



## LET US DISAGREE<sup>1</sup>

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### Resumo

#### Vamos discordar

Enquanto o respeito pela diversidade era um tema "à margem" dos debates sobre educação na primeira infância na década de 1980, é o cerne das preocupações de muitos hoje. Há um consenso emergente sobre como abordar as questões da diversidade na teoria da educação infantil, políticas e práticas. No entanto, é precisamente este consenso que pode ser preocupante. Inspirado pela teoria pós-fundacional, defendo que dissenso e desacordo não são apenas inevitáveis, mas também são necessários para promover o respeito pela diversidade, não como a tolerância para com aqueles que se desviam das normas, mas como uma desconstrução das normas que criam desvios.

**Palavras-chave:** democracia, políticas, pequena infância e diversidade

**Veja também a tradução deste artigo para o idioma Português nesta mesma edição.**

### Abstract

While respect for diversity was a theme 'on the margins' of the debates on early childhood education in the 1980's, it is at the core of many concerns today. There is an emerging consensus on how to address issues of diversity in early childhood education theory, policy and practice. Yet, it is precisely this consensus that may be worrying. Inspired by post-foundational theory, I argue that dissensus and disagreement are not only inevitable, but are also necessary to foster respect for diversity, not as tolerance towards those who deviate from the norms, but as a deconstruction of the norms that create deviations.

**Key words:** democracy, political, early childhood and diversity

**See also the translation of this article for the Portuguese language in the same issue.**

### Résumé

Bien que le respect de la diversité était un thème "en marge" des débats sur l'éducation de la petite enfance dans les années 1980, elle est au cœur des

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préoccupations de nombreux aujourd'hui. Il ya un consensus émergent sur la façon d'aborder les questions de la diversité dans la théorie de l'éducation préscolaire, la politique et la pratique. Pourtant, c'est précisément ce consensus qui mai à être préoccupant. Inspiré par la théorie post-fondatrice, je démontrerai que dissensus et de désaccord ne sont pas seulement inévitable, mais sont également nécessaires pour favoriser le respect de la diversité, non pas que la tolérance envers ceux qui s'écartent des normes, mais comme une déconstruction des normes qui créent des écarts.

**Mots-clés:** démocratie, politiques, petite enfance, diversité

**Voir aussi la traduction de cet article pour la langue portugaise dans le même numéro.**

While respect for diversity was a theme 'on the margins' of the debates on early childhood education in the 1980s, it is at the core of many concerns today. Thanks to the pioneering work of scholars such as Louise Derman-Sparks and the Anti-Bias team in the United States and multiple local projects in different European countries as well as transnational networks, much has changed. This change is twofold: first, we have now a growing consensus of what may constitute 'enabling practices' in contexts of cultural or ethnic diversity. In addition, other aspects of diversity have been explored, including class or social backgrounds, men as carers, the inclusion of children labeled as having special needs and other forms of diversity (same-sex families, travelling populations etc.). While two decades ago, publications on how to address diversity issues in early childhood education were hard to find, one can now fill several bookshelves with manuals, books, training materials and DVD's on these issues. Although in some places, diversity is still denied, in general, the early years community today cannot reasonably claim to focus on the 'average' child anymore. There is general consensus that learning processes differ depending on the contexts and that these contexts mirror the societal diversity in ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, family composition, ability etc. This evolution can be (shallowly) summarized as an evolution from an equalizing approach to a diversity approach. In short, the liberal, individualizing and equalizing approach of (roughly speaking) the 1950s up to the 1980s was based on explicit or implicit policies in which growth in wealth, welfare and well-being were considered as almost synonymous. The general, modernist belief was that the growing wealth and the construction of the 'modern' welfare state would eradicate all differences and make everybody happy. This is quite clear in the naïve, yet eloquent speech pronounced at the opening of the first major department store in the inner city of Ghent in 1957 (quotes in this paper are in their original languages, with translations in footnotes, as respect for diversity also includes respect for language diversity):

Ik ben ervan overtuigd dat over weinige jaren, dank zij de bestendige verhoging van de levensstandaard van de ganse bevolking, en dank zij ook de verkoop tegen gemakkelijke betalingsvoorwaarden, wij te Gent, evenals te New York, getuige zullen zijn van het opbeurende schouwspel van stoffelijke welvaart en comfort voor arbeiders, bedienden, landbouwers en burgers, die uiteindelijk zal bijdragen tot het verdwijnen van het klassenverschil, dat men in de Verenigde Staten niet aantreft.<sup>3</sup> (CAUWE, 1957, cited in SCHOLLIERS, 1994)

Today, the early years community is much more aware that equality and equity are not synonymous. Pursuing social justice and change goes inherently hand in hand with dealing with a multiplicity of differences in a productive way, rather than with minimizing diversity. We also begin to move beyond essentialist approaches of multiculturalism, which in the past have all too often ignored socio-economic power relations, i.e. the pitfall of culturalizing issues of blatant economic inequalities.

