Challenging the Hegemony That Rocks the Cradle: An Education for Hope, Justice, and Democracy

by Leigh O’Brien

Picture an early childhood classroom almost anywhere in North America. The walls are painted a sunny yellow, the child-sized furniture is distressed but still-attractive hardwood, and laughing children of diverse social and racial backgrounds rotate between academic centers disguised as home kitchens or stuffed-animal operating theaters. But don’t be fooled! The early childhood classroom is not just a place where students learn how to hold their scissors and play nicely with friends. These are actually places where we, as parents, educators, and policy makers, first decide what it means for children to be educated. And make no mistake: the stakes are high.

Currently, there are two competing visions of public education in America. One side sees public education as a public good and classrooms as places where anybody can (and should) learn what they need to know to become thoughtful and engaged citizens. The other—those who favor privatization, deregulation, and unfettered free markets over public institutions and government—sees students as mere pawns in their neoliberal economic and political agendas. The battle between the two sides is clearly evident in higher education, where an increasing number of poor and/or minority students are shut out from degree-granting programs. But the combatants are armed (or not) in early childhood classrooms.

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What does it mean to be a "good' early childhood teacher?

In this paper I reflect on a study in which two colleagues and I, teacher educators all, examined prospective students' college applications to gain insight into the discourses' with which students entered two early childhood teacher certification programs. We then built on these findings to hypothesize how the identified discourses might affect the applicants' future students. Now, with my colleagues' blessing, I revisit this study to examine the presence and possible consequences of hegemony in Early Childhood Education (ECE), perhaps the last place it might be expected. In fact, however, key neoliberal players on both the domestic and foreign-policy stages might find themselves surprisingly at home in an early childhood classroom due to the significant congruence of their values and agendas with those expressed by the applicants in this study. I highlight these parallels to show the pervasive reach of neoliberalism and to recommend actions and policies for other post-secondary educators, both in and outside the field of education, who seek to challenge and reposition the current dialogue, practices, and outcomes in education at all levels.

Initially, my colleagues and I focused on whether the two groups of candidates provided differing rationales regarding their choice of a teacher-education program. As two of us were charged with making decisions about student acceptance to our respective programs, from time to time we talked about the applications and eventually became curious about what the applicants wrote and why. The essays were written by prospective students to two very different ECE programs where the study’s authors worked, both in western New York: one an undergraduate program at a state-assisted college, the other a master's-level program at a private college. The 20 undergraduates were all applying to an initial ECE certification program. The 24 prospective graduate students were already certified as teachers, typically in elementary education; this program provided a second certification (in ECE) and a master's degree, as required in New York for a Professional Certificate.

We found that most undergraduate and graduate applications focused on process over content. These process-focused applicants said such things as:

- "I feel that my attributes of perseverance, self-confidence, initiative, and organization make me a well-qualified candidate;"
- "As an educator it is my responsibility to keep learning new and innovative ways to teach the children I have in my care"; and

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• “Each child is a unique individual and I have grown to value the different gifts that each child possesses.”

Applicants also tended to write in generalities, the majority of which reflect current cultural conceptions of caregiving or mothering. As the following examples suggest, they described themselves as loving children, being nurturing, and having a positive disposition:

• “Watching this child communicate with his peers and teacher brought joy to my heart”;
• “What kept me going were the children who needed love, affection, challenges, and just someone who would be there consistently”; and
• “My positive outlook truly stands out and makes a world of difference when working with children.”

When my colleagues and I began our analysis, we expected to see obvious differences between the undergraduate and graduate applicants’ essays, not only because of the differences in applicants’ ages and the nature of the two institutions, but also because the application forms were quite different. Initially we saw mostly similarities as noted above. As we continued to work with the data, we saw that the various responses could be collapsed into six overarching categories: professional development, prior experience, student learning, a positive stance toward teaching, commitment, and loving children. It was when we focused on these categories that we saw interesting differences between the ways in which undergraduate and graduate students completed the applications.

The undergraduate program applicants tended to emphasize their prior experiences working with children, as well as qualities of character. By contrast, the graduate program applicants tended to focus on getting a degree as a means to an end; they focused on admission as an opportunity for job training to improve their personal credentials for marketability and/or improvement in technical skill by which they might impart skills or knowledge. The following were typical of responses:
“Now settle down,” said Miss Nelson in a sweet voice.

