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Contemporary Challenges for Education in Early Childhood

John Eric Wilkinson

Abstract

Over the past two centuries the Age of Modernity has dominated intellectual thought and related actions predominantly in the English-speaking world. It is now becoming increasingly recognized by academics and powerful organizations both nationally and internationally that the consequence of this mode of thinking has generated immense problems for the contemporary world. The level of social and economic inequalities that continue to increase has now become the concern of many, particularly those who identify with the thinking and ideas associated with the emerging Age of Post-Modernity. The challenge to Education is profound not least so in how young children's awareness, knowledge and understanding about the society in which they live is transmitted, often unwittingly, initially in families and subsequently in kindergartens and schools. This paper first addresses the main social constructions of childhood that can be identified in democratic countries and then links these constructions to the three dominant ideologies that exert axiomatic influence on the education process in different countries. Emerging from this brief analysis the paper identifies three fundamental and important challenges to those with responsibility and influence on young children's education be they in governments, educational institutions or families.

Keywords: young children, education, ideology, postmodernism, social justice, social responsibility

1. Introduction

It is a characteristic of our common human identity that young children are endowed with a high level of curiosity and are eager to learn. Making sense of their world is critical not just for their well-being but for their very survival. How the adult world responds to this is overwhelmingly crucial that has been recognized for generations and enshrined in the famous Jesuit saying: *give me the child till he is seven and I will give you the man* [1]. Yet, history tells us that children have not always been treated positively at the hands of adults. It was the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the end of the eighteenth century in his iconic book 'Emile' who challenged the prevailing social attitude to children at that time as being born in sin, the consequence for the adult world being to make children good [2]. Rousseau turned this deeply embedded attitude on its head and advocated that children were actually born good with the consequence that it was the responsibility of adults [and Education] to keep them good and shield them from evil.

History also tells us that the adult world's responsibility to children has often been wanton. In the nineteenth century when the industrial revolution in the

western world was at its height children as young as five years of age were sent to work for long hours in factories. They were treated as slaves. In the twentieth century children were often regarded as a necessary nuisance. *Children should be seen and not heard* was the social attitude of the adult world at that time. Even in contemporary times, the abuse of children by adults is all too frequently evident. It is beyond belief to any reasonable person that not an insignificant number of adults get gratification by inflicting children to profound traumas. Less dramatic but of equal concern is the attitude of many parents that it is their right to be able to punish children physically for behavior considered unacceptable by inflicting pain, a 'right' that was very recently overturned in Scotland by legislation making it illegal for parents to smack their child [3]. But, for the vast majority of children, childhood can be a happy and challenging time which, at last, is being recognized by governments and society at large. There is widespread determination and resolve to provide children with experiences that will have positive proven long-term effects on the quality of their lives. How these experiences are designed largely depends both on our understanding of childhood and the prevailing ideology in any given society.

2. Constructions of childhood

It was the work of Berger and Luckman [4] that first alerted scholars to the fact that the adult world through culture and ideology imposes conceptual constructions on different groups in society. Childhood and senior citizenship are two examples. Different cultures attribute different characteristics to the different stages in the human life span (for example, innocence in the case of children, relative helplessness in the case of senior citizens) such that their individual members are treated in the context of these constructions often in conflict with their actual reality. In terms of childhood, social constructionism seeks to understand how children and knowledge about childhood is constructed by whom, why and most substantially what purpose it serves [5]. The social construction of childhood plays a powerful role not only in shaping the experiences afforded to children by the adult world but also in the emergence of their individual identities (*what am I?*) and subjectivities (*who am I?*). This powerful process of cultural socialization takes place at the hands of both parents (and carers) and the architects of education- teachers, administrators and politicians, often subconsciously.

Any specific social construction of childhood is not universal. It differs remarkably in different parts of the world. Childhood is neither universally similar nor natural rather it is tied close to social circumstances and cultural process [5]. Such cultural process forms part of what Bronfenbrenner described as the macro-level of social influence in his work on the ecology of childhood [6]. In the contemporary world, it is possible to identify three macro constructions of childhood: the *tabula rasa child*, the *developing child* and the *agency child*. Each one of these constructions have fundamental implications for Education. They exert a significant influence on how education is defined, understood and practised in different countries.

