creation, articulation, and valuing of alternatives, and confrontation and contestation between them. In healthy and vibrant democracies, contesting early childhood, meaning confrontation and debate between a multitude of perspectives, should be an everyday and everywhere occurrence, whether in services themselves, in their surrounding communities, in the academy, or among policy-makers and politicians. It is both sad and worrying that this is not happening today, or not nearly enough, leaving a democratic politics of education that is in the same moribund state as democracy in general. Rather than vibrant and exciting debates about diverse contemporary projects and different visions for the future, education like so much else has come to be dominated by one or two stories and how best to manage things to ensure their enactment; a stultifying dictatorship of no alternative.

There is no one objectively true viewpoint, rather there are many ways of thinking about, talking about, and doing early childhood (or any) education. And I introduce it in this way because it is a dominant discourse in today’s early childhood education. There are many ways of thinking about, talking about, and doing early childhood (or any) education. Therefore, there are many stories to be told, alternative narratives and the multitude of perspectives and debates from which they are derived are not only inevitable but something to be welcomed, reflecting a world rich in diversity. This prospect is invigorating, since encounters with difference can provoke experimentation, movement, and new thinking. It is, moreover, a necessary condition for a democratic politics of education, since democracy requires the creation, articulation, and valuing of alternatives, and confrontation and contestation between them. In healthy and vibrant democracies, contesting early childhood, meaning confrontation and debate between a multitude of perspectives, should be an everyday and everywhere occurrence, whether in services themselves, in their surrounding communities, in the academy, or among policy-makers and politicians. It is both sad and worrying that this is not happening today, or not nearly enough, leaving a democratic politics of education that is in the same moribund state as democracy in general. Rather than vibrant and exciting debates about diverse contemporary projects and different visions for the future, education like so much else has come to be dominated by one or two stories and how best to manage things to ensure their enactment; a stultifying dictatorship of no alternative.

A Dominant Discourse in Today’s Early Childhood

What is this dominant discourse in today’s early childhood education? One of the chapters in the Contexting Childhood Education series, Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education (Moss, 2014a), is titled “Two early childhood education stories: Quality and high returns coin-cide with the ascendency of an even bigger story, the meta-narrative of neoliberalism, which currently dominates politics in much of the world. This story tells of a world in which all human relationships and actions can be understood in economic terms, driven by competition, calculation, and (individual) choice; in which management and technical practice are harnessed to maximising returns; and in which all human beings are in the spirit of homo economicus, i.e., economically rational, always seeking to optimise returns through the exercise of free choice, an autonomous and self-serving consumer. In the political and economic context, the story of quality and high returns makes perfect sense, feeling so much at home that it comes to seem natural and self-evident – the only show in town.

But once aware there are alternatives, the story of quality and high returns is neither natural nor self-evident. Indeed, it can seem to be both unappealing and dangerous, offering a narrow and impoverished view of education and life, and leading to an early childhood education steeped in regulation and control. Moreover,
even considered in its own terms, the story of quality and high returns seems incredible. The iconic studies it draws on so heavily have been criticized – but no mention is made of this. And even if we do accept, without question, the results of such local studies, there is no evidence that early childhood education has, by itself, made any difference at a national level. This is true of Head Start, where it is difficult to discern any impact on child or adult outcomes for the USA as a whole, but also elsewhere. Naomi Eisenstadt, who led the English government’s ambitious early intervention programme Sure Start for its first seven years, reflecting on “what I have learnt and what I have achieved,” concluded that the most important lesson for her is the need to address inequality as well as poverty and least attainment. . . . We set out with Sure Start to improve educational, social and emotional development of young children living in poverty so as to reduce the chances of growing up to be poor as adults. We have probably achieved the first part of that aim, but have been less successful in the second part. . . . I believe that without significant redistribution of wealth across social classes, where you are born and who your parents are will remain a significant determinant of life chances. . . . The expectation that early years services, regulation and control. But once we have a story, the story of quality and high returns is neither natural nor self-evident. Indeed, it can seem to be both unappealing and dangerous, offering a narrow and impoverished view of education and life, and leading to an early childhood education steeped in regulation and control.

An Alternative Story

The good news is that there are other stories—alternative narratives—that can be told about early childhood education: stories with very different values, understandings, and practices. These are stories that prioritise politics and ethics over managerial and technical practices (politics and ethics as first practice is the subject of Chapter 3 in ANEC). They start from political questions, for example: What do we want for our children? What is the purpose and meaning of education? What are the fundamental values and ethics of education? What is our image of the child? How should we relate to each other? Do they not start from technical questions such as: What works? These are stories that draw on a wide range of disciplines and theories. These are stories that are aware of the risks of early childhood education—but also believe in the possibilities of an education that might contribute towards a more democratic, caring, just, and sustainable world.