They could see that Miss Swamp was a real witch.

• “My goal is to continue working in early childhood education as an inner-city preschool teacher. A specialized graduate program in early childhood education would develop my professional abilities.”
• “I will be able to immediately implement what I learn in this graduate program in my classroom. It will enable me to know my students’ developmental levels, needs, and thoughts, and thus, I can improve my methods of teaching accordingly.”

The similarities and differences that we identified in our comparison of the responses prompted us to situate applicants’ constructions of idealized early childhood teachers within circulating discourses, to think about what this might mean for the identities they might take up as teachers-to-be, and to consider the potential implications for the field of early childhood education. Ryan, Ochsner, and Genishi challenge us to think about what is missing when we primarily rely on one image of what a good early childhood teacher should look like. In the authors’ review of the dichotomous teacher images seen in the children’s book, *Miss Nelson is Missing!*, they illustrate the possibilities and limitations of different approaches to early childhood research on teaching. Following this line of thinking, I will outline why a position at the center, the current mainstream approach to ECE, might have been so attractive to our program applicants, as well as suggest a few of the options on the margins of ECE that could broaden the possibilities of practice for new early childhood teachers.

On the whole, we saw both sets of responses as giving voice to mainstream discourses about what schooling is for and the role of the teacher in schools. And we found it interesting, although (in retrospect) not surprising, that applicants seem to be immersed in the dominant early childhood discourse, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), well before they come to our programs, a point I will return to shortly. Their responses also suggest immersion in the dominant U.S. ideologies of individualism and neutrality. We saw these two foci in the attention to the individual qualities of being positive, nurturing, determined, respectful, and loving, as well as in the absence of attention to the broader socio-economic and political contexts in which, of course, all education resides.

These orientations can be seen in applicant statements such as the following:
• “The most important value to have with students is respect. Respect is the key to running an organized classroom.”
• “My emphasis is on creating a classroom and a curriculum that fosters...
early childhood learners’ self-confidence, early literacy and math skills, creativity, and life-long eagerness to learn!”

Given the applicants’ general orientation to the mainstream discourse, we found it a bit puzzling that there was no mention of teachers and children together constructing knowledge or even interaction between teacher and learner, key components of social constructivism, the primary theoretical underpinning of DAP. Further, there was no critique of the “getting-kids-ready-for-school” discourse which was one of the main reasons DAP was created. Also missing, perhaps less surprisingly given the apolitical view many teachers have of teaching, was a view of education as a vehicle for social change. Education for active, democratic citizenship, for example, was not mentioned once. In fact, the entire school-society link was missing. So, too, was any notion of transformation, emancipation, or alliance building. In this worldview, schools are seen as vehicles for social control and maintenance rather than social justice.

Consistent with this omission, the applicants spoke of young children (their presumed future students) in generalized, homogenous terms without noting or attending to cultural, linguistic, economic, geographic, ability, or gender diversity. Or, if they spoke to diversity, it was typically with the plan to help children whom they perceive to have difficult lives, as in the following statement:

• “I hope to teach in the inner-city so that my skills and experience can benefit those who most need them.”

Further, the candidates’ essays did not speak to the potential of pedagogy for empowerment through coalition-building between families, communities, and social/political groups such as unions; instead, we noted an individualized tone of service from both undergraduate and graduate program applicants.

• “Kids are so innocent, still untouched by all the troubles in the world, and I think that it would be such an incredible experience to be just one of the people who set the foundation for the rest of their lives.”

• “Some of my educational objectives [presumably for the children] are language development, self-expression, and self-esteem, plus learning to work within a group.”

These sentiments embody the neoliberal emphasis on the individual. In this model, a teacher’s success or failure depends on his or her willingness and ability to satisfactorily prepare children for their future roles in society. In the current era of market “reform,” the idea of the public has been replaced by an ideology of pri-
vate risk management whereby, under the banner of individualism, students-as-
consumers are taught responsible-choice strategies designed for competitive
advantage in the so-called new economy. Further, as old collectivities and their
support structures (e.g., working-class labor and unions) have begun to disappear
under advanced, competitive capitalism, so too have their counterparts within the
school system.

