Since the first edition was published in 1999, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* has established itself as one of the most important books in the early childhood field to have appeared in the last 10 years. Working with a range of critical perspectives and theories and an analysis of the world we live in today, and using examples from Canada, Sweden and Reggio Emilia, the book challenges many of the basic assumptions and assertions of mainstream early childhood policy and practice, showing that there are other possibilities – and therefore choices to be made. In particular the book challenges a strong tendency in the early childhood field, indeed throughout public services, to reduce philosophical issues of value and meaning to purely technical and managerial issues: the process whereby judgements of value become statements of fact.

This new edition of *Beyond Quality* includes a foreword by one of the leading figures in the early childhood field, Carlina Rinaldi from Reggio Emilia. New material also includes the three authors considering how the book remains as relevant today as when it was first written and the challenges the book poses to mainstream early childhood theory, practice and research – why, in short, there remains an urgent need to get beyond quality and reconceptualise not only early childhood education and care, but also evaluation.

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Beyond Quality
in Early Childhood
Education and Care

LANGUAGES OF EVALUATION

SECOND EDITION

**GUNILLA DAHLBERG,
PETER MOSS and ALAN PENCE**

Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care SECOND EDITION

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PETER MOSS and ALAN PENCE

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the field of early childhood, to enable dominant discourses to be made visible and problematized, and the production of alternative discourses including pedagogical practice. We will suggest that the pedagogical philosophy and practice of Reggio can, in many respects, be understood as postmodern, and show how the Stockholm Project has started out from postmodern conditions and their meaning for young children and for early childhood institutions, and developed its work quite explicitly within a postmodern and social constructionist perspective. We will argue that the increasingly hegemonic relationship between Minority and Majority Worlds, in early childhood amongst other subjects, has been produced, in part at least, from modernity's aspiration to universal laws and totalizing systems. The ethics of an encounter, addressing as it does relationships with the Other, provides one ethical perspective for relationships throughout the early childhood field, whether between practitioners and other adults, children and adults, different disciplines, different social groups or different societies.

Of course to bring theory into early childhood is not at all unusual. What is perhaps less common is to bring in the theories that we have done, whose theorists have generally ignored early childhood and its institutions (even though, as already noted, Foucault believed that such local sites were very productive for analysing theories of power). Furthermore, we have problematized, and will do so further, the area of theory most commonly referred to in early childhood — child development.

Early childhood institutions and pedagogy are often seen as neutral phenomena, subject to the technical application of value-free and universally true knowledge produced through scientific method. But according to a postmodern perspective outlined in this chapter, there can never be any knowledge that is objective or independent of context and power. Absolute certainty based on universal truths is an illusion. This means that, from our view, what 'good' and 'bad' pedagogical practice in institutions for young children can only be answered in a communicative context, in encounter and dialogue with others. Furthermore, early childhood institutions and the pedagogical work in which they engage are arbitrary and socially constructed; from possible alternative constructions, we always have to make choices which are both produced by constructions of the young child and are productive in turn of these constructions. We expand these statements in the next three chapters.

Notes

1 Young (1990) suggests that while the difference between twentieth-century Anglo-American positivism and European theory has been expressed in terms of contending models of explanation and interpretation, another distinction concerns ideas about objectivity. Positivist assumptions that persist in Anglo-American theory mean that the position of the investigator often remains unquestioned.

2 It is in this sense that we use the term 'productive' throughout the book, to indicate how power (and the means of exercising power such as knowledge and concepts) 'produces things', that is it shapes, forms, constitutes the social world and our understanding of it.

Chapter 3

Constructing Early Childhood: What Do We Think It Is?

Introduction

Children's lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what children are and should be. (Mayall, 1996: 1)

In early childhood institutions, we often say that we are taking the perspective of the child and that our pedagogical practice is *child-centred*. What do we mean by that? Child-centredness seems to be such a concrete and unproblematic concept. But in practice it is very abstract and rather problematic. The very term child-centred might be thought to embody a particular modernist understanding of the child, as a unified, reified and essentialized subject — at the centre of the world — that can be viewed and treated apart from relationships and context. The postmodern perspective, in contrast, would *decentre* the child, viewing the child as existing through its relations with others and always in a particular context.

Furthermore, what the term might mean depends on what we understand the young child is and might be — who is the child on whom practice is centred? From our postmodern perspective, there is no such thing as 'the child' or 'childhood', an essential being and state waiting to be discovered, defined and realized, so that we can say to ourselves and others 'that is how children are, that is what childhood is'. Instead, there are many children and many childhoods, each constructed by our 'understandings of childhood and what children are and should be'. Instead of waiting upon scientific knowledge to tell us who the child is, we have choices to make about who we think the child is, and these choices have enormous significance since our construction of the child and early childhood are *productive*, by which we mean that they determine the institutions we provide for children and the pedagogical work that adults and children undertake in these institutions.

This chapter is an extended discussion of this statement of our perspective. We enquire critically into some interrelated constructions of the young child — how he or she has been understood and conceptualized — which we believe to be influential in much public debate about early childhood, as well as much policy and practice in this field, including discussions about quality in early childhood institutions. These constructions are themselves produced within dominant discourses, which are located within the project of modernity, and which we as parents, practitioners, researchers or politicians have embodied. From our perspective

these dominant discourses, through being embodied, influence the whole 'childhood landscape' — relations between children and pedagogues, children and parents and between children themselves, the organization of early childhood pedagogical institutions, as well as how these institutions are ordered and designed in time and space, and what kind of meaning we give to them. They have consequences for the whole ecology of the system of early childhood pedagogy. But as we shall see later in the chapter, these are not the only constructions to be found; with the inspiration of Reggio, we can find other ways of understanding who the young child is and might be.

The Child as Knowledge, Identity and Culture Reproducer

As the global economy takes hold, politicians and business leaders — heretofore largely uninterested in young children — are voicing concern and demonstrating readiness for action. Facing an increasingly competitive global economic market, they are worried about economic productivity . . . Given this climate, quality early care and education services have been advocated as a cost-effective approach to maintaining a stable, well-prepared workforce today [through providing care for workers' children] — and preparing such a workforce for the future . . .

Fuelled by the concerns of the business and political communities, national education reform [in the United States] now includes a focus on the early years. The first National Education Goal, that all children will start school ready to learn, which has been endorsed by all the governors and two presidents, has highlighted the important relationship between early care and education and later educational achievement. (Kagan, Cohen and Neuman, 1996: 12–13)

Investment in learning in the 21st century is the equivalent of investment in the machinery and technical innovation that was essential in the first great industrial revolution. Then it was physical capital; now it is human capital . . . We know that children who benefit from nursery education — especially from disadvantaged backgrounds — are more likely to succeed in primary school. And we know that children who benefit from a good primary education are more likely to succeed in secondary school . . .

Our aim is that all children should begin school with a head start in literacy, numeracy and behaviour, ready to learn and make the most of primary education. (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1997: 14–16)

In the construction of *the child as a knowledge, identity and culture reproducer*, the young child is understood as starting life with and from nothing — as an empty vessel or *tabula rasa*. One can say that this is *Locke's child*. The challenge is to have him or her 'ready to learn' and 'ready for school' by the age of compulsory schooling. During early childhood, therefore, the young child needs to be filled with knowledge, skills and dominant cultural values which are already determined, socially sanctioned and ready to administer — a process of reproduction or transmission — and to be trained to conform to the fixed demands of compulsory schooling.

Viewed from this perspective, early childhood is the foundation for successful progress through later life. It is the start of a journey of realization, from the incompleteness of childhood to the maturity and full human status that is adulthood, from unfulfilled potential to an economically productive human resource. The child is in the process of becoming an adult, and represents potential human capital awaiting realization through investment; he or she is that which is yet to be, a 'structured becoming' (Jenks, 1982). Progress on the journey of realization is denoted by the acquisition of appropriate skills, the accomplishment of successive stages or milestones and increasing autonomy: the metaphor is climbing the ladder. Each stage of childhood, therefore, is preparation, or readying, for the next and more important, with early childhood the first rung of the ladder and a period of preparation for school and the learning that starts there.

This construction is arousing interest in early childhood among 'politicians and business leaders, heretofore largely uninterested'. To these powerful people, early childhood is coming to be seen as the first stage in the process of producing a 'stable, well-prepared' workforce for the future, and thus as a foundation for long-term success in an increasingly competitive global market. As well as reproducing knowledge and skills, that foundation entails reproduction of the dominant values of today's capitalism, including individualism, competitiveness, flexibility and the importance of paid work and consumption.

The Child as an Innocent, in the Golden Age of Life

The image of the child as innocent and even a bit primitive has been intriguing for many centuries. It is a construction which contains both fear of the unknown — the chaotic and uncontrollable — and a form of sentimentalization, almost a utopian vision, where childhood is seen as the golden age. This is *Rousseau's child*, reflecting his idea of childhood as the innocent period of a person's life — the golden age — and the belief in the child's capacity for self-regulation and innate will to seek out Virtue, Truth and Beauty; it is society which corrupts the goodness with which all children are born. Learning to know yourself — your inner nature and essential self — through transparency and introspection has been an important idea. Psychology has legitimated this construction of the young child, especially experts of young children who have placed the child's expression in free play and free creative work at the centre of pedagogical activity.

This image of the child generates in adults a desire to shelter children from the corrupt surrounding world — violent, oppressive, commercialized and exploitative — by constructing a form of environment in which the young child will be offered protection, continuity and security. From our experience, however, we become more and more aware that if we hide children away from a world of which they are already a part, then we not only deceive ourselves but do not take children seriously and respect them.

The Young Child as Nature ... or as the Scientific Child of Biological Stages

The third dominant construction, closely related to the previous two, produces an understanding of the young child as nature, an essential being of universal properties and inherent capabilities whose development is viewed as an innate process — biologically determined, following general laws — unless, of course, the child has some abnormality. That, we say, is the way children of that age are, that is their nature, that is what they can and cannot do if they are 'normal'. Albeit simplified, one could say that this is *Piaget's child*, since Piaget's theory of stages has surely been very influential for this construction, even through Piaget himself never put much stress on stages (Dahlberg, 1985).

This construction produces a young child who is a natural, rather than a social, phenomenon, abstracted and decontextualized, essentialized and normalized, defined either through abstract notions of maturity (Gesell and Ilg, 1946) or through stages of development. The influence of culture and the agency of children themselves are equally discounted, leaving 'the decontextualised individual who develops through natural and autonomous processes' (Vadeboncoeur, 1997: 33–4). In this construction, 'the psychological classifications assigned to children have no particular time or space continuum — self-esteem, competence and creativity seem to exist outside history and social contexts' (Popkewitz, 1997: 33).

The focus is on the individual child who, irrespective of context, follows a standard sequence of biological stages that constitute a path to full realization or a ladder-like progression to maturity. Although we have used the term 'the child as nature', we might also talk of the *scientific child*, as it is a biologically based construction much favoured by medicine and, as discussed in the last chapter, developmental psychology: 'the dominant developmental approach to childhood, provided by psychology, is based on the idea of natural growth ... childhood therefore is a biologically determined stage on the path to full human status' (Prout and James, 1990: 10). Despite frequent talk about a holistic perspective, in this construction the child is frequently reduced to separate and measurable categories, such as social development, intellectual development, motor development. Consequently, processes which are very complex and interrelated in everyday life are isolated from one another and viewed dichotomously, instead of viewing them as intrinsically interrelated functions that all work together in the production of change.

The Child as Labour Market Supply Factor

During the course of the present century, a construction of motherhood has become increasingly influential in the Minority World: the mother, like the child, as nature. The young child is biologically determined to need exclusive maternal care, certainly in the earliest years (up to around the age of 3 years), with a gradual introduction thereafter into the company of other children and adults. The mother is biologically determined to provide such care. Not to receive or to give this exclusive care is unnatural and harmful, undermining the young child's attachment to his or her mother and exposing the young child to relationships with other adults and children for which he or she is unready (Bowlby, 1969).

A large survey undertaken in the European Union in 1993 reported that more than three-quarters of all respondents thought that mothers should stay at home when children are young, although the proportion was lower in Denmark, the one Scandinavian country included (Malpas and Lambert, 1993). In a 1994 British survey of social attitudes, 62 per cent of respondents stating an opinion thought that women with a child under school age should stay at home. Of those who thought women should work, the great majority (31 per cent) said they should work only part-time rather than full-time (7 per cent) (compared to 88 per cent who thought married women who had not yet had any children should work full-time) (Jowell et al., 1995).

In fact, the empirical evidence does not support this view. There is no convincing evidence that young children necessarily suffer harm or that their relationship with their mother is inevitably undermined if care is shared (McGurk et al., 1993; Mooney and Munton, 1997). This is hardly surprising since exclusive maternal care is uncommon viewed either culturally or historically (Weisner and Gallimore, 1977); it is a construction of motherhood produced in particular societies at a particular stage in their histories. Yet despite the evidence, this construction remains pervasive and influential, with all its implications for the construction of early childhood.

But times change. Since the 1960s, the labour market in Minority World countries has *increasingly* needed the labour of women, as well as men, in their prime working years, and women as well as men, in general, wish to sell their labour at this stage (during the same period, capitalism has had *decreasing* need of the labour of other groups, such as young people under 25 and men over the age of 50; for a discussion of these trends in Western Europe, see Deven et al., 1998). Consequently, increasing numbers of mothers are joining fathers in the labour market. The number of 'traditional' two parent families, in which the mother cares for the children at home while the father acts as breadwinner, is diminishing. Increasing numbers of young children, under as well as over 3, are not cared for exclusively by their mothers.

In these circumstances, young children acquire a further construction: *as a labour market supply factor* which must be addressed to ensure an adequate labour supply and the efficient use of human resources. Alternative, non-maternal care must be arranged for young children if their mothers are to be employable (not, it should be noted, for their 'parents' to be employable, since the dominant discourse about gender governs ideas about roles and relationships, producing a taken-for-granted assumption that fathers go out to work and that mothers are primarily responsible for ensuring child care). In Britain and the United States, government, advocacy groups and others speak openly about the business case for employers to invest in child care, 'as a cost-effective approach to maintaining a stable, well-prepared workforce today'. This is matched by an increasing and diverse involvement — from direct provision of 'child care' to funding child care information and

referral services — of individual employers and economic agencies in early childhood institutions and other forms of child care, alongside a range of other occupational benefits, all intended to attract and retain labour — until such time may come that labour is no longer required.

The Child as a Co-constructer of Knowledge, Identity and Culture

Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not see them only engaged in action with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the affective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children. (Loris Malaguzzi, 1993a: 10)

The constructions of the young child that we have considered so far have in common that they can be understood as produced within the project of modernity, sharing modernity's belief in the autonomous, stable, centred subject, whose inherent and preordained human nature is revealed through processes of development and maturity and who can be described in terms of scientific concepts and classifications. These constructions also have something else in common. They produce a 'poor' child, weak and passive, incapable and under-developed, dependent and isolated.

But new constructions productive of a very different child have been emerging, as the result of a number of interrelated developments (Mayall, 1996): social constructionist and postmodernist perspectives within philosophy, sociology and psychology; the problematizing of developmental psychology, and the increasing influence of the comparative movement within psychology; and the work of individual researchers, and of a number of specific projects, notably the Childhood as a Social Phenomenon Project begun in 1987 under the auspices of the European Centre in Vienna (Qvortrup et al., 1994) and the BASUN (Childhood, Society and Development) Project undertaken in the late 1980s for the Nordic Council as a study of the everyday lives of young children (Dencik, 1989). This process of rethinking children and childhood[1] has mainly taken place in Europe, rather than the US, with the lead taken in many respects by Scandinavia. One reason for this rethinking may be that children's daily lives in this part of northern Europe have been transformed in recent decades due both to social and economic change and to government policy initiatives which have led, *inter alia*, to an extensive network of public-funded early childhood institutions:

Most children now spend many hours a day in group care ... The dramatic Scandinavian experiment in changing children's childhoods has promoted rethinking about inter-relationships between the triangle of parents, children and the state. Traditional formulations have thought of children mainly in relation to parents, with the state as a back-up; but Scandinavian policy now has an altered focus: children are a shared responsibility of the state and parents. Under these circumstances, it is appropriate to think of children's own direct relationships with the state, its policies and goals. In addition, concern for social justice and the rights of the individuals in these countries has led to a movement to regard children and parents as independent subjects with separate legal status. Thus the stage has been set for extracting children out from under the family, conceptually, and thinking about them, not only as individuals, but also, more widely, as a social group. (Mayall, 1996: 56)

In this passage we can see some of the main features of a new understanding of childhood and children, also referred to as a 'new paradigm of the sociology of childhood' (Prout and James, 1990). Children are both part of, but also separate from, the family, with their own interests that may not always coincide with those of parents and other adults. Children have a recognized and independent place in society, with their own rights as individual human beings and full members of society. Children are considered to be a social group: 'psychological individualisation of children gives way to sociological consideration of how as a group their lives are affected by large-scale socioeconomic factors' (Mayall, 1996: 61). Childhood is understood not as a preparatory or marginal stage, but as a component of the structure of society — a social institution — and important in its own right as one stage of the life course, no more nor less important than other stages.

Other features of this new paradigm include recognition that:

- childhood is a social construction, constructed both for and by children, within an actively negotiated set of social relations. While childhood is a biological fact, the way in which it is understood is socially determined;
- childhood, as a social construction, is always contextualized in relation to time, place and culture, and varies according to class, gender and other socioeconomic conditions. There is, therefore, neither a natural nor universal childhood, nor indeed a natural or universal child, but many childhoods and children;
- children are social actors, participating in constructing and determining their own lives, but also the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live, and contributing to learning as agents building on experiential knowledge. In short, they have agency;
- children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right;
- children have a voice of their own, and should be listened to as a means of taking them seriously, involving them in democratic dialogue and decision-making and understanding childhood;
- children contribute to social resources and production and are not simply a cost and burden;
- relationships between adults and children involve the exercise of power (as well as the expression of love). It is necessary to take account of the way in which adult power is maintained and used, as well as of children's resilience and resistance to that power.

Within this framework, a construction of early childhood and of the young child is produced that is very different to the modernist constructions described above. The young child emerges as *co-constructor*, from the very start of life, of knowledge, of culture, of his or her own identity. Rather than an object that can be reduced to separate and measurable categories (for example, social development, cognitive development, motor development and so on), through isolating from one another processes which are very complex and interrelated, the young child is understood as a unique, complex and individual subject. This construction produces a child who, in Malaguzzi's words is 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent'.

In Reggio Emilia they always say that they have dared to take, as the starting point for their pedagogical practice, the idea of 'the rich child' and that 'all children are intelligent'. Having a social constructionist perspective, where language is seen as productive, they are aware that this is a choice they have made — it is *their* construction. The rich child produces other riches. They argue that 'if you have a rich child in front of you, you become a rich pedagogue and you have rich parents', but if instead you have a poor child, 'you become a poor pedagogue and have poor parents'.

In this construction of the 'rich' child, learning is not an individual cognitive act undertaken almost in isolation within the head of the child. Learning is a cooperative and communicative activity, in which children construct knowledge, make meaning of the world, together with adults and, equally important, other children: that is why we emphasize that the young child as learner is an active *co*-constructor. Learning is not the transmission of knowledge taking the child to preordained outcomes, nor is the child a passive receiver and reproducer, a 'poor' child hopefully awaiting receipt of adult knowledge and enrichment. What children learn, all their knowledge, 'emerges in the process of self and social construction (since) children do not passively endure their experience but become active agents in their socialisation, co-constructed with their peers' (Rinaldi, 1993: 105).

Rather than an empty vessel awaiting enrichment, from the start of life the young child is a 'rich' child engaging actively with the world; he or she is born equipped to learn and does not ask or need adult permission to start learning. In fact, the young child risks impoverishment at the hands of adults and, rather than 'development', the loss of capabilities over time. In the words of Loris Malaguzzi, 'a child has got a hundred languages and is born with a lot of possibilities and a lot of expressions and potentialities which stimulate each other — but which they are easily deprived of through the education system' (quoted in Wallin, Maechel and Barsotti, 1981). As such, the young child should be taken seriously. Active and competent, he or she has ideas and theories that are not only worth listening to, but also merit scrutiny and, where appropriate, questioning and challenge.

Last, but not least, the young child is understood and recognized as being part of, a member of, society. He or she exists not only in the family home, but also in the wider world outside. This means being a citizen, with citizen's rights and, as he or she is capable of assuming them, citizen's responsibilities. It also means that the young child is not only included, but in active relationship with that society and that world. He or she is not an innocent, apart from the world, to be sheltered in some nostalgic representation of the past reproduced by adults. Rather, the young child is in the world as it is today, embodies that world, is acted upon by that world — but also acts on it and makes meaning of it.

This active engagement of young children with the world, and the need for adults to take this engagement seriously, is illustrated from an account by a Swedish pedagogue of a visit to an early childhood institution in Reggio Emilia.

> I would here like to share with you an experience I once had in Reggio Emilia. One day when I visited the Diana preschool [an early childhood institution] in Reggio Emilia and entered a fairly large room of the preschool I got very astonished. The whole room was emptied and on the floor a lot of commercialized playthings were lying around; such as He-Man figures, My Little Ponies and other similar figures. As a Swedish pedagogue and also a mother of two children I got really confused. What was going on here? How could they allow such tools? For my eyes in this moment saw the typical, pedagogically developed wooden playtools used in Swedish preschools.
>
> I asked the Italian pedagogues what they were working with and they answered that it was a project work on modern fairy tale figures. Once again I was surprised. These plastic and luridly coloured figures, were they modern fairy tale figures? The pedagogues continued to tell me how often they observed children talking about figures and stories they saw on TV and how little they as pedagogues knew about these figures and stories. They also found out how little they listened to the children when they talked about such figures. Often they said to the children, 'we don't talk about that here', or 'we'll talk about that another time'. They thought it would be interesting for the children to work with a project on modern fairy tale figures, and as is common in Reggio, the pedagogues began the project by getting more knowledge themselves through watching the programmes the children also were watching. They interviewed the children too about their knowledge and ideas. To their surprise they found one boy could mention more than 25 characters from these programmes, not only their names, but also what kind of role many of them had. As a start for the project the children were asked to bring all kinds of modern fairy tale figures to the preschool and the project moved out from the children's experiences, stories and ideas.
>
> Returning home from Reggio, I reflected on this experience and how we in the early childhood institutions in Sweden had always forbidden toys like this. I also remembered how I had quarrelled with my son in the mornings when he wanted to bring his He-Man figures to his centre. He had often hidden them in his pockets, and I had to feel ashamed in front of the staff. In the early 80s we also had a discussion in educational journals, where the message was that children should be allowed to bring their most precious things with them to the preschool, as they were seen, from a psycho-analytical perspective, as transitional objects. As a result children in many preschools were allowed to bring these figures with them — if they left them in the entrance hall.
>
> I also remembered how often when out shopping with my son, I tried to avoid passing the windows of the toy shop. One day we were anyway in front of the toy shop window and he said to me in a serious tone: 'Mum, now I really have to have a He-Man figure.' I answered very seriously. 'Haven't I told you, you won't get another one?' Then he looked at me even more seriously and said, 'Mum, you

haven't understood anything.' Then I asked, 'What haven't I understood?' 'You haven't even understood that He-Man is good.'

