Chapter 11
Democratic Experimentation in Early Childhood Education

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The Consensus on Early Childhood and Equality

Over the last decade or so, there seems to be an overwhelming consensus that (a) early childhood education matters for the developmental outcomes of children, (b) that this is most salient for children 'at risk' for underachieving in the educational system in later years (i.e. children living in poverty and children from ethnic minorities), (c) that this is only the case when early childhood education is of high quality and (d) that the early years workforce is one of the most salient predictors of this quality. In a first section, we will briefly illustrate the consensus in the academia as well as in policy on these four claims. Then, we will more critically try to uncover aspects that remain undiscussed and argue why this consensus constitutes a social order that instrumentalises children as well as parents and professionals and may be counterproductive for democratic experimentation. We subsequently illustrate this critique by drawing on studies on the professionalisation of childcare workers in the municipality of Ghent, as these may indicate some possible ways forward. Or probably it is better to speak about side roads rather than ways forward as it remains unpredictable where these roads are leading to.

There is overwhelming evidence of the long-term beneficial effects of early childhood education on the cognitive and social competences of children later in life. This international consensus is largely inspired by studies on outcomes on the use of early childhood education in the USA. Poor and/or ethnic minority children who were enrolled in programmes such as Abecedarian, Perry Preschool and High/Scope have been followed during many years, and the costs of these programmes are compared to the alleged long-term benefits (Barnett and Masse 2007; Nores and Barnett 2010). The findings of these studies have been combined with findings from

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neuroscience, to explain *why* the early years are so important for later developmental outcomes and subsequently translated into policy recommendations to invest in early childhood education, promising high returns on investments (Heckman 2006; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Shonkoff 2011). More recently, this vein of mainstream research has also been exported outside of the USA. One salient example is the much discussed recent Lancet series on child development, a meta-study of 42 efficacy or effectiveness studies and programme assessments of early childhood education programmes in low- and middle-income countries (Engle et al. 2011). The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study, conducted in England, and its Northern Irish counterpart (EPPNI) are probably the most cited European studies in this vain, equally concluding that high-quality early-year programmes have positive effects on educational achievements later in life (Hanna et al. 2006; Sylva et al. 2004). A recent meta-analysis of a variety of European effectiveness studies confirms this consensus (Burger 2010). Of course, there are studies that contradict the univocal success story: some population studies in the Netherlands (e.g. Driessen 2004) and France (Caille 2001), for instance, yield inconsistent findings and large-scale effectiveness studies of the implementation of High/Scope-like programmes in the Netherlands also yield inconsistent and unsustainable results (e.g. Veen et al. 2000). Yet, these studies do not question the overall consensus. Rather, they confirm the findings that quality matters, as the lack of positive results is attributed to the inconsistent quality of provisions in the targeted geographical areas (Driessen 2004).

Most studies concur in stating that the beneficial effects are more salient for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and implicitly suggest prioritising investments to these groups at risk for later school dropout. The policy priorities are symbolised by the famous Heckman curve, showing that 'return to human capital investment in disadvantaged children' is at its peak in preschool years (Heckman 2006). The researchers explicitly advocate that policy and practice should be moulded by their findings (e.g. Shonkoff 2011) and they can enjoy the pleasure of knowing that this is exactly what seems to happen. All major international organisations have referred to these studies to advocate for investments in early childhood education as one of the major instruments to 'level the playing field', that is, to combat poverty, including the World Bank (Alderman 2011; Penn 2002), UNESCO (2010), Unicef (Unicef Innocenti Research Centre 2008) and the EU (European Commission 2011). The latest OECD report on early childhood education starts by stating:

> There is a growing body of evidence that children starting strong in their learning and well-being will have better outcomes when they grow older. Such evidence has driven policy makers to design an early intervention and re-think their education spending patterns to gain "value for money". (OECD 2012, p. 3)

The consensus on the 'human capital investment paradigm' has obviously also dripped down to national policy makers in various European countries, who agree to frame early childhood education as a means of realising equal life chances by preparing school success in the compulsory school age. The human capital paradigm is explicitly mentioned in policy texts in the UK, France and Flanders as well as in other countries.