**Good girls and early childhood education**

These findings—and the disproportionate numbers of women in ECE—

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suggest that society’s “good girls” become society’s good early childhood teachers. This stance has deep philosophic and historic roots in U.S. schools beginning in the 1800s when, upon Catherine Beecher’s recommendation, women were sought after as teachers in the western territories not only because they were cheaper to hire than men, but also for the “feminizing effect” of their nurturing and caring in difficult environments.

Further, both sets of applicants described education as a means to the end of
making a difference in the lives of children. While this is admirable (albeit a bit of
a cliché), the question that concerns me is how these future teachers believed this
might occur. As I read it, their essays suggested they believed they could make a
difference by exporting their skills and knowledge to children-as-consumers, a
uniquely captive “market,” similar to the aggressive exportation of the neoliberal
brand of imposed democracy embodied in the *Project for the New American
Century.* This is a crucial point as K-12 education in the U.S. is now conserva-
tively estimated to be a $5 billion market and teachers are the purveyors of the
skills kids purportedly need to be “college and career ready.”

In fact, teachers are being judged on how well they prepare students for their
presumed futures. All states receiving federal Race to the Top funds, including
New York, now require teachers and principals to be evaluated by the state-gov-
erned Annual Professional Performance Review, where, for the first time ever, a
portion of teacher evaluation is directly tied to student performance. This model
applies to early childhood education as well; instead of viewing preschools as a
public good, as sites of ethical and political practice, we see their increasing com-
modification as they outsource services and privatize operations. Although I am
among those who find this trend frightening in the extreme, the pervasiveness of
the neoliberal model appears to be a “non-issue” for many. Our analysis suggests
that the applicants hailed those with the power to grant acceptance with this message: We understand who we are supposed to be and what we are supposed to do, and, because good girls don't rock the boat, we will not disrupt the status quo.

What I find most striking about these findings is the ways in which dominant discourses seem to limit and bound the ways that applicants were able to imagine what a good teacher looks like, may be, and does or does not do. In crafting their positions as ideal teacher candidates, nearly all of our applicants cloaked themselves in the traditional garb of the “good mother”: a positive disposition, experience that leads to competence, and a self-sacrificing love of children. At the same time, the applicants overlooked, disregarded, or perhaps even avoided the less familiar, the potentially controversial, unconventional, and even contradictory descriptions of what an educator of young children might look and act like. Noticeably missing were alternative or non-traditional conceptions of caring, nurturing, and teaching. Care was described as a unilateral act or disposition of the individual teacher toward the child/children rather than conceived of as a dynamic, fluid, and transactional social relation or even as a central theme around which curriculum itself might be organized.15

Paradoxically, while hoping to make a difference in the lives of children via their own determination, resolve, and sacrifice (as seen in movies such as Freedom Writers and Stand and Deliver), and looking to teacher education programs for the skills and dispositions with which to do so, most candidates situated themselves in a discourse that is unlikely to endorse or support this expressed ambition of making a difference and developing the ability to effect positive change in the lives of their students. Because of its prescriptive and dichotomous nature (for example, practice—in the singular—is either appropriate or inappropriate), the DAP book and video in essence present “teachers should…” statements.16

This emphasis on commonalities and consensus, rather than dissensus, diversity, and plurality, is consistent with an approach based on universally applied values of “quality.”17 Indeed, as Bredekamp and Copple write, the DAP position statement celebrates the preservation [italics mine] of “fundamental values deeply rooted in the history of the early childhood field.”18 In this way DAP privileges the priorities and knowledge of so-called experts over the insights and awareness of classroom teachers who (presumably) possess immediate knowledge of students’ backgrounds, strengths, needs, and communities, and excludes those who would question its codes.19 At the same time DAP perpetuates the myth of one-
size-fits-all “best practice” and thus denies all outside its parameters the label of appropriateness. This approach is consistent with the governance of self (i.e., that there is no need for governmental control if individuals are regulated from “inside”) required by the myth of meritocracy.\textsuperscript{20} In the neoliberal model, then, substantive political content is replaced by the criteria of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness. Policy becomes the province of “experts,” and the technical is privileged over the political as is the general over the particular.\textsuperscript{21} Successful policy is intended to be broad and inclusive, leading to universal prescriptions that then can be traded globally, as

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DAP literally has been. Thus differences and choice are downplayed as liabilities to efficiency and, at the same time, the political is masked.\textsuperscript{22} Building on the foregoing and reading between the lines, it appears to me that the discourse of DAP “teaches” several critical lessons:

• teachers cannot be trusted to make important decisions about working with children and families;
• homogeneity is valued over heterogeneity; and
• local conditions are unimportant because DAP is universally applicable.\textsuperscript{23} The teacher who buys (literally and/or figuratively) into these lessons is performing as the neoliberal model expects him or her to, thus assuring the maintenance of the world as given.