Later I thought, what an opportunity as an adult to take children's theories, hypotheses, dreams and fantasies seriously, instead of seeming not to have heard anything or telling children that they should not talk about these things. Children do embody the world, corrupt or not, like us as adults, and as adults we need to take responsibility to listen to them at the same time as we also have to give them counter-images, but not in any simple way. (Dahlberg, 1997)

This construction of the young child has profound implications for the construction of motherhood. Mothers, together with fathers, continue to have the main responsibility for their children, and the home and family provide an environment and relationships of vital and unique importance to the young child. But the young child does not require exclusive maternal (or parental) care in the family home. Indeed, exclusive parental care constrains the young child's opportunities for inclusion in society, the exercise of citizenship, and of fulfilment from interaction with other children and other adults, interaction which has a vital role to play in the active child's co-construction of knowledge, identity and culture.

Understanding the young child as a co-constructor and active participant, wanting and responding to a wide range of relationships, in the home and outside, with other children and adults, we can move away from the restrictive, dualistic thinking to which the belief in exclusive maternal care has given rise: *either* maternal care, which is good, *or* non-maternal care, which is bad or, at least, an inferior substitute. Instead, we can open up the possibility of a childhood of many relationships and opportunities, in which *both* the home *and* the early childhood institution have important, complementary but different parts to play. This possibility has been recognized by the children in Reggio Emilia,

> who understood sooner than expected that their adventures in life could flow between two places. [Through early childhood institutions] they could express their previously overlooked desire to be with their peers and find in them points of reference, understanding, surprises, affective ties and merriment that could dispel shadows and uneasiness. For the children and their families there now opened up the possibility of a very long and continuous period of [children] living together [with each other], 5 or 6 years of reciprocal trust and work. (Malaguzzi, 1993b: 55)

Childhood and Pedagogy in Conditions of Modernity

We have argued that constructions of childhood and children are *productive* of practice; in other words, pedagogical work is the product of who we think the young child is. The construction of the young child as an empty vessel and reproducer gives rise to an idea of pedagogy or education as a means of transmitting to, or depositing within, the child a predetermined and unquestionable body of knowledge, with a prefabricated meaning. Pedagogy is the administration of knowledge, a banking concept in which 'knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider

themselves knowledgeable on those they consider know nothing' (Freire, 1985: 46).

We view this concept of pedagogy as located within, and produced by, conditions of modernity because it is part of an Enlightenment narrative which tells of education as a site for transmission of scientific knowledge to produce autonomous subjects who are supposedly made free by the information they receive. This narrative has not only understood education in a particular way, as the transmission of preconstituted knowledge to empty vessels, but freedom also, as the individual transformed by knowledge into an autonomous subject, self-sufficient and independent of obligation — Man at the centre. This narrative further speaks of education as a linear process that 'transforms children who are, by definition, dependent upon adults, into independent beings, free citizens' (Readings, 1996: 158). This narrative, therefore, values children primarily for what they will become, for the task of education is to transform the 'poor' and dependent child into the 'rich', autonomous and mature adult subject. Early education is understood in foundational terms, equipping young children for what will follow, to be judged in terms of long-term outcomes. In this outcome-driven approach, 'events and experiences hold significance only if our narratives of education and child development name them as stepping stones on the paths towards positive or negative developmental outcomes . . . [and we] value activities that we believe will have a long-term payoff at the expense of activities that seem frivolous or pointless because they are not correlated with success later in life' (Tobin, 1997: 13–14).

In this pedagogy, the pedagogue has a privileged voice of authority, and commitment to the ideals of autonomy and truth puts an end to real questioning. Instead, a typical pedagogical practice is the pattern of *question–answer*, in which the pedagogue poses questions to the children — but questions which actually are not real questions as the pedagogue already knows the 'true' answers and only listens for these answers. This method of work is often associated with the tradition in schools, but not in early childhood institutions. However, studies show that it does appear in the practice of these institutions, especially during more pedagogically-oriented moments such as 'morning sessions' or 'circle times' (Haug, 1992; Hedenqvist, 1987; Rubenstein Reich, 1993). The following episode, from a morning session at a Swedish early childhood institution, vividly illustrates the power of the question–answer pattern (Hedenqvist, 1987). Siv, who is the pedagogue, sits with the children, including Bosse and Alvar, in a circle on the floor.

Siv:	There is something that does not exist in the air in the wintertime. They are in the air now. Some birds are eating them . . . something that flies in the air . . . that we talked about last week and that has come back now . . .
Bosse:	What?
Siv:	Yes, what is flying around in the air now . . . a lot of them . . .
Bosse:	Birds! Bees! Bumble-bees!
Siv:	Yes, I'm thinking of a very small insect. You said a . . .
Bosse:	A bumble-bee,
Siv:	Yes, (hesitating) and what other kinds of small insects are there?
Bosse:	Bees!

Siv: Hm, there are some more insects . . . those which come and bite you. Do you know which they are, Alvar? The ones which bite us in the summer and then it itches?

Alvar: A bee . . . ?

Siv: Yes, but . . . (imitating a buzzing sound),

Bosse: A wasp!

Siv: I'm thinking of mosquitos.

Bosse: What . . .

Siv: Mosquitos

This small excerpt shows children busy trying to grasp the code of what is expected of them from the teacher in a game of what one could call 'Guess what I am thinking of?' It shows how the question–answer pattern is embodied in the pedagogue and the children. It shows how, in this type of exchange, very poor and helpless a child appears, a child seen as an object without his or her own resources and potentials, a child to be filled with knowledge but not challenged.

Childhood and Pedagogy in Postmodern Conditions

The potential of the child is stunted when the endpoint of their learning is formulated in advance. (Rinaldi, 1993: 104)

The transgressive force of teaching does not lie so much in matters of content as in the way pedagogy can hold open the temporality of questioning so as to resist being characterized as a transaction that can be concluded, either with the giving of grades or the granting of degrees. (Readings, 1996: 19)

We have argued that we are living through a period of great change, in which what might be called postmodern conditions are emerging. If we view childhood as a social phenomenon located in a particular context, then it seems to us that the child as *co-constructor*, rather than reproducer, *of knowledge, identity and culture* can be understood to be living a postmodern childhood. What does this mean? What characterizes a postmodern childhood? What are the implications for the function and construction of early childhood pedagogy?

To live in a society that is characterized by postmodern conditions means that individual children have to adjust to a high degree of complexity and diversity, as well as to continuous changes. In a more stable society the children's biography and knowledge were almost predetermined (Asplund, 1983), much the same as their parents. In such conditions, the function of early childhood pedagogy can be understood as enabling children to assume their true identity, their essential identity, and the reproduction of knowledge and cultural values, predetermined earlier by religion and later by a supposedly value-free, objective science and reason.

But in a society of rapid change, the demands and requirements that the future will hold for children can be difficult to anticipate. If the past no longer provides guarantees for the future, if traditional reference points, such as the church, political party and class, weaken, then life increasingly becomes a project that you have to construct yourself. As Melucci (1989) and others have observed, a postindustrial society is characterized by a high degree of reflexivity.

But even more fundamental, living in postmodern conditions calls for a new way of understanding knowledge, requiring us, first and foremost,

to abandon the 'grand narrative' of a theoretical unity of knowledge, and to be content with more local and practical aims. This means abandoning one of the deepest assumptions (and hopes) of Enlightenment thought: that what is 'really' available for perception 'out there' is an orderly and systematic world, (potentially) the same for all of us — such that, if we really persist in our investigations and arguments, we will ultimately secure universal agreement about its nature. (Shotter, 1992: 69)

The postmodern perspective, therefore, questions the Enlightenment idea and hope that there is objective, or innocent, knowledge, through the accumulation of which we can get nearer the truth that will tell us how the world is, who we are and how to act in the world in ways that are universal and just. Instead it offers a quite different understanding: knowledge as perspectival and ambiguous, contextualized and localized, incomplete and paradoxical, and produced in diverse ways: 'there is a change in emphasis from confrontation with nature to a conversation between persons, from correspondence with an objective reality to negotiation of meaning' (Kvale, 1992: 51).

There is much discussion about 'constructivist' and 'social constructivist' teaching, and the different approaches and concepts covered by these terms (cf. Richardson, 1997). From our perspective, it is different understandings of knowledge that distinguish our postmodern *social constructionist* perspective from the *constructivist* movement which has had a revival in educational reforms in recent years. Both view the child as active and flexible and expect the pedagogue to start from the child's everyday understanding and construction of the surrounding world. But from a constructivist perspective knowledge seems to be seen as something absolute and unchangeable, as facts to be transmitted to the child, and thus as separate from the child, independent of experience and existing in a cultural, institutional and historical vacuum. Constructivism eschews the socially constructed nature of knowledge, and its rules of reason inscribe a fixed world of school subjects that children internalize through flexible strategies of problem solving (Popkewitz, 1993).

By contrast, a pedagogue working with a social constructionist perspective would give the child the possibility to produce alternative constructions before encountering scientifically accepted constructions. The child can then place constructions in relation to scientific constructions, and make choices and meanings (Lenz Taguchi, 1997). This is understood to be a learning process not only for the child but also for the pedagogue, if he or she is able to encounter the child's ideas, theories and hypotheses with respect, curiosity and wonder.

So, both perspectives see an active and problem-solving child. But unlike the social constructionist perspective, the constructivist perspective sees that child existing within a context of standardized, stable and objective concepts. Popkewitz

(1993), for example, has argued that educational reforms which have been influenced by the constructivist revival have focused on how learning occurs in classroom interaction so that children acquire subject matter. The consequence is a valuing of children's thoughts and values as right or wrong according to whether they agree with a predetermined definition of knowledge and a pedagogy which never gives children the chance to explore their own theories.

Taking a postmodern perspective means that we can no longer fall back on knowledge as universal, unchanging and absolute, but must take responsibility for our own learning and meaning making. The same goes for making moral choices. We must take responsibility for making moral choices, no longer being able to abandon this responsibility in favour of conformity to universal rules and absolute truths, reproduced in children through processes of cultural transmission. Postmodern ethics means each of us, from childhood, must take responsibility for making difficult decisions. We are our own moral agents, bearing responsibility for making — constructing — moral choices: there is no truth 'whose name might be invoked to save us from the responsibility for our actions' (Readings, 1996: 168).

This places increasing requirements on children to form and shape their own understanding of the world, knowledge, as well as identity and lifestyle. This process of individualization means having a high degree of self-control or self-government of your own choices and actions, individually and collectively. This calls for a trust in your own ability to make choices and argue for your standpoints. It also means that children gain an increased responsibility for themselves and for realizing their own possibilities.

These changes are often analysed negatively, as a threat to security and a source of alienation. But they can be understood as opening up tremendous possibilities — which are not always desirable — but can be. Realization of these possibilities requires highly developed capacities for learning, self-reflection and communication, and open and questioning relationships. It presupposes what Ziehe has called 'extraordinary learning processes' (1989), processes which are neither linear nor isolated, and which give children opportunities to use their curiosity and creativity, to experiment and take responsibility, to make choices concerning their life and future.

Living in postmodern conditions therefore puts considerable demands on the process of pedagogy. The challenge is to provide a space where new possibilities can be explored and realized through enlarging the reflexive and critical ways of knowing, through construction rather than reproduction of knowledge, through enabling children to work creatively to realize the possibilities and handle anxiety. It can contribute to the emergence of a pluralistic patchwork quilt of co-existing world views and life experiments.

But it is not just a matter of children constructing knowledge in changing times. They also construct identity. The project of modernity, believing in a knowable world of universal truths and universal properties, has sought a universal human nature and an identity of the subject that is coherent and unified, stable and knowable, to be assumed or realized. By so doing, it has threatened to reduce difference in identity, replacing complexity and contradiction with unity and coherence.

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, postmodern thinkers like Derrida and Foucault and many feminists have questioned the idea of a unified and stable subject, a fixed entity or essence of the individual, an inner self that the individual can discover and know truly through introspection, transparency and consciousness. Identity, both across groups and within individuals, is understood as complex and multiple, fragmented and ambiguous, contradictory and contextualized:

> we are seen to live in webs of multiple representations of class, race, gender, language and social relations; meanings vary even within one individual. Self-identity is constituted and reconstituted relationally, its boundaries repeatedly remapped and renegotiated ... Identities are continually displaced/replaced. The subject is neither unified nor fixed. (Lather, 1992: 101)

In this context, the issue of taking difference seriously, treating it as an opportunity rather than a threat and finding ways to relate to others, without making them the same, assumes great importance.

If Man was at the centre of the Age of Enlightenment, in a postmodern age man and woman are *de*centred, and the individual subject 'is dissolved into linguistic structures and ensembles of relations' (Gergen, 1992: 40). Inherent to the modernist concept of the free and self-determining individual is a static and essentialized self. But postmodernity's focus on the fundamentally relational nature of identity results in the historically constituted and shifting self (Lather, 1992).

Identity therefore is no longer understood, from a postmodern perspective, as taking on predetermined, rigid and universal forms through processes of socialization and reproduction. Rather, as a relational and relative concept, identities are constructed and reconstructed within specific contexts — contexts which are always open for change and where the meaning of what children are, could be and should be cannot be established once and for all. Postmodern children are inscribed in multiple and overlapping identities, in whose construction they are active participants. We can see how children and young people co-construct these multiple and overlapping identities in a dynamic and fluid fashion through the example of the increasing numbers of children and young people who have one parent who is 'white' and one parent who is 'black'. There is a long history of the construction of so-called 'mixed parentage' as necessarily problematic, partly as a result of an acceptance that there are clearly differentiated 'races' which are, in essence, necessarily polarized. People with one black and one white parent have usually been classified as black, but they have also been identified as separate from black and white people and classified using terms which tend to pathologize them for not fitting into a racialized binary opposition, for example 'half-caste', 'mixed race', 'biracial', 'maroon' and 'mulatto'. In this way, an arbitrary division is constructed between those of mixed parentage and others, even though the populations of the world are, in reality, intermixed (Phoenix and Owen, 1996).

But in the diversity of today's societies, there is movement away from the idea that racial identity is given or reproduced, towards the idea that 'people of mixed-parentage must be allowed to assert their racialized identities in whichever ways

they feel are most appropriate . . . [and] conceptualising identities as "both/and"'
(Phoenix and Owen, 1996: 129–30). A British study of social identities shows how
this happens in practice, with young people of mixed parentage proving active in
resisting external pressures and in constructing their own shifting, multiple and
contextualized identities.

> It was not uncommon for the young people to explain how they described them-
> selves in different ways at different times and in different contexts. In this they
> appeared to have a range of ways in which they could individually express their
> racialized identities which could be said to be congruent with notions of postmodern
> plurality and flexibility. In expressing these identities, some seemed to accept, and
> others to reject, the dualism inherent in the treatment of 'black' and 'white' as
> oppositional categories . . . Most of the young people were clear that they made
> their own decisions about whether to accept or reject the constructions their par-
> ents, teachers and friends attempted to persuade them to use. (Phoenix and Owen,
> 1996: 131–2)

There is a similar movement away from understanding culture as a given, an
heirloom to be handed down and taken up from generation to generation. Instead,
culture is also increasingly understood as complex, fluid and contextualized, co-
constructed by individuals in relations with others.

> The appropriation of cultural tradition becomes more dependent upon the creative
> hermeneutic of contemporary interpreters. Tradition in the modern world loses its
> legitimacy of simply being valid because it is the way of the past. The legitimacy
> of tradition rests now with resourceful and creative appropriations of it in view of
> the problems of meaning in the present . . . [T]he reflective effort and contribution
> of individuals becomes crucial. (Benhabib, 1992: 104)

Postmodern conditions bring processes of individualization. But they also fore-
ground relationships. Knowledge, identity and culture are constituted and reconsti-
tuted in relation to others — they are *co*-constructed. Relational concepts abound:
dialogue, conversation, negotiation, encounter, confrontation, conflict. If knowledge
is no longer viewed as an accumulation and reproduction of facts, but as perspectival
and open-ended, then knowledge can be viewed as an open-ended conversation,
privileging no party and seeking neither consensus nor a final truth. Constructing
identity not in essentialistic but pluralistic terms implies that a child is connected to
many different groups of shifting ethnic, religious, cultural and social character. For
this reason, as well as the importance attached to the ethics of an encounter, ped-
agogy for postmodern conditions is based on relationships, encounters and dialogue,
with other co-constructors, both adults and children.

This 'pedagogy of relationships', in which children are understood to be
actively engaged in co-constructing their own and others' knowledge and identities,
has been described by Loris Malaguzzi in writing about Reggio Emilia:

> Children learn by interacting with their environment and actively transforming
> their relationships with the world of adults, things, events and, in original ways,

their peers. In a sense children participate in constructing their identity and the
identity of others. Interaction among children is a fundamental experience during
the first years of life. Interaction is a need, a desire, a vital necessity that each child
carries within . . . Children's self-learning and co-learning (construction of know-
ledge by self and co-construction of knowledge with others), supported by inter-
active experiences constructed with the help of adults, determine the selection and
organization of processes and strategies that are part of and coherent with the
overall goals of early childhood education . . . Constructive conflicts [resulting from
the exchange of different actions, expectations and ideas] transform the indi-
vidual's cognitive experience and promote learning and development. Placing
children in small groups facilitates this process because among children there are
not strong relationships of authority or dependence; therefore, such conflicts are
more attractive and advantageous . . . If we accept that every problem produces
cognitive conflicts, then we believe that cognitive conflicts initiate a process of co-
construction and cooperation. (Malaguzzi, 1993a: 11–12)

So important are relationships to the thinking and work in Reggio that they do
not talk of being 'child-centred', with its implication of the child as an autonomous,
isolated and decontextualized being. Rather they would say that relationships —
between children, parents, pedagogues and society — are at the centre of every-
thing they do, viewing the early childhood institution as 'an integral living organ-
ism, a place of shared lives and relationships among many adults and very many
children' (Malaguzzi, 1993b: 56). For nothing and no-one exists outside of context
and relationships.

Nor is the idea of a pedagogy of relationships confined to early childhood. In
his discussion of the university — how it has been, is and might be — Readings
argues passionately for this understanding of pedagogy: 'I want to insist pedagogy
is a relation, a network of obligation . . . (in which) the condition of pedagogical
practice is an infinite attention to the other' (1996: 158).

When the human encounter — relationships — is the basis for pedagogy,
communication is seen as the key to children's learning. In Reggio, they view the
child as a communicative individual from the start, from the very first moment of
life. They want to have a child who is an active interacter, not a passive receiver.
Pedagogy and the pedagogical milieu have to stimulate children's own activity and
their possibilities for communicating their own experiences; they want to find many
ways for children to communicate, to use 'the hundred languages of childhood'.
Through communication, children can establish belongingness and participation,
laying the ground for taking different perspectives; view their own experiences in
the light of others'; discuss, make choices, argue for one's choices — stand up for
them, and handle new situations. To cite Loris Malaguzzi again:

> When children are born they are washed by an ocean of words, by signs, and they
> learn the art of speech itself, the art of listening, the art of reading, and to give
> signs meaning. I mean that upbringing implies the finding of a solution to an
> increasing competence as far as communication is concerned. Actually, in commun-
> ication the child's whole life is contained, man's whole life: the logical tools of
> thought, communication as a base for socialization, and the feelings and emotions

which pass through communication. To learn how one can speak and listen are some of the big questions of life. (Malaguzzi, 1993b: 57)

Foregrounding relationships and communication, also produces a 'pedagogy of listening', an 'approach based on listening rather than speaking' (Rinaldi, 1993: 104). This means listening to the ideas, questions and answers of children, and struggling to make meaning from what is said, without preconceived ideas of what is correct or valid. 'Good' listening distinguishes dialogue between human beings, which expresses and constitutes a relationship to a concrete Other, from monologue, which seeks to transmit a body of knowledge and through so doing make the Other into the same. Again taking up the same theme, but in relation to universities, Readings (1996) also argues for the importance of 'listening to thought' in pedagogical work, which he distinguishes from the production of an autonomous subject or an autonomous body of knowledge:

> Rather it is to think besides each other and ourselves to explore an open network of obligation that keeps the question of meaning open as a locus for debate . . . Doing justice to thought means trying to hear that which cannot be said but which tries to make itself heard — and this is a process incompatible with the production of even relatively stable and exchangeable knowledge. (1996: 165)

One other feature of the pedagogical work of Reggio should be mentioned here: a refusal to be time governed. Most children attend early childhood institutions for at least a full school day, and for at least three years, often longer. Time is not organized by the clock, but according to children's own sense of time, their personal rhythms and what they need for the projects on which they are working. All this gives children time to get engaged, time not to have to hurry, time to do things with satisfaction. This questions, for example, the tight time governance of British 'nursery education', where attendance is normally confined to a short morning or afternoon session on the grounds either that this is all the time young children can manage or that no better outcomes can be secured by longer attendance. More generally, it questions a reduction of education to what Readings calls 'a logic of accounting', which is concerned increasingly with ever faster progress up the ladder, acquiring a predetermined body of knowledge ever more rapidly and cost-effectively.

From our understanding, and a theme we take up again in Chapter 6, the pedagogical work in Reggio Emilia can be said to anticipate various themes of postmodernity. It has turned away from the modernist idea of unity, and recognized the enormous power of forces which insist on system, structure, centralization, hierarchy, coherence and normalization. It has turned towards the postmodern idea of complexity and contradiction, and has recognized the great opportunities that arise from recognizing difference, plurality, otherness and unpredictability. Over the years, Reggio has struggled to find a pedagogical practice of multiple languages and co-construction, of relationships and dialogue, rich in paradox and irony, valuing both cooperation and confrontation, welcoming doubt and amazement as much

as scientific enquiry. Working through pedagogical tools such as documentation, it has sought a learning culture characterized by participation, reflection, solidarity, pleasure and wonderment. What has made this possible is not only the establishment and support of a network of early childhood institutions, but a construction of them as forums in civil society, where children and adults can engage together in projects of social, cultural, economic and political significance. We consider this construction of the early childhood institution further in the next chapter.