The Tyranny of Consensus

In this apparent consensus, it may be wise to remember the words of Michel Foucault:

> Je ne cherche pas à dire que tout est mauvais, mais que tout est dangereux, ce qui n'est pas exactement la même chose que ce qui est mauvais. Si tout est dangereux, alors nous avons toujours quelque chose à faire.[1] (Foucault 1983, p. 1205)

Indeed, the renewed focus on early childhood education in the realm of a concern for equal opportunities is not bad. Yet, the consensus may be worrying, as there is no place for democracy in contexts of consensus. And consensus, understood as the absence of politics (Mouffe 2005), is precisely what is at stake. This is quite obvious in the rationale of the World Bank for investing in early childhood education, as it 'is embraced across the political spectrum, as a matter of fairness for the left and as a matter of personal effort for the right' (Paes de Barros et al. 2009, p. xvii). The idea is clearly to present early childhood education as an a-political environment, that is, 'not about government raising children (…). It is not about liberals versus conservatives. This is about wise investors who defy ideological labels' (Eming Young 2007, p. 31). What is particularly worrying in this consensus is that it (a) disables public discussions on what participation of parents may mean (silencing parents), (b) pretends that the social and societal meaning of early childhood education is beyond debate and therefore disables the public discussion on the very meaning of education, (c) consequently avoids any discussion on what quality may be, silencing the voices of parents, children and practitioners in decisions made about their lives and (d) propagates a technocratic vision of what professionalism is that entails a narrow concept of professionalisation as the accumulation of knowledge, skills and dispositions, ignoring the potential that professionals in the public sphere of education can play in what Biesta (2011) calls 'learning through citizenship'. We will shortly elaborate on this critique, before exploring alternative practices.

Instrumentalised Parents

A typical example of the tendency to 'scientific consensus' is the evolution that can be noted in the OECD Starting Strong reports with regard to the participation of parents. While there is since long a consensus on the importance of parent involvement, the vocabulary in which this is framed substantially changed over the last few years. The 2006 edition extensively advocated for broad curricula, providing generic frameworks that needed to be locally elaborated in dialogue with parents and local communities. The 2006 edition also advocated for 'emerging curricula', meaning

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[1] My aim is not to say that everything is bad, but rather that everything is dangerous, which is not quite the same. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do (translation by us).

open-ended curricula, that would not impose specific outcomes to be reached by children, let alone implement predefined programmes, but rather take advantage of what children and parents live in daily situations (OECD 2006). In contrast, the subtitle of the last edition of the OECD Starting Strong Report, published in 2012, is eloquent for the shift in thinking: 'A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care' (OECD 2012). While it still bears some vague memories of the previous report, advocating for parent and community involvement, the tone has substantially changed. In the 2006 report, parents and communities were important for democratic reasons, as bearer of voices that need to be heard when deciding about public education. In the 2012 edition, they are highly instrumentalised.

> Parental and community engagement is increasingly seen as an important policy lever to enhance healthy child development and learning. (…) Parental engagement – especially in ensuring high-quality children's learning at home and communicating with ECEC staff – is strongly associated with children's later academic success, high school completion, socio-emotional development and adaptation in society. (OECD 2012, p. 12)

The quotation illustrates much of the problems with the present consensual thinking. The reason to involve parents is the correlation between their involvement and developmental outcomes, as described by science, and since it belongs to the scientific output, it is beyond reasonable doubt and cannot be questioned. Parents are not involved out of a democratic concern to hear a plurality of voices, but paradoxically – through the predefined involvement – the plurality is silenced. It is indeed early childhood education (or the scientists having this sector as their core business) that defines unilaterally *what* parent engagement is and *how* it needs to be expressed. As a consequence, parents are reduced to be the spectators of the debate on what their alleged 'problem' is. It is evident that the consequence of this approach is that some parents will be constructed as 'good citizens', while others are constructed as 'in need of support to enhance participation'. Parents are attributed with a series of duties (ensure a high-quality home environment), rather than entitlements, and in so doing a concept of the 'good enough' parent is constructed, independent of the material, social and cultural context in which the family lives, that inevitably will have inclusive and exclusive effects. In short, one could summarise this concept of parental and community engagement as an instrument for the *socialisation* of children, meaning, the insertion in the social order: the preparation of future citizenship in a meritocratic and highly competitive society, in which parents are constructed as individual entrepreneurs (Masschelein and Simons 2002) who are expected to make the right choices and right investments in the human capital of their child.