The *tabula rasa* construction of childhood basically regards children as 'empty' vessels that have to be filled with knowledge and skills through a process of instruction augmented by extensive assessment. It has been and continues to be a very evident construction in Asian countries. At the elementary school stage, the learning space in schools has been organized in a traditional way with individual desks facing the front of the classroom in which the teacher was expected to impart the subject knowledge of the 'lesson'. Furthermore, many parents considered this to be the 'right' way that their children should be educated. To this day, parents in Asian

countries exert pressure on their children to get high grades in a formal 'test-loaded' pedagogy as their child's life-chances depend on such grades. It comes as no surprise that the performance of children in the fields of math, science and reading in the tiger-economic countries such as Singapore, Japan and Hong Kong are at the top of international league tables such as PISA [7].

The *developing child* construction regards childhood as a period in the human life span when children naturally pass through universal and sequential stages of development. One of the chief proponents of this construction was the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget whose work contributed to the growth of the academic field of activity known as Developmental Psychology. It was considered that children's natural maturation processes interact with their experiences of the world which then make them 'ready' for the next more mature stage. One can find this construction of childhood very much in evidence in public documents and institutions in countries such as the UK and the US and is often embedded in the documentation of national guidelines for teachers in the early childhood education and care sector (ECEC). One consequence of this construction was the emergence of 'child-centred' and progressive education. In the 1960's national reports issued by educational review bodies set up by the UK Government [8, 9] trumpeted the virtues of locating the child's needs at the centre of the education process. Children's natural curiosity and the desire for understanding had to be respected in the form of learning through experience and activity. Although this approach to the education of children was formally accepted in the 1960's, it had been advocated in a formal review of Primary Education some 30 years previously which recommended that the curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored [10].

The *agency child* construction is relatively new and has emerged from Scandinavian countries in the last 25 years, particularly in Sweden. Fundamentally, 'agency' is a mind-set that *brings us face to face with the political question of how we can motivate ourselves and others to work for social change and economic justice* [11]. In Sweden, children are encouraged to learn how to take control of their own lives through a process of self-formation such that they consciously resist the 'technologies of domination' that operate in society [12]. Central to this process is the importance attached to democracy at all levels of society. Children are taught from a very early age not only about the importance of democratic decision-making but they are also taught to be critical and to question the authority of grown-ups. Children's 'voices', their opinions and their preferences are given validity not only throughout the Education system in Sweden but in individual families even when children are young [13].

Each of the above constructions of childhood is both culturally and ideologically located. How any given society at any given time endorses a specific political ideology determines which construction of childhood plays out in the ecology of children's lives though in many societies there is an on-going conflict between different constructions particularly in the US. In most countries throughout the world the State now plays an active role in determining what counts as Education. It is part of the ideological State apparatus first articulated by Althusser [14] to maintain social order and stability.

3. Ideology and early childhood education

A major challenge for ECEC is the ideology in which both the policy and practice are rooted. The term 'ideology' emerged from the political and revolutionary turmoil in France at the end of the eighteenth century [15, 16] though as a concept it was first used by Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century. It was originally associated with a

profound shift in a 'world view' from an essentially disposition based on superstition and religious dogma to a disposition based on scientific and logical thought rooted in the Scottish Enlightenment associated with two Scottish philosophers Adam Smith and David Hulme [17]. It is a disposition that initiated the period of intellectual thought now known as 'Modernity' in Western and other English-speaking countries and resulted in significant financial prosperity for some and devastating poverty for others. However, during the subsequent 100 or so years its meaning evolved into its present conception based on fundamentally different sets of axiomatic principles concerning a society's social and economic arrangements in particular the relationship between the State, its institutions, the family and the individual.

