

# Introduction

## Embracing Social Justice in Early Childhood Education

BY ANN PELO

There's a small town in Italy with an international reputation for its early childhood programs. The teaching and learning that happens in their schools is certainly compelling—but more compelling is the story of how the community came together to create an early childhood education system. The town of Reggio Emilia, like much of Italy, was devastated by World War II; as the war ended, the townspeople were fiercely determined to create a new culture, a culture in which the fascism that had taken hold of Italy in the decades leading up to the war would find no foothold. The citizens of Reggio Emilia were clear about how to begin this work of culture-building: they would create schools for young children.

Parents occupied an abandoned building near the town square, demanding that the city government make that building available to them for their first school, while the teachers and children set up school each day on the courthouse steps where the city officials would be sure to encounter them. Parents and teachers didn't set out to create private schools available to a few; they wanted publicly funded schools, open to all families in the community, organized around the values of critical thinking and joyful collaboration. One of the founders of the schools, Loris Malaguzzi, explained the vision of the community this way: "We are part of an ongoing story of men and women, ideals intact, who realize that history can be changed, and that it is changed starting with the future of children."<sup>1</sup>

This story has resonance for us today. It reminds us that early childhood education is a political act, and that it necessarily involves values and vision. Early childhood is the time in our lives when

we develop our core dispositions—the habits of thinking that shape how we live; our work as early childhood educators is to nurture dispositions in young children towards empathy, ecological consciousness, engaged inquiry, and collaboration. These dispositions undergird just and equitable communities; they are at the heart of activism and in the hearts of activists. Early childhood educators must believe, with the founders of the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, that history can be changed, and that our work is to contribute to that change. That is the premise of this book: quality early childhood education is inseparable from social justice teaching and ecological education. It is essential to rethink early childhood education, and it is essential to ensure that quality early education—programs for children from their first months through the primary grades—is offered to all children.

### Fostering Social and Ecological Dispositions in Young Children

Early childhood programs that put social justice and ecological teaching front and center share particular characteristics.

**They prioritize anti-bias, culturally sensitive teaching and learning.** Teachers call attention to the ways in which people are different and the ways in which people are the same, honoring individual and group identity. They intentionally introduce issues of fairness and unfairness, and coach children to think critically and to take action. Teachers learn about children's family and cultural identities and integrate those identities into the daily life of the classroom, at the same time as they acknowledge the

ways in which their own cultural identities shape their teaching.

**They are organized around play and ample time for exploration.** Teachers create time and provide open-ended materials for children’s imaginative, self-directed play. They talk with families, with other teachers, and with community members about the value of play for children’s healthy development and for their learning.

**They use curriculum approaches that are responsive to children’s developmental and intellectual pursuits.** Teachers pay attention to children’s play and conversations, watching for the developmental themes, compelling questions, understandings, and misunderstandings expressed in their play. They use what they observe to develop curricula that challenge children to think deeply and to explore collaboratively.

**They cultivate a sense of place—of belonging to a particular patch of earth and sky—and a connection to the earth and its creatures.** Teachers take the children outdoors and bring the natural world into the classroom, inviting the children to engage their senses and their minds as they come to know and care about—and to care for—the place where they are spending their days.

**They emphasize children’s social-emotional and dispositional learning.** Teachers seek to cultivate in children the disposition to pay attention to their own and others’ emotions and needs. They emphasize the importance of collaboration and offer children coaching and practice about understanding multiple perspectives. Teachers create opportunities for children to think critically and engage intellectually with ideas and with each other—and to take action based on their critical thinking.

**They learn from and stand with children’s families.** Teachers recognize that they have much to learn about children from their families, about children’s particular ways of being in the world, about their family rituals and rhythms, and about their cultural identities. As they learn from families about their strengths and challenges, they can then offer themselves as allies to families, in ways specific to individual families and in the arena of broader community activism and justice efforts.

**They advocate for children, families, and early childhood workers.** Teachers acknowledge the broader social conditions that impact the lives of children, families, and teachers. They take action—speaking out in their community, writing letters to news media and to legislators, participating in demonstrations. They know that their activism is an extension of their teaching, contributing to social justice efforts and modeling for children what it is to live in the world as a change-maker.

This is early childhood education at its best: teachers, children, and families opening themselves to each other and to the earth in ways that invite joyful play, collaborative inquiry, thoughtful observation, and deep caring that gives rise to action. These ways of being are a foundation for children’s lives in community. They foster the social and emotional well-being that is at the heart of just communities, and they strengthen the intellectual development that is at the heart of academic learning.

## **Challenges to Early Childhood Education**

This vision for top-notch early childhood programs is a stark contrast to the cultural belief system that now threatens early childhood education. Early childhood, we’re told, is a time to get children ready for school and for work. Play is nice, but school is about learning and skill development, and that means memorization and drill and testing.