Note

1　'Childhood' is a stage in the life course, and a permanent phenomenon in society. Children live through childhood.

Chapter 4

Constructing the Early Childhood Institution: What Do We Think They Are For?

Introduction

From a social constructionist perspective [early childhood institutions], as well as our images of what a child is, can be and should be, must be seen as the social construction of a community of human agents, originating through our active interaction with other people and with society . . . [Early childhood] institutions and pedagogical practises for children are constituted by dominant discourses in our society and embody thoughts, conceptions and ethics which prevail at a given moment in a given society. (Dahlberg, 1997)

Early childhood institutions are socially constructed. They have no inherent features, no essential qualities, no necessary purposes. What they are for, the question of their role and purpose, is not self-evident. They are what we, 'as a community of human agents', make them. This chapter is an exploration of a few of the many different constructions of the early childhood institution; it is by no means exhaustive. These constructions are constituted by and in turn constitute constructions of the young child, linking to our discussion of early childhood in the previous chapter. They are also productive of pedagogical practice. What we think these institutions are determines what they do, what goes on within them.

The chapter falls into two main parts. The first examines some constructions of the early childhood institution that are dominant in many parts of the Minority World today — the early childhood institution as producer of child outcomes or as a substitute home or as a business. In the second part we examine an alternative and less common construction of the early childhood institution — as a forum in civil society where children and adults engage in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance.

Dominant Constructions of the Early Childhood Institution

Producer and Business

It seems to me that early childhood programmes are increasingly in danger of being modeled on the corporate/industrial or factory model so pervasive in elementary and secondary levels of education . . . factories are designed to transform raw material into prespecified products by treating it to a sequence of prespecified standard processes. (Katz, 1993: 33–4)

Three major, often conflicting purposes for child care create the child care dilemma we [the United States] as a society suffer today. First, child care supports maternal employment . . . Second, child care serves children's development, which can be enhanced by high quality early childhood programs, whether or not their mothers are employed. Third, child care has been used throughout this century to intervene with economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority children and socialize them to the cultural mainstream. (Scarr, 1998: 98)

The Key Note Market Report on Childcare [in the UK] has observed that wealthy companies are becoming increasingly attracted to the childcare market . . . [Nord-Anglia Education, the second largest company] was floated on the stock market last year. It has opened four purpose-built nurseries, runs nursery units in each of its 20 independent schools and bought the Princess Charlotte nanny college earlier this year. (Report headed 'Big business sees profit in childcare' in *Nursery World*, 27 August 1998)

The dominant construction of the early childhood institution is as a producer of care and of standardized and predetermined child outcomes. Linked to the modernist constructions of the young child discussed in Chapter 3, in particular as reproducer of knowledge, identity and culture, the broad and increasingly important task of these institutions as producers is to fill the empty vessel that the young child has often been understood to be. This task is mainly to be achieved through education, now recognized as a central concern not only in nursery education but also in child care and day care: 'due to this emphasis [in American policy on the relationship care and day care: 'due to this emphasis [in American policy on the relationship between early childhood and later educational achievement] more and more Americans are realizing that *all* programs for young children are about education' (Kagan et al., 1996: 13).

Some of the more specific outcomes that the early childhood institution is expected to produce are now widely recognized in early childhood policy and literature, in particular enhancing children's development and preparation for compulsory schooling which includes starting school 'ready to learn'. Other outcomes are more implicit, although nonetheless real, in particular the reproduction of culture, including values. For example, early childhood institutions help to reproduce cultural values concerning gender; the highly gendered nature of the workforce in early childhood institutions and the lack of gender awareness in most pedagogical work produces a powerful discourse, for children and indeed adults, about appropriate gender roles and relationships (Jensen, 1996).

As parental employment grows, so increasing importance is attached to early childhood institutions producing child care for parents and employers. In an attempt to resolve the contradiction between a still dominant construction of motherhood, which asserts that exclusive maternal care is the best way to bring up very young children (discussed in more detail in the previous chapter), and an economic reality in which an increasing number of mothers are unable or unwilling to provide such

exclusive care, the objective is often a very particular concept of care: to provide a *substitute* home reproducing, as closely as possible, the model of maternal care. This is sought either through individualized forms of care (for example, family day carers or nannies); or through the organization of early childhood institutions and the structuring of relationships between children and staff in these institutions, with importance attached to high ratios of staff to children and the need for close and intimate relationships between staff and children. This idea — that mother care is needed for secure development and that, in its absence, non-maternal care requires to be modelled on a dyadic mother–child relationship — has been termed 'attachment pedagogy' by Singer (1993), who argues that it has had a powerful influence on ideas about children's upbringing, both in the home and in institutions.

The individualistic approach taken to working with children in many early childhood institutions in Britain and the United States can be explained, in part at least, by this construction of these institutions as substitute homes. A comparison between nurseries in Britain, Spain and Italy illustrates how the staffing structure in the British nurseries encouraged staff to see themselves as individuals rather than, as in Spain and Italy, also as part of a group, sharing and working towards common objectives (Penn, 1997b). This was reflected in how the staff perceived and worked with the children.

> There was little sense of the children as a group able to influence or to help each other, and in general the organizational format of the nurseries would make it difficult to achieve, even if it were considered a worthwhile objective. The overall objective was instead the surveillance and monitoring of individual children to make sure they did not come to harm ... [I]n so far as any theoretical assumptions underpinned the approach to children in the UK nurseries, it was that of Bowlby ... [which] holds that emotional security, and therefore learning, only takes place in a one to one adult–child relationship, and all other situations are irrelevant. The contribution of the peer group is completely disregarded. (1997b: 52, 53)

This construction of the early childhood institution as producer of a particular form of home-like care has perhaps been most marked in Britain and the United States, with their strong ideological commitment to maternal care, their high valuation of individuality and their ambivalence to more collective relationships and ways of working (New, 1993). But it has also been productive in other countries. The development of a comprehensive system of early childhood institutions in Sweden, starting from the 1930s, was strongly influenced by a discourse of the home; centres for children up to the age of 7 years have been represented as home', have been called *daghem* ('day home'), and have organized 'professional homes', have been called *daghem* ('day home'), and have organized children into *syskongrupper* ('sibling groups'). This discourse of the early childhood institution as home can in turn be related to a construction of Swedish society as a large community, represented by the metaphor of *Folkhemmet* (the 'People's Home'). But it was also a means of shaping the encounter between the private and the public, the individual and the state: 'it can be seen as an active incorporation and blending of discourses connecting the family and the private into discourses

concerning the social and the public ... [B]inding symbols and representations of the people, the interests of the nation and the home together was a technique that made the world on the one hand intelligible and on the other hand manageable as an object of intervention' (Dahlberg, 1998: 5).

More recently, Sweden has entered a period of uncertainty about the role of the state and public intervention. The metaphor of the *Folkhemmet*, to describe the relationship between the state and the individual, has been problematized and faded. However, the construction of early childhood institutions as producers of substitute home care has gained further legitimation. Concerns have developed about the impersonal and bureaucratic character of both schools and early childhood institutions, and about the need to protect early childhood institutions from becoming more school-like. One response to these concerns has been a new emphasis on early childhood institutions as substitute homes, through privatizing public institutions and encouraging greater closeness between children and adults in a quasi-parental relationship.

The recent history of early childhood institutions in Sweden is also a reminder that the outputs that these institutions are understood to produce are not confined to individual development or conditions for economic success; they can be framed in terms of social progress, with outputs of benefit to society as a whole. Throughout this century, the expansion of early childhood institutions in Sweden has been motivated by a succession of social outcomes, connected by 'modernist visions and revisions of building a progressively better society, an improved human race and freer individuals' (Dahlberg, 1998: 1). Thus, the kindergarten movement of the early twentieth century envisaged early childhood institutions as a means both to liberate children from the constraints of tradition and to re-establish moral order (transforming the poor family into the moral family) and the spirit of community, badly disrupted by industrialization and urbanization (Hultqvist, 1990). The discourse of a comprehensive early childhood pedagogy, which opened up in the 1930s in the context of developing a broad welfare state, took forward the idea of early childhood institutions contributing to the production of a spirit of community, and added other social outcomes — freedom, emancipation, gender equality and solidarity between different social groups.

The production of social outputs, but of a more targeted variety, also constitutes one of the purposes of early childhood institutions in Britain and the United States: social control through processes of normalization. Within the American context, Sandra Scarr refers to one output, social cohesion through 'socializing' economically disadvantaged and minority ethnic children into mainstream culture. In both countries, a strong motive for increasing public investment in early childhood institutions is their role in 'welfare to work' programmes, intended to reduce welfare payments and to reverse the perceived social and moral damage caused by prolonged dependency on these payments, by establishing labour market participation as a normative expectation of all adults. A third output is the prevention or reduction of later problems or disorders in schooling, employment and adult life, and the high costs they impose on society. The most quoted example is the High/Scope Perry Pre-school Project, an intervention with 123 poor black children in a

town in Michigan in the United States, which concluded that for every $1 of public funds invested $7 was later saved, mainly through reduced criminality (Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart, 1993).

In all these instances, the early childhood institution is understood as a means of social intervention, capable of protecting society against the effects of poverty, inequality, insecurity and marginalization. It offers a quasi-medical treatment, a form of social immunization or medication which will reduce current social ills or protect against future infection. In all cases, the early childhood institution is embedded in a construction of the young child as weak, dependent and 'in need', 'the poor child — the deficit [child] or the child at risk, with limited capacities and in need of protection' (Dahlberg, 1995: 14), yet also potentially threatening and antisocial.

Whatever the outcome and whoever the beneficiaries envisaged for early childhood institutions, this construction of these institutions as producers has a common theme. Like most other institutions for children, early childhood institutions are provided primarily to serve adult interests (Mayall, 1996), or to protect children from adults. They constitute places where children are acted upon to produce predetermined, desirable outcomes, places where children are developed, educated, cared for, socialized, and are compensated. If these institutions are proposed in the interests of children and childhood, as places *for* children and childhood, rather than places where children are acted upon, adults (or at least those with the power to make decisions) remain, as Sharon Kagan and her colleagues observe, 'largely uninterested'.

This construction of the early childhood institution as producer of outputs brings to mind, as Lilian Katz observes in the quotation at the beginning of this section, the metaphor of the factory, a place where young children ('the raw material') are processed, to reproduce a body of knowledge and dominant cultural values ('prespecified products') that will equip them to become adults adapted to the economic and social needs of society, and/or to protect society from the consequences of social, familial and individual dysfunction. Just as the factory seeks to adopt standardized methods for efficient production anywhere, so the search is on in early childhood institutions for effective methods of processing that can be exported and reproduced anywhere, irrespective of context, and expressed in the language of 'models' or 'programmes', and the question 'what works?'

There is one other construction of the early childhood institution which is increasingly prominent: as a business. Early childhood institutions are still understood to be producers, but they are additionally understood as businesses competing in a market to sell their product(s) — for example, developmental outcomes, school readiness, care in a substitute home, prevention of later delinquency — to customers or consumers, invariably adults, never children (who lack the means to be consumers), most often parents, but also employers or public agencies.

This development is again most apparent in Britain and the United States. In recent years, these countries have witnessed a huge expansion of private markets in 'child care services' (day nurseries, family day care, nannies and so on) competing for the business of a growing number of parents who want care and education for their children and a growing number of employers who want to offer 'child care' support as part of their package of employee benefits. But the concept has also taken hold in public services, for example, in early childhood institutions in Sweden where, in the context of a shift towards a more market-oriented social welfare system, 'the work being carried out in child care centres is often compared with the work carried out in private business' (Dahlberg and Åsén, 1994: 161).

These constructions of the early childhood institution produce matching constructions of the early childhood worker. First, she is a *technician*, whose task is to ensure the efficient production of the institution's outcomes, however framed, for example, transmitting a predetermined body of knowledge to the child or supporting the child's development to ensure that each milestone is reached at the correct age. The technology she administers incorporates a range of norms or standards: where the child should be at his or her current stage of development and the achievable goal; what activities are appropriate to the child's stage of development; what the answers are to the questions she puts to the child, and so on. The outcomes are known and prescribed, even though the child may be allowed some choice and freedom in how he or she achieves them. From a Foucauldian perspective, she is the effect of disciplinary power, but also exercises power in her work with children and parents, embodying the discourse of developmental psychology which produces understandings of the child and shapes practice with him or her.

Second, she is a *substitute parent* providing a close, intimate relationship with the children in her charge. 'She' is significant. Because of the gendered nature of parenting, with mothers still viewed as primarily responsible for actual caring, the substitute parent is expected to be a substitute mother. This in turn contributes to the production of a highly gendered workforce.

Finally, she is an *entrepreneur*. She must successfully market and sell her product. She must manage the institution to ensure high productivity and conformity to standards, in short ensuring an efficient production process.

The Early Childhood Institution, the Nation State and Capitalism

Viewed from the perspective of the project of modernity, early childhood institutions have been increasingly considered a necessary technology for progress. Many constructions of the early childhood institution, as indeed of other institutions for children such as schools, embody an idea of social redemption through the application of science to children, an ideal which has strongly influenced modern life (Popkewitz, 1998b). Such institutions have come to be seen not only as places for the transmission of knowledge, but also as places where social and psychological problems can be solved with the careful application of behavioural and social sciences.

> This emerging reliance on science and technology, coupled with a romantic view of the purity and perfectability of the child, led to the perception that children are appropriate vehicles for solving problems in society. The notion was that if we can

somehow intervene in the lives of children, then poverty, racism, crime, drug abuse and any number of social ills can be erased. Children became instruments of society's need to improve itself, and childhood became a time during which social problems were either solved or determined to be unsolvable. (Hatch, 1995: 118–9)

This redemptive theme runs through the history of early childhood institutions, up to the present day. But we can also see changes in the influences shaping early childhood institutions and their purposes. Readings (1996) argues that, faced by the related changes in capitalism and the power of the nation state discussed in Chapter 1, universities are transforming themselves from being the ideological arm of the nation state, striving together to recognize the idea of a national culture and identity, to bureaucratically organized and relatively consumer-oriented corporations at the service of transnational capitalism.

> Global fusion and national fission go hand in hand and work together to efface the linking of the nation state and symbolic life that has constituted the idea of 'national culture' since the eighteenth century. It is now pointless to seek the destiny of the university in its capacity to realize the essence of a nation state and its people . . . Contemporary students are consumers rather than national subjects . . . Consumerism is a sign the individual is no longer a political entity, not subject to the nation state. (1996: 51, 53)

Although it is not as clear as for the university, we can still see how these economic and political changes have also affected early childhood institutions. We have already noted how the development of early childhood institutions in Sweden has been closely related to the development of a vision of Swedish society and the formation of a modern, industrialized nation state. Similarly in France, the *écoles maternelles*, or nursery schools, have been closely connected to the nation state, being viewed as a means of introducing the young French child into citizenship and civic values. As another example, the British government expanded nursery provision rapidly during the Second World War in the interests of the nation state, to ensure a supply of female labour for war industries (then ran down this provision when war ended and it was decided that the national priority was employment for men demobilized from the armed forces).

But the more recent growth of early childhood institutions, over the last three decades or so, can be seen as related to the weakening of the nation state and the growth of deregulated global capitalism discussed in Chapter 1. In a world in which the economic is no longer subjugated to the political and capitalism 'swallows up' the notion of the nation state, increasingly powerless nation states become increasingly managerial (Readings, 1996), seeking to entice transnational corporations by providing conditions for profitable investment. Amongst the conditions is the assurance of a ready supply of competitive labour, which means sufficient numbers of women and men in their 'prime working years' (i.e. between 25 and 50 years old), with the skills required in the modern workplace and prepared to work 'flexibly' and intensively.

In this scenario, early childhood institutions are a necessary means for ensuring labour supply, providing care for the children of today's labour force and, it is argued, enhancing the performance of tomorrow's labour force. While the dominance of the economic over the political, of transnational capitalism over the nation state, is further reflected in the language of business, management and consumerism which more and more permeates early childhood institutions, their purposes and practice. In this context, as already noted, early childhood institutions are increasingly seen as businesses, whether operating as autonomous for-profit 'service providers' within a private market, as in much of the English-speaking world, or within a publicly financed and managed system, as in Sweden.

However, things are not quite as simple as this outline may suggest. Many different discourses are interacting, as we can see if we take the case of Sweden. Recently, early childhood institutions in Sweden have been integrated into the *national* educational system (previously being within the social welfare system), and have got their first *national* curriculum, which might suggest even closer association with the nation state. At the same time, however, we can observe how local authorities, who are actually in charge of these institutions, are abandoning the justification of these institutions as vehicles for national culture and goals. In effect, a process of redefinition has begun where early childhood institutions, even if still financed by the state, are changing from a very close ideological relation to the state to being bureaucratically organized, relatively autonomous and consumer-oriented; the same transformation is occurring among local authorities themselves, which behave increasingly as autonomous consumer-oriented organizations, rather than political and cultural centres related to the nation state. From being closely connected to the common good, both institutions and authorities are more and more turned into business enterprises (Dahlberg, 1998; Dahlberg and Åsén, 1994).

In this process parents and children will be constructed and think of themselves less and less as members of a community and more and more as consumers of services, something which is also obvious in the rhetoric. Even if profit is not yet on the agenda, the language of economic management and free choice is introduced and words such as *parents* are exchanged for words such as *consumers*. This change in language symbolizes a shift in which early childhood institutions are no longer seen as essentially ideological and tied to the self-reproduction of the nation state. They become a human resource for the market place instead of a means for the development of a national culture. In this process, where the early childhood system turns from being an institution connected to the nation state into a business organization serving the needs of business, knowledge has itself become commodified as information and as a good that can be sold on a market (Bernstein, 1990; Dahlberg, 1998).

In a situation like this it is easy to become nostalgic or enter into cynical despair when the lost mission of liberal education becomes visible. This is also how we can understand the struggle that we can see today for going back to the Enlightenment project, and the relationship it posits between educational institutions and the nation state, national culture and national identity. But given the complexity of

the space in which early childhood institutions are presently located, we no longer think that it is fruitful to do this.

Looking back, we do not want to give up the hope that these institutions can still be connected to the broader social, political and cultural tasks of the nation state. However, through working more closely into the postmodern critique of the modernist project we are now more aware of the difficulties attached to realizing this hope. We cannot any longer position early childhood institutions by appealing to values of reason as the predetermined goal to strive for, nor values such as to autonomy and culture. For these values have been constituted through the meta-narratives of modernity, and as such have functioned as a means of unification, normalization and totalization. How then to take a stand against consumerism before early childhood care and education embarks irrevocably upon the path of becoming bureaucratic businesses dedicated to the service of global capitalism?

The Construction of the Early Childhood Institution as a Forum in Civil Society

Civil Society

The words 'civil society' name the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks — formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology — that fill up that space. (Walzer, 1992: 92)

Participation is not seen as an activity that is only and most truly possible in a narrowly defined political realm, but as an activity that can be realized in the social and cultural spheres as well . . . This conception of participation, which emphasizes the determination of norms of action through the practical debate of all affected by them, has the distinctive advantage that it articulates a vision of the political true to the realities of complex, modern societies. (Benhabib, 1992: 104–5)

The increasing numbers of early childhood institutions in most Minority World countries are part of a recent shift of 'reproduction', including the care and education of young children, away from the private domain of the household and the extended family (although these remain very important). But when this happens, to where is 'reproduction' shifted? In the case of early childhood institutions, there are choices. Where these institutions are located has implications for the social construction of the early childhood institution: what we think they are, how we understand their purposes. In many cases, early childhood institutions have been situated either within the domain of the state (i.e. provided by central or local government) or within the economic domain (i.e. provided by the workplace or as businesses operating within a private market). But early childhood institutions can be situated in a different domain — civil society.

Civil society has several contradictory meanings. For example, liberal theory of democracy, whose origins lie in Locke's development of Hobbes' theory, has seen society as constituted of two spheres: the state and civil society, the latter

viewed as a society of individuals integrated only through their economic relations. The state is differentiated from social life and should restrict its intervention in the civil society to protecting individual rights, in particular the right to property. In contrast republican theory, going back to ancient Greek society, distinguishes the state from the household, and regards the state as the only form of public sphere and the only possibility for social life; there is no distinction between political and civil society. As in liberal theory, the state does not deal with economic matters, but unlike liberal theory should be engaged with the realization of the good life.

Our understanding of civil society is somewhat different again. It has much in common with the definition of civil society 'as a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements and forms of public communication' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: ix). We would however view the 'intimate sphere' as a distinct and fourth area, apart from but in relationship with the state, the economy and civil society. Civil society can therefore be seen as being between and in relationship with these other three areas and their institutions (for example, government at different levels; the market, work organizations and trade unions; households and families). Civil society is 'the space of uncoerced human association' where individuals can come together to engage in activities of common interest, which may be of many kinds — cultural, social, economic and political.

Among the defining features of civil society, Cohen and Arato refer to *social movements* and *associations*. Since the 1960s, there has been a strong emergence of what Melucci (1989) calls new social movements. These have been analysed in relation to economic change and the continuing evolution of capitalism, gaining ground against older political movements such as mass political parties and trade unions, which were built around homogeneous and stable class identities produced during the period of 'organized capitalism' and industrialism. New social movements reflect weakening and fragmentation of these identities in increasingly complex post-industrial societies and a new phase of what has been called 'disorganized capitalism'. They have also been analysed from a postmodern perspective, embodying the 'death of metanarratives' and a new 'politics of difference' which draws attention to the particularities of group, place, community and history (Kumar, 1995).

New social movements can be seen therefore as one expression of what has been called a radical and plural democracy, responsive to the complexity, fluidity and ambiguity of identity and in which '*différance* is construed as the condition of possibility of being' (Mouffe, 1996b: 246). Rather than an essentialist notion of groups with given, stable and coherent interests and identities, new social movements can be seen to open up possibilities for shifting forms of alliances which recognize multiple interests and identities. From this perspective, consensus is a dangerous utopia, threatening to absorb otherness into a smothering and oppressive oneness and harmony, while 'recognition of undecidability is the condition of existence of democratic politics' (Mouffe, 1996b: 254). Conflict and confrontation, far from being signs of imperfection, indicate a democracy that is alive and inhabited

by pluralism: 'that is why, in Derrida's words, democracy will always be "to come", traversed by undecidability and for ever keeping open its element of promise' (Mouffe, 1996a: 11).