In present-day democratic and capitalist countries policy and practice in Education, particularly in ECEC, has been influenced by three dominant political ideologies which are competing for our future. They are: Conservatism, Liberalism and Social Democracy. Each of these ideologies has a set of powerful social and economic principles, often adopted by people with fervent belief though there are significant contested variants and overlaps both within and between them [18].

Of the three democratic ideologies conservatism has perhaps the longest lineage in history. Its variant or extreme form, referred to as neo-liberalism, has been and continues to be highly influential, particularly in present-day USA [19, 20]. In basic and perhaps over simplified terms, one of conservatism's dominant principles is often referred to as the *laissez-faire* principle. This means that the State should play a minimalist role in social and economic affairs and allow individuals to flourish whose behavior is driven by self-interest and the accumulation of wealth and prestige. Extensive provision of welfare is regarded as counter-productive to encouraging self-discipline and the 'work-ethic'. Welfare should only be provided by the State as the ultimate 'safety net'. The family or private foundations should take responsibility for supporting the vulnerable by providing the necessary welfare. In its more extreme form (that is, neo-liberalism) 'market-forces' should be encouraged not only in business and financial institutions but also in social services particularly in education, welfare and often health. Secondly, a society's prosperity is generated by unregulated competition as competition encourages greater efficiency and value for money. Thirdly, inequalities of wealth and prestige reflect 'natural' human differences so it is inevitable that some people will become wealthy and some people will become poor. The State should therefore refrain from initiatives in 'social-engineering' as they are doomed to fail. Fourthly, priority should be given to the maintenance of law, order and respect for a strong hegemony where citizens know and accept the existing social hierarchy.

In contrast, at the heart of Liberalism is the freedom, well-being and welfare of the 'individual' though there is some divergence between the original principles of Liberalism and individuals being liberal-minded [15]. It is taken for granted that if individuals seek to improve themselves morally, socially and educationally society will also improve. Liberalism maintains that the State should allow individuals to be free to choose their own life - style, to be free to express their views/opinions without fear of punishment or recriminations as these matters, according to Liberal ideology, make a profound contribution to the 'sum of human happiness'. In addition, citizens in a democratic society should be allowed to choose how they are governed by the State as this principle is the bedrock of democracy. Coupled with this, people are expected to be self-reliant, tolerant and to show respect for others. Cooperation at all levels of society, respect for human rights and social justice and the provision of welfare for the vulnerable are also basic principles of Liberal ideology. Critically important for Education is that the State should pursue policies aimed at providing opportunity for all irrespective of 'race', gender, socio-economic status, sexual preference and disability.

Social Democracy, described in the UK as the Third Way [21], is a relatively new ideology and has some overlap with Liberalism. The hallmark of Social Democracy is the concept of the *Managed State* whereby the State promotes social inclusion, social justice and individual happiness such that every citizen can participate, should they so choose, in fair and free social services (including Education, medical services and leisure activities) provided by the State throughout their lives. Inevitably such universal provision by the State requires citizens in employment to pay relatively high taxes in countries where Social Democracy is dominant, for example, in Sweden. However, Social Democracy should not be confused with the ideology of Socialism where the State controls the social and economic affairs in the name of egalitarianism. Under Social Democracy individual choice is paramount. In addition, throughout government, its institutions and the family there should be no authority without democracy. The application of this principles requires anyone who is invested with authority such as parents, teachers and school principals to negotiate their decision -making with students and children and not to resort to authoritarian dogma.

In countries where conservative ideology is highly influential, the *tabula rasa* construction of childhood is highly visible. This is reflected in both the policy and practice of ECEC. In many ECEC establishments there is an overwhelming emphasis on instrumental learning where young children are expected to acquire both knowledge about their world and skills to operate in the world [22]. This has been the *modus operandi* both in many Asian countries and recently in sections of US and UK societies, particularly in the private sector of ECEC provision where parents can exert considerable influence by financial means. As a result, childcare markets with their business priorities have been created which appeal to narrowly defined individualized self-interest where parents are treated as consumers. *Accompanying the rise of the market has been a discourse of childcare as a commodity—a commodity marketed and sold to its consumers (read parents) as a private benefit* [23].