Among these stories is one that might be called the story of democracy, experimentation, and potentiality. This story takes democracy as a fundamental value of education, experimenta-
tion as a fundamental principle of pedagogical work, and potentiality as a fundamental belief about children and adults alike. A fundamental belief in potentiality warrants that the potentiality of us all is great and unknowable, quite simply incalculable, a matter of . . . and . . . and . . . As the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza puts it: “We never know in advance what a body can do.” Or, in the words of the philosopher and educationalist John Dewey, human experience can “have no end until experience itself comes to an end.”

When it comes to choosing ethics, the story of democracy, experimentation, and potentiality makes a clear choice: the ethics of care and the ethics of an encounter. The ethics of care involves both particular acts of caring and a “general habit of mind that should inform all aspects of life” (Tronto, 1993, p. 127), which includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. The ethics of an encounter seeks to relate to the Other in a way that respects the Other’s uniqueness and resists making the Other into the Same, as everything which is pre-made categories implies we make the Other to be. The story of democracy, movement, and experimentation as the particular position from which we view the world, of adopting a god’s eye view that is objective and universal. Paradigms are, like stories, diverse and complex, but I will simplify here to clarify the point. The dominant discourse, the story of quality and high returns, views the world through the lens of the paradigm of positivism. This paradigm believes the world can be truly known, that the world is a thing to be observed and measured, that the world is a thing to be understood. The economic, the technical, the social, the political, with much else besides. Paradigms and Theories

The role of theory and paradigm are vital to contesting early childhood. Different stories draw on different theories and theorists, or different ways of trying to make sense of the world and our place as humans within it. As already noted, the dominant discourse draws in particular on theories in two disciplines—child development in psychology, and human capital in economics. The story of democracy, experimentation, and potentiality, and indeed most of the books in the Contesting Early Childhood series, draw on very different theories from a wider array of disciplines. You will find authors working with Foucault’s theories of power relations (the subject of Chapter 5 in ANEC), with Deleuze and Guattari’s theories of experimentation and creative thinking (Chapter 6), with Levinas’s theory of the ethics of an encounter, with Barad’s theory of agential realism (Chapter 7), with complexity theory and its various proponents, and with much else besides.
plexity and context. With natural science as an ideal, this paradigm puts much faith in the figure of the objective, rational, and authorita- tive expert, who is able to muster the evidence that reveals how things truly are and what we must do to change them.

By contrast, a story such as that of democ- racy, experimentation, and potentiality views the world from the position of what might be termed a paradigm of post-foundationalism. Truth, from this perspective, is not something that is absolute and immutable, or out there awaiting discovery by an impartial scientist, but is “the contingent product of particular, situated ways of comprehending the world” (Otto, 1999, p. 17). Indeed, it is better to speak of stories and trajectories. Truth, and if the postfoundationalist values and seeks certainty, control, and objec- tivity, the post-foundationalist welcomes and seeks to work with complexity, uncertainty, and unpredictability.

This has profound implications. Paradigm is a choice, not an inevitability. We can change paradigm, and to do so is also to change how we understand what a human being is, can be, and should be (ontology), what knowledge and learning is, can be, and should be (epis- temology), and what relationships are, can be, and should be (ethics). And these changes, in turn, have profound consequences for policy, provision, and practice, not the least for early childhood education. I take issue with the tollers of the story of quality and high standards, yet I am too quick to acknowledge what they have done: adopted a paradigm and taken a position, which is just one of many they could have adopted. To take a position and acknowl- edge you have made a choice is one thing; to take a position and behave as if it is the only one, is quite another and smacks of myopic arrogance.

Reggio Emilia: Contesting Dominant Discourses in Practice

As I said at the beginning, Reggio Emilia has a major role in the CEC series, with three titles from and about that city’s early childhood edu- cation. I return to Reggio in ANEC (Chapter 4), explaining why this Italian experience is so important to those wanting to contest early childhood. Not, I argue, because it is a trans- formed, perfected, or exact blueprint that, properly applied, can provide a panacea for early childhood education. For, it seems to me that the education undertaken in the municipal schools is best understood not as an approach, implying a generalizable model, but as a local cultural project that has emerged from a very particular time and place. From my perspective, there are three reasons for the importance of this local cultural project. First, it shows what can be achieved by local communities or groups with the courage and imagination to engage in what Roberto Unger has termed “democratic exper- imentation,” which is further described as “the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below . . . in which democracy is not the most important terrain” (Unger, 2005, pp. 179, 182). If Reggio Emilia has achieved something special educationally, “a collec- tive experimental practice from below,” then such democratic experimentalism can surely happen in some other places - where conditions are right. Indeed, it can and has happened, as there are numerous other examples of innova- tive local projects in early childhood education in other parts of Italy and far beyond.