Of particular importance to our subject, Melucci sees social movements as social constructions, in which a collective identity is constructed through an interactional process. They are systems of action, complex networks connecting many different elements, which through communication, negotiation and confrontation between the actors involved produce meaning, decisions and collective action. Without the challenges these new movements pose, Melucci argues, complex societies would not be capable of posing questions about meaning, and could not challenge the accepted wisdom or dominant discourse.

Some social scientists today, including many feminists, consider that rejecting a universal and essentialist perspective jeopardizes the democratic ideal of the Enlightenment. It seems to us, however, that it opens up the possibility for a new understanding of democracy in postmodern times, which seeks to avoid the oppression of reducing our identity to one single and constant position — be it class, race, gender or whatever. This new understanding of democracy calls for new forms of collective action and the proliferation of public spaces or forums in which collective action can take place. Melucci finds in new social movements a potential for new societal forms of collective action and thus an enlargement of democracy in complex societies. Collective action need no longer be channelled only through the established state and economic institutions (parliament, trade unions, etc.) but can also be expressed through democratic institutions situated in the framework of civil society; it is not a matter of 'either/or' but of 'and/also'.

Cohen and Arato also emphasize the democratic potential of civil society through

> a notion of self-limiting democratizing movements seeking to expand and protect spaces for both negative liberty and positive freedom . . . [T]he rights to communication, assembly and association, among others, constitute the public and associational spheres of civil society as spheres of *positive freedom* within which agents can collectively debate issues of common concern, act in concert, assert new rights, and exercise influence on political (and potentially economic) society. (1992: 17, 23, original emphasis)

Association is an important feature of civil society. In his study of Italian regional government, the American political scientist Robert Putnam (1993) describes civic associations as networks of civic engagement, which 'represent intense horizontal interaction', citing as examples 'neighbourhood associations, choral societies, cooperatives, sports clubs, mass-based parties and the like'. He argues that civic associations make a major contribution to the effectiveness of both economic life and democratic government, demonstrating that Italian regions with successful economies and regional governments (in particular, the region of Emilia Romagna, in which Reggio Emilia is located) also have the greatest number of civic associations. The key to understanding this relationship is what Putnam calls

'social capital' — trust, reciprocity, respect and other features of social organization which are an important condition for the economic and political success of a society. Networks of civic associations constitute 'an essential form of social capital', instilling in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity and public-spiritedness; 'the denser such networks in a community, the more likely that its citizens will be able to cooperate for mutual benefit' (1993: 173).

Forums in Civil Society

Early childhood institutions can be understood as *public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance*. Before considering these projects in more detail, we need to examine the concept of a 'forum'.

Forums are an important feature of civil society. If civil society is where individuals — children, young people and adults — can come together to participate and engage in activities or projects of common interest and collective action, then forums are places where this coming together, this meeting, occurs. They have much in common with Putnam's concept of 'civil association', and also with the concept of 'public space', described below by Henri Giroux in relation to the school:

> The school is best understood as a polity, as a locus for citizenship . . . To bring schools closer to the concept of polity, it is necessary to define them as public spaces that seek to recapture the idea of critical democracy and community . . . By 'public space' I mean, as Hannah Arendt did, a concrete set of learning conditions where people come together to speak, to engage in dialogue, to share their stories and to struggle together within social relations that strengthen rather than weaken possibilities for active citizenship. (1989: 201)

Forums provide a locus for active citizenship through participation in collective action and the practice of democracy. A strong and vibrant civil society requires this type of engagement by active citizens in forums — and out of such activity may come new social movements. Forums can therefore be understood as democratic institutions, operating beyond 'a narrowly defined political realm' in 'social and cultural spheres'. But this does not mean they are substitutes for political institutions. They are complementary, representing a new autonomous political arena alongside more institutionalized arenas (such as the state and the market) and offering an enlarged sphere for the operation of politics. Political institutions can support the idea and promote the availability of forums; while forums provide opportunities within civil society for politicians (as representatives from the state's political institutions) and others to meet together to engage in matters of common interest. To do this effectively — for forums to engage politicians and others in dialogue — requires *decentralization* of political authority to the most local level possible for the subjects of engagement, such as pedagogy for younger and older (school age) children and personal social services.

The operation of the forum as a locus of participation and dialogue, enabling politicians and others to engage actively and productively, to deepen their understanding, also requires procedures and conditions that support this function. Some procedures have been developed specifically in early childhood institutions, and might have wider applicability. These include *documentation*, which in Reggio has been seen as 'a democratic process to inform the public about the contents of the [early childhood institutions]' (Rinaldi, 1993: 122); and the participation of 'wise helpers', such as *pedagogista* or pedagogical advisers and philosophers, another feature of Reggio. Both are discussed in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

They also require 'the conditions of *universal moral respect* and *egalitarian reciprocity*' (Benhabib, 1992: 105). The principle of universal moral respect concerns 'the right of all beings capable of speech and action to participate in the moral conversation', which implies the participation of children. While the principle of egalitarian reciprocity requires each participant having the same rights 'to various speech acts, to initiate new topics, to ask for reflection about the presuppositions of the conversation'. The cultivation of moral and cognitive abilities is also important, for example, the capacity 'to reverse perspectives, that is, the willingness to reason from the Others' point of view, and the sensitivity to hear their voice'; and the ability to see the Other as equal but different. These procedures and conditions not only contribute to democratic participation and practice in forums, but also to the ethics of an encounter.

However, it is important to recognize that the comprehensive and perfect application of such procedures and conditions is unlikely. They are extremely demanding and may not even be universally agreed. Consensus may be neither required nor desired, and conflict or confrontation may be considered a healthy element of dialogue, but disagreement can become destructive. There are issues of power which can reduce possibilities for participation and dialogue. In many ways we are offering an ideal construction, how we would like things to be, but in practice things are unpredictable, we cannot be certain which way they will go. The forum in civil society is a possibility worthy of struggle, not a certainty guaranteed of success if only instructions are followed.

The Early Childhood Institution as a Forum in Civil Society

It seems to us that early childhood institutions have the possibility of being forums in civil society. But this is a choice to be made and an aspiration to be worked for, in civil society. But this is a choice to be made and an aspiration to be worked for, they are not inherently so. To be forums, early childhood institutions must choose to understand themselves as such and actively assume the task. They must locate themselves within civil society, rather than within the state or the economy, being in relationship with both of these spheres but remaining separate.

Early childhood institutions which wish to be forums in civil society need to be open to *all* families with young children — both children and adults — and to the world. Access should not be constrained either by cost or by admission criteria, for example, the employment status of parents. Early childhood institutions which

operate purely as businesses within the private market or for the employees of particular employers are situated in the economic sphere; they cannot also be forums within civil society. To be so, early childhood institutions should be largely or wholly publicly resourced (but not necessarily publicly managed) and available as of right to all local children, as such being not only forums, but also community institutions. To this end, employers can make an important contribution, by paying an equitable share of taxation from which early childhood institutions open to all children can be adequately resourced. They can also contribute by engaging in the forums constituted by the early childhood institution, alongside other adults and children.

For some years now there has been a widespread decline in the vitality of public life, marked by falling participation rates in various activities and a widely-remarked turn to private life and pursuits (Kumar, 1995; Putnam, 1995). Many types of civic association or forum which flourished in industrial society are in long-term decline, for example, colliery brass bands or working men's clubs in certain British communities where their significance has reduced with the contraction of mining and heavy industry. Early childhood institutions are increasing everywhere. They offer the possibility of forming part of a new generation of forums and civic associations, embedded in and attuned to the world we live in today, which could revitalize the public sphere through a rich variety of projects.

Nor is this wishful thinking. The early childhood institutions of Reggio Emilia can be seen as vivid examples of early childhood institutions as forums in civil society. Influenced by systems theory, they see themselves as systems of relationships and communication located within and inextricably part of the larger system of society, closely linked to their local community, including families and local government. Nor is Reggio alone: there are many examples, from many countries, of early childhood institutions beginning to assume this role and explore the opportunities it affords.

The Projects of the Early Childhood Institution

If early childhood institutions can constitute forums in civil society where children and adults may participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance, *what are these projects*? There can be no final, definitive agenda. Determining these projects — answering the basic question 'what are early childhood institutions for?' — is one of the political projects of the institution as forum, as well as for the wider society; it is an issue for continuous dialogue between children and adults, including local and national politicians. The only generalization that can be made is that the early childhood institution viewed as forum in civil society is a place *for* children to live their childhoods. It is a permanent feature of the community offering many opportunities and possibilities, not always knowable from the start, not an intervention of fixed duration, known purposes and predetermined outcomes.

Despite not knowing for sure what the projects of the early childhood institution should or will be, we can suggest four possibilities by way of illustration. First and foremost is *the project of pedagogical work or learning*. We have argued in Chapter 3, from a postmodern perspective, that knowledge and identity are constructed and that construction occurs not from young children being taught but from what children do themselves, as a consequence of their activities, relationships and the resources available to them — by being in relation and dialogue with the world. When the human encounter is the basis for pedagogy, as well as for ethical relationships, then to facilitate and accomplish these encounters becomes the 'true' role of early childhood institutions. Viewed in this way, the early childhood institution provides a space for activities and relationships, enabling the co-construction of knowledge and identity. A similar idea of creating public spaces for dialogic learning inspired Paulo Freire's work in Brazil, in this case in adult education projects:

> [Cultural centers] were large spaces that housed cultural circles, rotating libraries, theatrical presentations, recreational activities and sports events. The cultural circles were spaces where teaching and learning took place in a dialogic fashion. They were spaces for knowledge, for knowing, not for knowledge transference; places where knowledge was produced, not simply presented to or imposed on the learner. They were spaces where new hypotheses for reading the world were created. (Freire, 1996: 121)

More specifically, early childhood institutions provide children with tools and resources for exploring and problem solving, negotiation and meaning making. These include: thematic project work based on everyday experience, giving children the possibility to express themselves in many languages; the support and inspiration of reflective practitioners; and opportunities for small groups of children to work together in exploring and interpreting the surrounding world, and, by doing so, to take responsibility for their own learning or knowledge construction. The early childhood institution offers a pedagogy based on relationships and dialogue and the ethics of an encounter. This pedagogy recognizes that the child is co-constructing knowledge, not being taught an existing corpus of knowledge; and that producing knowledge, making meaning, is done in relationship with other co-constructors, both adults and children, who must not only take the young child's ideas and theories seriously, but be ready to confront and challenge them.

This pedagogical project of early childhood institutions, in which children are understood to be actively engaged in co-constructing their own and others' knowledge, has been described by Loris Malaguzzi, referring to the pedagogical work in Reggio Emilia:

> The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences . . . All people end by discovering the surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities of children linked with an inexhaustible need for expression . . . Children are autonomously capable of making meaning from experiences — the adults' role is to activate the meaning-making competencies of children . . . Between learning and teaching, we [in Reggio

Emilia] honour the first; the aim of teaching is to provide conditions for learning. (Malaguzzi, 1993b: 72–3, 77)

As we have already discussed in the previous chapter, this ideal of pedagogical work presupposes early childhood institutions which are permeated with active participation and a reflective culture, and which are open to, and engaged in dialogue with, the surrounding world. It assumes an active interest in the times we live in, such as questions concerning our environment, peace, justice and human coexistence, and new debates and achievements within science and philosophy. Kirsti Hakkola, a Finnish pedagogue, has expressed this idea in a very evocative way in relation to her own early childhood institution in Helsinki: 'I want our preschool to be a preschool without walls, and which is placed on a public square.'

The second important project, already introduced in the preceding discussion of forums, is to *promote an informed, participatory and critical local democracy*. Early childhood institutions have the potential to be places where parents, politicians and others (including employers, trade unions and the general citizenry) can come together with pedagogues and children to engage in dialogue on a range of subjects. There is no closed and definitive agenda of subjects, but several subjects might be suggested.

First and foremost, early childhood institutions as forums in civil society provide an opportunity for *constructing a new public discourse about early childhood* itself, an important part of what might be called a 'politics of childhood'. For early childhood institutions are one obvious place for the public discussion of issues such as pedagogical work and of questions such as: How do we understand early childhood? What is our construction of the young child? What is the relationship between young children and society? As we shall discuss further in Chapter 7, which is about pedagogical documentation, this first requires problematizing the dominant discursive regimes in pedagogical practice as well as in social and behavioural sciences, including the constructions of the child, early childhood institutions and the work of these institutions that they produce. Doing this, the way is opened up to reconstruct alternative images of the child, early childhood institutions and early childhood pedagogy.

Understood in this way, working with parents does not mean pedagogues giving to parents uncontextualized and unproblematized information about what they (the pedagogues) are doing, nor 'educating' parents in 'good' practice by transmitting a simplified version of a technology of child development and child rearing. Rather it means both parents and pedagogues (and others) entering into a reflective and analytic relationship involving deepening understanding and the possibility of making judgments about the pedagogical work (within the 'discourse of meaning making' discussed in Chapter 5), and in which pedagogical documentation (discussed in Chapter 7) plays an important part. 'Parental participation' in this context is a description of democratic practice rather than a means of social control or technological transfer.

Another subject for a politics of childhood may be called *issues of the 'good life'*. In the case of early childhood institutions, 'good life' questions might include

'What do we want for our children?' and 'What is a good childhood?'. By using the term *good life* we do not assume that there is one true good life to be discovered and lived, one conception of the good life that will prove equally acceptable to all. There may well be many conceptions in a plural democracy. The point is, however, that the early childhood institution as forum provides opportunities to enter into dialogue with others about good life issues, and the possibility of searching for some measure of agreement without any guarantee of or need for finding agreement.

> It may very well be that discourses will not yield conceptions of the good life equally acceptable to all . . . [But] it is crucial that we view our conceptions of the good life as matters about which intersubjective debate is possible, even if intersubjective consensus, let alone legislation, in these areas remains undesirable. However, only through such argumentative processes can we . . . render our conception of the good life accessible to moral reflection and moral transformation. (Benhabib, 1990: 349–50)

A third possible subject area concerns *the relationship between employment and caring for children*. At the same time that they provide care and enable parents to participate in the labour market, early childhood institutions can also provide opportunities for the relationship between employment and caring for children to be problematized and debated, through children and adults — including parents, politicians, employers and trade unionists — engaging in critical dialogue based on actual practice and experience. In this way, the early childhood institution can avoid uncritical collusion with the demands of the labour market, however unsympathetic to parenting these demands may be, and resist the mechanistic role of simply ensuring an adequate supply of labour (thus being reduced to serving the same function as a company car park or works canteen). Instead, it can become a space for democratic debate and deepening understanding about the important subject of the relationship between production and reproduction and, more generally, between capitalism and society, leading in turn to the possibility of challenge and action.

The democratic project of the early childhood institution can also be embodied in the pedagogical work itself, as it has been in Scandinavia where ideas of common good and democracy have always been influential. For example, the Danish system of early childhood institutions pays great attention to democratic values, in government guidelines that emphasize that children must be listened to, in the training of pedagogues and in the everyday life of the institutions themselves. Democracy is understood to involve 'the child's right to play an active and creative part in his/her own life — from the very early years onwards'; experiencing democracy in early childhood institutions 'will lead to [the child gaining] an understanding of and insight into modern democracy' (Lauridsen, 1995: 3).

This vision of a democratic project for the early childhood institution can be related to our earlier discussion of new societal forms of democracy situated in civil society. Early childhood institutions operating as forums in which there is active democratic practice addressing important subjects — and we understand early childhood and pedagogical work to be very important subjects — have the potential to contribute to the enlargement of democracy in complex postindustrial societies. More specifically, they can form part of a reconstruction of democracy at local level based on new relationships between elected representatives from established political institutions (local authorities, municipalities, communes, regional governments) and new democratic forums. We can also see in the pedagogical work in Reggio Emilia, and in the way it has inspired pedagogical work in many other places (the subject of Chapter 6), that early childhood institutions have the potential to generate new social movements.

The preceding projects — pedagogical work as co-construction of knowledge and identity and opening up new possibilities for democracy — can be viewed as contributing to *the exercise of freedom*, understood in a Foucauldian sense as being able to think critically — to think opposition, to promote 'reflective indocility' — and by so doing to take more control of our lives, through questioning the way we view the world and increasing our ability to shape our own subjectivity. Thinking critically makes it possible to unmask and free ourselves from existing discourses, concepts and constructions, and to move on by producing different ones. It is

> a matter of flushing out . . . thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that that which is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practising criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult . . . As soon as one no longer thinks things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes very urgent, very difficult and quite possible. (Foucault, 1988: 155)

Understood in this way, exercising freedom is not some revolutionary activity. Rather it is the 'art of not being governed so much' by power (Foucault, 1990). It is a 'practice to dislodge the ordering principles' and make 'the forms of reasoning and rules for "telling the truth" potentially contingent, historical and susceptible to critique' and by doing so creating a greater range of possibilities for the subject to act (Popkewitz, 1998b).

Exercising freedom does not mean or require absence of doubt, through establishing some unchallengeable body of facts on the basis of which we can say that we now know the world. In his book *Fear of Freedom*, the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1942) contrasts this 'compulsive quest for certainty', with what he terms 'positive freedom', the freedom to act spontaneously and to think for ourselves, a freedom which does not, however, eliminate what he calls 'rational doubt'. For the person, adult or child, who experiences positive freedom is not only free to question, but also welcomes uncertainty. Freedom may therefore mean feeling free to 'not know' and resisting pressures to foreclose by reaching definitive positions.

The third project of the early childhood institution arises from its potential for the *establishment and strengthening of social networks of relationships*, between children, between adults (both parents and other adults engaged in the institution) and between children and adults. The early childhood institution as 'a place of

shared lives and relationships, among many adults and very many children' (Malaguzzi, 1993b: 56) can help to counter the 'loneliness, the indifference and the violence that more and more characterize modern life' (Malaguzzi, 1993a: 10), and provide sources of social support. They can contribute to the cohesion of local communities and, more generally, civil society. They can provide opportunities for what Putnam (1993) refers to as 'intense horizontal interaction', and the increase of 'social capital' by fostering reciprocity and trust, cooperation and solidarity.

A fourth possible project of early childhood institutions, and the last we discuss in detail here, concerns *the care they provide for children which enables parents to participate in the labour market*. This child-care task supports gender equality in the labour market and employed parents in their struggle to manage the relationship between employment and family life. It is also of economic significance, making an important contribution to an efficient use of labour and to the successful performance of both private and public sectors in the economy. It is self-evident that in societies where most parents are employed, provision must be made to ensure the care of children while parents are at work. In our view, however, child care should never be the only or dominating purpose of early childhood institutions as forums in civil society; indeed such a focus is incompatible with this construction of the early childhood institution. As we have already argued, early childhood institutions as forums should be open to all children whether or not their parents have employment, and they should house a variety of projects, including pedagogical work that is important to all children, irrespective of their parents' employment status. Child care becomes a major, often dominating, concern in societies which have neglected to make adequate provision for this requirement (such as in Britain, where faced by growing parental employment and past political indifference, the Labour Government elected in 1996 gave high priority to what it termed a 'national child-care strategy'). Where adequate provision is made, as in the early childhood institutions of Reggio Emilia or Stockholm, 'child care' need no longer be a dominating concern and attention can focus on a range of other projects such as pedagogical work.

The early childhood institution, operating as a forum in civil society and undertaking the sort of projects outlined above, has an important contribution to make not only to the reconstruction of local democracy, but also to a reconstruction of the welfare state. As we have already suggested, the early childhood institution is one of a range of new or transformed *community institutions of social solidarity* that have the potential to foster and support new relationships of cooperation and solidarity in changing societies distinguished by increasing diversity, complexity and individualism. As such, they can help to give meaning to 'community'. These institutions of a reconstructed welfare state are open to all — children and adults, whether within or without the labour market, irrespective of income or class. They are committed to equality — but an equality that recognizes the Other as different — and to a democratic practice that replaces earlier welfare state institutions located within large, top-down bureaucratic systems with a commitment to equality as sameness. Reflecting the broad aims of a reconstructed welfare state, early childhood institutions as forums can serve multiple purposes: as a means of *inclusion*,

for children and adults, in civil society; creating opportunities for *the exercise of democracy and freedom*, through learning, dialogue and critical thinking; offering wide-ranging and flexible forms of *social support* for parents, both in and out of the labour market; and providing a mechanism of *redistribution* of resources towards children as a social group.

For us the question has been how to re-vision early childhood institutions and pedagogy, transgressing ideas of them primarily as ideological apparatus of the nation state or as bureaucratic organizations committed to consumerism and transnational capitalism. This is not to say that they can be divorced entirely from either; it would be misleading to pretend that early childhood institutions are not participants in both the nation state and the capitalist system. What is at stake is how they participate in and contribute to both, and whether and how they may find other purposes in other spheres.

We have tried to explore one possibility, of early childhood institutions as forums in civil society. We have seen them as contributing to pedagogy, welfare and community, conceptualizing them as community institutions for promoting learning, democracy, social solidarity and economic well-being, but also with many other possibilities. Rather than being places for finding truth through transmitting an autonomous body of knowledge, for prioritizing the establishment of consensus and unity, for forming a unified identity or for applying techniques of normalization, we see forums as places that are always open for discussion and questioning. Our ideal of early childhood institutions as forums is that they are places which encourage 'indocility' and confrontation, keep questions of meaning open, value listening to thought: in short that they serve as 'loci of debate and dissensus', and as 'sites of obligation, loci of ethical practices' (Readings, 1996: 154). Instead of viewing early childhood institutions as ideal communities, with ideal children and ideal parents and pedagogues, we see them more as places where *the question of being together is posed*, in which it is recognized that communication is neither transparent, nor grounded upon and reinforced by a common cultural identity.

Forums, not Substitute Homes

It will be apparent from our construction of the early childhood institution as a forum in civil society that we do not envision it as part of the state or the economy. But neither indeed do we see it as part of the private domain of the household. It is *not* to be understood as a substitute home. Young children — both under and over 3 years of age — are seen as able to manage, and indeed to desire and thrive on, relationships with small groups of other children and adults, without risking either their own well-being or their relationship with their parents. Not only is there no need to try in some way to provide a substitute home, but the benefit from attending an early childhood institution comes from it *not* being a home. It offers something quite different, but quite complementary, so the child gets, so to speak, the best of two environments.