In the US the origins of this development can be found the federal report *Good Start, Grow Smart* [24] which called for *state agencies that receive federal dollars to provide education programs for children three to five to develop early learning standards on pre-reading, language skills and mathematical knowledge* [22]. As a consequence, children's performance on academic type tests in ECEC became the marker of the success of the ECEC system thereby severely limiting children's learning experience to instrumental learning to the detriment of experiential learning in terms of affective, esthetic, emotional, and social learning. If a kindergarten was failing to meet the set standards many parents were eager to transfer their child to the private sector if they could afford it. This is also the situation in Taiwan where the cost of sending a young child to a high-status kindergarten in the private sector can be four times more than the annual fee for a university place for an older child [25]. However, many professional ECEC educators, particularly in the US, have challenged the childcare market mentality by raising the awareness of teachers in training to the limitations of this approach as it does not help children to become critically engaged democratic citizens [22].

In contrast to the above, Liberal ideology with its emphasis on the individual and alignment with the *developing child* social construction of childhood has a very different perspective on Education. It became dominant in the UK in the 1960's and played a powerful role in reshaping the entire Educational systems in three of the countries that are constituent parts of the UK, that is, England, Wales and Scotland. As far as ECEC was concerned a pedagogy firmly rooted in a holistic approach by supporting young children to learn through play was universally adopted. Instruction and formal assessment by 'testing' children had no place in ECEC. In Scotland, **Figure 1** shows the aims of ECEC which were set out by Government in 1994.

- Provide a safe and stimulating environment in which children could feel happy and secure
- Encourage the emotional, social, physical, creative and intellectual development of children
- Promote the welfare of children
- Encourage positive attitudes to self and others and develop confidence and self-esteem
- Create opportunities for play
- Encourage children to explore, appreciate and respect their environment
- Provide opportunities to stimulate interest and imagination
- Extend children's abilities to communicate ideas and feelings in a variety of ways

Figure 1.
Aims of pre-school education in Scotland [26].

These aims were subsequently incorporated into the national curriculum guidelines for children aged 3 to 5 and adopted by ECEC establishments in both the public and private sectors [27]. To the present day, the aims outlined in **Figure 1** act as a yardstick for a 'quality' ECEC experience. They are fundamental to the recent re-structuring and integration of the school curriculum in Scotland referred to as the *Curriculum for Excellence* [28] in which the same eight themes are common to the schooling process from age 3 to 18. However, as in many countries, the availability of ECEC services is based on a mixed economy model that consists of public, private and voluntary services with the provision of childcare regarded as a form of social welfare for children in vulnerable circumstances. Although ECEC services in the UK are now free and universally available for all children aged 3 to 5, the provision financed by the State is only available on a part-time basis.

The *agency* social construction of childhood is very much evident in the ideology of Social Democracy which emerged in Sweden in 1995 with the election of a Social Democratic government. In Sweden, Education from the age of one (with no upper limit) is virtually free for all children and adults and funded by the State. In a child's first year of life parents are entitled to generous parental leave allowance from work with return to their job protected by law after one year. All children are entitled to six years of full-time ECEC before formal schooling starts at the age of 7. Whilst ECEC in Sweden endorses many of the educational aims associated with Liberal ideology (see **Figure 1**) it gives much greater priority to children learning about democracy, social justice and the environment from an early age. Listening to 'children's voices' is very much part of day-to-day activity. Another hallmark of education under the mantle of Social Democracy is the concept of integration. The curriculum from age 1 to 18 is integrated and the same themes are used throughout the schooling system. Welfare (when needed) is integrated into all ECEC provision. In Sweden, children are encouraged to express criticism of the experiences provided by adults without fear of recrimination and without the adults feeling threatened. It is not surprising therefore that the Swedish system of ECEC has been widely applauded [13]. Neither is it surprising to find that children in Sweden, on the whole, are confident, capable and successful.

