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Progressive Education and the Quality Agenda: Contradictory Views of Children, Childhood, and the Purposes of Education for Young Children

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This dissertation, **PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND THE QUALITY AGENDA: CONTRADICTIONARY VIEWS OF CHILDREN, CHILDHOOD, AND THE PURPOSES OF EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**, by A. KRISTEN CAMERON, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

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**PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND THE QUALITY AGENDA:
CONTRADICTIONARY VIEWS OF CHILDREN, CHILDHOOD, AND THE PURPOSES OF
EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**

By

A. KRISTEN CAMERON

Under the Direction of Deron Boyles, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, the concept of quality in early childhood education has evolved into what has been termed “the quality agenda,” which has had increasing influence on policy and practice in schools for young children. The quality agenda reflects an essentialist understanding of education that is heavily influenced by neoliberal ideology. The enactment of the quality agenda reinforces and reifies values that are mainstays of neoliberal ideology, including meritocracy, accountability, privatization, and market-based solutions for public problems. Over time, neoliberalism has

emerged as “common sense” for determining the appropriate means and ends of education. This view of schooling is, however, irreconcilable with another philosophy of education: progressivism. Throughout the United States, federally mandated statewide Quality Rated Improvement Systems have proliferated in early childhood education. A key effort of the Quality Rated Improvement Systems is the administration of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale. This tool is used to assess a view of quality that reflects and relies on neoliberal essentialism. The expectations and norms of essentialism frame the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale; these expectations and norms are juxtaposed with the philosophical underpinnings of progressivism. The experiences of the University Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, under the leadership of John Dewey, and the Reggio Emilia educational project that was launched in 1963 by Loris Malaguzzi in Italy offer what Peter Moss terms “alternative narratives” about what constitutes quality in early childhood education. By explicating the view of quality that characterizes progressivism, the assumptions at the heart of the quality agenda, in general, and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, in particular, are interrogated and challenged.

INDEX WORDS: Early Childhood Education, Progressivism, John Dewey, Loris Malaguzzi, Reggio Emilia, Quality

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For Will and Eli,
for everything you are, have been, and will be.
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CHAPTER 1

WHAT OUGHT TO BE THE PURPOSES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE?: A PHILOSOPHICAL AND HISTORICAL APPROACH TO ANALYZING THE QUALITY AGENDA

Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences...Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.¹

-- John Dewey, *Experience and Education*

I had a conversation recently about the purpose of education with a police officer from Atlanta who founded a mentoring program for poor children. He, with his decades of work in law enforcement, and I, with my decades of work in education, exchanged thoughts about his hypothetical proposal that all students should be guaranteed at least two years of formal higher education after 12th grade. After years working in impoverished communities, he saw the children with whom he worked as being less prepared to think critically and less able to solve problems than ever before. He argued that an additional two years of schooling would give these children both the time and the place to develop critical thinking and essential problem-solving skills. He claimed that ensuring all children attended what he described as “grades 13 and 14” would be a model for equity in education.

After decades of working in education, I was taken aback but not surprised at the assumption at the heart of his idea; namely, the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills can be delayed until young adulthood at which time 19- and 20-year old students can be “taught” to think well, thereby compensating for the years they spent in inadequate schools receiving an insufficient education. I finally asked him with exacerbation, “Why would

¹ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 27-28.

you entrust children to two more years of state-mandated education and imagine that at last they would have the kind of educative experiences that lead them towards thoughtful and critical problem solving? And more importantly, why aren't you suggesting and expecting that the current PreK-12th grade system provide these same kinds of experiences? Why wait for young adulthood?"

He replied to my questions with a similar air of frustration, telling me that I simply did not understand the educational needs that are specific to children who have not grown up surrounded by the kinds of social and cultural supports that benefit their middle- and upper-class peers. In his estimation, children from disadvantaged backgrounds require a PreK-12th grade education that focuses on foundational academic concepts – an essentialist approach that emphasizes the basics of ABCs and 123s. He reminded me, as he has in previous conversations, that much of my professional life has been spent educating the children of middle- and upper middle-class families, which has, by his estimation, left me unable to recognize the ways in which public education has failed to teach even the “basics” well to poor children, and my expectations are naïve and unrealistic for the children he knows in his mentoring program.

As has been the case often during my career, I found myself facing an essentialist understanding of what schools *ought* to be for children, an understanding that is markedly different from the progressive philosophy of education that inspired me to become a teacher thirty years ago. My friend, like many others, wants to see children grow up well and live satisfying lives, and like many others, it seems he may be unable to imagine another way to “do” public education – a way in which critical thinking and problem-solving are woven into the daily experiences of children and are cornerstones of what it means to be an educated person. To achieve this end, I argue for the adoption of a progressive educational philosophy in public

schools in which the purpose of school is to provide experiences and environments that guide students in “find[ing] out how to make knowledge when it is needed,”² as described by noted progressive educator John Dewey and his daughter Evelyn Dewey in *Schools of Tomorrow*. Progressivism is an educational philosophy in which inquiry, experiences, problematizing, and critical thinking are crucial aspects of the educational process, with an understanding and appreciation of collectivism that values individuality as essential for effective social problem-solving. Despite my insistence that these ways of learning and thinking need not (and should not) be confined to young adults, my proposal that progressivism replace essentialism as the primary philosophical underpinning of public education, beginning in children’s preschool years, sounded unrealistic and naïve to him, as I suspect it does to more than a few others with whom I have shared my thoughts on education.

I open with this rather lengthy anecdote to illustrate that with which few American educators would argue: the progressive philosophy of education has “lost” whatever brief promise it may have held for American education. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was much interest in and important historical debates about the possibilities of progressivism. During this period, progressivism secured a brief foothold in public American education; even today it retains some influence in academia, where the philosophy’s tenets continue to be introduced to teachers as they are initially prepared for their work in schools. Despite the historical and contemporary interest in progressivism, schools have instead made increasingly strident moves in recent decades towards essentialism and essentialist expectations for what education ought to look like and do.

² John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow* (Lago Vista, Texas: Grindl Press, 2016), 16.

As with K-12 education, the move away from progressivism and towards essentialism has become increasingly evident in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the United States. As a young teacher in the early 1990s, I was drawn to a career in ECEC precisely because at that time, it was an area in education that seemed to have been ignored and nearly untouched by the essentialist forces that were calling for increased standards and assessments in elementary and secondary education. Over the years, however, there has been a noticeable shift in the overarching philosophy of education in ECEC towards an essentialist understanding of what teaching and learning means for young children – i.e., what ought to be the purpose of ECEC. This shift is exemplified in what Peter Moss has termed *the quality agenda*.³ Through political forces and social factors, the concept of *quality* and the corresponding *quality agenda* have reified an essentialist understanding of education in ECEC; in Chapter 5, I present the results of longitudinal research that demonstrate how an essentialist approach to ECEC is correlated with poor long-term outcomes for children who enrolled in Tennessee’s “high quality” state-sponsored Pre-K programs.

This dissertation explores how and why the concept of quality and the quality agenda have come to dominate ECEC policy and practice. Two interrelated questions are investigated. First, how does the concept of quality and the quality agenda (including pre-determined early learning standards and federal quality improvement mandates) reinforce an essentialist philosophy of education and challenge practices that originate in progressivism? Second, what challenges to progressivism in ECEC are produced by the tools and techniques the federal and state governments use for assessment of quality and to reinforce the quality agenda? A tool that

³ See Guy Roberts-Holmes and Peter Moss, *Neoliberalism, Imaginaries and Governance* (New York: NY: Routledge, 2021); Peter Moss, *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood: An Introduction for Students and Practitioners* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019); Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

is widely used throughout the United States to assess quality – the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition* (ECERS-3) – is the focus of my analysis.