This is not to say that overt or covert, implicit or explicit discriminations have been eradicated. Quite on the contrary: children living in poverty and children from ethnic minorities are still often squeezed out from mainstream provisions and in many countries the children of the poorest families are overrepresented in early childhood provisions of poor quality (VANDENBROECK et al. 2008). Children with what is labelled as 'special needs' still struggle to find their place in early childhood. Homosexual parents may still daily be confronted with messages that they – and their children – do not 'belong' on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the awareness that this is an issue, as well as the insights in how to tackle these issues have substantially evolved over the last two decades. Much remains to be done, but the way forward seems now clearer, as an apparent consensus grows on what is to be done.

Yet, despite diverse interpretations (see VANDENBROECK, 2007), this emerging consensus may exactly be what is worrying. As Michel Foucault said: «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».<sup>4</sup> (1983, 1205)

The emerging consensus on what respect for diversity and social inclusion in early childhood education may mean, seems to be based on a consensus within very specific circles of progressive academics and activist

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<sup>3</sup> 'I am convinced that in a few years from now, thanks to the rising living standards of the general population, and thanks to the profitable sale conditions, we will witness in Gent, as in New York, the material well-being and comfort of labourers, clerks, farmers and all citizens, that will eventually contribute to the disappearance of these class differences, one does not find in the United States'. [Tentative translation by the author]

<sup>4</sup> 'I do not wish to say that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not the same as what is bad. If everything is dangerous, we will always have work to do'. [Tentative translation by the author]



practitioners. Very often, textbooks on these issues explain that we ought to look at how diversity is represented in the educational environment (decorations, play materials, children's books, music, etc.). They may give precise examples of how we can address children's questions on diversity to prevent them from growing into prejudices; and they attach particular importance to multilingual education, through valuing the home languages of the children. In short, they present a holistic, child-centred, experiential curriculum in which a diversity of family cultures is acknowledged. However, very often, the voices of parents and children themselves are not included in the elaboration of such curricula, as if parents and children would all be quite happy with what the experts have imagined. The diversity curricula, paradoxically, risk becoming a new form of expert discourse on 'the good life' for children, silencing precisely those they wished to include.

In academia, we can observe an emerging interest in parents' and children's perspectives on education. There is a growing stream of publications, acknowledging children's agency, both inspired by the sociology of childhood and by psychologists who are interested in the bidirectionality of educational processes. In this vein of academic research, the paradigm of diversity has also become obvious through a growing number of studies that look at children's and parents' perspectives on different aspects of education in multiple disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, ethnopsychology, social work etc. In addition, we have gained insights in how the cultural context influences the learning processes of children, thanks to 'post-Vygotskian' research by scholars such as Barbara Rogoff, Ayrtin Göncü and many others. However, this vein of research hardly troubles what I described as a new expert discourse on diversity in early childhood education. What is basically at stake is that these studies complement our knowledge on parental ethnotheories, educational habits or beliefs and on the constructions of learning. This may lead to a well-intended plea for tolerance towards those who have 'other cultures' than what we are used to. One danger may exactly be the essentializing constructions of what 'other cultures' are. But, more importantly, what is missing in the debate is precisely the opinion of parents and children on how to deal with these differences. Indeed, taking stock of parents' or children's perspectives on early childhood education is not the same as looking at their perspective on the issue of diversity itself.

