
Readiness, Partnership, a Meeting Place? Some Thoughts on the Possible Relationship between Early Childhood and Compulsory School Education

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ABSTRACT At a time when the relationship between early childhood and compulsory school education is high on the policy agenda, this article questions the dominant, often taken-for-granted, relationship – school readiness; and offers two alternatives, a strong and equal partnership and the vision of a meeting place. Both are potentially transformative, inviting and welcoming critical thinking about compulsory school education as well as early childhood education.

The Resistible Rise of School Readiness

Belief in school performance and lifelong learning as necessary conditions for survival in an increasingly competitive and global market capitalism and in early intervention as an important part of a winning educational formula have pushed the relationship between early childhood education (ECE) and compulsory school education (CSE) up the policy agenda in recent years. In a new book, *Early Childhood and Compulsory Education: reconceptualising the relationship* (Moss, 2013) – myself and colleagues from Belgium, France, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the United States reflect on this relationship and the different forms it might take. We pay particular attention to three possibilities: readiness for school; a strong and equal partnership; and the vision of a meeting place.

Like everything else in education, the relationship is neither essential nor inevitable; there are alternatives, and choice between them is a political not a technical matter. Sadly, though unsurprisingly given the impoverishment of current educational debate, politicians and policy makers behave as if there was only one relationship, the simplest of the three under consideration: the

relationship of ECE readying or preparing children for CSE. The discourse of school readiness is not new, but is today spreading and increasingly dominant (OECD, 2006), not least in England. When instituting a review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the Ministry for Education announced that they wanted 'to shift the focus to getting children ready for education' and asked the review to look at 'the latest evidence about children's development and what is needed to give them the best start at school' (Department for Education, 2010, p. 1). The resulting revised EYFS 'defines what providers must do ... to ensure [children] are ready for school' (Department for Education, 2012, p. 4). This readiness discourse is also apparent in a 2011 report on early intervention commissioned by the UK government, which recommends that 'the United Kingdom should adopt the concept of the *foundation years from 0 to 5* (including pregnancy), and give it at least the same status and recognition as primary or secondary stages. Its prime objective should be to produce high levels of 'school readiness' for all children regardless of family income' (Allen, 2011, p. 46, original emphasis).

The discourse of school readiness is, however, very problematic. It is conservative, taking the school's understanding or social construction of the child, education, learning and knowledge for granted: in particular the image of the child as re-producer of culture of knowledge, 'starting life with and from nothing – as an empty vessel or *tabula rasa* ... [needing] to be filled with knowledge, skills and dominant cultural values which are already determined, socially determined and ready to administer – a process of reproduction or transmission' (Dahlberg et al, 2007, p. 44). It is hierarchical, assuming the 'lower' educational level, ECE, must serve the needs of the 'higher', CSE, and in the process 'grasping' the otherness or alterity of ECE, making the Other into the Same. It is simple and linear, assuming the child and her learning follow predetermined, sequential and predictable stages. It is monologic, with one-way communication from higher to lower. And though this relationship is inscribed with these very particular understandings and assumptions, they are invariably implicit and taken-for-granted, not made explicit nor offered as one possible and, therefore, contestable alternative.

An Other Point of View

Very different understandings of the child and learning are not only available but have also informed successful pedagogical practice. Take, for example, the educational project that has flourished for 50 years in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia, manifest in its municipal schools for young children (between birth and 6 years) (Rinaldi, 2006; Vecchi, 2010; Moss, 2011). Children, here, are understood as learners from birth, not needing to be readied to learn, but inherently capable and avid to do so. This understanding emerges from Reggio's answer to one of the critical – or political – questions they have asked as the basis for their educational project: what is (y)our image of the child? There is, of course, no correct answer to such a critical political question, only

alternative possibilities, and from these Reggio has made a collective and political choice. Carlina Rinaldi, a leading figure in Reggio's project, describes their choice, their construction or image of the child:

There are many images of the child, and many images of childhood. We need only think of psychoanalysis or the various branches of psychology and sociology. Though these theories are quite different, they tend to have one recurring aspect in common: the deterministic identification of the child as a weak subject, a person with needs rather than rights.