Second, Reggio Emilia challenges the dictator- ship of no alternative and the story of quality and high returns. For Reggio has had the courage to think for themselves in con- structing new discourses, and in so doing daring to make the choice of understanding the child as a rich child, a child of infinite capacities, a child born with a hundred languages; [and] building a new pedagog- ical project, foregrounding relationships and encounters, dialogue and negotiation, reflection and critical thinking; border crossing disciplines and perspectives (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013, p. 123).

In this way the city shows that there are alter- natives, such as creating their own narrative, which might indeed be called a story of democ- racy, experimentation, and potentiality, and by so doing has proven other worlds are possible, where other stories cannot only be told but enacted, and not only enacted but sustained.

Finally, Reggio Emilia demonstrates the importance of working with political ques- tions as a basis for building up early childhood education. They do so explicitly, being quite upfront about doing this: for, to repeat Malaguzzi’s clearly stated view, education is “always a political discourse whether we know it or not. It is about working with cultural choices, but it clearly also means working with political choices.” (Cagliari, Castagnetti, Giudici, Rinaldi, Vecchi and Moss, 2016, p. 267).

Why Does Contesting Early Childhood Matter?

I have already touched on one reason why it is important to contest dominant discourses, offering instead a diversity of narratives about early childhood education. Such diversity is a precondition for a democratic politics of edu- cation, in which politics and ethics are first practices, which constitute an important element in a democratic society.

A second reason for contesting early childhood is because, in Foucault’s words, “everything is dangerous.” What Foucault is getting at is that however well meant something is, however virtuous its proponents may be, however worthy its goals, there are always harmful risks attached. This is because power relations are always present, and these relations inevi- tably lead to attempts to govern and control others. In Foucault’s words, “In human relations, whatever they are – whether it be a question of communi- cating verbally . . . or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship – power is always present. I mean the relationship in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another (Foucault, 1987, p. 11).

Foucault, and his compatriot, Gilles Deleuze, have delved into the means, the human tech- nologies, through which such direction is exercised, and it is clear that over time these have become more pervasive, invasive, and powerful, capable of shaping not only our behaviour but our desires, fears, and pleas- sures, of forming the very ways we think about things and about ourselves: capable in short of governing the soul. Early childhood has not escaped this process.

As Foucault constantly reminds us, we can never escape power relations. One way to mitigate the dangers is to create an environ- ment of critical thinking among all forms of early childhood education – to treat all stories (including the story of democracy, exper- imentation, and potentiality) with caution and scepticism, seeing every narrative as having the potential both to emancipate and govern. In short, to create an environment where contesting early childhood is accepted practice, where analyses of power relations are routinely brought to bear on narratives, and where no narrative can ease its way unchal- lenged to claim it is natural, neutral, and only the show in town.

The CEC series seeks to contribute to the creation of a critical environment. But necessary as critique is, and I think it very necessary, it is not enough; there must also be hope. The series offers hope in two connected ways. First, by the alternative narratives offered alongside diverse paradigms and theories, showing that there are other ways of thinking and talking about early childhood education. Second, by demonstrating how those alternatives can be put to work, enacted in real, concrete sit- uations. Whether in preschools in Sweden (Olofsson, 2009; Moss, 2012; Davies, 2014) or in childcare centres in Australia (Taylor, 2015) or in the municipal schools in

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Innovations in Early Education

The Resistance Movement

I am certainly not naïve enough to think that a few books, however good they may be, will change the world of early childhood education and remove the dictatorship of no alternative. So, what might the series, realistically, hope to achieve? Before attempting an answer, I need to situate the series in a wider context.

I have already said that resistance is to be found in many shapes and sizes. Developing this theme, it seems to me that CEC is part of a growing international movement that is both critiquing the dominant discourse and exploring and creating alternative narratives. This might be thought of as a resistance movement confronting the dictatorship of no alternative, forming a global network of alternative storytellers from which new thinking and new ways of working are constantly emerging. Others in the resistance movement, whether in their everyday work, their postgraduate theses, or their research and publications. Indeed, there is a burgeoning resistance literature—the CEC series is not alone.

Peter Moss and Marina Castagnetti during a NAREA Alternative Narratives lecture series

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Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable (Friedman, 1982, p.12).

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