To begin, progressivism is discussed as an educational philosophy, and the historic and contemporary influence of progressivism in ECEC are analyzed before introducing the concepts of quality and the quality agenda. In the analysis of the ECERS-3, principles that are common to progressivism are used to interrogate the quality agenda, which gives a theoretical frame to help make meaning of the concept of quality in and for ECEC. The principles of progressivism are also useful in highlighting and challenging the assumptions about children, childhood, and education that characterize the quality agenda. The very concept of quality is an imprecise one whose meaning is contested, and the quality agenda is a product of neoliberal ideology that took root in K-12th grade education in the 1980s and spread into ECEC in subsequent decades.

I contend that progressivism offers a counternarrative to the quality agenda's essentialist view of the form and function of education. In this chapter, I describe two approaches to research that I use in my analysis: historical and philosophical. An historical orientation is useful for examining the changing beliefs about the purposes for and practices in ECEC, as well as to illustrate the changing notions of the conception of quality in ECEC. The use of philosophical analysis allows progressivism's foundational concepts and theories to "interact" with concepts and theories that are foundational to the quality agenda. The combination of philosophical and historical research approaches lends a robust rearview vision for understanding how the quality agenda arose, while simultaneously contributing a forward-facing view of how the current enactment of the quality agenda restricts progressive educational practices. My dissertation employs a Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) orientation as it engages the theories of

neoliberalism and progressivism to make meaning of the concept of quality and to challenge the assumptions that are the heart of the quality agenda, as exemplified in ECERS-3.

Chapter 2 (“Progressivism in Early Childhood Education and Care”) gives an overview of progressivism. The pragmatist roots of John Dewey’s theories of progressive education are examined, and then two exemplars of progressivism-in-practice are discussed. First, I discuss how progressive education was envisioned by John Dewey and actualized in the University Laboratory School (henceforth, the University Lab School) at the University of Chicago. Second, I focus on a contemporary interpretation of progressivism that originates in the educational project in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Through these two examples, some key concepts of progressivism are described and illustrated; these concepts are used later in the dissertation to support my analysis of quality and the quality agenda in ECEC.

Chapter 3 (“The Concept of Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care”) focuses on the “quality agenda” that predominates contemporary ECEC policy and practice in the United States. After an overview of the rise of the discourses of quality in ECEC, the state of Georgia’s federally mandated quality improvement system (Quality Rated, henceforth called QR) is described. This chapter introduces the ECERS-3, a tool that is used in my analysis of the concept of quality. I argue that the quality agenda reflects an essentialist philosophy of education that has roots in the social efficiency movement that emerged in the early 20th century in the United States. This chapter also describes the economic and political concept of *neoliberalism*, which was conceived in the years immediately following World War II. The emergence of neoliberalism bridges the period in which progressivism was a predominate influence in education and the ensuing period of the reification of essentialism, which began in earnest in the

1950s. As this chapter illustrates, neoliberalism's influence on policy development and social realities rose through the end of the 20th century and continues to wield influence in education. Chapter 4 ("Progressivism and the Quality Agenda: Irreconcilable Imaginaries for ECEC?") examines the intersection of these two concepts – progressivism and quality – with a focus on how the "quality agenda" undermines efforts in ECEC to embrace theories, practices, principles, and concepts that originate in progressivism. To frame the analysis, the ECERS-3 document is juxtaposed with experiences from the University Lab School and the Reggio Emilia educational project, which serve as examples of progressive education in practice. Through this comparison, irreconcilable differences between progressivism and the quality agenda are illuminated and illustrated.

The quality agenda and its accompanying discourse reifies a specific image of young children and of the schools designed for their education. A historian's approach seeks to understand how the quality agenda rose to the forefront of popular narratives in ECEC, while a philosophical approach seeks to make meaning of the rise of quality agenda as a dominant narrative in ECEC policy conversations. Both of these approaches are at the center of my effort to examine a tool that has been developed to purportedly assess quality (ECERS-3), and to consider the meaning of the quality agenda it ascribes for educators who embrace a progressivist's understanding of what it means to teach and learn.

Chapter 5 ("Reuniting Quality and Progressivism: Imaginaries for the Future in Early Childhood and Care") returns to the two questions that anchor the dissertation:

- How does the concept of quality and the quality agenda (including pre-determined early learning standards and federal quality improvement mandates) reinforce an essentialist philosophy of education and challenge practices that originate in progressivism?

- What challenges to progressivism in ECEC are produced by the tools and techniques the federal and state governments use for assessment of quality and to reinforce the quality agenda?

Concluding thoughts regarding these questions are offered, as well as suggestions for further avenues of study related to quality, the quality agenda, and progressivism in ECEC. Finally, suggestions are made regarding ways in which ECEC policy can assume a conception of quality that more readily encompasses the principles and practices that originate in progressivism.

Making Meaning of the Quality Agenda: A Philosophical and Historical Approach to Analyzing the Quality Agenda

In *Pragmatism and Educational Research*, Gert Biesta and Nicholas Burbules designate education “a thoroughly human practice in which questions about *how* are inseparable from questions about *why* and *what for*.”⁴ These are questions that consider the role of values in, and the meaning of ethics for, education, and these are the way questions are often framed in both philosophical and historical approaches; for this reason, I use philosophical and historical research orientation to consider the questions about the concept quality in ECEC that frame this research. Philosophical and historical research allows “how...?” and “why...?” and “what for...?” questions to interrogate the suppositions of the quality agenda, as well as the influence of the concept of quality on the experiences of children, teachers, and families in ECEC.

Philosophical and historical research approaches undergird a Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) method that is used to contextualize the quality agenda, in general, and to draw conclusions about the influence of the ECERS-3 assessment tool on ECEC practice, specifically. My use of CPA is informed by two theoretical paradigms: first, educational progressivism based on

⁴ Gert Biesta and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 22.

Deweyan pragmatism and second, critiques of neoliberal governance. These theoretical constructs – progressivism and neoliberalism -- inform my understanding of the meaning of the quality agenda for contemporary ECEC policy and practice.

Tracing the Roots of the Quality Agenda through Historical Research

Historical research gives insight into why and how certain concepts or political agendas gain and maintain relevance at a given time. From a historical research standpoint, policy analysis is “about shaking the false self-evidence of our current common sense and rediscovering the historical contingency of our policy approaches.”⁵ Put another way, by historian Kelly Cross Elliot, “the questions of [the history] discipline’s responsibility to the public good, of public memory’s influence on American identity, of who is or is not included in narratives of heritage are as live and as compelling as ever.”⁶ Historical research explores the meaning of historic events for contemporary society, as well as the ways in which these meanings have been created, crafted, and disseminated.

For this research, a historical approach is used to consider how the United States federal government – and, by default, the state governments – have made the concept of quality and the quality agenda the cornerstone of efforts to address the development and enactment of ECEC policy and practice. The federal government has done very little to address the cost of childcare, which has escalated at such an alarming rate that childcare costs now exceed ten percent of family income for a quarter of American families,⁷ nor have policies been implemented to address the historically inadequate wages of early childhood educators, many of whom qualify

⁵ Curtis A. Brewer, “Historicizing in Critical Policy Analysis: The Production of Cultural Histories and Microhistories.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)* 27, no. 3 (January 1, 2014), 275.

