

# We can turn the tide

## Reclaiming well-being and social justice as the foundation of early childhood education

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IFS: THE INTERNATIONAL FROEBEL SOCIETY  
Promoting Child-Centred Kindergarten & Early Education Worldwide



What counts, who count's in early childhood education and care?  
A call to *de*-centre ECEC and *re*-contextualise early childhood(s)

Our children can't be clean and tidy when they go to school; where can I bathe my child... there's a flood in my house. How? What if my child gets pneumonia? I didn't have children for them to get sick  
(a father)

...if there are no conditions at home for doing homework, if seven of them live in a small space. Everything is done there – the cooking, baking, smoking, changing babies, sleeping... all seven of them! How can a child learn and be at peace? What else do I have to say? Which factors have an impact on their development? I have mentioned enough -- poverty, malnutrition, [and] hunger...  
(a school principal)

# context

uniformity and the desiring machine  
pockets of resistance (and new alliances)

# Third world problems?

- Growing up under conditions of poverty and exclusion is a reality for an increasing number of children in Europe
- Being 'marginalised' is an experience no longer confined to the margins (neither geographically nor socially)
- Some countries more affected than others by dictatorship of TINA (there-is-no-alternative) and austerity policies that seek to dismantle public services and the welfare state (2015 Crisis Monitoring Report)
- Experiences of poverty and exclusion have become a new normality across Europe, including the most affluent countries
- 1 in 5 children in the UK live in cold and damp homes, 1 in 10 lack a warm winter coat; 1 in 20 grow up suffering from hunger and malnutrition. The only G7 country where wealth inequality is on the rise (Lansley&Mack, 2015)

# Chickens coming home to roost?

- In 2015, more than one million refugees and migrants entered Europe through perilous routes, fleeing war, violence and persecution in countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (the top three countries of origin)
- Many choose to seek asylum in EU Members States
- Despite highly questionable actions taken by the EU to prevent refugees from entering, and to keep them in confinement in Turkey or the country of first arrival (Greece), more than ~~135,000~~ 215,000 people have reached Europe since the start of 2016, 2,868 are dead or missing according to UNHCR data
- UNICEF states that *one in four asylum seekers in 2015 was a child – a total of 110,000 children in the first six months of 2015* alone.

## Third World Problems? (cont.)

- Ensuring the right to inclusive, culturally and locally appropriate early childhood education, care and development for all children is no longer a question that is only relevant to so-called ‘developing’ countries
- Boundaries between centre and periphery have become blurred (Braidotti)
- Europe (and North America) need to learn from Kenya, Palestine and Colombia – and vice versa

## Inequality: the crisis within

Present day Europe is struggling with multiculturalism at a time of increasing racism and xenophobia. The paradoxes, power dissymmetries and fragmentations of the present historical context rather require **that we shift the political debate from the issue of differences between cultures to differences *within* the same culture.** In other words, one of the features of our present historical condition is the shifting grounds on which periphery and centre confront each other, with a new level of complexity which defies dualistic or oppositional thinking.

(Rosi Braidotti)

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## Questions of purpose (1)

- EU understandings of *what* early childhood services are, *who* they are for, and what *purpose* they serve have shifted dramatically since 1992
- From *childcare services* as a commodity (to enable female labour market participation) to *early-childhood-education-and-care* and the politicisation of ‘a critical period in human life’  
(Woodhead)
- *Education* (LLL) has replaced *Care* as the central element. From ECEC to ECE? *A careless society* (Lynch)?
- Early childhood education seen as key tool for achieving ambitious policy goals

## Questions of purpose (2):

A narrow educational paradigm and the absence of systemic thinking

- Many in the early childhood sector (myself included) have argued for a right to education, in the broadest sense, from birth
- Unfortunately, a narrow definition of education prevails (firmly grounded in English language discourses, and constantly reinforced by global agents of neoliberalism: EU, OECD, World Bank, Philanthro-capitalism...)
- **Éducation? Educación? Bildung? Educação?**
- Increasingly, difference (*Différance*), diversity and (inequality) are framed in terms of educational achievement gaps, and documented / evidenced through 'assessment'
- *Closing the gap* through increasing participation in early childhood education – the 'more-of-the-same' trap?