If we approach early childhood institutions as forums in civil society, the concept of closeness and intimacy becomes problematic. It can turn public situations and institutions private. As such, it not only creates a 'false closeness' and risks trying to duplicate, necessarily unsuccessfully, the important learning processes that occur outside the institution. But it also hinders the ability of the institution to realize its own social life and relationships and devalues or trivializes the idea of a public space.

To abandon ideas of intimacy, closeness and cosiness does not leave indifference, callousness and coldness. It does not mean being uncaring. Instead, Ziehe (1989) offers a contrasting concept to closeness, the concept of *intensity of relationships* implying a complex and dense web or network connecting people, environments and activities which opens up many opportunities for the young child within a vision of the rich child and a co-constructing pedagogy. This is in line with the pedagogical work in Reggio Emilia, which constantly challenges the child's thinking and 'has encouraged multiple languages, confrontation, ambivalence and ambiguity . . . the whole milieu speaks of a collective adventure . . . one could almost say that Reggio has created a new university' (Dahlberg, 1995: 17).

If the early childhood institution is not understood as a substitute home, then the early childhood worker is also not to be understood as in any way a substitute parent. What then is the role of the pedagogue, the early childhood worker, in this postmodern construction of the early childhood institution? First and foremost, she (or he) is a co-constructor of knowledge and culture, both the children's and her own, in a pedagogy that 'denies the teacher as neutral transmitter, the student as passive and knowledge as immutable material to impart' (Lather, 1991: 15). The early childhood worker mobilizes children's meaning-making competencies, offering themselves as a resource to whom children can and want to turn, organizing space, materials and situations to provide new opportunities and choices for learning, assisting children to explore the many different languages available to them, listening and watching children, taking their ideas and theories seriously but also prepared to challenge, both in the form of new questions, information and discussions, and in the form of new materials and techniques.

The role also requires that the pedagogue is seen as a researcher and thinker, a reflective practitioner who seeks to deepen her understanding of what is going on and how children learn, through documentation, dialogue, critical reflection and deconstruction (Malaguzzi, 1993b; Rinaldi, 1993).

What Place for the Future and for Interventions?

Our discussion of the early childhood institution as a forum in civil society has taken us far from the beginning of this chapter when we presented an alternative construction, whose concern seems often to be less with the childhood that young children are living and more with the school children and adults they will become, and views these institutions as factories producing specified outcomes or intervention technologies preventing or treating social ills. Are these different constructions totally incompatible?

Our construction of what the early childhood institution can be foregrounds early childhood as an important life stage in its own right and the early childhood institution as a place for the young child and for the life she lives, *here and now*. But can it also be for the future, for the older child, the young person and the adult that the young child will become? An initial hesitancy in answering arises from wishing to avoid any implication that consideration of the future must be at the expense of the present, that we must choose between being and becoming. But if we can be confident in our constructions of the child and early childhood institution, then it seems to us that the answer should be yes, that early childhood institutions can be concerned both with the present and also the future, in that they enable children to relate to and participate in the wider society, in which they live today and will live tomorrow — at school, at college, in work, in families. The questions are, however, what type of society and what type of relationship?

We have discussed in Chapter 3 how the pedagogy of the early childhood institution can be made relevant to living in postmodern conditions. The early childhood institution we have talked about also presumes an information and lifelong learning society, as well as a democratic and welfare society. By understanding young children as active co-constructors of their own knowledge, as critical and imaginative thinkers and as the possessors of many languages, the early childhood institution enables young children to acquire a range of complex abilities that active participation in such societies calls for and which will equip them for further learning, future employment and continued citizenship: to adapt to new situations; to take a critical stand; to make choices; to integrate different experiences into a common understanding; to take on board the perspective of others; to articulate their own position and to communicate effectively; and to take initiatives and to be self-assertive (Denzik, 1997).

The language here is particularly difficult. The concept of early childhood education as a *foundation* for lifelong learning or the view that the early childhood institution contributes to children being *ready to learn* by the time they start school, produces a 'poor' child in need of preparation before they can be expected to learn, rather than a 'rich' child capable of learning from birth, whose learning during early childhood is one part of a continuous process of lifelong learning, no more nor less valid and important than other parts. The language of *school readiness* is also problematic from our perspective. Rather than making the child ready for school, it seems to us that the issue is whether the school is prepared for the child who has been in the questioning and co-constructive milieu of the early childhood institution constructed and operating in the way we have outlined above.

Indeed, our discussion of early childhood and early childhood institutions inevitably raises important and challenging questions about schooling and employment. What is the purpose of education? Are schools simply reproducers of knowledge, institutions where the individual is supposed to acquire a specific body of knowledge sanctioned by society, or are they institutions where children co-construct knowledge and their understanding of the world? Are schools also to be

constructed as forums in civil society, and if so, what are their projects — economic, social, cultural and political? Do they 'seek to capture the idea of critical democracy and community'? Are schools best understood, as Giroux argues that they should, 'as a locus for citizenship . . . in which students and teachers can engage in a process of deliberation and discussion aimed at advancing the public welfare in accordance with fundamental moral judgements and principles' (1989: 201)? Are schools, in the words of Paulo Freire 'an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it or (as) the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world?' (1985: 14).

We repeat that we would consider our constructions of the young child and the early childhood institution to be compatible with and supportive of school children and workers who are well attuned to learning and working and living in a postmodern world and in a society of lifelong learning, democracy and welfare. But it seems to us that this long-term perspective is neither the main project of the early childhood institution; nor should we expect the early childhood institution to provide a smooth ride for the schools and the labour market that follow. Indeed, by encouraging critical thinking among young children, and providing a forum for discourse about issues such as the relationship between employment and caring for children, early childhood institutions should challenge conformist practices and oppressive relationships.

Can our construction of early childhood institutions as forums in civil society accommodate the narrow and more instrumental understandings of these institutions as producers of outcomes? This is difficult because such different perspectives are involved. What we have called the dominant construction of the early childhood institution, at least in the United States and Britain, assumes that the young child is located in the private domain of the family. Early childhood institutions come into play when the family is understood as being unable to manage the ideal, as some sort of default arrangement: when parents work and substitute care is needed; when teachers can better educate children over 3; when children are deemed to be at risk or families in need of intervention. Not only does this approach construct the 'poor' child, it introduces dividing practices which classify children according to certain criteria and even allocate children in many cases to different types of institution according to these criteria (in Britain, for example, children classified as needing child care are directed towards private nurseries, many children identified by social workers as in need will be referred to so-called family centres, while children needing education mostly go to classes in primary schools).

We, however, see the child as located in civil society as well as the home, a citizen as well as a family member, requiring relationships with other children and adults to make full use of their tremendous capabilities for learning and to live a good childhood. We see the early childhood institution as a right of citizenship, a means of inclusion in civil society, a pedagogical opportunity, but also as part of the infrastructure that is needed for a strong civil society, democracy and welfare

state. The early childhood institution as a forum opens up many opportunities and possibilities, and many things can and do happen in this space.

In this context, the children are not attending an early childhood institution because they are classified as in some way disabled or otherwise in need, or because their families are classified as unable to meet their needs, but because the early childhood institution is a place *for* all children, a recognized part of early childhood. Moreover, as we discuss later, following the pedagogical work in Reggio, our idea of the early childhood institution is a place of close relationships between children, parents and pedagogues, where the work is always the subject of rigorous and public pedagogical documentation and one of the critical questions is 'do we see the child?' In these circumstances, children (or parents) who may need additional resources or other support will be apparent and the necessary resources or support assured. In these circumstances, ensuring children's rights to learn and to relationships and recognizing the potential and capabilities of all children are foregrounded, rather than targeted intervention and meeting needs. Pedagogues work together with parents to mutually deepen their understanding of the child and the pedagogical work, rather than applying technologies of normalization to children and parents.

Given our understanding of the early childhood institution as a complex and multi-faceted organism embedded in civil society, located in a particular context, engaged in co-constructive pedagogical work, fostering solidarity and cooperation and a site for democratic and emancipatory practice, the question, 'Does it work?' seems simplistic and normalizing. Instead, we need to find ways of deepening our understanding of what is going on in the institution, which may suggest new or modified forms of organization or ways of working. What this might entail and how it might be done are major themes of the next three chapters.

The early childhood institution as a forum in civil society opens up many possibilities for the inclusion of the young child in civil society and placing early childhood and early childhood pedagogy high on the agenda of that society. It engages young children with adults, beyond the private domain of the home, and makes young children audible and visible to the wider community. As such, it contributes to giving meaning to the idea of the child as citizen.

In many parts of the Minority World, there has been much debate about the relationship between *care* and *education* in early childhood *services*. Should these services be limited to one function or the other? Should they, in some way, attempt to combine these functions? It seems to us, however, that these are not very productive questions. Today, most children need some non-parental care, for one reason or another, most often because they have parents in the labour market; early childhood institutions, as we have already made clear, need to be geared to provide such child care. Far more productive are questions arising from the subject of this chapter, how we construct early childhood institutions. Who do we think these institutions are for? What do we think they are for? What are their projects? Where do we situate them — in the state, the economic domain or civil society? How do we understand their relationship to democracy and the welfare state?

There are profound choices to be made here, and these choices are never neutral; they are permeated with values. They always carry social implications and consequences. They say a lot about the role and position we give to young children and about how we envisage our democracies, welfare states and societies overall. For early childhood institutions carry great symbolic importance. They are statements about how we, as adults, understand childhood and its relationship to the state, the economy, civil society and the private domain.

Chapter 5

Beyond the Discourse of Quality to the Discourse of Meaning Making

Introduction

Taxonomy, classification, inventory, catalogue and statistics are the paramount strategies of modern practice. Modern mastery is the power to divide, classify and allocate — in thought, in practice, in the practice of thought and in the thought of practice . . . It is for this reason that ambivalence is the main affliction of modernity and the most worrying of its concerns. (Bauman, 1991: 15)

The age of quality is upon us. But 'quality' itself is not a neutral word. It is a socially constructed concept, with very particular meanings, produced through what we refer to as 'the discourse of quality'. In this chapter, we deconstruct this discourse, look for its origins and analyse its application to the early childhood field where it has become a dominant discursive regime.

It seems to us that the discourse of quality can be understood as a product of Enlightenment thinking, and modernity's zest for order and mastery. As such, it views the world through a modernist lens, and complements modernist constructions of the young child and early childhood institution. The language of quality is also the language of the early childhood institution as producer of pre-specified outcomes and the child as empty vessel, to be prepared to learn and for school, and to be helped on his or her journey of development.

But looking through the lens of postmodernity brings new ways of understanding the world, including young children and their institutions. As we become accustomed to looking through this lens, a new discourse comes into focus. What we call the 'discourse of meaning making' foregrounds deepening understanding of the pedagogical work and other projects of the institution, leading to the possibility of making a judgment of value about these projects. If the 'discourse of quality' can be seen as part of a wider movement of quantification and objectivity intended to reduce or exclude the role of personal judgment, with its attendant problems of partiality and prejudice, self-interest and inconsistency, the 'discourse of meaning making' can be seen as reclaiming the idea of judgment — but understood now to be a discursive act, always made in relationship with others.

The Discourse of Quality

Enlightenment Thinking and Trust in Numbers

Since 1945, and especially since the early 1980s, quality has moved to the top of the agenda in private business and public services. But to fully understand the emergence of a dominant 'discourse of quality', it is necessary to adopt a longer time frame. In the pre-industrial world, where most communication was local in nature, every region, sometimes even different towns, had their own measures: 'this was at least an inconvenience, if not an obstacle, to the growth of large-scale trading networks, and the expansion of capitalism was one important source of the impetus to unify and simplify measures' (Porter, 1995: 25). By contrast, quantification, based on standardization of measurement, is a technology of distance. As such, it has been a necessary condition for increasing globalization — of trade and science — in which communication increasingly went beyond the boundaries of locality and community: 'reliance on numbers and quantitative manipulation minimizes the need for knowledge and personal trust'.

The pre-industrial world privileged personal judgment over objectivity. By contrast, the modern world privileges objectivity, the withdrawal of human agency and its replacement by impartial uniformity, what Porter calls 'trust in numbers'. Quantification has become the great aid to achieving objectivity, acquiring an increasing role not only in economic relationships and in various fields of science, but also in democratic government. Science and democracy have been closely linked in this project, and in both cases the United States has taken a leading role. Following the overwhelming success of quantification in the social, behavioural and medical sciences in the postwar period, there was a major effort to introduce quantitative criteria into public decision making in the 1960s and 1970s:

> It is no accident that the move towards the almost universal quantification of social and applied disciplines was led by the United States and succeeded most fully there. The push for rigor in the disciplines derived in part from the same distrust of unarticulated expert knowledge and the same suspicion of arbitrariness and discretion that shaped political culture so profoundly in the same period. (Porter, 1995: 199)

It has provided a means to replace personal judgments, which have increasingly come to be regarded as undemocratic: 'objectivity means the rule of law, not of men; it implies the subordination of personal interests and prejudices to public standards' (1995: 74).

This growing 'trust in numbers' and the developing technology of quantification that held out the possibility of reducing the world in its complexity and diversity to standardized, comparable, objective, measurable categories can be understood not only as a response to economic change and political imperatives. It is an integral part of the project of modernity and Enlightenment thinking. It is a necessary technology for practices of dividing, classifying and allocating and, as such, a

means to impose order and for the exercise of disciplinary power. It represents the application of uniquely rational procedures to the search for certainty, unity and foundations, shedding the shackles of time and place and the limitations of judgment. Yet, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1944, 1997 edition) argue in their analysis of the destructive potential of Enlightenment thinking, 'trust in numbers' carries great risks: 'It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities ... that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion ... what cannot be made to agree, indissolubility and irrationality, is converted by means of mathematical theorems ... it confounds thought and mathematics' (7, 24–5). In laying down the foundations of certainty, meaning may be buried and lost.

The Emergence of the Discourse of Quality

The growing importance of quality in the field of early childhood institutions can be understood in relation to the modernist search for order and certainty grounded in objectivity and quantification. It can be located as part of a wider movement in which the 'discourse of quality' has become increasingly central to economic and political life, a movement which began in the business world and the production of private goods and services. The world of business is therefore a good starting point for seeking to understand the 'discourse of quality', and the meaning of the concept of quality within that discourse.

The concepts of quality control and quality assurance were created in the 1920s (Mäntysaari, 1997). But the 'discourse of quality' gained new momentum in the immediate post-war years, not at first in North America or Europe, but in a Japan that was rebuilding its economy devastated by war and seeking to re-establish its position in the world trading order. An important influence was the American quality expert W. Edwards Deming, who first presented his methods to a Japanese audience in 1950. Faced by increasingly successful competition from Japan, based on a reputation for high-quality goods, American and European companies began to take a heightened interest in quality: 'the Total Quality Management bandwagon started to roll in the early 1980s (and) by the end of the decade, quality was widely recognised as one of the most important factors of success in global markets' (Dickson, 1995: 196).

Bank (1992) gives definitions of quality offered by some of the gurus in the field. Edwards Deming emphasized that quality was about reliability, dependability, predictability and consistency — 'if I had to reduce my message to managers to just a few words, I'd say it all had to do with reducing variation'; Joseph Juran talks about quality as 'fitness for use or purpose'; Philip Crosby refers to quality as conformance to requirements; while William Conway defines quality in terms of consistent, low-cost products and services that customers want and need. The American Society for Quality Control, which 'is considered the leading authority on quality in the world' recognizes that quality is 'a subjective term for which each person has his or her own definition'; but goes on to state that 'in technical usage,

quality can have two meanings: (1) the characteristics of a good service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs; and (2) a good or service free of deficiencies' (quoted in Bedeian, 1993: 656–7). More recently, however, definitions of quality have begun to emphasize the satisfaction of the customer:

> Traditionally quality has been defined as 'conformance to requirements'. However in the 1980s, quality came to be symbolized by customer satisfaction — the quality movement in the 1980s assumed a customer focus . . . The ultimate aim of improved quality is total customer satisfaction. (1993: 56, 656)

The discourse of quality has spread not only globally, but from industry to industry (Bank, 1992). It has also spread from the private to the public sector:

> The concept of quality has been wholeheartedly embraced [in the 1980s] by those seeking to rationalise and shake up the public sector in the UK . . . because it includes notions of efficiency, competition, value for money and empowering the customer. More traditional supporters of a strong public sector have adopted quality to show that equal opportunities and other people-centred issues are inextricably linked to good outcomes; that welfare services can justify their cost in terms of tangible benefits and measurable efficiency; and that the empowerment of service users and staff is the best way to remove the dead hand of old-fashioned bureaucratic public control. Quality has thus become part of the mainstream of UK public life in many sectors. (Williams, 1994: 5)

Quality management and assurance in 'human services' have spread from the United States to Europe, especially in the current decade and in the context of a particular economic and political climate:

> under the influence of massive privatisation programmes and the search for cuts in social welfare budgets, a particular *discourse on quality* has become increasingly prominent, one which relies very much on a business-based approach . . . [T]he concepts coming from the market sector clearly prevail . . . in line with the fact that the global ideological trends have shifted towards an increasing impact from market liberalism. (Evers, 1997: 1, 10, emphasis added)

This process involves, once again, a shift from more individual and 'professional' judgments, to more quantifiable, objective and open methods of assessment, 'a move away from purely connoisseurial evaluation and towards much clearer and more specific definitions of quality' (Pollitt, 1997: 35).

The spread of the 'discourse of quality' from business to public services has had another effect. It has involved a new emphasis: 'business approaches are concerned with consumer quality (or 'user quality'), that is services which are tailored to satisfy consumer requirements and expectations' (1997: 34). But as we shall see, the expansion of the discourse of quality into the public sector has raised issues that contribute to the problematization of the concept of quality.

We have already alluded to several of the influences which have driven the 'discourse of quality' to its present dominant position: modernity and Enlightenment thinking; the need for 'technologies of distance' in market economies operating on an expanding scale; growing global economic competition; the increasing dominance in human services of business culture and market economics, with concepts like 'quality' permitting the 'integration of all activities into a generalized market' (Readings, 1996: 32); and a democratic desire for impartial and transparent methods of assessment to replace personal judgments. But still other influences can be seen at work.

As well as growing global competition and the resurgence of market forces, the 1980s saw the start of a strong movement, among companies and governments, to decentralize. But as companies and governments decentralized, some sought to retain control through the application and evaluation of quality criteria.

> In the context of the economic and fiscal crisis and efforts to change the public welfare system in Sweden (and in many other western countries) decentralization, goal-setting and evaluation have become new 'prestige' words . . . Goal governing has become a new way to direct and control services. The main idea of goal governing is that rules and relatively detailed plans are replaced by clear goals — 'management by objectives' — and strategies for evaluation of goal attainment. With increased decentralization and deregulation, evaluation of the quality of early childhood education and care programmes will grow in importance as an instrument for governing. (Dahlberg & Åsén, 1994: 159)

Quality and its evaluation can thus become an integral part of a new control system, assuming a policing function (Lundgren, 1990; Popkewitz, 1990), so that 'the power that decentralization gives away with one hand, evaluation may take back with the other' (Weiler, 1990: 61).

But the increasing prominence of quality can also be understood at a more personal level. As the world becomes more complex and demanding, each of us becomes involved with and dependent on ever more services, organizations and technologies. We are subjected to increasing quantities of information, much of it intended to enable us to be good consumers and much of which is meaningless without further investment of time and effort. Time pressures mount, particularly for women and men in their 'prime working years' (between 25 and 50), as child rearing increasingly coincides with peak participation in the labour market. At the same time, the rapid pace of change means that former sources of authority — for example, kin or religious codes of behaviour — may no longer be able to reassure or offer relevant guidance in making decisions.

Overwhelmed by information and choices, pressed for time and lacking a presumed expertise, unable to rely on traditional sources of authority or to trust the self-interested claims of producers, it is unsurprising if, to help us make sense of the world and to make decisions, we come to rely increasingly on 'expert systems

... of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of material and social environments ... [and which] remove social relations from the immediacies of context and provide "guarantees" of expectations across distanciated time-space' (Giddens, 1991: 27). Methods of quantification, including measures of quality, are one feature of these expert systems, minimizing, as we have already seen, the need for knowledge and personal trust.

So in the field of early childhood, we can see a growing body of experts — researchers, consultants, inspectors, evaluators and so on — whose job it is to define and measure quality. Increasingly, we rely on this expert system to make judgments for us about the services we want or need for ourselves and our children. We look to these experts to tell us that what we are getting is good 'quality'. Increasingly overloaded, we seek reassurance rather than understanding, we want the guarantee of expert assessment instead of the uncertainty of making our own judgments.

This search for reassurance goes beyond simply needing guidance for decision making. It is also about coping with the uncertainty, complexity and increased risk that characterize living in the world today, which Giddens (1991) has likened to riding a 'juggernaut' — a powerful and disturbing image which evokes an explosive mix of unpredictability and uncontrollability, dangers and opportunities. One response to these conditions is to seek shelter in the reduction of complexity to simple certainties.

What all these developments and movements have in common is a search for certainty and trust in authority, based on rigour, objectivity and impartiality. People look to experts to provide these. But, paradoxically, experts themselves increasingly lack security and public trust, either because they represent newer disciplines or because public confidence in previously trusted disciplines has diminished (for example, as the gains from various physical sciences and technologies come to be overshadowed by the risks they are found to produce (Beck, 1992)). Where expert judgment is no longer sufficient, if it ever was, experts have to build, or rebuild, trust through the development of quantifiable methods. In this context, quantification can be understood as a response to conditions of mistrust and exposure to outsiders (Porter, 1995).

The 'discourse of quality' has an obvious appeal as part of a search for clear, simple and certain answers underwritten by academic, professional or other authority. Part of us may know we need to learn to live with uncertainty — but another part of us may still desire objectivity and a 'quest for stable criteria of rationality'. Secure in modernity's belief that facts can be split from values, we hope to treat definitions and choices as technical issues and leave them to expert technicians, without the need to question how and why they are arrived at. The 'discourse of quality' offers us confidence and reassurance by holding out the prospect that a certain score or just the very use of the word quality means that something is to be trusted, that it really is good. Indeed, one of the wonders of a cynical age is the trust and credibility accorded to numbers or other forms of rating, as if numbers or stars or whatever symbol is used must, by their very existence, represent reality (just as we may end up believing the map is the same as what is mapped, the name the

same as the named) — rather than being a symbol whose meaning can only be arrived at by critical reflection and judgement.