Pressure from federal policy has pushed assessment-driven, academic instruction into programs for the youngest children: most federal- and state-funded programs use standardized, scripted curriculum packages that emphasize literacy and numeracy at the cost of open time for play, and administer a barrage of tests to the 4- and 5-year-old children enrolled in their programs. This emphasis on a “teacher-proof” drill-and-skill curriculum communicates to families that early childhood ought to be about “school and test readiness,” defined in the narrowest and most hollow academic terms. Families, in turn, are confused: should they accede to this vision for their children’s earliest years, hoping to insure

their children's school success, or press for a more generous and spacious experience for their young children, anchored in their intuition that childhood ought to be about more than literacy drills and tests?

Families carry their confusion to teachers, looking for reassurance that their children will be ready for school—and for the tests they're sure to encounter there. Teachers are squeezed between this push towards early academics and their commitment to children's right to play and to meaningful curricula anchored in their lives and questions. And teachers are weighed down by the emphasis on narrowly technical teaching centered on discrete skills, which stands in stark contrast to the intellectually engaging work of reflective study and inquiry that is teaching at its best and most sustaining. Teachers face wrenching pressure to abandon their desire to be reflective, responsive educators who think critically about their teaching and the children's learning, and, instead, to organize their teaching around assessments and scripted curricula.

In addition to this daily intellectual and emotional challenge, childcare teachers and caregivers work with the constant strain of low wages and no health care or retirement. Their work is dismissed as unskilled, jobs that anyone can fill—an attitude born of the view that early childhood work is women's work. Caring for and educating very young children comes naturally to women, the thinking goes: women do that work by instinct, and have been doing it forever—it certainly doesn't require any particular education or professional development. That attitude has been institutionalized in the field of early childhood education: there are only minimal requirements for childcare workers in most states—typically, passing a criminal background check and having a high school diploma. No specialized training, no internships, no particular experience needed.

The attitude that “anyone can do this work” is one reason for the current emphasis on “teacher-proof” curricula. Early childhood agencies provide scripted curricula in place of professional development for early childhood educators. This communicates a startling disrespect for teachers' ability to generate engaging, thoughtful, instructive

experiences for children without a script to follow, and drives people from the field who are eager to engage intellectually with children, families, and colleagues.

Given these stresses, it's no wonder that the annual national turnover rate in child care stands at around 40 percent.<sup>2</sup> And that turnover compounds the challenges that early childhood education faces. Children and families are shaken each time a cherished caregiver leaves; the effort of developing trust in new caregivers becomes a too-familiar detour away from learning. And teachers, too, are shaken as their colleagues come and go; they face a daunting uphill struggle to create a community of thinkers anchored by a shared understanding of the work. The disruption created by teacher turnover is felt especially in impoverished communities, where teachers typically earn rock-bottom wages and struggle with an appalling lack of resources and a corresponding high degree of stress.

Early childhood education is in a precarious situation.

We believe that social justice and ecological teaching offers a much-needed vision for early childhood education in the face of the challenges weighing on the field and confronting the planet.

## **Social Justice and Ecological Teaching Is Responsive Teaching**

Social justice teaching grows from children's urgent concerns. If we listen to the themes embedded in children's play and conversations, we hear questions about identity and belonging, about community and relationships and fairness: *Can boys be part of the game about the kitty family, or just girls? The bad guy is the one with brown skin and a funny way of talking, right? Can we have two moms in this family?* And, in their everyday negotiations, children are working to make sense of the ways in which people are the same and different: *Your lunch has food in it that I've never seen before. Why don't you have a dad in your family? You have Easter at your house, but I don't. Why is your skin a different color than your mom's skin?* Children are fundamentally concerned with making sense of their social and cultural world; teachers and caregivers can join them in this

pursuit, guiding them towards understandings rooted in accurate and empathetic understandings—or we can leave them to figure out their questions on their own, coming to conclusions based on misinformation and cultural bias. When we engage with children in questions about identity and equity, we participate in the work of reshaping our society.

Ecological teaching grows from an understanding that current ways of living on this planet are unsustainable and destructive and must be replaced. Young children are forming the fundamental understandings that will shape how they engage with the earth. Will they learn that the earth is a resource to be used and abused by humans with little attention to the price of that use, or will they grow a more intimate relationship with the earth that ranks the environment high on the list of “things to consider” in every decision? Our planet cannot afford another generation of children to grow up disregarding the earth, the sky, the water, and all who live in them. And children cannot afford to grow up ignorant of the earth and its ways, displaced from their ecological home terrain by lack of intimate knowledge.