Instrumentalised ECEC

What the desired outcomes or the very meaning of early childhood education may be is absent from the debate, as this is predefined by science. It seems to be unquestionable that the meaning of ECEC resides in preparing children for compulsory school. Just as compulsory school is narrowed down to a labour market instrument.

The consequence is that the meaning of ECEC resides outside ECEC, as it is predominantly a preparation for *later*. Another consequence is that the meaning is predominantly framed in economic terms, rather than in pedagogical, let alone in political terms. There is little place to discuss what might be democratic (or what might be a democratic deficit) in ECEC when its meaning resides primarily in the expected effects on the labour market. It needs to be noticed that narrowing down ECEC as a preparation for compulsory schooling is highly problematic and internationally contested (Moss forthcoming). One can indeed argue that ECEC is first and foremost a place of democratic practice (Moss 2007) or that it is a space of cultural production (Rinaldi 2005). But what is important to stress here is that the alleged consensus on its meaning not only instrumentalises ECEC but also silences children, parents and professionals in the debate on what ECEC should be about.

Instrumentalised Quality

As a result, children, parents or professionals are denied access to the debates on what constitutes quality. As said earlier, the consensus in academia and policy is that early childhood matters but only if it is of high quality. In the dominant vein of research, quality is de facto predefined as what is measured by quality rating scales, such as ITERS and ECERS (Harms et al. 1998, 2003). As a consequence, what constitutes quality is defined without consulting professionals, parents or children who are concerned by the study. Yet, cross-cultural studies clearly show how conceptions of quality (regarding structural quality aspects, such as adult-child ratio, as well as more pedagogical aspects regarding interactions) might change according to cultural and historical contexts (Tobin et al. 2009). We might, for instance, substantially differ in how we deal with the inevitable tensions between educational aims of autonomy and solidarity (or individual development versus social cohesion). We might also substantially differ on the political meaning (e.g. policy to enhance female labour participation, a policy for distributional justice, a structural policy for all families or a targeted approach for the education of children living in families 'at risk'). It is clear that what constitutes quality will substantially differ according to one's opinions on what ECEC is for. By predefining quality (in order to make it measurable), a democratic deficit is installed as the discussion on its meaning is made redundant. In so doing, the consensus on the human capital paradigm functions as a tyranny, or 'the dictatorship of no alternatives' (Ungerer in Moss and Fielding 2010). As Biesta (2007) suggests, this leads to a technocratic model in which the only relevant research questions are about effectiveness, forgetting that what counts as effective crucially depends on judgements about what is desirable. The problem is that the choices (of what is desirable) remain implicit, uncontested and presented as evident, rather than as a choice amidst other possibilities. Biesta adds that this severely limits the opportunities for educational practitioners to make judgements about what is desirable in ways that are sensitive to and relevant for their own contextualised settings.

Instrumentalised Professionals

The dominant focus on human capital investments indeed seriously impacts on the conceptualisation of professionalism. Many scholars have empirically demonstrated the relations between higher qualifications (i.e. at bachelor's levels) and quality indicators, as well as outcomes for children (Clarke-Stewart et al. 2002; Early 2007; Fukkink and Lont 2007; Sylva et al. 2004). Some scholars have added that a lack of pre-service training can be compensated by in-service training, provided it is of sufficient intensity and length (Fukkink and Lont 2007; Jaegher et al. 2000; Pianta et al. 2008). Despite the consensus on the importance of training of the early years workforce, there is very little research on the content and format of this training. The latest OECD report (2012, pp. 145–146) summarises what is considered to be the mainstream understanding of the content of this professionalism.

> Qualifications can matter in terms of which skill sets and what knowledge are recognised as important for working with children. The skills and staff traits that research identifies as important in facilitating high-quality services and outcomes are: good understanding of child development and learning; ability to develop children's perspectives; ability to praise, comfort, question and be responsive to children; leadership skills, problem solving and development of targeted lesson plans; good vocabulary and ability to elicit children's ideas.