These positions have probably gained widespread approval because they work well for certain images of motherhood, women, and the family, images that are more 'convenient' and accommodating. They are certainly easier to manage than the image that is part of our theory, *which views children as strong, powerful, and rich in potential and resources, right from the moment of birth*. In this sense, we share the values and meaning of the constructivist and social constructivist approaches. We see a child who is driven by the enormous energy potential of a hundred billion neurons, by the strength of wanting to grow and taking the job of growing seriously, by the incredible curiosity that makes children search for the reasons for everything. A child who knows how to wait and who has high expectations. A child who wants to show that he or she knows things and knows how to do things, and who has all the strength and potential that comes from children's ability to wonder and to be amazed. *A child who is powerful from the moment of birth because he is open to the world and capable of constructing his own knowledge*. A child who is seen in his wholeness, who possesses his own directions and the desire for knowledge and for life. A competent child!

Competent in relating and interacting, with a deep respect for others and accepting of conflict and error. A child who is competent in constructing, in constructing himself while he constructs his world and is, in turn, constructed by the world. *Competent in constructing theories to interpret reality and in formulating hypotheses and metaphors as possibilities for understanding reality*.

(Rinaldi, 2006, p.123; emphases added)

It is clear from this extended quotation how the image of the child and the understanding of learning are interwoven. The child is rich and competent from the moment of birth because capable from birth of learning, understood as a co-constructive process of theory building and meaning making.

An important part of Reggio Emilia's image or construction of the 'rich child', 'powerful from the moment of birth', is the theory of the hundred languages of childhood, a theory full of democracy and a metaphor for the extraordinary potential of children. It refers 'to the different ways children (human beings) represent, communicate and express their thinking in different

media and symbolic systems; languages therefore are the many fonts or geneses of knowledge' (Vecchi, 2010, p. 9). These many linguistic possibilities range from mathematical and scientific languages to the poetic languages, 'forms of expression strongly characterized by expressive or aesthetic aspects such as music, song, dance or photography' (ibid). The choice of a hundred does not denote a precise count, but is intended to be 'very provocative, to claim for all these languages not only the same dignity, but the right to expression and to communicate with each other' (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 193).

Loris Malaguzzi, the first director of ECE in Reggio Emilia and one of the leading pedagogical thinkers and practitioners of the 20th century, not only insisted on the hundred languages being a potential from birth. He feared that children lost many languages, not least through the baleful influence of the conservative school. The issue for him was not getting young children ready for school, but the very real danger of schools depriving young children of their potential and competence. Childhood was not, therefore, necessarily a period of progress; it could rather be a period of retreat and loss. He chose to write poetically about this danger:

The child has a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine
the school and the culture
separate the head from the body ...

Developing this theme of loss, at least in some educational regimes, Veà Vecchi, one of Reggio's first *atelieristas* (an educator with an arts background working in a pre-school), criticises a form of traditional education that again has the capacity to destroy important qualities that children bring into the world:

When we are born we are whole, and the whole of our senses strain to relate with the world around us in order to understand it. Very quickly, however, we find ourselves 'cut into slices', a phrase used by Loris Malaguzzi to define the state of separation in our culture which forces us to pursue knowledge on separate paths ... We need to reflect seriously on how much individual and social damage is being caused by education and culture which prefer to separate than to work on connections ... How much does a school which works with decontextualised objects and situations lead to thinking in separate fragments and mistaking information for knowledge, which is only obtained by organising and placing parts in relation to each other? How much does ignoring the fact that emotions are an integral part of learning and educational processes distort the global process of knowledge building? We could continue this type of questioning, *highlighting how hierarchical and discriminatory is our school culture when dealing with different languages, with teaching/learning processes and with children's general approach to exploration, understanding and construction of reality.* (Vecchi, 2004, pp. 18-19, emphasis added)

Vecchi returns to this critique of the compulsory school system in her book, *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia*.

I fear that as in the past, *the real problem is that artificially and superficially separating disciplines is part of school and that in the education of both pupils and teachers, an aesthetic dimension is not considered in the least important ...* We need to truly reflect on how much this has diminished the thinking and formation of younger generations ... It is important to society that schools and we as teachers are clearly aware how much space we leave children for original thinking, without rushing to restrict it with predetermined schemes that define what is *correct* according to a school culture. (Vecchi, 2010, p. 138, emphases added)

In short, compulsory schooling has pedagogical choices to make and schools need, therefore, 'to consciously take a position on *which knowledge* they intend to promote' (2010, p. 28, original emphasis). They can pursue an idea of teaching that chooses 'to transmit circumscribed "truths" in various "disciplines"'; or they can choose 'to stand by children's sides together constructing contexts in which they can explore their own ideas and hypotheses individually or in groups and discuss them with friends or teachers' (ibid).