⁶ Kelly Cross Elliot, “Ready for a New Story: Toward a Pedagogy of Applied History.” *Fides et Historia* 51, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2019), 47.

⁷ Marybeth J Mattingly, Andrew Schaefer, and Jessica A Carson, “Child Care Costs Exceed 10 Percent of Family Income.” (Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire, 2016), <https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1287&context=carsey>.

for public assistance.⁸ Instead, as my research shows, investments have increasingly been made in ensuring that the nebulous concept of quality – which many suggest has not been built on a foundation of sound scientific or philosophical conclusions about young children and their learning – is reified and centered in most conversations among policymakers.

To critically interrogate childcare policies that have been legislated and mandated to reify the quality agenda, one must know whose voices and which discourses have become dominant, and to make meaning of what these discourses reveal about America's historic and collective views of children, childhood, and ECEC. Historical research offers a means for tracing the roots of the core interests and efforts of the quality agenda, and a way to consider which historical events and what ideas might have been influential for the concept of quality to emerge as highly influential in ECEC policy and practice. This research offers a reappraisal of how the quality agenda has influenced policy, future research, and political discourse in ECEC in the United States, as well as the public perception of young children and their schooling. According to Green and Troup, the value of this revisitation is evident,

as new scholars critically engage with and respond to the perspectives of the earlier generation...[the questions that] emerge from this process generate new interpretations or analyses that make connections, or identify patterns of change, of which our historical actors were not always aware.⁹

As Zachary Schrag describes it, “historians reject the notion that a question can be settled forever...Historians routinely revisit events previously studied by others, believing that old versions of the past may no longer serve today's needs.”¹⁰

⁸ Caitlin McLean, Marcy Whitebook, and Eunice Roh, “From Unlivable Wages to Just Pay for Early Educators,” Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, July 16, 2019), <https://csce.berkeley.edu/from-unlivable-wages-to-just-pay-for-early-educators/>.

⁹ Ann Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in History and Theory* (Manchester, Great Britain: Manchester University Press), 2.

¹⁰ Zachary Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 21.

Considering to the Quality Agenda through Philosophical Analysis

The primary act of the researcher who uses philosophical approach is to make a claim, and then to use logic, documentation, and evidence to create a premise for the claim that, ultimately, results in a cogent conclusion about the claim. Philosophical research relies on both cogent and normative reasoning as primary tools for analysis.

Philosophical analysis is inherently value-laden, with less interest in questions of what *is* in education and more focus on what *ought* to be. Unlike the positivism that is at the heart of most social science and much educational research, philosophical research is allied with methods that characterize research in the humanities. As Kenneth Howe describes it, the philosophical approach emphasizes the specific contributions that the humanities have to make to – or *in* – education science in determining “what works.” Again, “What works?” is elliptical for “What works to produce valued education outcomes?” Exploring what *should be* valued – is *valuable* – in human endeavors is at the heart of much scholarship in the humanities. An education science that jettisons this freight also jettisons its compass.¹¹

Philosophical analysis is inherently ethical, and when used as a framework for policy analysis, reveals value-laden beliefs about what *ought* and *ought not* happen in public policy. As Andrew Cohen describes it,

Ethics is then that part of philosophy that considers, among other things, what makes for a good human life, what people owe to one another, and how human beings ought to behave. The institutions we create and inhabit crucially shape what sorts of lives we lead....Ethics can indicate how to construct, change, or assess key social and political institutions...Even though there is sometimes uncertainty and disagreement about many fundamental ethical questions, ethics can still help us in part by making a bit clearer what is at stake in policy disputes. I can deepen our understanding of what matters and why...Perhaps ethics is sometimes a chore. However, it might also help to understand

¹¹ Kenneth Howe, “Positivist Dogmas, Rhetoric, and the Education Science Question,” *Educational Researcher*, 38, 6, (August/September 2009), 438-439.

what our values are, what they could be and should be, and how to go about realizing them...Ethics then might be an important part of understanding and shaping policy.¹²

As with other research approaches, context matters in philosophical research. Context is, at least in part, predicated on experience with the concept or phenomenon that is at the heart of the claim. Who makes the claim and from what experience does the claim originate? Answering these questions gives a normative point of view that is value-laden, which contributes to a conceptual analysis that offers important considerations for determining what *ought* to be happening in ECEC policy and practice. Thomas Leś sees the efforts to delineate a social role for education in the theories of philosophers like Socrates, Locke, Kant, and Dewey, who “distinguished the aim of education and the means to achieve it,” concluding that these early iterations of a philosophy of education had “an ethical-normative character.”¹³ The philosophical orientation towards educational research, with its ethical-normative emphasis, readily supports a Critical Policy Analysis method, which reveal the normative assumptions that are at the heart of the quality agenda.

Critical Policy Analysis as Method

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) is a helpful method for historical and philosophical considerations of policy and practice in education. To paraphrase Simons, Olssen, and Peters, the focus of CPA is not on problem solving but instead on recognizing how problems with a policy emerged in the first place. Analyzing educational policy with a critical lens is not concerned with or focused on making

existing systems, procedures, or practices more efficient and effective by offering solutions for problems identified elsewhere. In other words, the critical policy orientation

¹² Andrew Cohen, *Philosophy, Ethics, and Public Policy: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 2.

¹³ Tomasz Leś (2017) “The Research Potential of Educational Theory: On the Specific Characteristics of the Issues of Education, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49, 1434

is not rooted in the concern for problem solving, but is concerned with obtaining the larger picture within which policy problems take shape.¹⁴

Policy analysis is frequently done through empirical and positivistic research methods that generate data and factual information in order to create assessments of policy effectiveness; these assessments result in generalizable recommendations for policy improvement. CPA that is influenced by a philosophical research approach makes different sorts of assessments and recommendations, based on different understandings of policy analysis itself. Philosophy is not merely a tool for thinking carefully about meaning and justification, although it surely does that. It can expand our moral imagination and alert us to barriers that are not so much constraints but opportunities for honoring our deepest values. Philosophy can also inspire greater appreciation of the merits of alternative policy paths.¹⁵

Policy Analysis as Counsel: An Interpretive Theory of Critical Policy Analysis

Bruce Jennings described three models of policy analysis:

- the Positivist Model, or policy analysis as science
- the Advocacy Model, or policy analysis as advocacy
- the Interpretive Model, or policy analysis as counsel

Each of these approaches “can be discussed in terms of the epistemological and ethical relationship it postulates between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge.”¹⁶ *The Positivist Model* relies on objectivity, value neutrality, and emotional for policy analysis, reifying a belief that scientific approaches to policy analysis result in factual information that has not

¹⁴ Martin Simons, Mark Olssen, and Michael Peters, “Part 1: The Critical Educational Policy Orientation,” in *Re-Reading Education Policies: A Handbook Studying the Policy Agenda of the 21st Century*, eds. Martin Simons, Mark Olssen, and Michael Peters (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers), 29.

¹⁵ Andrew I. Cohen, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy and Public Policy*, ed. Andrew I. Cohen (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2018), xi.

¹⁶ Bruce Jennings, “Interpretation and the Practice of Policy Analysis,” in *Confronting Values in Policy Analysis: The Politics of Criteria*, eds. Frank Fischer and John Forrester (Newberry Park, CA: SAGE Publications Inc), 143.

been tainted by human experience and interpretation. In this model, the relationship between the knowing subject and the object of knowing is externalized, with an emphasis on the objects of knowledge as “things to be described, manipulated, and controlled.”¹⁷ *The Advocacy Model*, on the other hand, relies on “procedural rather than scientific rationality to guide policy decisions towards efficacy, justice, and the public interest.”¹⁸ Jennings cautions against the Advocacy Model due to the potential this method presents for “blurring the distinction between the policy analyst and the lobbyist.”¹⁹

Jennings presents a third model for policy analysis – *the Counsel Model* – which is based on an interpretive social science orientation, and which is the model adopted in my research. In this approach, facts and values are understood to be interrelated and to offer useful rationality as human’s undertake efforts to make meaning. The Counsel Model contributes to the effort of policy analysis in specific ways.