Professionalisation, in this vein, is considered to be a list of competences – knowledge, skills and dispositions – that the individual professional needs to achieve, in order to reach the desired, yet undiscussed, outcomes in children. Again, it is striking that most countries tend to ignore what competencies may be necessary in order to negotiate with diverse stakeholders about what the desired outcomes might be. A recent survey among experts in 15 EU countries about professional and training competence profiles reveals that very little, if any, attention is devoted to discussing the meaning of early childhood education with parents, nor about the relation between early childhood services and the broader community (Urban et al. 2011). As a consequence of the technical notion of individual skills, the responsibility of the quality rests on the shoulders of the educators, who are supposed to invest in their lifelong learning. In sum, the tendency to consider desired outcomes in children as individual assets (in line with the meritocratic society) and to construct parents as entrepreneurs of their own life and of the life of their child is also to be found in the construction of the ideal professional. This is clearly illustrated in the survey we mentioned above, where it reveals that in many countries, the qualified teacher is assisted by unqualified assistants, who very often take up the caring roles, reducing the teachers' function to a very narrow concept of 'learning' as intrinsically different from 'caring' (Van Laere et al. 2012). In so doing, the professional is reduced to a technocratic function, expected to deliver a child that is predefined, by applying 'effective' curricula and programmes that are developed and evaluated by scientists. Obviously, that predefined child is as much as possible an average child, meaning that the child that differs from this norm needs compensation programmes to bring it as soon as possible to an alleged normalcy. In contrast, reality is increasingly complex and *dis-normal*.

To give but a few examples, the number of children in poverty has doubled over the last decade in Flanders, and while birth rates are expected to remain almost equal in the next decade (Kind en Gezin 2011), it is also expected that the number of children will increase with 30+ % in the most densely populated and poorest areas of Brussels, with the highest percentages of immigrant families (Humblet 2010). Equally, the OECD expects a rapidly growing diversification of families, amongst others through the increase in single parent families (OECD 2011). In short, the average child is dead. However, this crucial issue is often reduced to the acknowledgement that professionals will have to acquire an additional set of skills, related to intercultural approaches, approaches to second languages and language acquisition, and working with children at risk (Eurydice 2009, quoted in OECD 2012).

A Depoliticised Education

The outcomes, which are defined for children (and that define the very meaning of early childhood education), tend to make the educational work controllable (with efficiency and effectiveness as the major buzzwords) and predictable. In continuation with that concern, also the professional is trained to control, to monitor and to predict. The instrumentalisation entailed by the human capital paradigm constructs what is 'a good child', an average child that benefits from ECEC and is pleased to further invest in its education. It also constructs the 'good parent', the parent who participates in ECEC in ways that the early childhood centre recognises as a correct way to participate (e.g. attend meetings, listen carefully at meetings and ask interesting questions, interesting being defined as questions that illustrate the parents' interest in ECEC, but do not challenge the pedagogical expertise of the educator). And it constructs what is a 'good practitioner', the one who knows about child development and the stimulation of different domains of development and the one who knows about the curriculum and has the skills and dispositions to adequately perform what is outlined in the curriculum. In other words, this 'good child', 'good parent' and 'good professional' can be considered as variations on the 'good citizen', meaning 'the one that goes with the flow' (Biesta 2011). It leaves little place for the odd, the strange, the unfamiliar, the unexpected, and the one who challenges us by asking the unexpected question, in short, the one who is 'out of order' (Biesta 2011). Consequently, accepting the dominant consensus on ECEC would mean defining children, parents and professionals in their social identity, meaning in their *becoming* instruments to realise goals that are decided without them. As Biesta (2011) explained, we need to distinguish this social identity from the political identity that has to do with the participation in collective decision-making. Accepting the consensus on ECEC, as a consequence, would imply a profound depoliticising of the education and present a democratic deficit. Let us look at two concrete observations from daily practice to illustrate another possibility.

> In the context of a project on diversity in early childhood education in Brussels, mothers were interviewed by centre managers about their experiences with the child care centre. One immigrant mother of African descent explains how the number of little bicycles in the centre amazes her. She says this is wonderful, since each child can ride the bicycle whenever he wants, without having to take turns. And then she asks: 'But how do you do to teach children how to share?'

