Telling stories that need telling

A dialogue on resistance in early childhood education

Nathan Archer and Jo Albin-Clark

Abstract

Recent years have seen international and national policy intensification in early childhood education (ECE). This has manifested in multiple ways, including the design and implementation of increasingly prescriptive curricular policies. Against this backdrop some early educators are pushing back. Drawing on work from their recent enquiries and doctoral studies, the authors surface less visible pockets of resistance, highlighting actions taken 'under the radar' to respond to such policy demands.[1] Taking the form of a dialogue between two ECE researchers, this paper explores the actions of a number of educators who found subversive ways which circumvent, mediate and disrupt demands upon them. These multiple, 'below the surface' subversions and resistances illustrate ethical pedagogical decision-making in action.

Keywords: early childhood education; resistance; dominant narratives; subversion

Introduction

Why and how do educators in early childhood education (ECE) resist and subvert policy and curricular initiatives? As two researchers in early childhood education, this is a question that is troubling and fascinating to us. A growing corpus of international research critiques the ways in which ECE has been positioned in relation to the dominance of a neoliberal paradigm.[2] Neoliberal thinking has been described as focusing on marketisation, efficiency and globalisation, privileging the power of the market over issues of citizenship, equity and social justice. In such a regime, ECE is framed by an investment narrative and as an economic imperative as the 'foundation for tomorrow's workforce'.[3] This narrative has also steered curricular and assessment policies with a focus on standardisation and accountability.

Against this backdrop, studies of ECE resistance are emerging with explorations of micro to macro movements of resistance and activism.[4] As researchers we seek to illuminate, problematise and develop this work. We recognise the power of naming and sharing these resistances to tell new stories as counter narratives to those that are 'deeply problematic, eminently resistible and eventually replaceable'.[5]

Building on this work, we have exchanged thoughts and ideas through online discussion, social media messages and email correspondence. In March 2022, we undertook an email exchange to further ponder these ideas. This dialogue considers

our readings of resistance and responses by educators who found subversive ways to circumvent, mediate and disrupt demands upon them. This conversational paper draws on a combination of our individual research, collaborative thinking and personal experiences, and is supported by literature which has informed and shaped our ideas.

A dialogue

Nathan Archer [NA]: I think we've both explored the idea of 'pockets of resistance' in early childhood education and care – what does this mean to you Jo?

Jo Albin-Clark [JAC]: Excellent question to open with my friend! The concept of a 'pocket' is one I find really intriguing. Pockets are close to you, worn on the body, they are unseen yet felt. What fits in a pocket is chosen by you alone. So, the notion of resistance being in a pocket is apt. In my research, the teachers I have worked with have described their resistances in modest ways.[6] Small acts. Matters of having agency and control seem to be important. Pocket-sized resistances feel doable, personal, yet hidden. Did you find resistances happened in small ways too?

NA: I really like that idea of pockets as personal, and the contents chosen by the individual. Pockets also hide the contents, and this resonates with me too. Many of the participants in my study talked about examples of hidden subversions, operating 'under the radar'; and one described operating 'a little bit underground, appearing to maintain the status quo is an easier way to go about it'. These subversions of power that happen under the radar make me think of Scott's description of a 'hidden transcript' rather than a 'public transcript'.[7] So, the (in)visibility of the resistances in ECE is, I think, an important feature.