### **Changing the Discussion about the Purpose of Early Education**

Social justice and ecological teaching relocates the meaning of early childhood education from school readiness to social and emotional learning and intellectual development. It offers another way to understand childhood, reminding us that this is a time when children ought to be developing core social and ecological dispositions rather than cramming for the tests ahead. Social justice and ecological teaching reframes our work as educators from a too-heavy focus on academic skills that actually diminishes the capacity for deep learning, and offers, instead, an emphasis on thoughtful observation, reflection, and planning on behalf of children’s dispositional and developmental learning. This is teaching at its best: responsive to children’s developmental questions and pursuits and attentive to building a sturdy

intellectual foundation for the academic work that children will encounter in later schooling.

In these ways, social justice and ecological teaching becomes a form of resistance to the view that early childhood education is unskilled work, important only inasmuch as it prepares children to recite the alphabet, identify colors, and count to 10. Social justice and ecological teaching is intellectually and emotionally engaging work; it sustains, rather than drains, teachers and caregivers. It asks that teachers listen closely to the social and cultural questions embedded in children’s play, and that they think carefully about how best to engage the children around those questions. It demands that teachers stay present to the children’s developing understandings about the world and themselves in order to best support their learning. This is a far remove from scripted curricula and preplanned lessons; it is authentic teaching—and it is the kind of teaching our society urgently needs. We need teachers who are engaged and curious, who create in their classrooms cultures of deep listening, compassionate perspective-taking, and critical thinking. We need teachers who, in the words of Terry Tempest Williams, cultivate “democracy as a way of life: the right to be educated, to think, discuss, dissent, create, and act, acting in imaginative and revolutionary ways.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Our Work Extends Beyond the Classroom**

When we embrace social justice and ecological teaching, we participate in changing history, “starting with the future of children.” But the challenges we face and the vision we hold of just communities carry us beyond our teaching practices into the arena of broader activism.

We can resist and subvert assessment-driven, standards-based curricula in our daily teaching, but our individual efforts won’t safeguard children’s right to education that is anchored by their questions, passions, and pursuits. There is a growing movement to remake the government mandates that locate drills and tests at the heart of education; until recently, that movement hasn’t much involved early childhood educators. Now, though, Head Start directors, community childcare

leaders, administrators in state-funded preschools, and other early childhood educators are coming together with colleagues in elementary and secondary education to strengthen the movement against packaged curricula and assessments.

The push to create universal prekindergarten (UPK) programs offers another entry point for activism on behalf of children, families, and teachers. Universal prekindergarten is a movement to provide preschool programs to all 4-year-old children as preparation for the academic work that they'll encounter in kindergarten; it's a state-funded drive—each state legislates its own mandates for prekindergarten programs. Universal prekindergarten offers increased access to early education for low-income families, something to celebrate given the large numbers of children who currently aren't served by affordable, quality early childhood programs in their communities. Yet UPK classrooms typically adopt (often by the mandate of funding agencies) standardized curricula characterized by rote learning and skill-and-drill teaching. This compromises the assertion that these are top-quality programs. And it is especially problematic for low-income communities most deserving of education that fosters critical thinking and social awareness: as children's opportunities seem to be expanding because of the increased access that UPK offers, the type of education that they're offered is narrow and intellectually numbing. In addition to these contradictions, UPK threatens to disrupt community-based childcare programs, as families and teachers exit these programs to move into UPK classrooms. UPK is in its infancy; this is the time for concerned educators, parents, and community members to get involved in shaping how it unfolds.

Another challenge that carries us into action beyond our daily teaching arises from the ongoing discrimination that early childhood educators face. In the late 1970s, teachers and caregivers of young children began to organize in protest of the unlivable wages and lack of benefits that characterize early childhood education. They created the Child Care Employees Project, a national effort to draw attention to poor working conditions in early care and education and to jumpstart initiatives that would make early childhood education a sustain-

able career. The Child Care Employees Project gave rise to the Worthy Wage Campaign, as early childhood educators across the country took part in creative, bold acts of protest and challenge, and began to form and join unions in an effort to improve working conditions. That effort has been folded into the current Center for the Child Care Workforce, a project of the American Federation of Teachers. In the three decades since this movement began, important ground has been won—and new struggles have emerged. There is work for us to do beyond our classrooms, stepping into the terrain of broad social action aimed at transforming the working conditions for early childhood educators.

There is an even broader arena of social concerns to acknowledge. Inadequate health care, immobilizing poverty, unstable housing, lack of access to decent nutrition—the best early childhood programs that we can imagine won't fix these broader social conditions. There is much work to be done, and all of it is interconnected. Caring about young children means caring about—and taking action to improve—the social conditions that shape their lives and determine their opportunities.

When we embrace a vision of social justice and ecological teaching in early childhood education, we join a lineage of educators who are intent on changing history, participating in the “ongoing story of men and women, ideals intact,” who understand that how we engage with the youngest children in our communities speaks volumes about the kind of society in which we hope to live. ■

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## References

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