Policy analysis is often motivated in the first place by policy failures, and these failures, in turn, are usually a function of the fact that some significant actors did not respond as it was assumed they would... A good policy analysis must identify these anomalous responses, explain them in some coherent way, and provide policymakers with more realistic expectations about the behavior of those with whom they must deal and to whom the policy will apply.²⁰

As with any research method, CPA from the Counsel Model orientation relies on certain beliefs about ethics and public policy. Andrew Cohen has written about the role of ethics in public policy analysis, and the ethical principles that support meaning-making in policy analysis. As Cohen describes it, “These principles can also tell us what we *ought* or *ought not* to do.”²¹ CPA is useful to examine and critique how dominant education policy discourse about quality

¹⁷ Jennings, “Interpretation and the Practice of Policy Analysis,” 137.

¹⁸ Jennings, “Interpretation and the Practice of Policy Analysis,” 138.

¹⁹ Jennings, “Interpretation and the Practice of Policy Analysis,” 147.

²⁰ Jennings, “Interpretation and the Practice of Policy Analysis,” 144-145.

²¹ Andrew I. Cohen, *Philosophy, Ethics, and Public Policy: An Introduction*, 1.

influences ECEC. The construction and implementation of the quality agenda is contingent upon a complex system, which the CPA framework allows me to interrogate and examine. CPA is normative critique that identifies and describes what a policy is or means. CPA also “assesses the extent to which [policies] match up to values that are taken (contentiously) to be fundamental for just or decent societies.”²²

Theoretical Framing: Progressivism and Neoliberalism

Progressivism as Educational Philosophy

Progressivism is the educational philosophy against which the normative assumptions of the quality agenda are challenged. In Chapter 2 (“Progressivism: Educational Philosophy in Practice”), progressivism as an educational theory is defined and contextualized. Progressivism is situated historically, and the tenets of the theory are articulated. Experiences from the University Lab School and the educational project in Reggio Emilia, Italy provides “exemplars” and illustrations that, while not generalizable, identify and clarify themes that are useful for the analysis of the quality agenda, in general, and the ECERS-3, in particular.

Neoliberal Policy and Practice in ECEC

One of the efforts of this research is to illuminate the way neoliberalism has influenced the rise of the quality agenda in ECEC. Progressivism offers an alternative narrative to neoliberal-influenced essentialist education for young children. These two philosophies of education – progressivism and essentialism – are not only different in practice, but they are also oriented towards different assumptions about children, different values for society, and different visions for the purpose of education. In Chapter 3 (“The Quality Agenda In Early Childhood Education and Care”), the assumptions, values, and visions that emerge under a neoliberal

²² Norman Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Policy Studies,” *Critical Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2013): 178

orientation towards education – an orientation that is reflected in the policy and practices of the quality agenda in ECEC – are articulated. My assertion is that the well-being of children and teachers is more easily guaranteed when there is, first, critical awareness of and resistance to the broader neoliberal context in which contemporary ECEC is situated and is cultivated (including the emphasis on the quality agenda and the move towards essentialism in ECEC) and second, a commitment to consider and imagine alternative possibilities for ECEC.

CHAPTER 2

PROGRESSIVISM: EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE

I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform.²³
 -- John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed"

Considered by many to be the most important American-born philosopher, John Dewey had wide-ranging influence across numerous disciplines, including psychology, art, political science, ethics, sociology, and education. He is a founder of pragmatism, the only philosophical tradition that is uniquely American in origin. Alongside Charles Peirce and William James, Dewey developed a philosophical tradition that emphasized inquiry, problem-solving, and thinking with others as central epistemological acts. Dewey was rare among philosophers, even among those who are considered pragmatists, in his insistence that philosophy must be *useful*, and that it should be used in service of human efforts like justice, education, social work, and labor relations. Deron Boyles describes Dewey as theorizing a "*pragmatic* instrumentalism [that] looks at transformative consequences for people engaged in practical, everyday transactions" while cautioning against a utilitarian concept of usefulness in which "(utilitarian) benefits were seen to be in the future."²⁴ As Dewey famously said in 1897's "My Pedagogic Creed," "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself. Education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living."²⁵

For Dewey, education is about the here and now, with an important role in solving problems that society faces at *this* moment in time. Central to Dewey's theory of pragmatism is the role of inquiry in "the constructively instrumental work of producing imaginative and

²³ John Dewey. *My Pedagogic Creed* (Washington, D.C The Progressive Education Association, 1929), 15.

²⁴ Deron Boyles. *John Dewey's Imaginative Vision of Teaching* (Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press, 2020), 42-43.

²⁵ Dewey. "My Pedagogic Creed," 6.

generative ideas to meet social needs.”²⁶ Dewey developed an educational philosophy that reflected the value he placed on inquiry and experience as paths towards learning and knowing, the epistemological necessities for individuals to be considered *educated*; Dewey’s educational theories coalesced into a philosophy of education that became known as progressive education, or *progressivism*.

An Overview of Progressivism

To understand progressivism, a path must be traced to the rise of the philosophy of pragmatism. Pragmatism became an influential philosophical paradigm during the American Progressive Era, a time characterized by a national spirit of optimism, growth, and expansion during a time of unprecedented prosperity and tranquility in American history, as the 19th century gave way to the 20th century. The societal influence of the Industrial Revolution was becoming evident, and the Progressive Era was marked by collective efforts to mitigate poverty, to address labor issues, and to rein in the unfettered rule of capitalism. *Progress* was seen as the American way, as the nation emerged from its long march across thousands of miles under an imaginary God-given right called Manifest Destiny and began laying railroad to cover the thousands of miles that Manifest Destiny had revealed; progressivism in education, however, represented a different kind of imagining for what the meaning of progress could be for America’s capitalism-created class system in which racism and sexism were not seen as barriers to advancement but as taken-for-granted realities that privileged the progress of the few over the advancement of the many.

Out of these larger historical and philosophical differences in the visions for the nation, an ideological battle emerged in education between progressives and traditionalists that is

²⁶ Boyles, *John Dewey’s Imaginative Vision of Teaching*, 43.

commonly known as the *curriculum war*. David Ferrero, who terms this conflict the 100 Years War, calls it one of “education’s fiercest and most intractable conflicts.”²⁷ Ferrero described the false and ineffective *either/or* dichotomy that has emerged between the traditional and progressive philosophies, a dichotomy that has served to make progressivism weak and ineffectual in practice; Dewey, too, imagined this risk.

As Dewey described it, progressive theory and practice run the risk of proceeding “negatively or by reaction again what has been current in education rather than by a positive and constructive development of purposes, methods, and subject-matter.” In other words, Dewey grew increasingly aware that a philosophy of education that was conceived as a reaction to essentialism would be weak in theory and anemic in practice. With the caution in place in the opening chapter of *Experience and Education*, Dewey juxtaposes the common principles of traditional and progressive education in order to highlight the differences – or oppositions, as he terms it – in the two philosophies.