In exploring what counts as activism, Martin *et al.* recognise these 'often-invisible forms of activism in embeddedness and social relations'.[8] I think this explains a different kind of resistance; one that is less dramatic and less obvious than many collective expressions of resistance. This perspective has also been described, in relation to various fields, as 'implicit activism' … characterised by 'small acts, kind words and 'not too much fuss'.[9] I know you've worked with that idea Jo …

JAC: Yes, I have. Nathan, Horton and Kraftl's work leapt off the page for me with that notion of activism through small acts. The idea of implicit rather than explicit feels resonant too and fits with our idea of pockets of resistances. In my research I found resistances embedded into the normal everyday life of teachers in early education classrooms. One example is a nursery teacher who worked with three- and four-year-olds.[10] She was under some pressure from a literacy coordinator to demonstrate

how she was dealing with handwriting. Now you can imagine that is an interesting question to a specialist teacher of young children, as we know handwriting is actually a culmination of so many other kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions. In fact, it is not really an appropriate question at all. So, the teacher had a massive push on capturing what early skills and actions contributed to later handwriting through playful learning. These were children who were lying on their tummies pushing small cars, children swinging in the outdoor area. She shared these images, along with her view on these as early writing. Here she was actively drawing attention to how essential play with children's whole-body actions is to later learning. Like Horton and Kraftl's idea of small acts, Millei and Kallio use the idea of 'mundane politics'.[11] I like this framing, capturing the everyday, ordinary and positioning it as a political act. Resistance is an everyday act, but we often do not think of it through that framing. In your research Nathan, did you find that forms of activism were everyday things?

NA: Small acts of everyday resistance by early educators were evident in my research too. One educator I spoke with pushed back when it was suggested, by the headteacher, that the large-scale loose parts equipment for outdoor play were removed. The headteacher and other colleagues appeared to be challenged by the 'untidiness' of play with tyres, planks and crates. In response, the educator argued for the many affordances of these resources and how formative they were in children's development. Her resistance took the form of retaining the resources despite being asked to remove them; but, despite a short-term 'win', the educator felt this was an ongoing challenge.

So, it also strikes me that an important question around these resistances is what motivates them. Many of these 'ethical subversions' appear to be informed by a principled pedagogy; rooted in a set of personal and pedagogical values.[12] I think these examples demonstrate the power of 'no', as a 'resistance-based professionalism' when educators challenge demands on their practice with ethical responses. As Fenech *et al.* comment: 'resistance is grounded in ethical practice that is driven by an intentional commitment to continually deconstruct taken-for-granted truths and reconstruct practices'.[13]

A feature of these small acts and mundane politics also appears to be that many educators resist individually rather than collectively. I wonder whether this is to do with the scale of resistance, as in these examples being local and less visible? Do we see predominantly individual resistance informed by issues about which educators feel strongly? Is this about capacity or confidence in collective resistance? Or other factors?

JAC: Visibility of resistance is an interesting line of enquiry for me too. In a recent piece of writing, I've been looking at how teachers use social media and I am wondering about this now and how publicly visible it was.[14] I have been thinking with a series of social media posts made by a nursery teacher and here I have used feminist materialisms

and posthuman theories to think about the performativities of those posts bouncing around the internet.[15] I like these theories because they ask interesting questions – such as what these posts are *doing*. My research always seems to circle back to the actions and liveliness of things, as well as the entangled meanings.[16] Feminist materialisms and posthuman theories frame the world by shifting the focus from the human and instead attending to the lively relationality between the human and non-human world. I found that the nursery teacher and her social media posts had multiple performativities that seemed to move with and against a reproduction of dominant narratives. From this vantage point, social media posts made lots of actions:

- They told stories of play (not stories of formalised learning).
- They connected families, schools, teachers and charity sectors, so stakeholders that were meaningful; telling stories to people who mattered.
- They foregrounded all the spaces and materials that matter in playful pedagogies (natural spaces, open-ended materials, time to experiment, human and non-human in play).

It made me think about how important it is that teachers tell stories to those who matter and about what is important to them, and stories that push back against neoliberal narratives.[17] We can see this as resistances. In terms of visibility, you could argue that these kinds of stories through social media are very public, but what was interesting to me was that they were created and sent all in the personal time of the teacher, so social media was enacted in the evenings and weekends. This told me that resistance and visibility have costs and can make the spaces between the personal and private a porous place for teachers who want to tell stories about their practice. Have you found that there is a cost to teachers when they resist Nathan?