The ideas of learning and knowledge that have flourished in Reggio Emilia place great value on the unexpected, on the creation of new theories and concepts, on respectful listening and on questioning to which the answers are not already known. Hence learning understood as a process of meaning making or theory building, in relationship with others who are called on to listen to the theories. Hence, too, Malaguzzi's image of knowledge as a tangle of spaghetti, similar to the image of knowledge as a rhizome, developed by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari (1999). In a rhizome there is no hierarchy of root, trunk and branch; nor is it like a staircase, where you have to take the first step before you move onto the next one. The *rhizome* is something that shoots in all directions with no beginning and no end, but always *in between*, and with openings towards other directions and places. It is a *multiplicity* functioning by means of connections and heterogeneity, a multiplicity which is not given but constructed. Learning, then, is a matter of experimentation and problematisation – *a line of flight* and an exploration of *becoming*, echoed in Rinaldi's observation that 'the process of 'becoming' is the basis of true education' (2006, p. 80).

These ideas of learning and knowledge – so different to the linear, sequential, predictable notions that underpin the readiness for school discourse – are productive of pedagogical practice, in particular the importance Reggio Emilia attaches to project work, which

is sensitive to the rhythms of communication and incorporates the significance and timing of children's investigation and research. The duration of a project can thus be short, medium, or long, continuous or discontinuous, with pauses, suspensions, and restarts. The

statement of a hypothesis on how the project might proceed is valid only to the extent that it is seen precisely as a hypothesis and not as a 'must', as one of a thousand hypotheses on the direction that might be taken. Above all, making hypotheses is a way to increase the expectations, excitement, and the possibilities for being and interacting, for welcoming the unexpected as a fundamental resource ... [Project work] is a way of thinking, a strategy for creating relations and bringing in the element of chance, by which we mean 'the space of the others'; i.e. that undefined space of the self that is completed by the thoughts of others within the relational process. (Rinaldi, 2006, pp. 132-133)

I could continue – but I hope the point is made. What might be termed the mainstream discourse about the relationship between ECE and CSE, with school readiness at its heart, is situated in a particular positivistic paradigm and inscribed with the understandings, values and assumptions of that paradigm. Taking another point of view, from a different paradigmatic position, readying children – to learn, to enter school, to achieve predetermined outcomes, to progress sequentially – is no longer self-evident, indeed is highly contestable. It ignores the potential with which children are born, their readiness to learn from day one; indeed it threatens to waste this capability. It applies a reductionist, fragmented and narrow approach, which is more about taming, controlling and predicting than creating learning based on movement, experimentation and meaning making.

Two Other Relationships

The dominant 'school readiness' discourse puts ECE at issue, judging it against the taken-for-granted and therefore uncontested regime and purposes of CSE. By contrast, the other two relationships explored in the new book contest both ECE and CSE, putting the meaning and practice of *all* education and *all* educational institutions at issue. The 'strong and equal partnership' is a recommendation of the review of early childhood policies in 20 countries conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the results of which appear in two reports, *Starting Strong I* and *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2001, 2006). This partnership is about each partner – ECE and CSE – recognising and drawing on the strengths of the other:

[It provides] the opportunity to bring together the diverse perspectives and methods of both ECEC and schools, focusing on the strengths of both approaches, such as the emphasis on parental involvement and social development in ECEC and the focus on educational goals and outcomes in schools...ECEC and primary education could *benefit from the knowledge and experience of young child accumulated in each sector*, and in the process help children and families

negotiate the transition from ECEC to school.
(OECD, 2001, p. 129, emphasis added)

The 'vision of a meeting place' is proposed in a paper by Swedish researchers Gunilla Dahlberg & Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (1994), *Förskola och skola – om två skilda traditioner och om visionen om en mötesplats* [Preschool and school – two different traditions and the vision of a meeting place]. This paper originally appeared in the 1994 report of a Swedish commission, whose title suggests a questioning of the hierarchical idea of readiness: *Grunden för livslångt lärande: en barnmogen skola* [The foundations for lifelong learning: a child-ready school]. It offers another conceptualisation, envisioning a new relationship between ECE and CSE emerging through creating 'a meeting place' between these two parts of the education system, where differences in traditions, culture and understandings can be recognised and transcended through the co-construction of a new, shared tradition and culture, expressed in new, shared understandings, values, concepts and practices.