To imposition from above [which characterizes traditional education] is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality [which characterizes progressive education]; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world.²⁸

The remainder of *Experience and Education*, as well as other seminal works by Dewey such as *Democracy and Education*, is devoted to developing the purposes, methods, and subject-matter of a progressive philosophy of education that was not devised purely in reaction to traditionalism.

²⁷ David Ferrero. “Pathways to Reform: Start with Values,” *Educational Leadership* 62, no. 5 (2005): 8.

²⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 19-20.

Also emerging during the battle between the traditionalists and the progressives was a distinction between what has been called *pedagogical progressivism* and *administrative progressivism* in education. As David Labaree describes the distinction, “the former focused on teaching and learning in the classroom, the latter focused on governance and on the structure of and purpose of the curriculum.”²⁹ Dewey’s philosophy of education represents the pedagogical arm of progressivism, while social efficiency thinkers like William Bagley and Michael John Demiashkevich are representative of the administrative arm of progressivism. Eventually, the term progressivism became most closely aligned with pedagogical progressivism, while administrative progressivism became most synonymous with social efficiency, essentialism, and traditionalism. The lingering influence of social efficiency theory, the rise of essentialism, and the persistence of traditionalism in educational philosophy in the United States are discussed with more depth in Chapter 3 (“The Quality Agenda in Early Childhood Education and Care”). For now, it is sufficient to share Ellen Lagemann’s oft-quoted, and admirably succinct assessment of the final outcome of the 100 Year War for the American curriculum: “One cannot understand the history of education in the United States during the twentieth century unless one realizes that Edward L. Thorndike won and John Dewey lost.”³⁰

Towards the end of the Progressive Era, as World War I loomed, Dewey and his daughter Evelyn Dewey visited progressive schools around the United States. Following their travels, they published *The Schools of Tomorrow* in 1915. While they rarely used the moniker “progressive” to describe the schools, and they insisted “there has been no attempt in this book to develop a

²⁹ David Labaree. *The Trouble with Ed Schools* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 146.

³⁰ Ellen Condliffe Lagemann. “The Plural Worlds of Educational Research,” *History of Education Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1989): 185.

complete theory of education,”³¹ they nonetheless articulate the inclinations of the schools which might be described as progressive.

The movement shows the tendencies that mark the schools we have described; tendencies towards greater freedom and an identification of the child’s school life with his environment and outlook; and, even more important, the recognition of the role education must play in a democracy...[these] proved to be the most marked characteristics of all the schools we visited.³²

While Dewey and Dewey do not explicitly define progressivism, I believe this description of the schools in *Schools of Tomorrow*, which was originally published in 1915, gives good insight into what progressive schools traditionally sought to do and why. The progressive schools across the United States that the Deweys toured and about which they wrote were among those that were developed during the earliest emergence of progressive theory and practice in education.

As he describes it, Dewey’s progressive philosophy of education was built on “the foundation of a theory of experience and its educational potentialities.”³³ Decades after his work at the University of Chicago’s Laboratory School and his visits with his daughter to progressive schools across the United States, Dewey wrote of the divide between traditional and progressive education in *Experience and Education* and cautioned against developing progressivism as a “negative philosophy,” as is described above. Contemporary critics of progressivism for present-day schools might agree with Dewey’s concern that the philosophy of education that he espoused would become weak in vision and ineffective in practice because the attention to the purposes, methods, and subject-matter was insufficient.

³¹ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 5.

³² Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 6.

³³ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 22.

David F. Labaree, who has critiqued the continued attention that progressivism garners in higher education teacher preparation programs, offers a provocative vision of present-day pedagogical progressivism as

basing instruction on the needs, interests and developmental stage of the child; it means teaching students the skills they need in order to learn any subject, instead of focusing on transmitting a particular subject; it means promoting discovery and self-directed learning by the student through active engagement; it means having students work on projects that express student purposes and that integrate the disciplines around socially relevant themes; and it means promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality.³⁴

In *The Trouble with Ed Schools*, Labaree juxtaposes a contemporary perception of progressivism with what he terms a “traditional” approach to education, which reflects the essentialist philosophy. He shares a revised and abridged table (Table 2.1) that he attributes to Harvard professor Jeanne Chall, a prominent critic of the influence of the “child-centered” progressive philosophy. While critical of progressivism, Chall and Labaree’s description of the characteristics of the philosophy are accurate.

³⁴ David. F. Labaree, “Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education: An American Romance,” *Paedagogica Historica* 41, nos. 1&2 (2005): 277. While using Labaree’s definition of progressivism may seem ironic, given his criticism of the influence of progressivism on teacher preparation programs in academia (what he dismissively calls the “ed schools romance with progressivism” in 2004’s *The Trouble with Ed Schools*), his definition of the contemporary understanding of progressivism is precise and well-articulated..

Table 2.1. Comparison of the Characteristics of Traditional and Progressive Education

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Traditional Instructions</u>	<u>Progressive Instruction</u>
Curriculum	Standards are established for each grade level; specific subject areas are taught differently	Follows student interests; integrates materials across subject areas
Role of teacher	Teacher as leader of the class: responsible for content, leading lessons, recitation, skills, seatwork, and assigning homework	Teacher as facilitator of learning: provides resources, helps students plan, and keeps records of learners' activities
Materials	Teachers work with commercial textbooks	Teachers use a rich variety of learning materials, including manipulatives
Range of activities	A small range, largely prescribed by the teacher	A wide range, based on individual interests
Grouping of students	The whole class is moved through the same curriculum at roughly the same pace, with occasional small groups, and individual work	Students work in small groups, individually and/or with teacher guidance based on their own initiative
Teaching target	The whole class	The individual child
Movement	Child-child interactions are restricted	Students are permitted to move around freely and cooperate with others
Time	The day is divided into distinct periods for teaching different subjects	The use of time is flexible, permitting uninterrupted work sessions largely determined by learners
Evaluation	Norm-referenced tests and grade standards; informal and formal testing	Based on individual progress rather than classmates or grade standards; preference for diagnostic evaluation; deemphasis on formal testing
Progression	Students are assigned to grades by age	Student proceed at different rates

Source: Revised and abridged version by David Labaree from Jeanne Chall's *The Academic Challenge*.³⁵

Labaree's criticisms are less about pedagogical progressivism in practice, and more focused on how education schools' avowed commitment to progressivism is disingenuous, at best; he notes, "the main thrust of educational research and teacher education in the United States is not progressive but instrumentalist, aimed a serving the administrative needs of the existing school system, whose teaching and curriculum are largely traditional."³⁶ The meaning for ECEC

³⁵ Labaree, "Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education," 132.

³⁶ Labaree, "Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education," 131.

of Labaree's claim concerning a disconnect between the education school's preparation of teachers and the reality of the teaching practice in schools is discussed further in Chapter 3, but suffice it to say at the moment that while we may orient from different philosophical places, I agree with Labaree's assertion.

The administrative progressives, which one can also envision as socially efficient essentialists, have finally arrived at the door of ECEC with a vision of education that compromises the "final frontier" in progressive education – the schools for the youngest children. The quality agenda is an essentialist one that relies heavily on the ECERS-3 assessment tool for enactment. I argue that the possibility for ECEC educators to make a collective commitment to truly progressive pedagogy has been increasingly compromised under the influence of ECERS-3. Two examples of progressivism will be used to interrogate the assumptions about ECEC that characterize the ECERS-3: the University Lab School under the leadership of John Dewey, and the Reggio Emilia Education Project in Reggio Emilia, Italy.³⁷

Progressivism in Practice: Two Stories of Progressive Education

The University Laboratory School at the University of Chicago

In his introduction to Katherine Mayhew and Anna Edwards' history of the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, Dewey wrote

The problem of the relation between individual freedom and collective well-being is today urgent and acute, perhaps more so than at any time in the past. The problem of achieving both of these values without the sacrifice of either one is likely to be the dominant problem of the civilization for many years to come. The schools have their part to play in working out the solution, and their own chief task is to create a form of community life and organization in which both of these values are conserved.³⁸

³⁷ While these two examples of progressive education were chosen for analysis, other examples of progressivism would offer additional insight and may be useful in future research, including Lucy Sprague Mitchell's Bank Street School for Children in New York City, the educational experiences at Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago, and Colonel Francis Parker's Chicago Institute.