NA: Yes! Noticing the spaces, the opportunities, the platforms to share stories is, I think, hugely important. That's fascinating to think about both the public nature of stories on social media, but also the development and sharing of them in time outside of work. So, an educator's personal time might be one of the few opportunities to express an alternative narrative and thereby an act of resistance?

But also, you asked, what is the cost involved to the educator? I think by being visible there is often a risk. I've been thinking more recently about these risks and costs: the implications and consequences of resistances for those working in early childhood education. It reminds me of one of the participants in my study who reflected on this. She openly shared her opinions in the focus group, about the hazards of social media: 'You just don't know who is looking. It can be antagonistic. I find myself thinking "no", read it, step back, calm down'.

So, there is clearly, at least in this instance, a fear of the surveillance associated with

social media. And these costs of expressing dissent publicly can be high.

This leads me on to thinking about those participants in my study who 'walked away' from circumstances where they felt the costs of any resistance would be too high. In all these instances, the participants considered that the pedagogical practices in their early years settings were so at odds with their personal values, they decided to leave, withdrawing their labour. But I see this 'walking away' not only as an act of resistance but also an act of self-care. In these cases, the action of leaving prioritised personal wellbeing, but it was simultaneously a refusal, an opposition, and an act of defiance. As Lorde says, 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare'.[18]

Self-care as an act of resistance might be seen as both agentic behaviour and a radical act. In a climate which, I would argue, values control and performativity (going back to your point about the neoliberal narrative), these acts of resistance demonstrate a rejection of these demands and of certain policy constructs of professional identities. Walking away can be read not only as negation, as non-compliance, but might also be seen as a refusal to be complicit in broader cultural or systemic expectations.

I appreciate that this kind of action may not be desirable, or even an option for many! So it makes me wonder how people negotiate or mediate some of these demands. Are there forms of resistance which might be more akin to covert disruption? Perhaps educators are also engaged in actions which could be read as 'constructive subversions' or even a 'masquerade as conforming'.[19]

JAC: Yes, that is the rub! How it is negotiated, how visible it is and how you manage it.

Now we can get to the part of our dialogue where we begin to look at the implications of subversions and what next for us in a research field in tension. The heart of it for me is twofold, one about policy compliance and the other about how subversions spill out from that tension.

If we operate in constant tidal waves of policy change, which ones seem to overwhelm and cause the most discomfort? I think policies that impact on measurement and reporting of children's progress have the most harmful heft. Only this week I heard responses from some inspections in England where the use of practical materials in mathematics had been criticised and all the fallout from that. Heaven forbid young children might use their senses to make sense of abstract ideas! Even Ofsted issuing a reply to clarify only obfuscated. The idea of inspectorate advising (dictating?) the nature of pedagogical approaches is a real-life thing that has power. Wood's paper really made me think about that, how Ofsted has morphed into a body that defines quality, rather than solely inspects and reports on it.[20] I know Elizabeth Wood's scholarship has influenced us both.

So, what kinds of subversion are out there? On balance, resistances that look like

disruption are about 'constructive subversions'.[21] This for me is the big one and the most visible and takes the most toll. It forces teachers to play a game, an assessment game.[22] I would say subversions and resistances are a game that is played, and some stakes are higher, some costs more burdensome and some more visible. It is interesting we are both writing about this subject now we have a few birthdays under our belt and also that we are in universities and not in practice, because we feel it less and see it less.

My final thought about the implications is to say there is a bit of devilment for me in resisting and subverting. When I say 'resist' do I actually mean I am just enjoying flexing, or acting back? Is this because I can and it's a way of having my voice heard? Am I in fact *playing?*

Conclusion

So here we circle back to our question that started our dialogue, what is the nature of the resistances we are making sense of, what implications does that have in practice, what lines of research do they open?