Constructing the Concept of Quality

[Logical positivism is based on a] firm conviction that the social-political world [is] simply 'out there' waiting to be discovered and described ... that it [is] only by means of applying logical (and empirical) criteria that we are able to distinguish genuine, objective knowledge from mere belief ... Research, according to a positivist account, is a systematic and methodical process for acquiring genuine, positive scientific knowledge. ...

Given the influence of positivist epistemology, we have come to equate being rational in social science with being procedural and criteriological: To be a rational social enquirer is to observe and apply rules and criteria for knowing ... to be rational is not to engage in moral and political speculation, critique, interpretation, dialogue, or judgement. (Schwandt, 1996a: 58, 59, 60, 61)

[In the quantitative paradigm in evaluation literature] the research enterprise resembles a search for a single and objective truth. As far as the social researcher is concerned there is a social reality which is amenable to quantitative measurement ... The quantitative paradigm assumes that it is possible to separate the researcher ... from the researched. The investigator is seen to be able to adopt an objective, value-neutral position with regards to the subject matter under investigation. This value-neutral detachment is made possible by the use of research tools and methodologies ... which serve to limit the personal contact between researcher and researched and provide a safe guard against bias. (Clarke, 1995: 7–8)

The discourse of quality is firmly embedded in the tradition and epistemology of logical positivism, whose main features are described above by Thomas Schwandt and Alan Clarke, which itself is deeply embedded in the project of modernity. The concept of quality is primarily about defining, through the specification of criteria, a generalizable standard against which a product can be judged with certainty. The process of specification of criteria, and their systematic and methodical application, is intended to enable us to know whether or not something — be it a manufactured or service product — achieves the standard. Central to the construction of quality is the assumption that there is an entity or essence of *quality*, which is a knowable, objective and certain truth waiting 'out there' to be discovered and described.

The discourse of quality values and seeks certainty through the application of scientific method that is systematic, rational and objective. At the heart of this discourse is a striving for universality and stability, normalization and standardization, through what has been termed 'criteriology', 'the quest for permanent or stable criteria of rationality founded in the desire for objectivism and the belief that we must somehow transcend the limitations to knowing that are the inevitable consequence of our sociotemporal perspective as knowers' (Schwandt, 1996a: 58).

How is the essential quality of a product to be defined? How is 'the quest for permanent and stable criteria of rationality' to be conducted? The specification of

criteria of quality is undertaken by a particular group whose authority to specify comes from various sources, including expert status or political, bureaucratic or managerial position. Production of criteria is a process of construction, permeated by social, cultural, political and moral influences. Typically, though, the definition of criteria is treated as a technical process based on the application of disciplinary knowledge and practical experience (or alternatively political, managerial or other types of authority), free of values. In line with the positivist distrust of philosophy (Schwandt, 1996a), the question 'on what philosophical basis has quality been defined?' is almost entirely absent. The discourse of quality eschews the first person proposition 'we mean' or 'it seems to us', for the third person assertion 'it is'.

Because definition of quality is regarded as a process of identifying and applying 'objective' and indisputable knowledge, the process itself receives relatively little attention, analysis or further justification (except perhaps some rationale which explains the linkage between the knowledge base and the specified standard). Defining 'quality' therefore is an inherently exclusive, didactic process, undertaken by a particular group whose power and claims to legitimacy enable them to determine what is to be understood as true or false; it is not a dialogic and negotiated process between all interested parties. Once defined, criteria are then offered *to* others and applied *to* the process or product under consideration. Quality is presented as a universal truth that is value and culture free and applicable equally anywhere in the field under consideration: in short, quality is a decontextualized concept.

As the definition of quality is taken for granted and treated as a given, the main focus of the 'discourse of quality' is the achievement and evaluation of this expert-defined specification, rather than the construction (or deconstruction) of the specification. The discourse places more emphasis on the question 'how do we identify quality?' than on the preceding questions 'what do we mean by quality and why?' and 'how and by whom has quality been defined?' This in turn *prioritizes methods*, especially methods of measurement: within the positivist perspective 'many social scientists believe that method offers a kind of clarity on the path to truth that philosophy does not . . . method has become a sacred prescription' (Schwandt, 1996a: 60). Because the essence of quality is its absolute and universal nature, it is particularly important to remove any element of personal speculation, interpretation or judgement, any whiff of subjectivity. These suspect behaviours must be replaced by methods of measurement that are reliable and open to scrutiny and undertaken by disinterested measurers who are clearly separated from the subject of their measurement: objectivity rules. Not only does the discourse assume a reality, a thing called *quality*; it assumes that this reality can be perfectly captured, given adequate and carefully controlled means.

The overriding aim is to reduce the complexity and diversity of the products measured and the contexts within which they exist and operate to a limited number of basic measurable criteria which can then be encapsulated in a series of numerical ratings — the dream of modernity. Typically, this encapsulation involves processes of representation and normalization. Rather than engaging with what is actually going on, with all its complexity and contradictions, the discourse of quality seeks to depict or map in relation to certain criteria held to represent the essence of quality for the product under consideration. The purpose is to assess the conformity of the product — for example, an early childhood institution — to the criteria, and the norms that underlie these criteria, rather than seek understanding of the subject.

The contrast between the complexity of the everyday life of the early childhood institution and the simplification involved in the process of representation is discussed below by a Danish pedagogue, who struggles with the apparent contradiction that two very different approaches can both be called 'quality' (the contradiction disappears when we see that he is describing different ways of understanding the world, within the projects of modernity and postmodernity):

> In the past, 'quality' was generally used to provide a brief reference point in describing an experience and as a way of expressing in shorthand a complexity which was hard to define otherwise without using thousands of words — and if thousands of words were used, the feeling remaining would often be that the description had only scratched the surface of what had actually been experienced. The concept of quality is used differently today, especially in Danish business life . . . Quality charts, certificates, points and grades are being produced at a furious rate by business, a sort of 'quality inflation'. And after all many things can be weighed and measured or recorded in a table, formula or graph . . . My fear is that if this approach to quality, with its emphasis on weighing and measurement, comes to dominate the discussion in services for children then it will spoil more than it improves. A society with clearly defined ideas of how to measure art will be regarded as authoritarian and narrow-minded: true quality, like true art, cannot be reduced to simple statements. (Jensen, 1994: 156)

Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Public Services

Our argument has been that the discourse of quality is essentially about the quest for an absolute standard for products, objective and generalizable, defined in terms of criteria. But how does this relate to the other definition of quality, emanating from the business world — customer satisfaction? In some ways, it is quite compatible. Customer satisfaction, expressed through surveys or some other means, can be treated as one of the relevant criteria for determining quality, one indicator of product performance. Alternatively, and more complex, the customer, or the customer's requirements, can determine the criteria that define standards, what has been called a 'constructivist' approach to quality definition, 'where services' users play a major role in defining and valuing the dimensions along which quality will be sought, measured and assessed' (Priestley, 1995: 15). In other words, the particular group specifying criteria in this case are the customers, and it is being customers that gives them authority.

The idea of customer satisfaction is, however, problematic, in particular when it proves necessary to move beyond the simple notion of the individual customer seeking personal satisfaction from a product purchased within a private market, to a wider recognition of the social and political significance of many institutions and services, especially those that are provided in the public sector. Matters then become

complex and multi-dimensional, and business approaches to quality 'do not and sometimes cannot grasp some of the peculiarities of the area of personal social services' (Evers, 1997: 11). There may be problems in some cases with the customer expressing themselves about the services they receive or are entitled to receive. In the context of personal social services, many users are frightened, alienated and/or disabled, members of weak and vulnerable groups (Evers, 1997; Pollitt, 1997). If young children are regarded as the customers for early childhood institutions, they too are unlikely to be able to act as customers according to the theory of market relations. At the very least, to make the idea of customer and customer satisfaction meaningful requires considerable further thought and ingenuity.

To assume a simple customer–provider relationship begs many questions, for 'the question of the customer is a complicated one' (Mäntysaari, 1997: 59). The growing enthusiasm for consumerism in public services 'bypasses some important prior questions about the whole character of [that] consumerism' — in particular, who is the consumer? (Pollitt, 1988). There is the person currently using the service (although whether in the case of services for children the user is the child, the parents or both is not discussed). But, there are also *potential* users and *future* users, and other members of the community who may also be affected by the provision of public services and the taxpayer. Moreover, consumers of public services are also citizens.

Hambleton and Hoggart (1990) similarly question the appropriateness of the model of the individual consumer, emphasized in the private market, applied to quality of public services because it fails to address important issues including the wider collective responsibility and accountability of the public sector. Gaster suggests that 'a further dimension to the question "What is quality?" must be the democratic element both through representative democracy and participatory democracy ... If a quality service is one that meets as nearly as possible the needs of consumers and the wider community, it follows that the definition of quality needs to emerge from a dialogue with that community' (1991: 260, 261). Pollitt (1988) similarly makes the case for developing inclusive and dialogic approaches to quality in public services, 'guided by a normative model of a (potentially) active, participative citizen-consumer, concerned with a range of values of which efficiency is only one' and a recognition that 'every set of performance indicators, however "hard" the measures, is thoroughly suffused with values and judgemental uncertainties' (1988: 86).

This work in the personal social services demonstrates the impossibility of limiting discussions of quality to a discreet and decontextualized consumer and his or her satisfaction. Because many of these services are public goods, other people — beyond the 'customer-provider' dyad — have to be brought into account, as well as other considerations that go beyond whether or not the customer is satisfied: 'providers have to design their services according to specific social-policy criteria of distributional justice, which are non-existent or far less relevant than in private business'; and public services have to adopt standards of professionalism which 'are not only agreed with direct recipients of the service, but with a broader public as represented by administrators and legislators' (Evers, 1997: 20). Last but not

least, when democracy comes into play, matters become messy if diversity is to be taken into account:

> In many countries, PSS [personal social services] units or parts of them are intertwined with local communities, subcultures and networks; they are finely tuned with demands arising from there, as well as by their respective values and aspirations ... Preserving a dimension of localism in PSS can be a very controversial issue. Taking a position which does not want to abolish it but prefers to develop it further as part of a rich and diversified landscape of care and PSS providers, will have consequences when assessing QA [quality assurance] concepts. Because for this specific local and moral economy, the takeover of models of standard-setting and control coming from the big hierarchical systems will be problematic. The challenge would be to develop methods for quality improvement which respect the peculiarities of this local economy. (Evers, 1997: 19)

The preceding discussion draws largely on work in the personal social services field. By questioning the private market concept of the isolated and decontextualized consumer or customer and by introducing a political and social context which takes account of societal relationships and democratic goals, it seems to us that many writers about quality in the personal social services are problematizing the concept of quality as constructed within the discourse of quality. Much of this work raises many of the issues concerning quality that have been raised in relation to early childhood institutions (quite independently, since there seems to be little communication between personal social services and early childhood when it comes to discussion of quality), and which led us in Chapter 1 to conclude that there was a problem with quality. Can the discourse of quality recognize context and the peculiarities of different contexts? Can it recognize and live with the values and judgmental uncertainties that suffuse any set of indicators or criteria? Who defines quality and how can this process cope with the multiple perspectives of a genuinely democratic process?

The Discourse of Quality in Early Childhood

Since its emergence on the scene in the early 1980s, the discourse of quality has been applied to the field of early childhood institutions in a number of ways, including research, measures, standards and guidelines on good practice. These have all involved, in various forms, the development and application of criteria, to enable evaluation of the standards or performance of early childhood institutions. These criteria mainly fall into three groupings: structure, process and outcome.

Structural criteria (sometime referred to as 'input' criteria) refer to resource and organizational dimensions of institutions, such as group size, levels of staff training, adult to child ratios and the presence and content of a curriculum. *Process* criteria refer to what happens in the institution, in particular the activities of children, the behaviour of staff and interactions between children and adults. This category can be extended to cover relationships between the institution and parents. *Outcome* criteria have mainly been defined in terms of certain aspects of child

development, assumed to be desirable, but also to young children's later school, social and economic performance sometimes stretching as far as adulthood. Another outcome is also receiving some attention (although less than in many other fields): customer satisfaction with parents the assumed consumers of early childhood services. This emerging emphasis on parental satisfaction, it has been argued, reflects 'a broadened conception of child care quality that takes the interests and concerns of parents into account' (Larner and Phillips, 1994: 47).

A reviewer of the different approaches to quality in early childhood services concludes that every approach 'can be analysed in terms of its Input, Process and Outcome' although he adds that 'some methodologies are stronger on one aspect than another' (Williams, 1994: 17). In particular, outcome criteria are less often evaluated, mainly because there are difficulties, financial and methodological, in collecting and interpreting data about children's development and performance in a way that enables it to be neatly related to the performance of early childhood institutions. For example, in the messy real world children may attend a number of different institutions during their early childhood making it difficult to tease out the outcomes from attending any one particular institution; and a child's development needs to be tested both before starting to attend an institution and after leaving to get a clear idea of the impact of that particular institution. Consequently, structural and process criteria have been used as a proxy for outcomes, so that researchers and others often 'identify "quality" with characteristics of care facilities that correlate with favourable scores on developmental tests' (Singer, 1993: 438).

The discourse of quality has influenced the early childhood research field over the last 20 years or so. It has generated many studies, mainly American, although an increasing number are coming from other countries, indicating the spread of the discourse of quality in the early childhood field. One of the main consequences of this research has been to establish relationships between some structural and process criteria on the one hand, and some outcome criteria: 'research in child development and early childhood education has identified several clear indicators of quality care, defined in terms of their predictive significance for children's development' (Phillips, 1996: 43).

Another product of this research work within the discourse of quality has been the development of measures which have come to be used by many researchers as a tried and tested means of assessing quality. The best known and most widely used example is the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS). The ECERS was developed by two American early childhood specialists, Thelma Harms and Richard Clifford, in the early 1980s, and has been described by its authors as 'a relatively short and efficient means of looking seriously at the quality of the [early years] environment . . . [covering] the basic aspects of all early childhood facilities' (Harms and Clifford, 1980: iv). Designed for use in a variety of forms of early childhood institution in the United States, a country with a very particular economic, social, cultural and political context, it has nevertheless been used increasingly in other countries across the world by both researchers and practitioners and seems set to become a global standard and the basis for an increasing body of cross-national comparisons of early childhood institutions.

The ECERS is an observation schedule comprising 37 individual items, with the scores from subsets of these items aggregated to provide 7 scale scores, intended to provide an overall picture of the surroundings that have been created for the children and adults who share the setting that is being rated. The development of the measure involved an initial formulation by the authors, which was validated against the views of American experts in the early childhood field. Seven 'nationally recognized experts' were asked to rate each item on the scale in terms of its importance to early childhood programmes. Subsequently, the scale was tested by comparing its ability to distinguish between classrooms of 'varying quality' as judged by early childhood trainers in the US. The ECERS is not explicit about its values (Brophy and Statham, 1994), although the authors refer to 'the lack of universally acceptable norms for early childhood environments' (Harms and Clifford, 1980: 38).

The discourse of quality has generated another field of activity, the development of standards and good practice guidelines for various forms of early childhood provision, which although not framed as measures or evaluation methods in effect provide definitions of quality. In the UK, for example, 'many agencies with particular interests . . . have produced explicit standards and recommendations for practice. These specifications of quality standards have been fundamental to the development and assessment of services aimed at providing a good experience for the child' (Williams, 1994: 3). One of the best known examples from the United States is *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*, the first edition of which was published in 1987 by the American National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1987). Founded on 'child development knowledge', it produces guidelines that 'define a "universal" child rearing practice to foster this development by distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate practises, a dualism that makes it difficult to consider other options' (Lubeck, 1996: 151). This decontextualized approach, 'premised on modernist assumptions', 'serves to foster the development of an isolated being . . . with the end goal being the autonomous individual' (1996: 156).[1]

As in other fields, the discourse of quality in early childhood has been constituted by a search for objective, rational and universal standards, defined by experts on a basis of indisputable knowledge and measured in ways that reduce the complexities of early childhood institutions to 'stable criteria of rationality'. Method has been emphasized at the expense of philosophy, the 'how' rather than the 'why' has been emphasized at the expense of philosophy, the 'how' rather than the 'why' prioritized. Consequently, the discussion of quality in early childhood institutions rarely starts by seeking important and productive questions — about children, childhood or early childhood institutions — and offering some answers, however partial and uncertain.

Developmental Psychology and the Discourse of Quality

The 1930s opened up a discourse (in Sweden) of a comprehensive early childhood pedagogy — a discourse that became an important part of the choreography of a

political rationality holding modernist visions and revisions of a better society . . . Developmental psychology was an important instrument in this strategy, in which the child is supposed to bring her(him)self into agreement with social normativity, universality and the principle of reason. To use a concept from Foucault, one could say that from now on developmental psychology and child-centered pedagogy became a form of 'discursive regime of truth' which governed what was seen as important to do in practice, but also what could be thought and said and not thought and said about children. (Dahlberg, 1995: 3, 4)

Developmental psychology based on positivist and universalist goals with a biological basis has dominated theorizing about children and profoundly influenced policies towards them. (Mayall, 1996: 19)

As we have already discussed in Chapter 2, developmental psychology is 'a paradigmatically modern discipline' (Burman, 1994: 18), and has been a very important, indeed dominant, discursive regime in the field of early childhood institutions, at least in the Anglo-American world: 'child development knowledge has been so foundational to the field of early childhood education that erasing it would seem to leave us in a mindless limbo' (Lubeck, 1996: 158). One reason why the discourse of quality has been taken up so readily, and unquestioningly, in the early childhood field is because it shares so many of the perspectives and methods of this dominant discipline. Both are products of the project of modernity — 'development' and 'quality' are quintessentially modernist concepts.

The discipline of developmental psychology and the discourse of quality in early childhood have fitted like hand in glove. Child development has offered, as certain and objective truth, the individual's progress through universal developmental stages, a 'grand narrative' that has done much to produce the constructions of young children and early childhood institutions discussed in earlier chapters, as well as criteria for definitions of quality in these institutions. Both the discourses of child development and of quality adopt a decontextualized approach or, at best, attempt to bring 'context' in as an explanatory variable, divorcing the child and the institution from concrete experience, everyday life, the complexities of culture, the importance of situation. Both are 'driven by the demand to produce technologies of measurement' (Burman, 1994: 3), including systems of classification which attempt to reduce complexity so that processes which are very complex and interrelated in everyday life are isolated from one another and placed into abstract systems and ideas; assessments of children's development and of quality both end up producing abstract maps which simplify and normalize, saying how children or institutions should be, while distracting our attention from finding out how they really are. Both discourses assume and seek to discover objective, universal and generalizable innate truths, treating both children and institutions as 'independent pregiven objects about which [they] make "discoveries"' (Henriques et al., 1984: 101–2). Both are highly individualistic in orientation, the discourse of quality focusing on individual outcomes and relationships, while the discourse of child development believes 'in the individual and self-contained child . . . the idea that the child is a social construction and a continuing social construction seems uncongenial to the spirit of American culture and child psychology' (Kessen, 1983: 32).

In sum, both discourses — quality and child development — are strongly modernist, positivistic in approach and committed to the importance of generating objective forms of knowledge. Both have adopted the assumptions of the natural sciences — with their emphasis on the universal and rational — rather than the assumptions of the cultural/historical sciences — with their emphasis on the constructed and local nature of both problems and answers (Cole, 1996).

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that developmental psychologists have played a leading role in work on quality in early childhood institutions — as expert authorities for defining quality criteria, as producers of methods of measurement and as researchers into quality and its determinants. It would be unfair, however, to imply that this dominance is simply the result of imperialistic tendencies; developmental psychology has been given a clear run because other disciplines have not been interested (Mayall, 1996). In particular, until recently sociology has tended to ignore children and childhood, regarding them as the province of psychology and accepting psychology's definition of children as cognitively incompetent and therefore essentially passive: 'psychologists' designation of children as developing non-people and as socialization projects has allowed sociologists to write children out of their scripts' (Mayall, 1996: 19). But whatever the reason, the field of early childhood has been the poorer for its dependency on one discipline and its neglect by others. These 'absent' disciplines might have felt more ill at ease with the positivist assumptions underlying the 'discourse of quality'. Had they been actively engaged, it is possible that the 'discourse of quality' in the field of early childhood would have been problematized sooner.

History provides one example of the potential benefits of alternative disciplinary perspectives. Even a cursory examination of the history of early childhood institutions shows how ideas about these institutions — their purposes, the nature of pedagogical work, their understanding of the young child — are the subject of recurring construction and reconstruction (cf. the discussion of the recent history of early childhood institutions in Sweden in Chapter 4; of nursery education in Britain from Robert Owen to the present day in Moss and Penn, 1996; and of the North American infant school movement of the 1820s and its relationship to contemporary early childhood dynamics in the United States and Canada in Pence, 1989). More broadly, many historians have a fundamentally different understanding of children and childhood than developmental psychologists.

Historians take for granted and indeed know in their bones: that human behaviour is invariably contingent and that social action is crucially conditioned by context . . . [But] can the developmentalists abandon the positivist presumption of homogeneity and give up the positivist goal of universality? Can they authentically accept radical contingency and indeterminacy and come to terms with situation-specific particularity? Are they about to quit the quest for unchanging childhood on which their field was founded? Can they surrender the conviction that the child is . . . a natural kind rather than a social and historical kind? . . .