³⁸ Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago 1896-1903* (New York, NY: Atherton Press, 1965), xv.

While living in Chicago, Dewey was inspired by the ideas and actions of educators like Jane Addams of the Hull House (the nation's first settlement house) and Chicago School Superintendent Ella Flagg Young. When he was given the opportunity to open a school at the University of Chicago in 1896, he began putting into practice a philosophy of education that situated an experimental ethos at its center, encouraged inquiry, embraced active experience, and made relatable and real problems the centerpiece of the school's curriculum. Dewey worked alongside a group of educators (which included Mayhew and Edwards), who were motivated by his vision for this new kind of school. Teachers were actively involved in the development of the educational philosophy which became known as progressivism.

In *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*, Laurel Tanner writes of "the school's underlying hypothesis that learning is connected with active work."³⁹ Mayhew and Edwards affirm Tanner's claim as they describe a theory of education that grounded the University Lab School: "the idea that the young have native needs and native tendencies of curiosity, love of active occupation, and desire for association and mutual exchange which provide the intrinsic leverage for educative growth in knowledge, understanding, and conduct."⁴⁰ By building on these "native needs and native tendencies" in a spirit of experimentation, those who worked at the school aimed "to discover the conditions under which educative growth actually occurs."⁴¹ This experimental attitude extended to the school's approach to curriculum, which Mayhew and Edwards describe as having two "cardinal principles":

First, in all educative relationships the starting point is the impulse of the child to action, his desire responding to the surrounding stimuli and seeking its expression in concrete

³⁹ Laurel N. Tanner, *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1997), 167.

⁴⁰ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 6.

⁴¹ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 6.

form. Second, the educational process is to supply the materials and the positive and negative conditions – the let and hindrance – so that his expression, intellectually controlled, may take a normal direction that is social in both form and feeling.⁴²

In this short and concise passage, Mayhew and Edwards lay out several principles of progressivism that were articulated through the experimental praxis at the University Lab School. The role of pedagogical relationships is emphasized at the outset. The mention of “the impulse of the child to action” alludes to Dewey’s theory of the four native impulses – the social, the constructive, the investigative, and the expressive⁴³ – which serve to guide educators in the “what, how, and why” of teaching and learning alongside children. By tapping into the native impulses of children, educators are given an entrance into educative experiences that are meaningful and relevant to children.

The use of the word *stimuli* in Mayhew and Edwards’s description of the cardinal principles of progressivism is also worth noticing, as it illuminates the influence of the scientific method on the philosophy of education that was emerging under Dewey’s leadership at the University Lab School. *Expression* is a term that appears twice in the description of the cardinal principles, demonstrating the strong emphasis on communication that is common to a progressive philosophy of education. Expression and communication are prioritized in progressivism, based on a fundamental belief that undergirds progressive thinking and its transactional realism theory of epistemology; namely, individuals have a responsibility to share their ideas with the larger group, as learning is understood to be a largely social endeavor.

The Reggio Emilia Education Project

The system of Reggio Emilia infant/toddler centers and preschools has roots in the town for which it is named, a mid-sized northern Italian city with a strong history of cooperative living

⁴² Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 23.

⁴³ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 40-41.

and collectivism that reflects the region's agrarian history. The "founder" of the Reggio Emilia educational project is Loris Malaguzzi, an Italian pedagogue who spent his own childhood in a nearby village. Malaguzzi referred to Dewey's ideas of schooling as foundational experience in the cultivation of both individual and group understandings of and commitments to democratic citizenship and to the participation that characterizes the Reggio Emilia education project. It would be difficult to deny Dewey's influence on Malaguzzi, and on his conceptualization of ECEC. According to Lella Gandini, "Malaguzzi was an avid reader of all these thinkers [whose ideas were floated about in post-World War II Italy], but the one who probably influenced him the most was the American John Dewey."⁴⁴

Malaguzzi's ideas about teaching, learning, and childhood were developed and refined alongside other educators in the preschools and infant/toddler centers of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Thinkers from diverse disciplines, including art, philosophy, psychology, and architecture influenced the beliefs about children, childhood, teaching, learning, and schooling that were being explored in Reggio. Dewey's ideas about democracy and progressive education were especially influential in their emerging conceptions of schools for young children. Malaguzzi spoke with admiration for Dewey, calling him "the great figure"⁴⁵ of American pedagogy and philosophy and a "giant."⁴⁶

The influence of Dewey's ideas on Malaguzzi's emerging conception of school is clear. In 1963, the year that the first preschool opened in Reggio Emilia under the guidance of Loris Malaguzzi, he spoke of "Dewey whose 'laboratory' underlines the need to look at educational

⁴⁴ "Play and the Hundred Languages of Children An Interview with Lella Gandini." *American Journal of Play* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 5.

⁴⁵ Loris Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A Selection of His Writings and Speeches, 1945-1993*, ed. Paola Cagliari et al. (Routledge, 2016), 263

⁴⁶ Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*, 383.

solutions in the spirit of research.”⁴⁷ This attention to and intention around the environment that characterizes the Reggio Emilia educational project may be traced, in part, to Malaguzzi’s study of Dewey.⁴⁸ In the 1950s, Dewey’s writings, which had been forbidden under Italian fascist rule, were translated into Italian anew and undoubtedly studied by Malaguzzi during his time as a student of Italian Deweyan scholar Bruno Ciari at the University of Bologna. The enduring influence of Dewey on Malaguzzi’s thinking is evident. In a set of lecture notes from the late 1970’s, Malaguzzi wrote, “I remember...that after 1950, in around 1956 and 1957, Italian journals were discussing Dewey in some way...and perhaps we need to rediscover him again today”.⁴⁹

Given his study of and admiration for Dewey, it is not difficult to imagine that Malaguzzi’s vision for Reggio Emilia was inspired by Dewey’s description of the school that is envisioned in *School and Society*. The school Dewey described was one designed for experimentation and for the evolution of theory and practice – a school inspired by inquiry. In 1963, when Malaguzzi spoke of Dewey’s concept of school as laboratory, he encouraged what he described as “the need to look at educational solutions in the spirit of research.”⁵⁰ It is this school-as-laboratory sensibility that remains a visible expression of a theory of teaching and learning oriented in experimentation and inquiry, inspired by the visionary thinking of Dewey.

⁴⁷ Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*, 71.

⁴⁸ Please see Gai Lindsay, “Reflections in the Mirror of Reggio Emilia’s Soul: John Dewey’s Foundational Influence on Pedagogy in the Italian Educational Project,” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 43, 6 (2015): 447–457.

⁴⁹ Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*, 71.

⁵⁰ Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*, 71.