# A critical example

## World Bank Education strategy

*Learning for All: investing in people's knowledge and skills to promote development:*

- Human rights mentioned only in passing; children's rights completely absent from document
- Play: absent (except for collocations, e.g. 'bank played pivotal role...')
- Diversity: absent
- Democracy: absent
- **Assessment: 107 hits on 112 pages**



# Public education: Collateral damage?

## Tanzania 1989 - 1996

- Primary school attendance was almost 100%
- Dropped sharply to 70% after World Bank imposes Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), pushing towards privatisation and public sector cuts (Klees, Smoff & Stromquist, 2012)

## Ghana / Uganda / Malawi 2016

- World Bank forcing countries to open education systems to private-for-profit providers
- Pearson / Bridge providing 'low-fee' private schools to supplant public provision
- Fees amount to 40-70% of family income. Immediate consequence is a drop in enrolment rates for girls (Benn, 2016; EI, 2016)

Meanwhile, in the real world...

Dear mathias

[...] they sales Colombia to create a currículum and evaluation of maths and reading achievements.

[...] they are totally committment with Pisa test.

[...] I was fighting and defending *de cero a siempre* because Ministry of Education Wants to take the whole control, they argue that **children are wasting time with play, arts and literature.**

(personal communication, Bogotá)



Dear Mathias

Colombia is trying to be accepted by OCDE. They did an study about education in Colombia.

[...] They presented as results about the big gap of Colombian childrens related to others countries.

They insisted a lot that the study demonstred that Children are not learning what they need because their performance was very low .

[...] The key issue is the discussion between Human development vs. scholar objectives related to meet international standards

In the background all is about PISA´s test and Colombian results in order to be accepted in OCDE

(personal communication, Bogotá)

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# Learning from the margins: ECD as public good and public responsibility:

*A sustainable long-term public policy for early childhood;  
providing comprehensive and integrated ECD/ECEC  
Promoting integrated governance  
that recognises knowledge(s),  
practices and developments in the  
diverse territories*

**POR SU ALTA  
CONTRIBUCIÓN A LA  
ERRADICACIÓN DE LA  
POBREZA**

**Desarrollo humano**

Salud

- Menor morbilidad y mortalidad
- Mejores índices de nutrición
- Mayor práctica de estilos de vida saludables

Educación

- Menor repitencia y deserción
- Mejores resultados en calidad
- Mejores competencias productivas
- Mayor demanda de educación superior

Cohesión social

- Mayor solidaridad
- Mayor respeto por las instituciones
- Reducción de costos sociales por infracciones a la Ley
- Desarrollo de cultura democrática

Igualdad

- Intervenciones tempranas iguales reducen de forma notoria la desigualdad de capacidades y oportunidades
- Menores costos sociales asociados a corrección de desigualdades





# Stories of relevance and recognition: Is ECE the solution – or part of the problem?



Whose knowledge  
and experience are  
valued and deemed  
relevant?  
Who decides – and  
who is silenced?

(The Family Wall Project,  
EDENN, Ireland)

# Stories of purpose at local and global level: Education for survival?



Children learn through  
apprenticeship  
Learning is participative,  
emerging, generative,  
developmental and socially  
transformative  
Learning is for survival

(John Ng'Asike, Kenya)

# Theoretical and conceptual alliances

The ethics of nomadic subjectivity rejects moral universalism and works toward a *different idea of ethical accountability in the sense of a fundamental reconfiguration of our being in the world that is ethnically diverse, technologically and globally mediated, and fast changing.*

One of the most pointed paradoxes of our era is precisely *the clash between the urgency of finding new and alternative modes of political and ethical agency, on the one hand, and the inertia or self-interest of neoconservative thought on the other.*

It is urgent to explore and experiment with more adequate forms of nonunitary, nomadic, and yet accountable modes of envisaging both subjectivity and democratic, ethical interaction.