Operating on notions of the child as a natural kind and notions of themselves as natural scientists, studying predictable processes of that natural kind, developmentalists have been disinclined to struggle with portents of the relativity they are

nonetheless feted to face . . . [While historians'] extended experience with [relativity] doubtless conditions our receptivity — to the proliferation of perspectives that attended the emergence of the new social history. . . . We recognise that we cannot pronounce reliable regularities on which to base predictions because we cannot countermand the inexorable contingency of the human condition. (Zuckerman, 1993: 231, 235, 239–40)

Developmental Psychology and Quality in Crisis

The project of developmental psychology as the presentation of a general model which depicts development as unitary, irrespective of culture, class, gender or history means that difference can be recognised only in terms of aberrations, deviations and relative progress on a linear scale . . . The notion of 'progress', whether of societies or through the 'life span', implies linear movement across history and between cultures. Comparison within these terms is now being recognised as increasingly untenable. In particular, the implication that there is a detached, disinterested set of devices and techniques for this purpose, such as developmental psychology illustrates the extent to which we have come to believe in the abstract, disembodied psychological subject and dismiss all it fails to address as merely supplementary or inappropriate . . . The issue is to bring to light and acknowledge the investment and hidden subjectivity that lie beneath the claims to disinterested and true knowledge. (Burman, 1994: 185, 188)

Though developmentalism and functional models of socialization theory have suffered a beating in the last 20 years, they remain remarkably powerful . . . Whilst the critiques of established child development theories have come from many quarters, over a considerable time, not only do these theories have very considerable resilience in policy and practice fields concerned with child health, welfare and education, but the construction of a more wide-ranging child psychology paradigm has also proved difficult. (Mayall, 1996: 52, 55)

In Chapter 1, we described how the concept of quality in early childhood has been problematized during the 1990s. Developmental psychology, the discipline that has been so closely associated with the application of the discourse of quality in the early childhood field, has been going through a similar, but more exhaustive and extended, process of problematization and deconstruction, both from without the discipline but also from within and including some of the most well-known names in the discipline (cf. Bronfenbrenner et al., 1986; Burman, 1994; Cole, 1996; Elder et al., 1993; Henriques et al., 1984; Kessen, 1979, 1983; Lubeck, 1996; Mayall, 1996; Morss, 1996; Prout and James, 1990). The features of developmental psychology which are being problematized are similar to those being problematized in the discourse of quality in early childhood (not surprising since both are so deeply embedded in the project of modernity): the positivist approach and its methods, including the reduction of complexity to simplified and quantifiable representations, and its suspicion, even rejection, of subjectivity and philosophy; a belief in general laws and universal truths, personified by the decontextualized view of development as a biologically-determined sequence of stages; a focus on the individual as the

centrepiece of enquiry; the strong normalizing tendency; its implication in processes of regulation and control; the very concept of 'development' itself.

Both developmental psychology and the discourse of quality can be said to be in crisis, based as they both are on a positivistic programme of 'establishing permanent criteria and uncovering an indisputable foundation for knowledge [that has] proved to be unattainable' (Schwandt, 1996a: 59). It is difficult to find today philosophers who subscribe to this programme (Shadish, 1995). Positivism has been displaced and 'the programme of making everything knowable through the supposedly impersonal norms and procedures of "science" has been radically questioned' (Apple, 1991).

In some respects, none of this should cause concern. We have already argued that crisis can be viewed optimistically, opening up new possibilities and horizons, alternative enquiries and solutions, and opportunities for new understandings: 'the critique that has amassed over the last 20 years or so regarding the inadequacies of positivist assumptions in the face of human complexity has opened up a sense of possibilities in the human sciences' (Lather, 1991: 2). Moreover, there is no need to be prescriptive, to insist on either/or; those who choose to understand the world through the modernist perspective are free to do so.

In practice, however, there are causes for concern. For despite the intellectual breakdown of positivism, it still remains influential in publication, funding, promotion and tenure in many academic fields (Fishman, 1995), while the Cartesian dream of certainty lingers on and motivates a continuing search for definitive and universal criteria (Schwandt, 1996a) as in the discourse of quality. Developmental psychology and quality are still dominant discursive regimes, which continue to govern people's understanding of early childhood and early childhood institutions. Many policy-makers and practitioners in the field of early childhood are unaware that developmental psychology has 'suffered a beating': they continue to rely on it to provide them with a 'true' account of childhood and a foundation for policy and practice. Not only do alternative approaches and perspectives go unexplored, but early childhood programmes, measurements of quality and constructions of 'normal' child development are exported from the United States, the heartland of the positivistic discourses of quality and child development, to be applied unquestioningly in other countries throughout the world. The project of modernity may be increasingly questioned; but its belief in progress and universal truth continues to exert a powerful and problematic global influence, which we shall consider in more detail in Chapter 8.

Beyond Quality to Meaning Making

What can be done about the 'problem with quality'? Can quality be reconceptualized to accommodate diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and temporal and spatial context? For example, can an item 'context' be added as a variable to the study of quality, leading to statistical calculations of the effect of this item on the variance of scores produced from measurements of quality? Can we qualify definitions of

quality to indicate to which society or culture they specifically refer and apply, ending up with, for example, Swedish or British or Canadian variants of some basic standard of quality? If more stakeholders were to be consulted, and if they were to be better informed, could a more inclusive and consensual definition of quality be constructed based on a shared understanding? Should quality be left to every individual centre or community to define, in isolation and according to its own interests, values and understandings, assuming all definitions to be equally valid?

It seems to us that none of these questions leads very far. The idea that context can be separated out and its effect independently measured requires a conceptualization of context as 'that which surrounds'. But this conceptualization has been problematized as a reductionist simplification. An alternative conceptualization, 'context as that which weaves together', precludes the possibility of separating context out as an independent variable (Cole, 1996). For some psychologists this has meant, for example, a move from looking at culture as an independent variable affecting cognition, to regarding cognitive processes as inherently cultural (Rogoff and Chavajay, 1995). Applied to the study of early childhood institutions, this perspective would mean recognizing that these institutions are similarly inherently cultural — inextricably interwoven with culture as well as the other strands that make up context.

The view that early childhood institutions are inherently cultural might suggest that the notion of, for example, 'Swedish quality' or 'British quality' or 'Canadian quality', could prove productive. Yet the very words, this qualification of quality, seem rather strange, almost absurd, not least because we never see them in other settings, for example, in adverts for cars or other products where 'quality' is never qualified in this way but always assumed to be a universal yardstick, a 'technology of distance'. The problem is a basic contradiction: the notion that understandings of quality in early childhood institutions might be societally or culturally specific is incompatible with the concept of quality being a universal and objective norm. Once you allow for some diversity and recognize the possibility of multiple perspectives, where do you draw the line? Are you not forced to accept that you are looking at different understandings of what is going on or what people would like to be going on? As the possibility of standardization fades in the face of diversity and complexity, why not seek an understanding of how the institution really is rather than evaluating its conformity to an increasingly problematic norm?

Stakeholders, even if consulted and better informed, might still disagree and arrive at different understandings on quality. Unless, of course, we assume that there is a single right answer, probably based on expert knowledge, which will enable conflicts of definition to be eventually reconciled — an assumption which takes us back to the idea of quality as a universal, knowable truth. Even members of one particular stakeholder, cultural or other group, while sharing much in common, may still differ amongst themselves on many important issues or form sub-groups and sub-sub-groups. Indeed it would be surprising, and perhaps worrying, if members of such broadly defined groups were in complete agreement, since stakeholder (or other groups) do not consist of uniform clones, but individuals with many differences: 'as but one example, upon close inspection, "women" become

fragmented, multiple and contradictory both across groups and within individuals' (Lather, 1991: xvi). In any case this discussion begs the question of whether consensus is viewed as desirable or problematic (Karlsson, 1995).

Finally, few people are comfortable with the idea of unqualified 'anything goes' relativism, especially when its consequences affect a relatively powerless group such as young children. We address the issue of relativism in more detail later in this chapter (pages 116–19), locating our discussion within a wider ethical context.

It seems to us that the underlying problem is with the concept of quality itself. Is it an empty vessel which we can fill and refill with different meanings? Or is it a filled vessel, with a very particular and immutable content of meaning? It seems to us that the concept of quality does have a very particular meaning, that of a universal, knowable and objective standard, and that it is situated within a particular modernist understanding of the world. Quality is a 'technology of distance', a means of excluding individual judgment and for crossing group and community borders. Quality cannot be reconceptualized to accommodate complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives, and other features of a world understood to be both uncertain and diverse.

The 'problem with quality' cannot be addressed by struggling to reconstruct the concept in ways it was never intended to go. If we try to make an accommodation with, for example, subjectivity or multiple perspectives, then an increasingly desperate search for quality will prove to be a wild goose chase. For the concept of quality in relation to early childhood institutions is irretrievably modernist, it is part of the Cartesian dream of certainty and the Enlightenment's ambition for Progress and Truth. It is about a search for definitive and universal criteria, certainty and order — or it is about nothing. Working with complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and temporal and spatial context means taking another position which understands the world in a different postmodern way and which will be productive of new discourses, concepts and questions — not struggling to reconstruct quality. The problem with quality is not really a problem once we recognize that it is not a neutral concept, but that it is a concept which we can choose to take or leave.

The Discourse of Meaning Making

In place of talk about programs and projects, we prefer to talk about conjectures and images and contradictions and ambiguities that accompany ideas that we value when we choose our way of life and society. We believe that we will never fully understand and nail down these ideas because their meanings will continue to shift and drift. These are not reasons for despair. It is just the way things are, as we understand them, when we cope with education, society and living. (Cherryholmes, 1994: 205)

Even at the core of 20th-century physics, idiosyncrasies of persons and cultures cannot be eliminated . . . Within a humanized Modernity, the decontextualization

of problems so typical of High Modernity is no longer a serious option . . . 'To every human problem' [said the commentator Walter Lippmann], 'there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong'; and that is as true of intellectual as it is of practical problems. (Toulmin, 1990: 201)

We have argued that the modernist discourse of quality in early childhood institutions (or any other settings) involves the decontextualized quest for certainty through the detached and objective application of universal and timeless criteria. The intention is to assess how far the institution conforms to some preordained ideal of performance. Because it is situated within the project of modernity, the discourse of quality 'is inadequate for understanding a world of multiple cause and effects, interacting in complex and non-linear ways all of which are rooted in a limitless array of historical and cultural specificities' (Lather, 1991: 21). It seems to us that such understanding requires a different discourse situated within the project of postmodernity, which is at home with diversity, complexity, subjectivity and multiple perspectives, and which, as part of an emancipatory practice, enables us to act as agents, to 'produce rather than reflect meaning' (1991: 37).

We term the postmodern discourse, *the discourse of meaning making*. It shares much in common with the sceptical approach adopted by sixteenth-century humanists (overtaken in the seventeenth century by the Cartesian dream of certainty), which in recent decades has made its reappearance in philosophy (Toulmin, 1990). This discourse is also situated within the ethical position we have outlined previously, the ethics of an encounter, foregrounding the importance of meaning making in dialogue with others. These requirements distinguish this approach both from the concept of personal or expert judgment, dependent on the individual seeking to discover truth in isolation from others; or from the concept of quality, involving the application or reproduction of standardized and quantified criteria which replaces reliance on individual judgment, however expert, with trust in numbers and objective scientific methods.

In the field of early childhood, the discourse of meaning making speaks first and foremost about constructing and deepening *understanding* of the early childhood institution and its projects, in particular the pedagogical work — to make meaning of what is going on. From constructing these understandings, people may choose to continue by attempting to make *judgments* about the work, a process involving the application of values to understanding to make a judgment of value. Finally, people may further choose to seek *some agreement with others* about these judgments — to struggle to agree, to some extent, about what is going on and its value. However, the discourse does not assume that all three stages must be followed. Indeed, it may be considered sufficient to confine making sense to deepening understanding, without going on to judge or to seek some agreement.

There are continuities between the discourse of quality and the discourse of meaning making. In particular, a desire to make sense of what is going on can be said to motivate both the modernist discourse of quality and its postmodern counterpart. We could even say that the different discourses both seek answers to the questions of what is *good work* in our early childhood institutions, how can it be

defined and how can it be carried out. However, the two discourses have very particular and different understandings of what it means to make sense and to enquire into good work, using very particular and different methods. For instance, within postmodernity *good* is not understood as an inherent, substantial and universal category, an idea in which the Enlightenment believed and which it tried to legitimate. Rather good is understood as the product of discursive practice, and is always contextualized (specific to time and place), often subject to disagreement and inevitably subject to negotiation. While recognizing the possibility of *some* agreement, the 'discourse of meaning making' does not require or even seek consensus and unanimity, for 'it is in the graveyard of universal consensus that responsibility and freedom and the individual exhale their last sigh' (Bauman, 1997: 202). Nor can answers to what good work in early childhood institutions is, can be and should be stand in isolation from understandings of early childhood, early childhood institutions and early childhood pedagogy, the sorts of issues we have discussed in the preceding chapters.

Each discourse involves the making of choices, or judgments. But whereas the discourse of quality speaks of value-free technical choices, the discourse of meaning making calls for explicitly ethical and philosophical choices, judgments of value, made in relation to the wider questions of what we want for our children here and now and in the future — questions which must be posed over and over again and which need to be related to even larger questions about 'what is the good life?' and 'what does it mean to be a human being?' The answers we give tell a lot about how we understand the position of the young child in society, as well as our forms of democracy.

'Making sense of what is going on' within postmodernity is about the construction or making of meaning. We do this, each of us, acting as agents — but always in relation to others, understanding *us* to be situated in a particular spatial and temporal context and to be 'finite, embodied and fragile creatures, and not disembodied cogito or abstract unities' (Benhabib, 1992: 5). 'Making sense' involves processes of dialogue and critical reflection, drawing on 'concrete human experience', rather than exercises in abstracting, categorizing and mapping.

The discourse of meaning making therefore not only adopts a social constructionist perspective, but relates to an understanding of learning (discussed in Chapter 3) as a process of co-construction, by which in relationship with others we make meaning of the world. It assumes that each person co-constructs his or her own understanding of what is going on. In contrast, the discourse of quality relates to an understanding of learning as reproducing a predetermined body of knowledge, with the expert technician acting as the transmitter of this knowledge. In short, the two discourses can be seen as about different ways of learning about what is going on in early childhood institutions.

The ability to make meaning and deepen understanding — what we would call *wisdom* — is neither equally spread nor unsusceptible to change; some are wiser than others and wisdom can be cultivated. Nor does rejecting the search for certainty that figures so highly on the modernist agenda mean rejecting rigour and openness, trust and fairness. The discourse of meaning making must seek to avoid

'the danger of rampant subjectivity where one finds only what one is predisposed to look for, an outcome that parallels the "pointless precision" of objectivism' (Lather, 1991: 52). The discourse of meaning making foregrounds the need for democratic and public accountability, for example, of the work of early childhood institutions, but at the same time 'refuses to equate accountability with accounting' (Readings, 1996: 131).

Meaning making requires very precise, demanding and public conditions that create an interactive and dialogic process in which prejudices, self-interest and unacknowledged assumptions, with the distortions and limited vision that they produce, will be confronted and challenged. In the context of the early childhood institution, these conditions include:

- situating meaning making of pedagogical work and other projects of early childhood institutions within a wider, continuous and critical enquiry into 'good life' issues (such as, What do we want for our children? What is a good childhood?), constructions of early childhood and early childhood institutions, and pedagogical philosophy;
- the application of critical and reflexive thinking, including problematization and deconstruction;
- pedagogical documentation as a tool to assist critical and reflexive thinking and understanding of pedagogical work, by enabling us 'to submit practice to strict, methodological and rigorous questioning' (Freire, 1996: 108). Because of its importance, we devote Chapter 7 to exploring what we mean by pedagogical documentation and what it involves;
- the importance of encounters and dialogue, applying to them the principles of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, and cultivating moral and cognitive abilities such as the sensitivity to hear others' voices, the ability to see the Other as equal but different and the capacity to reverse perspectives (Benhabib, 1992). This capacity to reverse perspectives presents particular challenges in the early childhood institution, since it involves not only other adults, but also young children. As we shall see, the process of documentation provides one means to enable adults not only to see the young child but also to gain understanding of the perspective of the young child;
- the participation of facilitators, or wise people, drawn from a range of backgrounds and experience, including pedagogical work and philosophy; in the next chapter we present the example from Italy of the *pedagogista*.[2] Such facilitation can also be a role for evaluators, where enabling people to deepen their understanding and to cultivate the ability to make judgments — what Schwandt below calls 'practical wisdom' — is acknowledged as the ethical aim of evaluation (other ethical aims for evaluation include enlightenment and emancipation, and each assumes a different role for the evaluator):

> Evaluation practices that aim to cultivate an ethic of practical wisdom decenter the place of social enquiry in social life. At best, social scientific enquiry serves as but one source of insight or self-awareness that supplements or complements our ordinary struggles to understand ourselves and to do good. In a phrase, social scientific inquiry is secondary or ancillary to praxis ... The task of evaluation here is to help clients cultivate this capacity [to make judgments of the qualitative worth of different ends in practice] ... The evaluators use their special knowledge about what it means to evaluate and how to come to warranted conclusions of the worth of evaluands to add to the conversation about practice that clients and stakeholders routinely conduct. But such knowledge is used in a complementary or supplementary manner. It is not knowledge in the form of a pronouncement from an allegedly detached, objective and disinterested observer who enlightens practitioners ... [T]here is no knowledge that the evaluator 'transmits' to parties in the evaluation. (Schwandt, 1996b: 17, 18)

One reason why the discourse of meaning making is so rigorous is that it is not abstract. On the contrary, it is very concrete; it is about what is going on in the pedagogical work and other projects of the early childhood institution, in particular making visible and public what children are actually doing, through various forms of documentation, and about different people entering into dialogue about that work. In this discourse people address the institution, the children and the work directly, not through attempts at representation such as measures which purport to show how 'good' or 'bad' the institution is or how 'normal' the children are in relation to some theory of child development. The intention is to study and make meaning from actual practice, recognizing that in fact there may be many meanings or understandings, not attempt to reduce what is going on to fit preconceived categorical criteria.

Contextualization — locating the work of the early childhood institution within a particular place and time — is therefore critical to the discourse of meaning making. Schwandt emphasizes this point in his discussion of the implications of taking 'practical wisdom' as the ethical aim of evaluation:

> [In theories of evaluation practice aiming at cultivating practical wisdom] human practices are essentially characterized by their mutability, indeterminacy and particularity that makes judging their goodness inaccessible to systems of general rules and principles. Good judgment thus requires cultivating perceptual awareness of concrete particulars. At the same time, human practices are constructed around standing commitments to what is good and right; they are oriented towards agreed-upon social aims. Right action — in this case, the activity of judging the worth of a practice — is not however dictated by these general principles. We cannot engage in some (relatively simple) process of weighing alternative goals, values, criteria and the like that reduces judgment of what constitutes good practice to calculation. Rather, we must engage in strong evaluation judging the qualitative worth of different ends or aims of our practices. (1996b: 18)

We have so far been at pains to emphasize the rigour of the discourse of meaning making, and to specify procedures to promote this rigour. But we do not expect, nor

indeed want, simple answers, certain conclusions, in short to establish mastery and control. Pedagogical work is embedded in life and the world we live in. It is not some decontextualized abstraction that can be readily measured and categorized. Simple and neat solutions are also likely to be wrong solutions. Instead, making meaning, deepening understanding, or attempting then to make judgments, will be a struggle, full of 'contradictions and ambiguities' (Cherryholmes, 1994: 205), of 'the unavoidable complexities of concrete human experience' (Toulmin, 1990: 201). It can offer no certainties and no guarantees, only judgments to be made, always in relationship with the Other, for which each one of us must take responsibility. It will also be a continuous struggle. There are no endings, only beginnings, for 'we will never fully understand and nail down these ideas because their meanings continue to shift and drift' (Cherryholmes, 1994: 205). The endeavour is inherently messy, and like Cherryholmes, we accept that these are 'not reasons for despair [because] it is just the way things are' (ibid).

Meaning making is messy in another way. The discourse of meaning making is, first and foremost, about producing meaning, deepening understanding. But in a world of diversity and multiple perspectives, in an activity that is unavoidably subjective, the result will be multiple and diverse understandings. Again, this is no cause for despair: 'tolerating the resulting plurality, ambiguity, or the lack of certainty is no error', being in Stephen Toulmin's memorable phrase 'the price that we inevitably pay for being human beings and not gods' (1990: 30).

But there is also no reason for not seeking some agreement about what is going on, in the sense of some degree of shared understanding and judgment about the work of the early childhood institution. This undertaking does not require complete agreement. Indeed, consensus may be undesirable. The process of dialogue and seeking agreement may be as important as the outcome in terms of agreement or consensus:

> When we shift the burden of the moral test in communicative ethics from consensus to the idea of an ongoing moral conversation, we begin to ask not what all would or could agree to as a result of practical discourses to be morally permissible or impermissible, but what would be allowed and perhaps even necessary from the standpoint of continuing and sustaining the practice of the moral conversation among us. The emphasis now is less on *rational agreement*, but more on sustaining those normative practices and moral relationships within which reasoned agreement *as a way of life* can flourish and continue . . . [I]t is the process of [moral] dialogue, conversation, and mutual understanding, and not consensus, which is our goal. (Benhabib, 1990: 346, 358)

Seyla Benhabib is here talking about moral conversations and moral judgments. Is this relevant though to making sense of what is going on in the early childhood institution? It seems to us that it is entirely relevant. Seeking to understand what is going on in these institutions, and making judgments, involves moral issues that each of us have to confront and struggle with. It is not just about the application of supposedly value-free and morally neutral technical expertise. Making sense requires each of us making value-based, and therefore moral and political, choices about

how we understand young children, the nature of early childhood, the position of young children and early childhood institutions in society and democratic process and the projects of early childhood institutions.

Evaluation and the Discourse of Meaning Making

Evaluation will be associated in many people's minds with the discourse of quality and with the aspiration of the modernist project to discover the truth about the world — or at least that part of the world that is to be evaluated. Yet, evaluation, or at least one part of the field, is engaged in a process of reflection, debate and reconstruction that is specifically located in the context of the shift from the project of modernity to the project of postmodernity. We have found much in that process that resonates with, indeed illuminates, our own attempt to better understand the problem with quality.

In an extended review of Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Daniel Fishman (1995) describes the book as 'a major publishing event . . . [which serves] as a broad historical framework and conceptual umbrella for postmodernism as a large scale intellectual movement, both within program evaluation and across the social science field generally . . . and which should have an impact upon all program evaluators and other social science researchers in laying out alternatives to traditional, positivist, quantitative studies' (1995: 301, 307). He concludes:

> The *Handbook* makes clear that from the perspective of the postmodern critique of the positivist and post-positivist foundations of objective knowledge, there is no justification for 'pure' research whose goal is to discover truth about the world. Rather, postmodernism argues that in place of objective truth, there are simply alternative constructions and perspectives on particular, socioculturally and historically situated events and things . . . An implication of the postmodern idea that 'all meaningful research is applied' is that all research is 'political', that is, the human goals and purposes to which research is linked always take place within political contexts . . . Of course, to paraphrase Mark Twain, 'reports of the death of positivism and postpositivism's subsequent hegemony are greatly exaggerated' . . . However, the trend certainly seems very clear: [critical theory and constructivism] are gaining strength, and there is general support for them as the general culture moves from modernism to postmodernism . . . All this gives us as individual program evaluators much to think about. (1995: 307)

Thomas Schwandt, another American evaluator and critic of the modernist agenda in the field of evaluation, has similarly problematized situating evaluation within the modernist project, with its epistemology of logical positivism, belief in criteriology, its assumption of the disinterested social scientist and its distaste for philosophy and moral issues (Schwandt, 1996a).