The resistances we continue to explore vary in visibility and size. They can be everyday, unseen and quiet acts that sidestep surveillance. Resistances can take the form of more covert disruptions; a kind of game being played. Sometimes they are more visible subversions that erupt from private to public, and all of them assert what matters to educators. On occasion, resistance involves the self-care of walking away. It is interesting to us how much resistances involve educators promoting pedagogies that foreground young children's right to play. What is suggested here is that resistances are closely aligned with educators pushing back on accountability narratives that foreground more formalised learning. It is like educators are just quietly getting on with what they know will motivate children and enable a kind of practice that promotes children's agency and entitlement to play. So, resistances might be a way of educators hanging a sign on their classroom door that says 'business as usual' and that business is the business of play. Play matters to our youngest children.

In terms of implications, we think it is blindingly obvious that educators have a strong sense of what is right for young children and resistances are a way they are making sure that it happens on their watch. The power of 'no' to practices that feel unethical are powerful indeed. Now here is the 'but', there are costs involved. Resistances are the leaking of professional autonomy. What we mean here is that if educators were afforded trust and autonomy, then they wouldn't need to resist. The costs involve educators having to constantly justify choices and circumvent, interpret and upend policy directives. It can also be a lonely business, and there are risks involved for educators who resist dominant narratives, and we are seeing that resistance can leak out of educators' professional timespaces. You know what? We are darned proud

to be members of a profession who do this, but frustrated that there are risks involved for educators and that it is still happening after such a long international history of scholarship that closely connects rich learning and playful pedagogies.

What now for research? Well, we say let's first of all illuminate and share these acts of resistance and open up further dialogue that brings about critical awareness in the field. These resistance stories need to be told if we are to find other narratives. Let's tell new resistance stories as counter narratives to the dominant narrative that frames early education as preparation for and subservient to formal learning.[23]

We say: let's tell each other why we resist accountability narratives.

Let's tell each other stories of how we do it and tell those stories about what matters to those who matter.

Hey, you reading this, want to tell us your resistance story and join our dialogue?

Come and play, tell your story.

Dr Nathan Archer is Director of the International Montessori Institute at Leeds Beckett University. Following initial training as a Montessori teacher, Nathan has undertaken a number of roles in practice, policy and research in early childhood education. He completed a PhD at University of Sheffield in 2020 exploring the activism of early childhood educators.

His research interests include issues of social justice in early childhood education, workforce reform policies and the professional identities of early educators.

N.J.Archer@leedsbeckett.ac.uk; @NathanArcher1

Dr Jo Albin-Clark is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Edge Hill University. Following a teaching career in nursery and primary schools, Jo has undertaken a number of roles in teaching, advising and research in early childhood education. She completed a doctorate at the University of Sheffield in 2019 exploring documentation practices through posthuman and feminist materialist theories in early childhood education. Her research interests include observation and documentation practices and methodological collaboration and research creation through posthuman lenses. Throughout her work, teachers' embodied experiences of resistances to dominant discourses have been a central thread.

jo.albin-clark@edgehill.ac.uk; @JoAlbinClark

Notes

1. J. Albin-Clark and N. Archer, 'Sites of hope: What are the possibilities for activism and resistance for those marginalised in early childhood education and care?', research presentation from the conference Marginalised Voices in Contemporary

Times: Addressing Inequities through Professional Learning and Education, organised by IPDA, 27-29 November 2021.

2. Dahlberg and Moss, *Ethics and politics in early childhood education,* Oxford, Routledge, 2005; M. Sims and M. Waniganayake, 'The performance of compliance in early childhood: Neoliberalism and nice ladies', *Global Studies of Childhood*, 5(3), 2017, pp333-45, doi.org/10.1177%2F2043610615597154; M. Sims, 'Neoliberalism and early childhood', *Cogent Education*, 4, 2017, doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1365411.