Rosi Braidotti



# Resisting ‘normal science’ and indigenous scholarship

*Western cognitivist approaches to learning and assessment fail to acknowledge the foundational significance of children and families’ spiritual, social, cultural and emotional wellbeing.* In ignoring the validity of other ways of being knowing, doing and relating, and instead focussing on increasingly prescriptive, ‘normative’ standards for learning, these approaches are inadvertently excluding an increasingly large sector of the population, those who do not fit within these ‘normal’ parameters.

[...]

This experience suggests *that re-engagement of spiritual interconnectedness and spiritual wellbeing is a form of resistance against ‘normal science’, the paradigm of which has disavowed recognition of spiritual dimensions, privileging positivism and cognition over embodied, intuitive and spiritual ways of knowing.*

(Ritchie, 2016)

# Indigenous ontologies never had a nature-culture dualism, never truly differentiated nature and culture

(Alison Jones and Te Kawehau Hoskins)

# Friedrich Froebel: post-humanist and new materialist readings?

When he is at play a child talks continuously, thus indicating that with him talking is not yet distinguished from himself as talker, nor names from the things named. Play and speech are the elements in which the child now lives. *So he attributes the same life to all about him. The pebble, the chip of wood, the plant, the flower, the animal — each and all can hear and feel and speak.*

(Friedrich Froebel, 1826/1912)

Friedrich Froebel:  
post-humanist and new materialist readings?

In childhood there is a four-fold development of life – the child's own inner life; his life in relation with parents and family; his life in relation, common to him and them, with a higher invisible Being; and, especially, his life in relation with nature, regarded as endowed with life like his own

(Friedrich Froebel, 1826/1912)

# Friedrich Froebel: political and pedagogical readings

- Uniqueness of each child's capacity and potential
- Holistic view of each child's development



- Importance of play as a central integrating element in a child's development and learning
- Ecological view of humankind in the natural and spiritual world
- Integrity of childhood in its own right
- The child as part of a family and a community



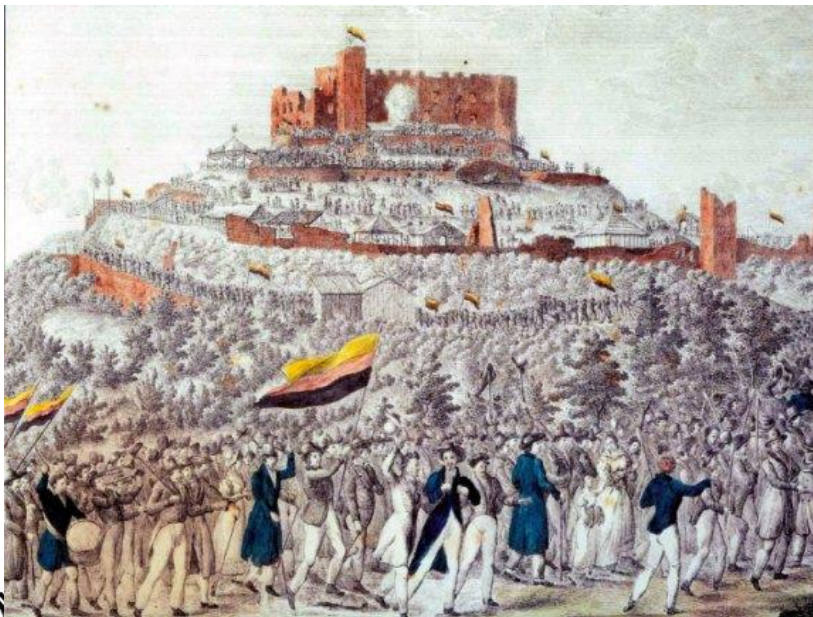


# Friedrich Froebel: political and pedagogical readings

- 1832 Hambach Festival: The republican movement demanding liberty, civil and political rights as well as national unity and popular sovereignty against the 'Holy Alliance' (Austria, Russia, Prussia)
- 1848 Revolutions in Germany and Europe