By asking this question, the mother points at the essence of what Mouffe (2000) calls the democratic paradox between freedom and equality, painfully unveiling that it is not possible to reach consensus over such matters. This is also at the core of Sen's argument on the impossibility of having a rational consensus of what constitutes fairness or justice (Sen 2009).

> A municipal day care centre started with a project on the inclusion of children with a disability. The centre is divided into two groups: one for babies and one for toddlers. Since the foundation of the centre, many years ago, it is considered 'normal' that children change from the baby to the toddler group when they start to walk and the spaces are also designed as such. Due to the inclusion project, there is a baby with a motor impairment who will probably never walk. However, his mother asks the staff to let him go to the toddler group together with some of his friends. The question of the mother is the subject of long and heated debates in the team. The outcome of this negotiation is eventually that the centre decides to change the organisation of the groups and not to distinguish babies from toddlers, but rather to have two mixed-age groups.

The arrival of the child with a motor impairment, together with the question of his mother can be considered as an 'interruption of the existing order' (Biesta 2011). It is, as Biesta explains, not a claim to identify the child with his walking peers, since he will probably never walk. It is rather a claim of a new identity, leading to a reconfiguration of the existing order. It is therefore an example of the possibility of *subjectification*. Let us now look at some of the conditions that allow these 'interruption' or potential moments of democratic experimentalism (or repoliticising for that matter) to occur.

There Are Alternatives

In different regions in Europe and beyond, alternative views on early childhood have been explored, albeit that they are mostly published off the beaten tracks (often meaning in other languages than English). Well-known examples are the policies of the major municipalities of Tuscany and Emilia Romagna in Italy. They typically share a tradition of considering early childhood education as a public good and therefore to be negotiated with parents, professionals and policy makers in public fora. Professionalism is not considered as an achievement of individuals, but as a quality of the system, that includes not only individual practitioners but also their relationships within the team and across teams (*collegialità*) and with other stakeholders. The deeply embedded conviction of education as a public good is closely related to the work of pedagogues such as Bruno Chiari and Lori Malaguzzi who were actively involved as partisans in the opposition against the

fascist regime (Lazzari 2011). One of the diverse ways, in which the democratic debates about the meaning of early childhood education are put into practice, is the use of documentation. Practitioners not only document the learning of the children (as well as other activities and the life of the early childhood centre itself) but also discuss this documentation with peers and parents, both within and across centres as a means to explore the meaning making of different stakeholders and to place the discussion on the meaning of ECEC in the public sphere (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Picchio et al. 2012; Rinaldi 2005).

Recently, the European Commission, DG Education and Culture commissioned a study on competence requirements for the early years workforce in the European Union (Urban et al. 2011). In the framework of this *CoRe* study, a case study was conducted in municipal day-care centres in Ghent to explore the voices of practitioners on these issues. The reason for this, being that Ghent is often cited as an example of high quality (e.g. OECD 2006), despite low levels of formal qualifications for the staff, thanks to a long history of in-service pedagogical support. In the context of this case study, pedagogical coordinators, but especially practitioners – both experienced and newcomers – were interviewed about their professional practices, using of a life history (or biographic) approach. The analysis of their narratives goes beyond the scope of this chapter (see www.vbjk.be for a full report). Rather we focus on two important hinge moments (or moments of interruption) in the history of professionalisation that we consider as bearing the potential of democratic experimentalism.

A first moment of interruption goes back as early as the late 1970s and early 1980s. In these days, childcare was predominantly seen as the care of children in the (allegedly regrettable) absence of their parents, and the main concern was on hygiene. Childcare centres were regulated along very strict hygienist rules, meaning that parents were not allowed to enter the playrooms, children were bathed daily and every contact between inside and outside was to be avoided (Mozère 1992; Vandenbroeck 2009). The task of the professional was to follow the guidelines in a strict hierarchical system, with the head nurse on top and the practitioner as a technological aid, executing the protocol. It was forbidden to them to talk with parents, and there evidently was no such thing as a team meeting. A large-scale study, conducted by OMEP clearly documented this approach and severely condemned the practice in childcare as unfriendly and psychologically and pedagogically deplorable (Peeters 1993).