3. J. Heckman, '*The Heckman Equation'*, 2017, https://heckmanequation.org/the-heckman-equation/ (accessed 15 June 2018); World Bank, 'Early childhood as the foundation for tomorrow's workforce', World Bank Blog, 16 January 2017, https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/early-childhood-foundation-tomorrow-s-workforce

4. P. Moss, 'There are alternatives! Contestation and hope in early childhood education', *Global Studies of Childhood,* 5(3), 2015, pp226-38; P. Moss, *Alternative narratives in early childhood: An introduction for students and practitioners*, Routledge, 2018; J. Albin-Clark, '"I felt uncomfortable because I know what it can be": The emotional geographies and implicit activisms of reflexive practices for early childhood teachers', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood,* 21(1), 2020, pp20–32, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1463949118805126; N. Archer, '"I have this subversive curriculum underneath": Narratives of micro resistance in early childhood education', *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, November 2021, doi:10.1177/1476718X211059907.

5. G. Roberts Holmes and P. Moss, *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education: Markets, Imaginaries and Governance*. Routledge, 2021, p4.

6. J. Albin-Clark, 2020, *op. cit*.; J. Albin-Clark, 'What is documentation doing? Early childhood education teachers shifting from and between the meanings and actions of documentation practices', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 22*(2), 2021, pp140-155, doi:10.1177/1463949120917157.

7. J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts,* New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 1990.

8. D. G. Martin, S. Hanson and S. Fontaine, 'What counts as activism?: The role of individuals in creating change', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 35 (3/4), 2007, pp78-94 (p91).

9. J. Horton and P. Kraftl, 'Small acts, kind words and "not too much fuss": implicit activisms', *Emotions, Space and Society,* 2, 2009, pp14-23 (p14).

10. J. Albin-Clark, 2021, *op. cit*.

11. Z. Millei and K. P. Kallio, 'Recognizing politics in the nursery: Early childhood education institutions as sites of mundane politics', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 19*(1), 2018, pp31-47 (p31), doi:10.1177/1463949116677498

12. L. Morris, 'Love as an act of resistance: Ethical subversion in early childhood professional practice in England', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 22(2), 2021, pp124-139.

13. M. Fenech, J. Sumsion and W. Shepherd, 'Promoting early childhood teacher professionalism in the Australian context: the place of resistance', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood,* 11(1), 2010, pp89-105 (p92).

14. J. Albin-Clark, 'What is mobile documentation *doing* through social media in early childhood education in-between the boundaries of a teacher's personal and professional subjectivities?', *Learning, Media and Technology*, 2002, doi:10.1080/17439884.2022.2074450.

15. K. Strom, J. Ringrose, J. Osgood and E. Renold, 'PhEmaterialism: response-able research & pedagogy', *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology, 10*(2-3), 2020, pp1-39, https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10091313

16. J. Albin-Clark, 2021, *op. cit*.

17. P. Moss, 2015, *op cit*.; P. Moss and G. Roberts-Holmes, *Neoliberalism and early childhood education: imaginaries, markets and pedagogies*, London, Routledge, 2021.

18. A. Lorde, *A Burst of Light*, US, Dover publications, 1988 (p130).

19. K. Hall, 'To codify pedagogy or enrich learning? A Wengerian perspective on early literacy policy in England', in K. Goouch and A. Lambirth (eds), *Understanding 306 phonics and the teaching of reading. Critical perspectives*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2007, pp88-101.

20. E. Wood, 'Unbalanced and unbalancing acts in the early years foundation stage: a critical discourse analysis of policy-led evidence on teaching and play from the Office for Standards in Education in England (Ofsted)', *Education 3-13*, 47(7), 2019, pp784-95, doi:10.1080/03004279.2019.1622494.

21. K. Hall, 2007, *op. cit*.

22. J. Albin-Clark, 2021, *op. cit*.; J. Basford and C. Bath, 'Playing the assessment game: an English early childhood education perspective', *Early Years,* 34(2), 2014, pp119-132.

23. Roberts Holmes and Moss, 2021, *op. cit*.