Only recently have scholars begun to discuss aspects of the diversity curriculum with those concerned: children and parents from multiple backgrounds. And what is beginning to emerge in these studies does not at all put our minds at rest. To give but two examples: some ethnic minority parents protest against what they view as a nonacademic direction of multicultural curricula and ask for a more 'traditional' magister, directing the learning and disciplining of the children when necessary. Some parents reject the presence of bilingual assistants or of the home language of the child in the centre. As a particularly agentic father from Moroccan descent in a French-language preschool in Brussels said to me recently: 'Do you think our children do not deserve to read Molière?' We cannot ignore that the educational system,



including early childhood education, is one of the pathways in the (re)production of social inequality. As progressive academics or practitioners, how can we not take into account the perspective of parents who wish to 'conform' to standards of academic achievement (or to achieve this cultural capital as Bourdieu could have said), rather than to discuss holistic education? But on the other hand, how can we, if we have consecrated a major part of our lives to child centeredness? As a critical pedagogue I may argue that this parental question of conformity with the dominant norms and values is to be considered as 'internalized oppression' (FREIRE, 1970). But then again, wasn't it also Freire who said 'Dialogue cannot exist without humility. [...] How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?' (1970, 78).

For 'progressive educationalists', it is hard to argue that we educate the whole child, when children leave their language and culture at the doorstep (Cummins et al. 2005). But, unfortunately, it is also hard to argue that we educate the whole child, when leaving his or her parents' opinions in the corridor. The aim of this editorial is not to engage in a new dichotomy, as if ethnic minority parents want adult-centred education versus liberals who advocate for child centred curricula. Perhaps to create such a dichotomy would be the worst case scenario. What is the case is the mere observation that we have only begun to discuss with parents and children how to deal with issues of diversity in education, instead of deciding for them. What is also the case is that discussing these issues with them will entail many new disagreements on many new issues: language acquisition, the role of early childhood education in society, the multiple meanings of 'inclusion' or 'integration', the relationships between private and public spheres, the relationships between culture and religion etc. These disagreements will inevitably entail disputable decisions, such as the French prohibition on the veil in public functions (including for early childhood teachers) or the English possibility that rulings issued by sharia courts are enforceable, provided that the parties concerned agree to give them the power to rule on their case. The observation that we have only begun these discussions may be challenging, yet at the same it is quite a relief that these impossible discussions have emerged. As Chantal Mouffe (2005) argues, these fundamental disagreements on how to organize our living together, these 'antagonisms' as she labels them, are the essence of democracy. She argues that every compromise in essence is a form of exclusion and that it is in this impossibility that we need to act and take decisions. Indeed, educating young children is a matter of decision-taking, a chain of multiple small, insignificant and yet highly important decisions. Shall I ask Jim to finish his meal before he can leave the table? Shall I put Dyvia on the potty as her mother asked? Shall I stop Zeynep and Clarice from fighting? Shall I tell the parents of Mathew that I am worried about how he talks? How shall I explain to the group why Boris does not understand me? That is what educators do: taking decisions. Yet, it is highly improbable that if we would reflect on how these decisions are taken and why, we would all agree. Of course, we may agree on some very general horizons, to use the term of Kunneman (2005), such as 'aiming at a society without discrimination' or 'respecting diversity', but it remains most unlikely that, when





specifying what this actually means in daily practice of early childhood, when discussing it with professionals, policy makers, parents and children, consensus will be reached. And luckily so. Because it is precisely the disagreement that allows us to reflect about the decisions taken. There is nothing as deadly for a team as consensus. Indeed, in the daily practice of early childhood education, it is the exception, the odd question, the unexpected, the 'leakage' that raises the debates that makes professionalism 'progress'. As Jan Peeters (2008) claims in his very well documented PhD study on the history of professionalization in Flanders, it is precisely those action-research projects that were concerned with diversity that enabled professionals to develop this highly valued reflexive professionalism. It is the mother who asks to put her daughter on the potty at a very early age, it is the father who wishes his impaired child to attend 'normal' classes, it is the child refusing to sleep, who challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions, provided we allow them to do so. It is the Other who urges us to make our decisions transparent and therefore disputable and who forces us to acknowledge that these disputable decisions can never be merely the results of protocols for the sake of protocols or based on a higher moral order. As a matter of fact, these daily actions will inevitably remain micro-political and disputable decisions. This requires various ways in which decisions can be documented, to make them transparent, and therefore disputable. What it also requires is the time and space to allow ourselves to ask the difficult questions about how the dispute compels us to rethink our conceptions of what 'good practice' may be, over and over again.