> In the West and particularly in the United States, evaluation (as well as other professions involved in social policy, programming and administration) is heavily

influenced by the tradition of value-free social science. In this theory of science, the ethical register or domain is predefined as irrational, subjective, emotive and attitudinal . . . This is compounded by a second problem. As many commentators have noted, the modern self struggles with the grip of an epistemology of disengagement from and control of the social world. This way of knowing squeezes out the realm of the personal, the intuitive, the perceptual and the emotive, all characteristics of moral engagements. It is reflected in the modernist tendency in social science and management practice to convert what are essentially moral and ethical problems to technical and administrative ones. (1996b: 3)

The critique is leading to new ideas emerging about evaluation and social enquiry, with two central themes:

> [First] the object of social science inquiry is both a social and linguistic construction, and hence, because this object is represented in social scientific discourse, it is partially constituted by this discourse . . . Second, as we abandon the modern attempts to model our practice on the natural sciences, we turn to social practice and practical philosophy . . . [which] means (a) that conceptions of the aim of social inquiry are now being shaped not by the demand for a 'neutral, objectifying science of human life and action' or for *episteme* but by the search for a better understanding of *praxis*; (b) that the kind of investigation required here must attend to both ethical and political concerns (ethical because praxis [action] is defined by habits, modes of thought, customs and mores and political because action is public and is concerned with our lives in the polis); and (c) that the rationality of everyday life (and the rationality of social scientific practice itself) is regarded as intrinsically dialogic and communicative. (Schwandt, 1996a: 62)

This analysis leads Schwandt (1996a) to argue that social inquiry, such as evaluation, should be reconceptualized as 'practical philosophy', inquiry *with* rather than *on* human actors, intended primarily to enable practitioners 'to refine the rationality of a particular practice for themselves'. Features of this approach include: inquirers seeking to establish a dialogic relationship of openness with participants in the inquiry; inquirers viewing the participants in an enquiry as themselves engaged in performing a practical art, in which decisions are both cognitive and emotional and always contextualized; the aim being a reflective examination of practice, in which the inquirers encourage practitioners to reflect critically on and reappraise their commonsense knowledge. Overall, Schwandt concludes that saying farewell to the 'bankrupt' project of criteriology 'means not that we have resolved this quest for criteria but that we have gotten over it or beyond it . . . What once was the critical problem of the correct criteria becomes the problem of how to cultivate practical reasoning' (1996a: 70).

Bill Readings has addressed the issue of evaluation in relation to universities, in the context of a critique of what he calls 'the discourse of excellence', 'excellence' having become the watchword for universities in the same way that 'quality' has for early childhood institutions. While critical of the discourse of 'excellence', he recognizes the importance of evaluation, but understood by him to involve an act of judgement and self-questioning 'embedded within a discursive or pragmatic context, a context that must be acknowledged' (1996: 133). Readings argues that evaluation produces a judgment of value; he is therefore critical of methods of evaluation which rely on the completion of standardized forms and the application of statistical calculation since they 'presume that evaluations can be directly deduced from descriptive statements, [which is to confuse] statements of fact with statements of value' (p. 131). Bringing issues of value into the reckoning means 'recognizing that there exists no homogeneous standard of value that might unite all poles of the pedagogical scene so as to produce a single scale of evaluation' (p. 165), and that 'evaluation can become a social question, not a device of measurement' (p. 124).

Judgments should be delivered not as a statement of fact but precisely as a judgment and be judged by others in turn. In other words, the judge must take responsibility for his or her judgment, 'rather than hide behind statistical pretension to objectivity' (p. 133), and taking responsibility for a judgment as a discursive act 'invokes an accountability that is radically at odds with the determinate logic of accounting . . . which only serves to prop up the logic of consumerism' (p. 134). Readings is at great pains to emphasize the provisionality of evaluation as judgment, the importance of keeping the issues open and subject to continuing discussion rather than seeking foreclosure, since the 'question of evaluation is finally both unanswerable and essential' (p. 133).

It seems to us that these discussions from the field of evaluation bear close relationship to what we have described as the discourse of meaning making, foregrounding the socially constructed nature of knowledge; the emphasis on constructing and deepening understanding of what is going on (i.e. practice or *praxis*); doing so by engaging with and being in dialogue with others, in particular practitioners, and through reflective analysis; recognizing that the process is value-based and therefore political and moral; and being comfortable with uncertainty and provisionality. Understood in these ways, evaluation can readily be part of the vocabulary of the discourse of meaning making.

Questioning the Discourse of Meaning Making

Conditions and Frameworks

We have put forward an alternative discourse for making sense of what goes on in early childhood institutions. Located within postmodernity, it is a discourse that speaks of personal agency and responsibility to produce or construct meaning and deepen understanding about pedagogical work and other projects, foregrounding practice and context, always in relationship with others and following rigorous procedures. It assumes multiple perspectives and voices and the possibility of finding some areas of agreement with others, while being wary of total agreement or consensus; uncertainty and indeterminacy are viewed as unavoidable.

This discourse of meaning making will be subject to many questions and objections. Some are the inevitable response to problematizing a dominant discursive regime which is assumed to be a permanent and unquestionable feature of the

landscape and that governs us through having become embodied. To suggest that the very concept of quality is problematic, that it is located within a particular philosophical position, that it is the product of power and saturated with values may be so challenging that the suggestion is simply not heard or, if heard, ignored. Others arise from the need to make our so far abstract discussion more concrete, which we begin to do in the following chapters — although we also recognize that there is much work to be done.

Some may say that working within a discourse of meaning making, as well as enabling early childhood institutions to operate as forums in civil society as discussed in the previous chapter, is not possible without demanding conditions being in place: adequate numbers of trained and experienced staff; the availability of *atelierista* to support the hundred languages of children and the production of documentation in those different languages;[3] the availability of *pedagogistas* or other facilitators and of adequate time to enable staff and others to engage in meaning making; motivation of all concerned to undertake challenging and demanding work; organization that integrates care and learning into a single early childhood service; sufficient public resourcing to enable early childhood institutions to operate as forums in civil society; long-term political commitment and involvement and so on.

We agree. Structure and resources, together with political commitment, are necessary. There is no magic formula for a cheap and painless way to achieve a complex and demanding response to a complex and demanding issue. It is no coincidence that two of the main examples we give of work within the discourse of meaning making have emerged in parts of Europe — northern Italy and Sweden — where early childhood institutions have benefited from sustained public support, including sufficient tax-based resources, and an integrated approach to organization. (The third main example — from the First Nations in Canada — has arisen in a context of cultural suppression where communities have begun to question dominant regimes of truth.)

It seems to us that, as in the case of these Italian and Swedish examples, early childhood institutions should and need to operate within a publicly supported system (although the actual management of services may be by either public or private organizations), representing a political and community commitment to early childhood and early childhood institutions. But again, it is not inevitable that a publicly supported system will construct early childhood institutions in the way we have proposed (as forums in civil society) or adopt the discourse of meaning making that we have offered in place of the discourse of quality. Publicly supported systems may just as easily choose modernist constructions of young children and early childhood institutions, and go down the road of standards and quality criteria.

Adopting the discourse of meaning making, rather than quality, is not a recipe for neglect and indifference, for 'low cost' or 'cut price' solutions. Combined with our understanding of the importance of early childhood and early childhood institutions, it is a recipe for a system of well-organized and well-resourced early childhood institutions. It seems to us, however, that the way to achieve that system is not to establish a universal but static set of 'structural criteria', but to ask recurrently

'What do early childhood institutions require for their projects?', 'What do we need for the pedagogical work and the process of meaning making?'

We have attempted to delineate two alternative discourses and concepts — quality and meaning making — and we have argued that each is located within a very different philosophical position and premised therefore on very different assumptions and perspectives. It makes no sense to compare them in terms of which is better and which worse. Furthermore, *even if the discourse of meaning making were to be more widely adopted, it will co-exist alongside the discourse of quality for the foreseeable future.* For even though there may be a profound transformation underway, with a widespread feeling that we are moving either into postmodernity or, at the very least, a distinctive phase of late modernity, it is also still the case that we are living in the age of quality.

Individual institutions will almost always be working within regional or national frameworks which attempt to set certain common conditions or requirements — what might be called 'frameworks of normalization'. These frameworks may take various forms: legal rights for children; standards or regulations for the running of institutions; curriculum guidance; systems of inspection and quality assurance; and so on. Working within the discourse of meaning making does not preclude operating such frameworks of normalization, if required: it is not a case of having to choose between one and the other.

However, it is necessary to understand the limitations of these frameworks. Frameworks of normalization are themselves socially constructed, therefore value-laden, not revelations of inherent and value-free truth. For example, the concept of 'standards' begs many questions: 'What possibilities do we want to ensure or avert by setting standards?'; 'Why these possibilities and not others?'; 'Whose interests are being taken into account?'; 'What is the trade-off between these interests?' Once constructed, frameworks are still likely to be in constant need of interpretation. Unless we close our eyes very tight, we cannot avoid subjectivity and multiple perspectives. The more tightly frameworks are defined, to avoid local interpretation, the more likely they are to be accused of rigidity and irrelevance to local circumstances and so risk being ignored or side-stepped.

Frameworks are problematic in other ways. They can readily become normative, deadening innovation and aspiration. They focus our attention on the map, rather than the actual terrain. More generally, they can lead to a false sense of security, by seeming to offer certainties and guarantees. Ultimately, we must face the realization that there are no certain answers, no guarantees. We may decide to adopt a modernist perspective and the discourse of quality in the hope of reassurance and certainty of performance, hoping that 'there must be someone, somewhere, who knows how to set apart the right decision from the wrong one — a grandmaster . . . a supreme practitioner and/or a supreme theorist of the right choice' (Bauman, 1997: 202). But, it seems to us that all that this achieves is to get one perspective, one understanding of what is going on. And since everyone can learn what that perspective is, we risk a circular and self-defeating process in which institutions gear themselves to delivering the criteria that frameworks of normalization and their attendant inspectors determine, so that targets are met not because they

are understood to be an important part of pedagogical work but because they are targets — resulting in the tail of evaluation wagging the dog of pedagogical practice. Moreover, by calling in the grandmasters, we opt out of taking responsibility for something for which we should be taking responsibility — young children and their lives.

If we can envisage situations where early childhood institutions operate both with the discourse of meaning making, but within frameworks of normalization, the balance becomes an issue. How many general rules, regulations and conditions? How much autonomy given to individual early childhood institutions to produce and make meaning of their own pedagogical work? It may prove illuminating to study what happens in countries that have chosen frameworks that quite deliberately leave much space for regional and local discretion and interpretation, for example, the national curricula for Early Childhood Education in Spain and Sweden.

The relationship between frameworks of normalization and local autonomy is emerging as an issue in other areas. In the field of development aid to Majority World countries (discussed further in Chapter 8), 'many professionals seem driven to simplify what is complex and to standardize what is diverse' (Chambers, 1997: 42), and there is a history of top-down attempts to manage complex relationships at local level. What emerges from this history is that

> not centralization and many complex rules, but decentralization and a few simple tendencies or rules, are the conditions for complex and harmonized local behaviour . . . The key is to minimize central controls, and to pick just those few rules which promote or permit complex, diverse and locally fitting behaviour. The practical conclusion is to decentralize, with minimum rules of control, to enable local people to appraise, analyse, plan and adapt for local fit in their necessarily different ways. (1997: 195, 200–1)

So, by all means let there be frameworks of normalization, if these are wanted. But equally let us not fool ourselves about what they are or what they can do. Let us recognize their limitations and dangers, their assumptions and values. Let them not be at the expense of ignoring other ways of thinking about and making sense of early childhood institutions and the work that they do.

The Great Bugbear of Relativism

One of the biggest concerns that many people have with problematizing quality and the construction of a discourse of meaning making is 'relativism'. There is a general anxiety here about chaos and anarchy, the breakdown of order and morality. How can we live in a world where there is no agreement about what is good or right or true? But there is also a more particular anxiety about what this might mean for young children and other vulnerable groups, since 'a slide into relativism (is seen as) dangerous for the dispossessed in its undercutting of the grounds for social justice struggle and its feeding of nihilism and quietude' (Lather, 1991: 115). There are two responses to these concerns, the first questioning the concept of 'relativism',

the second about the capability of people to live in a world without foundational standards and the opportunities opened up by this world.

'Relativism' is used as a charge by people who adopt a modernist perspective against those who take a postmodern perspective. Indeed, 'relativism is a concept from another discourse [to postmodernism], a discourse of foundations that posits grounds for certainty outside of context' (Lather, 1991: 116). Relativism is an issue, therefore, if a foundational structure is held to exist and is then ignored (Cherryholmes, 1988), if there are universal and unshakeably founded laws and codes, if there is absolute knowledge. But from a postmodern perspective there are no foundations, no universal laws and codes, no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society — and therefore no absolute truth against which other positions can be objectively judged: 'we just thought otherwise, believing in gods and kings and, more recently, the "objectivity" of scientists' (Lather, 1991: 117).

Postmodernism is 'modernity without illusions . . . the illusions in question boiling down to the belief that the "messiness" of the human world is but a temporary and repairable state, sooner or later to be replaced by the orderly and systematic rule of reason' (Bauman, 1993: 32). Rather than 'relativism', we choose to speak of 'partial, locatable, critical knowledges' (Lather, 1991: 117) and of difference — of context and position, of perspectives and understandings. But recognition of difference is not just about taking account of the way the world is, its diversity and messiness: it also opens up possibilities and opportunities. For if there are foundations — principles, rules, codes, laws of universal validity — then all that is asked of us is to conform to them: to stick to the rules, to learn the codes, to ingest knowledge, to implement the standards. But if there are no foundations, then there is space for personal agency and responsibility, for making meaning and taking decisions — while at the same time recognizing the complexity and uncertainty that are an inevitable consequence of being human beings and not gods.

Zygmunt Bauman, in his study of postmodern ethics, discusses the heightened moral demands on the individual in postmodernity, but his comments could be applied more broadly to the situation of people struggling to make sense of the work of early childhood institutions:

> The probable truth is that moral choices are indeed choices and dilemmas are indeed dilemmas — not the temporary and rectifiable effects of human weakness, ignorance or blunders. Issues have no predetermined solutions nor have the crossroads intrinsically preferable directions. There are no hard and fast principles which one can learn, memorize and deploy in order to escape situations without a good outcome . . . Human reality is messy and ambiguous — and so moral decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent. It is in this sort of world that we must live; and yet, as if defying the worried philosophers who cannot conceive of an 'unprincipled' morality, a morality without foundations, we demonstrate day by day that we can live, or learn to live, or manage to live in such a world, though few of us would be ready to spell out, if asked, what the principles that guide us are, and fewer still would have heard about the 'foundations' which we allegedly cannot do without to be good and kind to each other. (1993: 32)

The American philosopher Richard Rorty likewise proposes that living and working without foundations places far greater responsibility on the individual to make choices (1980). He further argues that virtually no one actually adopts a relativist view: 'except for the occasional cooperative freshman, one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good' (Rorty, 1982: 166). Like Bauman, he believes that many people get by without foundational beliefs and without giving up on making choices: 'the liberal societies of our century have produced more and more people who are able to recognise the contingency of the vocabulary in which they state their highest hopes — the contingency of their own consciences — and yet have remained faithful to those consciences' (Rorty, 1989: 46).

It seems to us that 'relativism' is a mystifying term, more used to stir up anxiety than further understanding. We prefer to talk about people finding ways to live in a world that is 'messy' and 'ambiguous', or complex and rich in diversity, which includes finding ways to understand and make judgments about complex issues such as early childhood pedagogy. There are ways, procedures, for supporting this task, and we believe, like Bauman and Rorty, that people have capacities and competencies that enable them to make decisions without universal codes. We have agency and responsibility, which carry with them the freedom or the burden of making choices — and from which there is no escaping uncertainty and ambivalence:

> [There is a] temptation to have one's cake and eat it, to taste in full the joy of choosing without fear of paying the penalty for a wrong choice, to seek and obtain a foolproof, patented and guaranteed recipe for the right choice — for freedom without anxiety . . . The snag is that foolproof recipes are to freedom, to responsibility and responsible freedom, what water is to fire . . . There is no such thing as freedom without anxiety . . . All in all, it is by no means certain what most of us would have chosen were they given the choice — the anxiety of freedom, or the comforts of such certainty as only unfreedom can offer. The point is, though, that the choice has not been and is unlikely to be given us. Freedom is our fate, a lot which cannot be wished away and will not go away however keenly we may avert our eyes. We do live in a diversified and polyphonic world where every attempt to insert consensus proves to be but a continuation of discord by other means. (Bauman, 1997: 202–3)

We do not lay claim to the only way of understanding the world and early childhood. Others will see them differently, through a modernist lens, and continue to be governed by the discourse of quality. We would not wish to prescribe how they think or what they do. The postmodern project values diversity and 'both/and', rather than the dualistic and 'either/or' approach. We can, for example, envisage a situation where many early childhood institutions adopted the discourse of meaning making, while at the same time having to conform to various standards and targets (what we have termed frameworks of normalization), democratically determined nationally or locally, which prescribed some of the work that they did. We can envisage different researchers operating within the different approaches, some, for example, comparing nurseries using ECERS or some other standardized measure, whereas others adopt other methods such as documentation to compare early childhood institutions from a different perspective and to reach different understandings. We recognize that the discourse of quality might be particularly useful for certain highly technical issues, perhaps, for example, food hygiene or building standards to ensure the physical safety of young children in early childhood institutions. Nor does adopting the discourse of meaning making imply rejection of quantification; a comprehensive and reliable system of information on such subjects as the supply and use of places, the costs of running institutions and the gender, ethnicity, training and other details of the workforce are necessary conditions for a system of well-organized and well-resourced early childhood institutions.

What we believe, however, to be important is for all those engaged with early childhood and early childhood institutions to recognize that there are different perspectives, that the work we do (whether as practitioners or parents or policy-makers or researchers) always takes a particular perspective — and that therefore choices — or judgments of value — are always being made from which flow enormous implications in terms of theory and practice. Our criticism of the modernist approach in early childhood — represented, par excellence, by the burgeoning work using standardized measures — is that it operates as if it was the only approach, the only true way, and in the process reduces complexity and diversity to methodological problems that can be controlled for and manipulated.

This modernist approach in the early childhood field, sustained by the power of United States research and developmental psychology and by the dominance of the discourse of quality across so many other fields, is an example of the hegemonic thinking that we raised in Chapter 1. For it is a feature of hegemonic practice, of a dominant discursive regime, that it takes itself for granted, assumes its premises to be neutral and unproblematic, denies and ignores or even remains unaware of the views and positions of others. The time has come, however, for researchers, practitioners and others who view the world from different perspectives to engage in dialogue with each other, not to *prove* who is right, but to seek mutual understanding and recognition and to understand how and why they have made their choices.

Notes

1   The NAEYC has recently produced a revised edition (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997), which takes more account of issues such as context and diversity. Although it still takes a modernist perspective, including a search for common principles and a dualistic division between 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' practice, the shift represented by this new edition opens up new and welcome possibilities for dialogue with work choosing to adopt other perspectives.
2   The *pedagogista* is a pedagogical adviser who works with the pedagogues in a small number of early childhood institutions, to enable them to reflect on and better understand pedagogical practice and theory. This type of position is found in Reggio Emilia, but also in other parts of northern Italy.

3   *Atelierista* are pedagogues trained in the visual arts, working closely with other ped-
    agogues and children in the early childhood institutions in Reggio. They both enable
    children to express themselves in a variety of non-verbal languages and assist adults to
    understand how children learn. Through their workshops *(ateliers)* and skills they help to
    produce a range of documentation, to contribute to processes of critical reflection on
    pedagogical work (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1993). It would be possible to have
    atelierista trained in other forms of artistic expression — music, dance, drama and so on.

Chapter 6

The Stockholm Project: Constructing a Pedagogy that Speaks in the Voice of the Child, the Pedagogue and the Parent

The Inspiration of Reggio

What is so terribly impressive and exceptional about the Reggio experience and
the work of Loris Malaguzzi is the way they have challenged the dominating
discourses of our time, specifically in the field of early childhood pedagogy — a
most unique undertaking for a pedagogical practice! This was achieved by
deconstructing the way in which the field has been socially constituted within a
scientific, political and ethical context and then reconstructing and redefining chil-
dren's and teachers' subjectivities. That is, they have tried to understand what
kinds of thoughts, conceptions, ideas, social structures and behavioural patterns
have dominated the field and how these discourses have shaped our conceptions
and images of the child and childhood, the way we interact with children and the
kind of environment we create for them . . . As I see it, all of this was possible
because Malaguzzi was extremely familiar with the field and its traditions; but he
also had the courage and originality to choreograph his own thinking. (Dahlberg,
1995: 9–10)

In Reggio they share a social constructionist view based on such concepts as
construction, co-construction and reconstruction . . . Heinz von Foerster, to whom
Malaguzzi often referred, argued that 'objectivity is a subject's false view that
observing can take place without him'. For Malaguzzi, the notion that we cannot
describe our world without taking notice and being aware that we are describing it
was nurtured by the inspiration he drew from a variety of disciplines. In this
connection he was known to cite scientists and philosophers representing, for
example, the new quantum mechanics associated with Chaos Theory, the new
cybernetics as well as the science of mathematics. Coupled with Malaguzzi's
social constructionist perspective is his awareness of the power of the process of
representation. As a result the pedagogues in Reggio have been very much against
a textbook approach to their practice with prescribed rules, goals and methods.
This explains why they do not have a 'programme or a curriculum' that can be
readily transferred and applied to another cultural context. I recall Malaguzzi en-
quiring once, very seriously, in view of all the Swedish pedagogues visiting Reggio,
whether many of them were working with the dove now — 'The Dove' being, by
then, one of the most well-known thematic projects in Reggio. I couldn't help but
answer yes! (Dahlberg, 1995: 11–12)