- Early education for all: the basis for a democratic society
- Early education requires highly qualified, well-educated professionals (women!)
- Early education is a public good and public responsibility (independent from church and state!)





# Friedrich Froebel's Kindergarten: Banned by the Prussian government in 1852



For being  
**Atheist...**  
**Socialist...**  
**... and outright  
dangerous!**

# Early childhood politics, 21<sup>st</sup> century

‘As Former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it’s clear to us that our military readiness could be put in jeopardy given the fact that **nearly 75 percent of young Americans are unable to serve in uniform.** We joined Mission: Readiness because we believe that investing in our children through **early education** is not a Republican issue or Democratic issue. It’s a plain common sense issue **critical to our National Security.**’

‘Our national security in the year 2030 is absolutely dependent on what’s going on in pre-kindergarten today. We urge Congress to take action on this issue this year.’

Generals John M. Shalikashvili, Henry H. Shelton (US Army) and Rear Admiral James Barnett (US Navy) emphasise the importance of early childhood education <http://www.missionreadiness.org/>





# Where to from here? (a tentative roadmap)



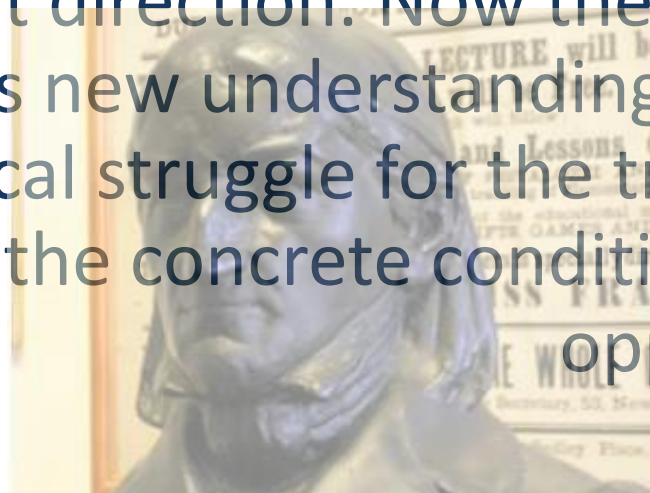
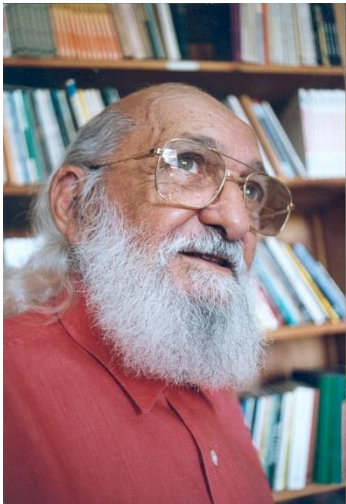
Hic sunt Leones

1. the *bigger picture*: an extended systemic approach across all dimensions of the 'competent system': children in context, practice, research/theory, policy
2. the *margins within*: learning from/with indigenous methodologies / epistemologies for research with marginalised communities
3. '*Why*' questions and *social justice*: radical, critical and transformative inquiry, and resistance to 'normal science'

## An activist alliance: Froebel and Freire

A more critical understanding of the situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction. Now the person who has this new understanding can engage in a political struggle for the transformation of the concrete conditions in which the oppression prevails

Paulo Freire 2002



# Thank you!

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[www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Early-Childhood-Research-Centre/](http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Early-Childhood-Research-Centre/)



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