This disposition and worldview is inconsistent with education for free thought, and, thus, is antagonistic to teaching for the “full power of education” or “education in the democratic arts.”\textsuperscript{24} In sum, DAP is constraining. But who benefits from this model? And who is most constrained by it? I believe that, as is the case with many current “reforms” in U.S. education (e.g., high-stakes testing; the deskilling of teachers; the devaluing and, in some cases, dissolution of unions), this model is clearly and deliberately anti-democratic. Policies and practices such as this, established and disseminated by those with the power to do so, are intended to control and regulate what happens in education. As Au writes, referring to government-sanctioned testing, “it is important to remember that policies are designed, [and] that they require active intent with regards to particular structures and particular outcomes.”\textsuperscript{25} The world of ECE is no different.

**Sustaining hope: The charge to higher education**

Given the stakes, we in post-secondary education must pay attention now. We
must think about how our programs and policies might be altered to challenge the model of student as the consumer—and product—of what we feed them. Together with our colleagues and students, we can consider the concept of a public good versus private consumption; work to pull apart the conflation of democracy with capitalism; and both identify and challenge cultural imperialism that masquerades as a benevolent model of education. If we in higher education are to forge a community attentive to difference, we need to be suspicious of our certainty, less firm in our convictions, and more willing to listen well. If we approach our work with this kind of humility and open-mindedness, maybe we will be able to develop ways of working together that allow us to better understand and address the problems that confront us when and where we live, and give up trying to capture and codify the nuances, ambiguities, and complexities of reaching and teaching students in a diverse array of schools and communities.

Perhaps most importantly, we can suggest languages and images of possibility. Both early childhood and post-secondary education settings can be understood as spaces for ethical and political work involving a collective process of critical thinking, resistance to practices of subjectification, and confronting of injustice. In both settings we can try to move past a view of knowledge as regulation, we can look for—and challenge—examples of unquestioned dominance, and we can be alert to the move from description to prescription. We can also be wary of claims to so-called objective expertise, seek opportunities for transgression, and attempt to resist the power of dominant discourses. And we can work to make values and assumptions visible, question the “taken-for-granted” of education practices, and make explicit the largely tacit. We can, in sum, think for ourselves.

In addition, we can move toward “border crossings” that allow adults and children alike to be the creators of their own lives. For instance, in teacher education programs we can focus on democratic and equitable social relations while challenging the neoliberal language of accountability and commodification. We can ask our students to question the values of monetary exchange and received knowledge, and to consider instead responsibility to self and others, the construction of meaning, and communication as central to our work as educators. And, rather than accepting a forced consensus of values and approaches to teaching, we can acknowledge that plurality almost always means a degree of antagonism and conflict, and welcome disagreements as an opportunity for dialogue and the search for ‘truth.’

Looking more closely at both who may be accepted into the field of education...
as well as how we design, implement, model, and co-critique the experience of learning may make it possible for students to construct multiple and overlapping images of teachers and teaching. To this end, we could ensure, for example, that alternate theories and philosophies are an important part of the course work. For instance, if we are to make relationship central to teaching and learning, educators must care about their students’ lives enough to build on their experiences and bring their stories into the classroom. Teachers who create true learning communities must model connection, open communication, and deep reflection, and refuse the language of monetary exchange that views students as merely “economic units.”

A model like this could teach students to re-evaluate, to resist, and, finally, to re-imagine. It would celebrate and enhance the opportunity for a more democratic society from a more authentic, inclusive, and diverse treatment of what it means to learn and for what purpose(s); what it means to care, nurture, and teach children in and across a variety of cultural contexts and societal norms; how to recognize and resist injustice and oppression; and how to collectively imagine and craft equity-based outcomes. All of these could be explored in dialogic conversations, and possibilities presently constricted and co-opted by the increasingly ubiquitous values of neoliberalism could be imagined and shared.