Both relationships, but particularly the meeting place relationship, are potentially transformative, inviting and welcoming critical thinking about existing understandings and practices, both in ECE and CSE; both are egalitarian, assuming all sectors of education to be of equal value, with their own identity and contribution to make to the whole, and with each sector respecting the alterity of other sectors and willing to learn with them; both are open to complexity, non-linear ideas about learning and the rhizomatic image of knowledge; and both are dialogic, implying not only exchange and listening but, adopting Rinaldi's concept of dialogue, 'a process of transformation where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result'.

But there are some important differences. The 'partnership' relationship, to the extent it is elaborated in the *Starting Strong* reports, puts emphasis on each party learning about and adopting some of the existing 'strengths' of the other. But the report by Dahlberg & Lenz-Taguchi adopts a quite different approach. In an interview in the new book, Gunilla Dahlberg recalls that some

said you should take and mix the best of both pre-school and school. But we said that we have to start out from analyses of dominant discourses and common traditions, deconstruct them – and then construct something totally new together, what we named a vision of an encounter.

This relationship, this 'vision of a meeting place' is distinguished, therefore, by processes of deconstruction and construction, by creating 'something totally new together', beginning with 'a common view of the child, learning and knowledge ... a meeting place where pre-school and school have a similar view of the learning child, pedagogy's role and the pedagogical work, and which is built on the same value base.'

Yet this emphasis on the new does not mean devaluing, discarding and escaping the past.

Dahlberg & Lenz-Taguchi, in formulating their 'vision of a meeting place', attach great importance to the search for a 'common heritage of ideas in the pre-school and school tradition'. So they acknowledge the importance of ECE and CSE having different traditions and cultures, creating obstacles to a new relationship; but they also acknowledge the possibility of some common ground that can provide a foundation for building that new relationship. In the Swedish case, the authors suggest, this common heritage includes 'the classic concept of *bildung*, progressivism and the philosophy of dialogue'.

Importance, therefore, is attached to the adoption of a historical perspective by both ECE and CSE, recalling past thought and experience, which may have become lost in current discourses but which reclaimed may provide that 'common heritage of ideas.' History always contains complex and multiple narratives, providing a relativist challenge to all essentialist claims. So taking a historical perspective entails recognition of an educational pluralism that is rich in diverse theories, concepts, understandings and practices. The historical process, excavating past strata to explore this plurality in search of strands of common heritage, can thus contribute to the present-day construction of shared understandings and practices; and, equally important, through highlighting alternatives it can contribute to restoring the primacy of politics and ethics to education, rescuing it from the current dominance of technical and managerial practice.

A New, Shared Pedagogical Culture

For Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi, the meeting place could encompass relationships across 'all forms of education and lifelong learning', not only ECE and CSE. Through the meeting place relationship, it is possible to envisage the whole field of education for children, young people and adults co-constructing a new, shared pedagogical culture including:

- shared images of the child, the young person, the teacher, the school itself – for example, the child and teacher as co-constructors of knowledge, values and identities; the school as a place of encounter and collaborative workshop capable of producing many projects;
- shared understandings of learning, knowledge and education itself – for example, learning as meaning making, rhizomatic knowledge, and education in its broadest sense;
- shared values – for example, democracy and experimentation as fundamental values;
- shared ethics – for example, an ethics of care and an ethics of an encounter;
- shared curricular goals, built round broad aims and thematic areas;
- shared pedagogical approaches – for example, a pedagogy of relationships and listening;
- shared practices – for example, project or thematic work that strives for connectedness, the use of ateliers and atelieristas, a central role for pedagogical documentation.

What emerges here is a common idea of education that flows across the years and through different types of schools and other educational institutions, rather than a sequence of disconnected educational 'enclosures', each providing for arbitrarily defined age groups, each with its own understandings, goals and practices, each tasked (and struggling with) readying students for the next level up, and requiring a series of 'transitions' from one educational enclosure to another. What this common flow might look like is suggested in the writings of Carlina Rinaldi (Rinaldi, 2006), when she talks about 'schools': for though she is referring to the 'municipal schools' for ECE in Reggio Emilia, she could as easily be talking about any type of school. As the three instances cited below illustrate, her use of 'school' seems a deliberate attempt to reclaim a generic concept, turning away from school's frequent association today as a place of transmission and reproduction and foregrounding instead a place of democracy and relationships, creativity and research.