4. Contemporary challenges for early childhood education and care

The overwhelming challenge for ECEC in the modern world that is now required is to address the deep divisions, both social and economic, that have emerged in many countries throughout the world during the Age of Modernity and at the same time both to respect and celebrate diversity in a way that children come to understand how they can make a positive contribution to this process. The challenge is both exciting and daunting as it requires enlightened professionals, politicians and parents to engage in a new dialog informed by a fundamental awareness of the deep-seated problems facing humanity. But where to start? There is a very powerful case for ECEC being in the vanguard of educational reform.

First, over the past 30 years there has been several large-scale longitudinal studies which have reported on the long-term effects of 'quality' ECEC [29–32]. The findings of these studies consistently show that young children's experience of high quality ECEC has a long-lasting positive effect on their later opportunities and success both in schooling and in adulthood. Secondly, and more specifically, there are studies that demonstrate the economic benefits of ECEC particularly in terms of productivity and economic efficiency in the workplace [31]. Thirdly, recent developments in neuroscience, particularly in the field of social cognitive neuroscience, provide evidence that socio-emotional competence develops as a function of changes in the dynamic interaction between regulatory processes that lesson such reactions as stress and anxiety [33]. Fourthly, and very important, is the research in the field of health, both mental and physical well-being which shows that ECEC can help to prevent disease and mental instability [34].

It is now abundantly clear that, taken as a whole, this body of research and scholarship makes an immensely strong case for investment and reform in ECEC.

4.1 The challenge to governments

Drawing on the Swedish system of ECEC where there is a common educational experience for children in their pre-school years financed from public funds, the challenge for governments in the developed world is to reform the relationship between the public and private sectors in ECEC provision in countries where such a division exists. One example of a national government currently taking a policy initiative is in Scotland. The Scottish Government and local authorities have committed to making an unprecedented investment in ECEC through near doubling of the funded entitlement from August 2020 for all three- and four-year old children and eligible two-year olds in all ECEC sectors- public, private and voluntary [35].

Scotland has had a devolved administration since 1997 and currently has a minority Nationalist government which ideologically is liberal and centre-left politically. It is very committed to expanding and improving early learning and childcare (referred to as ELC in Scotland) by allocating considerable new resources to the sector.

Since the introduction of free part-time places 20 years ago for all three- and four-year old children subject to parental wishes, virtually all can now access two years of free ELC before the start of primary school at age 5 (see **Table 1** below). The new policy also includes the provision of ELC for 'eligible' two-year old children. The criteria for such eligibility are aimed at those children who experience the greatest disadvantage from their circumstances and includes children from low socio-economic status families receiving State benefits who are often single-parent families with vulnerable children.

From **Table 1** it can be seen that access to ELC in Scotland is very high. The problem, however, is not that places aren't available but that places in the public sector

Type of setting	%
Local Authority nursery school/class	62
Other local authority setting	15
Private and voluntary providers	23

Table 1.

Percentage of children in Scotland aged 5 by 2015 attending an ELC setting by type [32].

are largely part-time (3 hours per day). Private sector provision tends to be open most of the day and throughout the year and is more compatible with the routine of working parents. The problem largely impacts on women either by limiting their scope for a successful career or by downloading stress in the management of their domestic arrangements.

With regard to the specific aspects of the policy [35] the principles and practice focus on the expansion and improvement of ELC services in public, private and voluntary provision. It intends to do this by requiring all providers of ELC services which enter into a contract with the local authority to meet new ELC National Standards (see **Figure 2**) in order for the private and voluntary sectors to access direct government funding for providing an ELC service for 1140 hours per year for each child who is admitted. Included in the 10 National Standards is the requirement for the private and voluntary sectors to provide a common educational experience consistent with the National Curriculum.