As a result, the faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University set up an action research project, inspired by social constructivism, by the notion of the 'teacher as researcher' (Stenhouse 1975) and the Freirian notion of 'cultural action'. Some of the guiding principles included avoiding the hierarchical dichotomy between researchers (as pedagogical counsellors) and practitioners, involving practitioners in debates on their everyday work and documenting their experiences (Peeters 2008). The task of the researchers as pedagogical counsellors consisted of instigating a mutual dialogue across the centres and encouraging the professionals' ongoing reflection on their practices and their beliefs. When looking back upon their career, practitioners explain that this was the first time their voice was heard, and it was not easy for them to speak, as they were trained to execute the

hygienic protocols, rather than to reflect on education. But when confronted with observations of their practice some decades ago, they feel both ashamed of how they behaved with the children and proud of how practice changed thanks to them.

According to the testimonies of the experienced practitioners, a second 'turn' occurred in the early 2000s, when the Pedagogical Guidance Centre started to initiate projects on respect for diversity. The essence of the change was that parents were listened to. This can be illustrated by an example. In most day-care centres, it was common practice to install a transition period in which parents were welcomed before their child was received in the centre. During this transition, parents were explained how things went in the centre, sleeping and eating habits and the like. They were also invited to comment on this usual practice. However, with an increasing number of children from ethnic minority families, practitioners were more often confronted with different family cultures (e.g. eating habits, different sleeping rituals), and these were often not expressed in the transition period, as parents felt insecure to contradict the usual order of things in the centre. By not speaking, one could say that they were eloquent in illustrating the inevitable unequal power relations between newly arriving parents and experienced practitioners (Spivak 1988). Therefore, in the new diversity projects, practitioners experimented in turning the order of things upside down. Before even showing the centre to the parents or explaining them 'this is how we do', they asked parents to show them *their* ways of doing things and explain their worries and concerns, hopes and expectations. It turned out that installing some form of reciprocity in the transition period, not only facilitated the mutual adaptation but also favoured a better relation with the parents afterwards, and this is not only for immigrant parents but for all parents (Vandenbroeck et al. 2009). In sum, the projects on diversity made it obvious that it was not possible to have a welcoming approach towards children, without also having a welcoming approach towards parents. Moreover, language barriers encouraged practitioners to better document their practices in various ways. In the recent case study, practitioners said that opening the doors for parents, beyond mere technical conversations (e.g. about how the child had slept or eaten today), was probably the most significant shift in their careers.

The practitioners became more sensible to what parents wished to communicate, to their concerns, their worries and expectations. Pedagogical counsellors, in turn, saw the relations with parents as an important and ongoing source of professionalisation. One counsellor put it this way: 'It takes a long time before younger colleagues can recognise the signals parents give. Some young practitioners are able to construct a real relationship with parents, and they most often have experience in youth work. These competences are not learned at school, but are learnt by doing, in working with parents'.

The reason why this is not obvious, according to the practitioners, is because this attitude requires a flexibility of the practitioner in thinking and doing, meaning that one has to be ready to question what one always has considered as best practice and to embrace uncertainty and unpredictability. As one practitioner put it: 'Before these projects, every day looked the same. When I left my house in the morning to go to the crèche, I knew exactly what would happen and when it would happen.

Today, nothing is sure anymore. And this is much more interesting. Uncertainty about what the day will bring is attractive. Because you do not know in advance what you have to do, the job becomes exciting'. This flexible approach can at times be difficult for younger, less experienced childcare workers.

One of the goals of the case study was to also analyse critical success factors enabling the emergence of these practices. The findings suggest that a critical factor was the pedagogical support being sustained over long periods of time and developed by specialised staff. Another critical factor was the teams of practitioners having the ownership of the change, that is, being the actors of change, rather than external advisors. According to the practitioners, it was important for them to do so with a shared system of ethical values (based on the UN convention on the rights of the child) underpinning the work with parents, children and neighbourhoods. The practitioners stressed that essential in their common culture was a strong commitment towards each child and each parent and the conviction that the educator *can* make a difference for children and adults who live in difficult situations.