In schools, creativity should have the opportunity to be expressed in every place and in every moment. What we hope for is creative learning and creative teachers, not simply a 'creativity hour'. This is why the *atelier* must support and ensure all the creative processes that can take place anywhere in the school, at home, and in the society. (p. 120)

The metaphor that might best represent our image of the school is that of a construction site, or a permanent laboratory, in which children's and teachers' research processes are strongly intertwined and constantly evolving. Here, teachers build an awareness of knowledge and the processes of its construction through a progressive understanding of the structure and skills being developed by each child and the group of children, as well as of their individual and group identities. The question of 'knowledge of knowledge' leads to another fundamental point of our philosophy: one of the primary tasks of the teacher, and thus of the school, is to help the child and the group of children learn how to learn, fostering their natural predisposition toward relationships and the consequent co-construction of knowledge. (p. 126)

We must not forget how closely the school is connected to the society in which it is situated. There is the recurring question of whether the school is limited to transmitting culture or can be, as we in Reggio aspire to, a place where culture is constructed and democracy is lived. School and democracy, a theme that was dear to Dewey, is an important commitment for all of us: school as a place of democracy, in which we can all live democracy. (pp. 140-141)

This approach to education – as a lifecourse project inscribed with common understandings, values, goals and practices – opens up the possibility of a truly

dialogic relationship between different areas of education, a relationship in which, for example, teachers working with 16-month-olds and with 16-year-olds would be able to dialogue and document together as equal partners in a relationship of mutual learning. Not just able, but wanting to do so. This is perhaps, too, the vision of the school of the future hinted at in *Starting Strong II*, in which interdisciplinary knowledge 'will be constructed through personal investigation, exchange and discussion with many sources, and co-constructed in communities of learning characterised by team teaching' (OECD, 2006, p. 222).

Other Possibilities

The vision of the meeting place opens up other possibilities for cross-sectoral dialogue, not only for constructing new shared understandings, values, ethics and practices. One such possibility is for a meeting place to provide space for interested educators drawn from different sectors of the educational spectrum to explore together theoretical perspectives of common interest. At present such cross-sectoral collaboration is minimal, reflecting the fragmented and hierarchical nature of the education system. But imagine how it could be. For example, those in the field of ECE who are interested in the thinking of post-structuralists – such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari – and who are going beyond interest to applying this thinking in the pre-school (cf. MacNaughton, 2005; Olsson, 2009; Sellers, forthcoming), in a meeting place with counter-parts from primary, secondary or higher education. That could create, to draw on Deleuzian language, new assemblages that might work with movement and experimentation to generate new vitality and intensity, new desires, new lines of flight, new thought.

The vision of a meeting place has further potentialities. It can help to realise the proposition that Gunilla Dahlberg and myself made in our book *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education* (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005): that education should be, first and foremost, a political and ethical practice, rather than, as now, primarily a technical practice. Politically, the 'meeting place', with its close affinity to the forum or the agora, a place of encounter for citizens, children and adults alike, has strong democratic connotations. The meeting place creates a new *space* for participatory democratic practice, inviting the inclusion not only of educators but of all concerned with education as a public and community project – potentially everyone. It provides opportunities not only for democratically co-constructing new understandings – of the child, the educator, the school, learning and knowledge – but also for addressing other political questions, such as: What is the state we are in and what future do we hope for? What do we want for our children? What is the purpose of education? What are the fundamental values of education and what ethics does education work with? Through deliberating and contesting such questions, and through using the space for working with documentation, the meeting place can

contribute to the democratic political idea of a transparent education and transparent school.

Ethically, the concept of a meeting place can evoke the concept of the ethics of an encounter, also an important theme in *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. A central concept of this ethical approach to relationships is the importance of relating to the Other in a way that respects the Other's alterity and avoids the process of grasping to make the Other into the Same. The desire to classify children into pre-made categories, so prevalent in education today, is one example of grasping; pursuing a 'readiness for school' relationship that leads to 'schoolification' can be seen as another. Dahlberg (2003) summarises the consequences in both cases:

Putting everything which one encounters into pre-made categories implies we make the other into the Same, as everything which does not fit into these categories, which is unfamiliar has to be overcome. Hence, alterity disappears. This betrays the complexity in children's lives ... [Working with the ethics of an encounter] [t]o think another whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy. (p. 270)

A pedagogical meeting place could provide one opportunity for taking up that challenge, respecting and welcoming alterity and complexity and creating new thinking from the provocation of an encounter with difference.