To ensure compliance with the above Standards the National Care Inspectorate (NCI) will make unannounced visits to ELC settings and publish reports which will be available in the public domain making them universally accessible. With regard to National Standard 3 in **Figure 2**, new arrangements are currently being developed to instigate joint inspections of all ELC settings between the NCI and Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education (HMIE). If a specific setting is considered unacceptable on any of the Standards, the NCI can require that the setting address its shortcomings within a given time period and has powers to close the setting altogether in acute circumstances.

1. Staffing, leadership and management (including specific requirements to improve qualifications of staff)
2. Development of children's cognitive skills, health and well-being
3. Physical environment (including access to outdoor play)
4. Evaluation and improvement (with regular reviews and planning)
5. Parent and carer engagement and involvement in the life of the setting (with regular communication and support)]
6. Inclusion (with access to the full range of experiences for all)
7. Business sustainability (private sector)
8. Fair work practice, including payment of the living wage (private sector)
9. Payment process (private sector)
10. Food (including the provision of healthy meals and snacks)

Figure 2.

The list of National Standards for ELC provision in Scotland [35].

The policy of the Scottish Government is a bold attempt to bring the private and public sectors of ECEC provision into close alignment whilst still recognizing the parents should be able to make choices for their children which are not based on their ability to pay expensive fees for high-status institutions in the child-care market. The new policy adopts a 'funding follows the child approach' whereby parents (and carers) can access their child's funding entitlement from any ELC setting in the public, private or voluntary sectors. The criteria for choosing an ECEC setting for one's child will now become wider and based more on the geographic location, the opening hours of the setting and the NCI inspection reports as opposed to family income.

The second major challenge for national and local governments is to instigate a root and branch review of national curriculum guidelines for ECEC with a view that the guidelines be re-structured. To do so, requires governments to outline what they regard as the primary purpose of ECEC. The detailed re-structuring should then be undertaken by representatives of the various stakeholder groups in ECEC.

4.2 The challenge to ECEC settings and ECEC professionals

In the modern world, the thinking associated with post-modernism is gathering momentum [36]. It is crucially relevant for ECEC [13]. At the onset of the Age of Modernity some 250 years ago the dominant intellectual challenge and inspiration at that time was to differentiate between rational/scientific thinking and thinking based on superstition rooted in religious dogma. It is a mode of thinking that has dominated the English-speaking world for over two centuries and still acts as a dominant driver for many people. The world now faces a new challenge, the challenge of post-modernism which requires us to differentiate between the 'self' and the 'social' in our understanding, awareness and behavior. ECEC is heavily implicated in the transition from modernity to postmodernism and carries an immense responsibility.

Central to this responsibility is the requirement to focus children's learning to encompass the two concepts of social justice and social responsibility. Social justice encompasses three main themes: fairness, opportunity and respect and are axiomatic to how the adult world intersects with childhood. The challenge for ECEC settings is to make a public declaration that the principles of social justice are pursued in the setting in which children are encouraged to become aware about fairness, to take up new and challenging opportunities and to respect the views of others [25]. Such a declaration needs to be negotiated with the children's parents as it contains sensitive and potentially threatening challenges to many parents whose mind-sets may be deeply rooted in a particular ideology outlined above. Keeping parents informed about all aspects of the setting is a vital part of effective communication [12], not least to offer advice about ensuring that their child is enthusiastically engaged in the learning process and is aware of the importance of social responsibility.

Throughout 2020 and well into 2021 the lack of social responsibility particularly in many western countries has become a matter of deep concern and deeply shameful. The rapid spread of the deadly virus covid 19 has taken place as a consequence of enormous number of people rejecting the scientific advice aimed at limiting the spread of the virus. Is this a failure of education on a massive scale such that acceptance of constraints on individual freedom in times of crisis has been abandoned? ECEC settings and professionals need to recognize that fundamental rethinking is required. The curriculum needs to be restructured to embrace social justice at the core. In addition, teachers need to become more aware about how the 'hidden

curriculum' impacts on children's subjectivity. The discourse that teachers use, often subconsciously, with children both individually and collectively, plays a significant role in shaping children's social attitudes [37].