Obviously, this makes the work of professionals in early childhood quite demanding, both for researchers and practitioners in the field, as it questions too many taken for granted assumptions. Inspired by the work of Cameron and Moss (2007), Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and Rinaldi (2005), and based on his own narrative research, Jan Peeters (2008) suggests that four basic, generic 'competencies' are crucial for early childhood professionals in this domain:

- (1) The ability to look for (always provisional) solutions in contexts of dissensus.
- (2) To focus on the meeting of the Other, the one we do not know.
- (3) The ability to co-construct knowledge with others (colleagues, parents, children).
- (4) Acting with a focus on change.

It is the merit of the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* to make an attempt to address some of these issues in this special issue. It includes contributions on the perspectives of children and parents from very diverse regions: inner cities such as Birmingham or Brussels as well as post-conflict or conflict areas such as Northern Ireland and Israel. In so doing, the contributions to this special issue may be read as case studies of what Chantal Mouffe (2005) calls agonistic democracy or as multiple ways in which politics can be brought into the nursery, to use the framings of Peter Moss (2007).



Zvi Bekerman and Moshe Tatar show how, in the highly segregated and discordant context of Israel, Palestinian and Jewish parents share the same preschool, but for quite different reasons and with quite different understandings of what is going on in the preschool, embedded not only in different cultural traditions, but first and foremost because they may have different interests, embedded in different socio-economical and political conditions. Geert Van Hove and his colleagues give another example of how listening to parents may be challenging our assumptions. By analysing the metaphors used by parents of children with disabilities, they question the dominant discourses on these parents and highlight their agency in a context that I would interpret as discordant, the (political) conflict residing in the continuous struggle to be listened to in mainstream provisions and in a highly medicalized care system. Vandebroek, Roets and Snoeck analyse these daily conflicts on the micro-level and document – through narratives of newly-arrived immigrant mothers – how within a broader context of fundamental asymmetrical power relations, forms of reciprocity, belonging and citizenship may emerge, with the help of reflexive practitioners. Paul Connolly and his colleagues also investigate a segregated context: Northern Ireland. They research the children's perspectives and show how, from a very early age on, children develop concepts of 'us' against 'them' or divisive group identities. In so doing, they force us to deeply reflect on the place and functions of early childhood provisions in society. Julia Oliveira-Formosinho, adopting a more qualitative approach, unveils some aspects of the importance of the search for sameness, togetherness and closeness from the children's perspectives. Again, but from a different angle, her contribution points to the fact that living together cannot ignore that in- and out-groups shaped as concepts of 'us' and 'not us' are inherent to meeting the other and to dialogue. Each of these papers shows that true listening always reveals new insights, sheds light on what is not expected and therefore is challenging. The ethical and methodological contribution of Christine Pascal and Tony Betram explains indeed how challenging this journey can be, as it requests that the researcher also considers his/her own power relations with the practitioners and especially with the children that are all too often the objects of research. But then again, this is exactly why researchers may benefit from listening to children, since 'Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking' (Freire 1970). In very diverse ways, the contributions in this special issue show not only how different family, economic, cultural, social and political contexts need to be taken into account in early childhood education, but also that what these context mean may differ significantly, according to different parents and children.

Once we take the voices of these children and parents seriously – not only on their individual 'needs', but also on how living together is constructed or on what equal opportunities may mean – things can never be easy anymore. Consensus is then beyond our reach. Eternal confrontation, disagreement and uncertainty will be our fate. But then again, it may be a very reassuring thought, that this is exactly what respect for diversity is all about.



Respect for diversity is not about tolerance toward those who deviate from the norms. It is about disputing the norms that create deviations. We need disagreement in order to challenge what is taken for granted and to acknowledge that our expertise is provisional and tentative. Indeed, as a Palestinian father said in the study reported by Bekerman and Tatar 'When you see the other, you know yourself better'. Consequently, disagreement is complex, but complexity is exceptionally welcome. It is not only in sameness that we construct who we are, it is also thanks to the mirror of difference and disagreement. Moreover, disagreement may very well be one of the cornerstones of the 'heterotopias' Michel Foucault described as 'real existing utopias':

[...] des sortes de contre-emplacements, sortes d'utopies effectivement réalisées dans lesquelles les emplacements réels, tous les autres emplacements réels que l'on peut trouver à l'intérieur de la culture sont à la fois représentés, contestés et inverses [...].<sup>5</sup> (1967/1984, 1574)

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<sup>5</sup> 'Some sort of counter-locations, real existing utopias in which real locations, all the real locations one can find in culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inversed'. [Tentative translation by the author]





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