Immensely Difficult, but Not Impossible

Overall, as will be apparent by now, the 'vision of a meeting place' provides for me the most satisfying account of a future relationship between CSE and ECE: indeed, it seems to me that a meeting place is one way of expressing and constructing a 'strong and equal partnership', taking us beyond the concept into the realm of implementation. To that extent these two relationships are not necessarily distinct. But it is no universal blueprint, a 'meeting place programme' to be taken off the shelf and applied anywhere. Dahlberg & Lenz-Taguchi's text, with its analysis and ideas, draws on Swedish educational history and discourses and is the product of a particular context, 1990s Sweden, a time and place marked by a strong, distinctive and articulate ECE, widely available, fully integrated and with widespread public support, a context in which a dialogue with CSE was possible to envisage and explore.

But to say that this Swedish paper cannot supply us with a proven blueprint, exportable to anywhere at any time, is to miss the point. The idea of transferable and predictable programmes or universal and stable projects can only appeal or be credible to the most unthinking positivist. I would argue that we should come, instead, to such rich texts as reminders that there are alternatives, as provocations to our own thinking, and as contributions to our own theory-building. They put (in the evocative words of Nikolas Rose) a 'stutter in the fluency of meta-narratives' (1999, p. 20), which leaves us space to

take issue with them. Moreover, we can use the concepts and the processes as tools, applying them to different contexts, with different traditions, and producing different results.

In any case, *Förskola och skola – om två skilda traditioner och om visionen om en mötesplats* hardly counts as a blueprint. It lacks the necessary detail to qualify. It is more a sketch of a possibility – a broad vision – than a detailed account. It remains a work in progress leaving much to be done, not only on the ‘what’ of formulation, but also the ‘how’ of realisation. At what levels might meeting places operate – national, local, institutional? What forms might these meeting places take and how might their co-constructive work be facilitated? How might they address issues around exclusion and disparities of power among potential participants? How might the outcomes of their deliberations be put to work in practice, how might new shared understandings find expression in everyday life? These are questions to which Dahlberg & Lenz-Taguchi devote little space, indeed implementation is not part of their terms of reference.

So, it is one thing to set out the vision, important though that is, and another to realise it. The readiness for school approach, at least in its most conservative forms, is simple in theory and simple in implementation. It requires applying certain types of ‘human technology’ (Rose, 1999) to steer ECE towards greater conformity to the needs and demands of CSE, expressed in certain predefined norms and standards. These technologies include: pre-school curricula, ‘training’ pre-school educators, setting new goals, establishing new modes of assessment of performance, introducing incentives and sanctions, denying space to alternatives. It is essentially about applying a new regime to a particular sector (ECE) to enhance the performance of the regime in another sector (CSE). Moreover the returns from the new regime, even if banal, are likely to be observable and relatively quickly too; school performance as defined by the traditional CSE regime is likely to improve somewhat if ECE is re-engineered to prepare children for that regime. It would indeed be rather shocking if such change, applied with the full weight of modern technical practice and the full resources of the ‘social investment’ state, did not produce results.

But easy implementation hides the hollowness of this particular readiness relationship. The whole exercise ignores the political questions and the larger issues that they raise: the meanings of education, learning or knowledge; the images of the child, the teacher and the school; the fundamental values and ethics. It is a technical carapace, masquerading as the whole body.

It seems to me that implementing the vision of a meeting place is immensely difficult but by no means impossible. It brings us into the important field of how to bring about transformative change in ways that are democratic and participatory, recognise complexity and context, and are responsive to reflection and changing conditions. Important as this field is, it is not the task of this article to go further into it (for further discussion of transformative change, see Fielding & Moss, 2011). It is simply to highlight one part of the dilemma facing those who wish for an education different to the current neoliberal

juggernaut, with its fundamentalist beliefs in markets, management, competition, privatisation, standards and technical practice; who wish instead for a democratic, dialogic and emancipatory education, such as underpins *Starting Strong's* 'strong and equal partnership' and Dahlberg & Lenz-Taguchi's 'vision of a meeting place'. This is not, I would argue, a cause for despair, but a reason to renew contestation and reconceptualisation, to insist there are alternatives, and drawing on existing cases develop strategies for transformative change working at all levels from national through local to the individual pre-school and school.

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