A critical issue in this transformation is the professional education of teachers. Initially, the selection of students for access to courses of initial teacher education (ITE) should be revisited such that those admitted be required to display a commitment to social justice. Specific courses in social justice should be included in the curriculum. Furthermore, the organization of ITE courses needs to be re-thought. Without too much upheaval, it should be possible to introduce new arrangements such that all ITE students attend the same classes and courses for at least the first year in order to acquire a common understanding of what it means to be a 'teacher' such as currently happens in Sweden [13].

Another challenge to ECEC professionals is the need for each ECEC centre to develop policies and practices that are inclusive of all children's contemporary diverse characteristics. *These policies are more effective when they are developed in consultation with staff, families, communities and relevant stakeholders so that different perspectives are included* (12). The celebration of diversity should indeed resonate throughout each ECEC centre where staff *offer all children guidance and support in developing positive attitudes towards all people* [38].

4.3 The challenge to parents

It has become evident in many countries throughout the world that parents now understand the value of ECEC and want access to ECEC services for their young children before they start elementary school. This is a major change in social attitude from that 50 years ago when the education of young children was regarded as the sole responsibility of the family, principally mothers. Yet, under the influence of neoliberalism, many parents are ignoring the long-term benefits of ECEC for their child's psychological and social well-being for the possible short-term advantages which they think will lead to greater economic benefits for their child in the future [23].

However, even though their child may attend an ECEC setting, this does not mean that parents should take 'a back seat'. Parents still have a responsibility to engage with their children in helping them to understand, be knowledgeable, be socially competent and gradually become aware of the wider world. The challenge to parents in supporting their children to be successful is to 'raise your game' through more meaningful engagement both with the child and the ECEC setting. Children learn a great deal about their identity and subjectivity from their parents in the first few years of life. The foundations of their social attitudes are subconsciously transmitted from parent to child through discourse that often contains deeply held values about the world at large [36]. This means that parents need to become more aware of how they interact with their children even at a casual level. All too often many parents with busy lives are content to have their children self-engaged with, for example, an electronic device to play games or watch a video over lengthy periods of time. Such action on the part of parents is a form of abuse of the parent-child relationship and can lead to an addiction which is socially disengaged.

Reading stories with children is another activity that is popular with many parents. However, the choice of stories is critical. Parents should not shy away from choosing stories that contain sensitive issues regarding race, gender, socio-economic status and even same-sex relationships as well as stories that feed children's imagination. Such situations are ideal for helping children to learn how to regulate their socio-emotional learning and for parents to encourage children to reflect on the behavior of others as actors in the stories keeping in mind the principles of social justice and social responsibility.

Social responsibility can also be practiced in the family even when children are young.

Children should be encouraged to participate in domestic routines. Helping to plan and prepare meals and tidy up afterwards as collaborative activities are valuable situations for the effective socialization of children.

Parents can also help their child to establish social networks with other children and show an active interest in their child's social relationships. A key aspect of children's learning about relationships is their awareness of 'others'. Parents have considerable influence in helping children to raise their consciousness concerning how their actions impact on others such that they are able to regulate their actions with friends, family members and strangers especially at the level of micro-social engagement.

5. Conclusion

It is becoming evident to many that the education of children, particularly young children, now faces a daunting challenge. The increasing social and economic divergence in the modern world is staggering and potentially a major threat to our stability and security. But can the key stakeholders in education recognize the challenge and embrace a commitment to adapt policies and practices to address a fundamental re-alignment in the mind-set of children in terms of their social attitudes and social justice? First, it requires an awareness that education is deeply implicated in efforts to bring about greater fairness, more opportunities for young people and respect for others. Teachers have a very considerable responsibility in their day-to-day engagements with children so they need to be persuaded not only that reform in a post-modernist context can be achieved but also that many current social attitudes and injustices must be challenged. Reform is possible, but it needs the understanding, the commitment and the vision in those empowered to instigate it. Second, it needs parents to become more aware about the power they exert over their children and to use that power in a more democratic way to promote social justice. Such is the challenge for the education of children in modern times.

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