Discussion

We analysed the dominant discourse on the societal function of ECEC (the human capital paradigm) in the present meritocratic society. Our analysis suggests that the human capital paradigm entails a focus on socialisation of children, conceptualised as adaptation to the social order, favouring the autonomous, entrepreneurial citizen, ready for lifelong learning as well as lifelong competition. This construction of childhood is paralleled with a construction of adults as entrepreneurial beings as well as a focus on the socialisation of professionals into a technical-oriented profession. The consensual thinking, in other words, leads to silencing the voices of parents, children and educators. Yet, other constructions are possible as is shown in different parts of the world.

The story of practitioners who explore different pathways in their work, confirms Biesta's claim that plurality and difference are preconditions for democratic citizenship, rather than sameness. It is the odd and the strange that have the potential of making the familiar unusual, or to cause an interruption in the normal flow of things. But we also learn that this is not what automatically happens in the encounter with the other. It is therefore important to avoid the pitfall of making the other into the same (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). It is also not a matter of making some new consensus, a renewed 'one size fits all'. Therefore it is important not to consider the strange as a problem for stability, but rather to welcome the strange as stability is the problem. In the case of the municipal day-care centres in Ghent, the work of the practitioners was not a work of individual outcasts. It was on the contrary supported by the municipal pedagogical guidance centre and by a clear mission statement of the municipality advocating for respect for diversity. The 'choice' for democracy in practice and its underlying values of equality and freedom started with localised experiments in one or two centres with committed practitioners but grew into a

public policy. This is equally the case in many Northern Italian cities, where considering education as a *public* good and therefore a responsibility of the community inevitably entails the conception of *public* authorities as responsible for safeguarding these values. Biesta (2011) explains that politics and democracy emerge when private wants are transformed into public issues. His distinction between private and public does not entail a conceptualisation of public as belonging to the sphere of governments or formal politics. Our experience in early childhood education, however, strengthens the conviction that in educational matters the notion of public as a place where education can be deeply discussed is most often paired with the notion of education as a public good including belonging to the responsibility of also public authorities. Indeed, as Moss (2009) explains, democratic experimentalism in early childhood education does not flourish in marketised environments.

Biesta (2011), recalling Rancière, conceptualises democratic moments as allowing the interruption of a particular social or political order, making visible what had no business being seen. This is probably one of the most important lessons we can learn from the pedagogy in Reggio Emilia, Pistoia, Bologna and many other Italian cities. It is that the careful documentation of daily practice is one of the most salient conditions to bring the discussions on education into the public. Educators there spend much time and energy in documenting their practice, as well as the learning of children. The pedagogical documentation serves as a memory of the institution but also as the start of discussions with children, parents and practitioners from other institutions about the meaning of education (Musatti 2012; Picchio et al. 2012; Rinaldi 2005). It is, when carefully done, probably one of the most powerful ways to challenge the hegemony of the human capital paradigm, since it 'makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise' (Rancière 2003, quoted in Biesta 2011). It is through the documentation and the subsequent discussions that dissensus is installed and the social order can be challenged. As Biesta rightly states, it is indeed in the action (and the reflection upon that action) that the professionalisation of the practitioners take place, as a form of learning from citizenship, rather than learning for citizenship.

This brings us to a final thought on what these experiences can tell us about the conceptualisation of citizenship. Biesta argues that citizenship is related to disidentification, rather than identification, as identification would mean a way of adapting to the social order. We have shown some examples of this disidentification, such as was the case with the mother of the toddler who crawls rather than walks or the African mother who is concerned about sharing, rather than just individual freedom. We explored the process of new-coming parents challenging the social order of daycare centres and in so doing expressing citizenship also elsewhere (Vandenbroeck et al. 2009). It needs to be noticed that this can only happen in contexts where the professional manages to install reciprocity in what is fundamentally an unequal and asymmetrical relation. It is when this reciprocity is installed that the new-coming parent can feel that he *belongs* to the institution. It is the feeling of belonging and identification that allows for the disidentification. One can therefore question if identification and disidentification need to be opposing concepts.

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