CHAPTER 3

THE QUALITY AGENDA IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

For most people, quality remains a challenge, something to be achieved,
rather than a problem, something to be questioned.⁵¹

-- Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss,
Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

In the 1980s, *discourses of quality* emerged in the United States as a dominant way of purporting to know, understand, and communicate about young children and their education. In the decades since, the concept of quality has had a profound influence on policy and practice in ECEC, an influence which, according to Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence, assumes “that both indicators and outcomes [in ECEC] are universal and objective, identifiable through the application of expert knowledge and reducible to accurate measurement given the right techniques.”⁵² The concept of quality is “strongly modernist, positivistic in approach and committed to the importance of generating objective forms of knowledge,”⁵³ with a reliance on evaluation and assessment instruments that reflect what seems to be an intractable belief that developmental psychology’s norms and standards have “predictive significance for children’s development.”⁵⁴ As Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence describe it, “the discipline of developmental psychology and the discourse of quality in early childhood have fitted like hand in glove.”⁵⁵

The term “quality” is tossed around with frequency and with a confidence in the potential of this very specific notion of quality to inform practice in ECEC in ways that support children’s healthy development and reinforces in teachers a particular understanding of their role in the

⁵¹ Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan R. Pence, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation* (London: Routledge, 2013), 3.

⁵² Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, *Beyond Quality*, 5.

⁵³ Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, *Beyond Quality*, 106.

⁵⁴ Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, *Beyond Quality*, 5.

⁵⁵ Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, *Beyond Quality*, 106.

education of young children. And yet, even with enormous expectations laid at the base of the concept of quality, putting a finger on precisely what is meant by *quality* proves tricky. Through several decades, a neoliberal conception of quality has become taken-for-granted in ECEC, such that the meaning of quality is rarely explicated and the sway of quality is rarely contested. With that said, the concept of quality, which has been increasingly codified in ECEC policy and practice in the United States, is grounded in a developmental perspective on children, education, and the purpose of schools.

The most influential conception of quality in the United States is promulgated throughout the federally-mandated development of Quality Rated Improvement Systems (QRIS) by each state. Mandated participation in state-level QRIS is a prerequisite to accepting federal funds for childcare subsidies; in turn, QRIS serve as the policy mechanism through which states purport to measure the concept of program quality, to determine what forms of technical assistance should be made available to a school in order to improve quality, and, ultimately, to determine what competitive rating the program deserves for use in its marketing and advertising efforts.

But the question remains: what *is* quality? The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance,⁵⁶ a division of the United States' Department of Health and Human Services, refers to New Mexico's "Essential Elements of Quality for Center Based Early Care and Education Programs" in defining quality; in this document, four essential elements of quality are described: the full participation of each child, health promotion and developmental screenings, professional qualifications, and ratios/group sizes. This dissertation challenges the notion that these are the essential elements of quality in ECEC, and makes a case for practitioners and policymakers to consider other conceptions of what might constitute quality in ECEC. Before

⁵⁶ "QRIS Resource Guide," The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, accessed July 15, 2023, <https://ecquality.acf.hhs.gov/resource-guide>.

making this case, however, it is necessary to look at the historical roots of the contemporary conception of quality in ECEC.

The Roots of the Quality Agenda: Social Efficiency and the Curriculum Wars

When John Franklin Bobbitt co-opted Frederick Winslow Taylor's theory of scientific management by applying its principles to education, the social efficiency movement in education was born. The principles of social efficiency are readily traced to Taylor's theory of scientific management, with its focus on maximizing optimal output and minimizing the cost of production. When Bobbitt applied scientific management theory to schools, he replicated Winslow's ideas in the "building" of individual students. Scientific management principles had a meaningful influence on not only the content to be taught to individual students but also on the way in which teachers were expected to deliver content in schools. "The heart of scientific management lay in the careful specification of the task to be performed and the ordering of the elements of that task in the most efficient sequence."⁵⁷ Unlike progressivism, with its emphasis on education as experiential, lifelong, and necessary for the development of a democratic disposition in citizenry, social efficiency theorists envisioned an education that would instill more obedience in children and make expectations for their individual roles in society more clear.

In 1912, with the publication of "The Elimination of Waste in Education," Bobbitt emerged as a leading voice in the effort to tailor the discourse and the practice in schools to reflect that of the industrial world, where waste and inefficiency were seen as primary threats to profit and progress. Efficiency was meant to eliminate waste and "to achieve the higher purpose of a more orderly and less contentious society. It was a reform that political conservatives could

⁵⁷ Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 21.

easily embrace.”⁵⁸ While Bobbitt’s push for efficiency was often about administrative matters in schools (i.e., arrangement of the physical plant, use of bells to signify movement of students, and organization of students within the educational space), there were also important implications for curriculum, which Herbert Kliebard⁵⁹ describes:

Efficiency became more than a byword in the educational world; it became an urgent mission. That mission took the form of enjoining curriculum-makers to devise programs of study that prepared individuals specifically and directly for the role they would play as adult members of the social order. To go beyond what someone had to know in order to perform that role successfully was simply wasteful.⁶⁰

Social efficiency emphasized individuality and creating schools that privileged individual strengths and pre-determined goals based on quantified assessments.

In order to reduce waste, educators had to institute a process of scientific measurement leading to a prediction as to one’s future role in life. Within the framework of the new theory, “education according to need” was simply another way of saying “education according to predicted social and vocational role.”⁶¹

Labaree argues that the progressive movement offered two possibilities for education – pedagogical and administrative progressivism – and the social efficiency camp allied with the administrative progressives; in turn, administrative progressives thrived under the neoliberal ideology that emerged during the 1980s and that has served as the primary driver of educational policy and practice since the publication of the Reagan-era report “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” in 1983. Within a decade of the report’s publication, school reform was on the lips and in the speeches of nearly every politician in America. Indeed, school reform was an issue that united politicians across the aisle.

⁵⁸ Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 82.

⁵⁹ While I rely on Kliebard’s influential *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* for a historical perspective on the rise of progressivism, it is important to acknowledge criticisms of Kliebard’s lack of attention to the multicultural history of American education. For more on these criticisms, please see Wayne Au, Anthony Lamar Brown, and Aramoni Dolores Calderón, *Reclaiming the Multicultural Roots of U.S. Curriculum: Communities of Color and Official Knowledge in Education* (Teachers College Press, 2016).

⁶⁰ Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 77.

⁶¹ Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 84.

Republicans set national education goals with the aid of Clinton Democrats. A national school “report card,” with charts and graphs, appeared annually from the Department of Education, which Republicans otherwise regarded as the demon child of the Carter administration. Strange new phrases such as “performance indicators” rolled off the tongues of experts who vowed to measure progress ever more efficiently.⁶²

The ease with which politicians from across the political spectrum came together around the socially-efficient vision of school reform is evidence of the rise and the power of neoliberal ideology in the United States.

The Emergence and Influence of Neoliberalism

The late 1970s saw neoliberalism emerge as a powerful contender in the ongoing battle for the discourse and ideology around which societal norms and expectations are structured. Since that time, the language and vision of neoliberalism has infiltrated virtually all spheres of society, from banks to philanthropic organizations to utility companies to the airline industry. As Wendy Brown describes it, neoliberalism is “an order of normative reasoning that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation for economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life.”⁶³

Education has not been insulated from the neoliberal imagination of the world. Within the neoliberal framework for society, educational policy and practice is influenced by a set of beliefs that prioritizes market-based solutions to social problems, which rely on techniques like meritocracy, auditing, privatization, and deregulation to construct its vision of public and private lives. While neoliberalism has not always had the dominance over the conceptions of social life that it currently enjoys, its rise has been steady and stealthily orchestrated since the 1940s with such success that the assumptions that neoliberalism makes about political life, society, and

⁶² William J. Reese, *America’s Public Schools: From the Common School to “No Child Left Behind”* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 8.