If we teacher educators co-construct a climate of collaboration, cooperation, and civility with our students, they may come to esteem each other as additive stakeholders working toward a public common good rather than see each other as competitors in a private “race to the top.” In this way, we could move with our students toward a more complicated and powerful model of pedagogy less vulnerable to the dangers of trickle-down oppression. Finally, by questioning the current dominant discourse, we may be able to craft a more inclusive and active image of the good early childhood educator: one who feels empowered to challenge the hegemony that is rocking the cradle.

Will you join us as we work to construct and champion an approach to pedagogy that is complex, context-specific, and potentially liberatory? Can we in higher education collaborate to support public education as a public good and classrooms as places where everyone can become engaged citizens? Do we have the knowledge, the will, and the courage to infuse attention to diversity, justice, and equity into everything we do as educators? I hope so, for the sake of our children, our education system, and the very future of democracy in our country.
END NOTES

1. I use James Gee’s (1996) definition of Discourse here, although for ease of reading I will not capitalize: When discussing the combination of language with other social practices (e.g., behavior, values, ways of thinking, customs, perspectives) within a specific group, Gee refers to that as Discourse (vs. lower-case discourse, referring to language-in-use).

2. O’Brien, Novinger, and Leach-Bizari, “What does it mean to be a ‘Good’ Early Childhood Teacher? An Analysis of Themes in Application Essays Submitted to Two Early Childhood Education Teacher Certification Programs” is the study mentioned.

3. In the U.S., the term “Early Childhood Education” usually refers to working with children from birth to age 8. Here we are focused on cultural hegemony, whereby the prevailing cultural norms of a society, imposed by the ruling class, are perceived as natural and inevitable and therefore function to maintain unquestioned power.

4. See, for example, Hursh, “Neoliberalism and the Control of Teachers, Students, and Learning: The Rise of Standards, Standardization, and Accountability.”

5. Ryan, Ochsner, and Genishi, “Miss Nelson is Missing! Teacher Sightings in Research on Teaching,” pp. 45-59

6. See Bredekamp and Copple Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8 (rev. ed.), and Copple and Bredekamp Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8 (3rd ed.).


8. See, for example, Counts, Dare the School Build a New Social Order?, and Grieshaber, “Advocacy and Early Childhood Educators: Identity and Cultural Conflicts.”

9. In 2011, 86.7 percent of U.S. primary-level teachers were female (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Education_statistics#Women.C2.A0in_the_teaching_profession), and approximately 97 percent of preschool teachers were female in 2010 (Education International ECE Task Force).


11. See Dahlberg and Moss, Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education; Chomsky, Deterring Democracy; and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_for_the_New_American_Century re Project for the New American Century.

12. In 2008, Bill Gates introduced the term “college and career readiness” which has become a lynchpin of the discourse of Race to the Top. “Awards in Race to the Top will go to States that are leading the way with ambitious yet achievable plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive education reform. Race to the Top winners will help trail-blaze effective reforms and provide examples for States and local school districts throughout the country to follow as they too are hard at work on reforms that can transform our schools for decades to come.” See www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html.

13. See, for example, http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/teachers-leaders/plans/

14. Dahlberg and Moss, Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education.


19. See, for example, O’Brien, “Engaged Pedagogy: One Alternative to ‘Indoctrination’ into DAP.”
20. See, for example, Dahlberg and Moss, op cit; Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.


22. See, for example, O’Brien and Novinger, “Our ‘Excellent Adventures’ with NCATE: Stories of Struggle, Resistance, and Hope.”


25. Au, op cit, p. 11.

26. Greene, in Diversity and Inclusion, exhorts us to do just that.

27. See, for example, Giroux, Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning.

28. See Dahlberg and Moss op cit; Foucault op cit; and Novinger, O’Brien, and Sweigman, “Challenging the Culture of Expertise: Moving Beyond Training the Always, Already Failing Early Childhood Educator.”

29. Giroux, Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education. See also Novinger, O’Brien, and Sweigman “Challenging the Culture of Expertise: Moving Beyond Training the Always, Already Failing Early Childhood Educator” and O’Brien, “Holding the Talking Piece Gives Me a Chance to Make a Sentence Out of What I am Thinking’: Children’s Responses to the Use of Peace Circles at One Primary School in the U.S.”

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