⁶³ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2015), 30.

humanity itself are simply taken-for-granted today. The power of neoliberalism echoes throughout political and civil society; neither education in general, nor ECEC in particular, have been spared the sway of neoliberal ideology's influence.

Neoliberalism offers a particular, predetermined perspective – one that situates its gaze toward profit and the free-market – from which a host of questions related to the education and care of young children are considered. What is to be done during the formative years of human development? How do we decide what are the necessary experiences for young children, and what are the ideal environments in which these experiences can emerge? What are the essential components of ECEC? Who decides? When competing agendas emerge that reflect disparate educational, political, and philosophical perspectives and priorities, what is the ultimate arbitrating consideration for decision-making, and who decides? What constitutes *high-quality* in the care and education of young children, and who makes this determination and on what merits? Those who espouse a neoliberal ideology have enjoyed a privileged seat in economic, corporate, and political arenas, which has had increasingly important implications for how the questions are answered, and the ways in which some legislation, policy, and practices have been devised and enacted.⁶⁴

Neoliberalism: Economic Theory Instrumentalized

The origins of neoliberalism can be traced to the formation of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947. As the echoes of World War II reverberated globally, a group of men representing different nations and different professional experiences “were driven by the desire to learn how

⁶⁴ For a robust discussion of the rise of neoliberalism in public and private arenas, see Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

to effectively oppose what they summarily described as collectivism and socialism.”⁶⁵ From this meeting emerged a network of like-minded intellectuals, and from this network was born an organized effort to “economize” political life and other “noneconomic spheres and activities.”⁶⁶

In the United States, a specific iteration of neoliberalism emerged out of the University of Chicago’s School of Economics (the Chicago School) under the guidance of Friedrich Hayek.

From the inception of neoliberalism, Hayek and others at the Chicago School understood that

the condition for [neoliberalism’s] success must be *constructed*, and will not come about ‘naturally’...so neoliberalism is first and foremost a theory of how to reengineer the state in order to guarantee the success of the market and its most important participants, modern corporations.⁶⁷

The ideology that originated in the Chicago School’s interpretation of neoliberalism successfully infiltrated all strata of society with its conceptualization of society as a market.

As neoliberal discourse began to shape thinking in the United States, neoliberal principles simultaneously began to emerge across the globe following The Mont Pelerin Society’s inaugural meeting. In the ensuing decades, neoliberalism morphed into “common sense.” By the 1980s, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was famously declaring “there is no alternative” to neoliberalism. In the view of Thatcher, capitalism’s inevitability was further legitimized by the seeming neutrality it maintained on social issues. Neoliberals argued the free-market was without the biases that characterize human decision-making because capitalism does not rely on human intervention to determine who is a winner – and in a neoliberal society, winning is the fundamental ethos.

⁶⁵ Dieter Plehwe. “Introduction,” in *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, edited by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 6.

⁶⁶ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17.

⁶⁷ Rob Van Horn and Philip Mirowski, “The Rise of the Chicago School of Economics and the Birth of Neoliberalism,” in *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, edited by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 161.

Thatcher's framing of capitalism as the only alternative was embraced by many, which allowed an unfettered market to expand in new ways that intruded more often on everyday life. Similarly, in the United States, President Ronald Reagan spoke of free-market capitalism as a foundational force for good in a civil society. Under the leadership of Thatcher and Reagan, neoliberalism blossomed in Britain and the United States; since that time the seeds of free-market devotion have been successfully sown around the globe. New markets and new techniques for governing have emerged alongside new sources of profit.

In all sectors of society, the performance of neoliberalism has become a nearly invisible yet pervasive means through which political, social, and economic life is structured. The characteristics and the assumptions of neoliberalism – in which civil society as primarily a money-making endeavor and profit is the only arbitrator of human worth – have developed into a taken-for-granted assumption that has been increasingly framed as the only alternative. In the United States as in Great Britain, neoliberal ideology has become synonymous with “common sense.” In the process, new realities have been constructed around the tenets that are at the heart of the neoliberal project. The beliefs and techniques that were constructed by neoliberalism have quickly become taken-for-granted certainties in social and political realms. Within years of its emergence as dominant ideology, neoliberal rhetoric co-opted traditional “common sense,” in favor of a version of truth Michael Apple calls *reconstructed common sense*, which “tacitly [implies] that there is something of a conspiracy among one's opponents to deny the truth or to say only that which is ‘fashionable.’”⁶⁸ David Gilborn depicts common sense as “a powerful technique...[that] assumes that there are no genuine arguments against the chosen position; any opposing views are thereby positioned as false, insincere, or self-serving...the moral high ground

⁶⁸ Michael Apple, *Educating the “Right” Way* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 58.

is assumed and opponents are further denigrated.”⁶⁹ Within neoliberalism’s stealthy reconstruction of what constitutes common sense in ECEC, the education and care of America’s youngest children is increasingly troubled with the trappings of neoliberal ideology, and I offer three examples of this reality later in the chapter. It seems neoliberalism has altered what might be considered common sense when it comes the education and care of young children. I argue that the concept of quality, and the accompanying quality agenda, are used to propel a certain image of children and their education to the collective societal consciousness, such that conversations about a 3-year old’s future economic potential are viewed as a “common sense” and natural way to frame their experiences, education, and care.

The Rule of Neoliberalism and the Rise of the Quality Agenda

While the leap from the rarefied halls of post-World War II University of Chicago to the contemporary American ECEC classroom might seem a tremendous distance, neoliberalism was conceived to operate as a presence in the everyday lives of citizens – a force that works behind the scenes to orchestrate a specific vision for society. For those who espouse a neoliberal worldview, society is a location best governed with guidance from capitalist economic principles and liberal political beliefs. The principal tenet of the neoliberal system is that humans are advantaged by functioning entirely within and exclusively in service to capitalism and the free-market. Accordingly, neoliberalism conceives of and constructs an economic notion of the ideal human that begins at their birth. It is, therefore, no surprise to find neoliberal policies and practices firmly ensconced in the nursery.

⁶⁹ David Gillborn, “Racism and Reform: New Ethnicities/Old Inequalities?” *British Educational Research Journal* 23, no. 3 (1997): 353.

Peter Moss examines popular narratives in ECEC through a neoliberal lens. In his *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood*, he offers a description of neoliberalism and its influence on ECEC:

The story of neoliberalism, therefore, is about how life in all its many facets – including personal relationships – can and should be reduced to economic relationships, based on the constant exercise of competition, choice and calculation by individuals, each one understood to be a unit of human capital and to act in life as ‘homo economicus’ or economic man or woman.⁷⁰

Without its hooks in education, both as a location for communal knowledge construction and as a source for privatization and profit, neoliberalism is weak and, ultimately, unsustainable.

Neoliberalism needs schools. As with virtually any site that is deemed educational, culture is communicated, and power is wielded, in the classroom. The power of neoliberalism is its reliance on what Mark Fisher has termed *capitalist realism*, “a persuasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work in education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.”⁷¹ The ECEC classroom is a place where neoliberalism is both produced and is productive, and neoliberalism reinforces these efforts.

As a final note on the societal influence of neoliberalism, writers like Fisher and other intelligentsia have been tolling the death knell of neoliberalism since 2008, when the federal government bailed out American banks *en masse* to artificially bolster the economy in the face of a nearly unimaginable global financial crisis resulting from decades of neoliberal policies and practices. As Fisher describes the condition of neoliberalism, post-2008:

After the bank bail-outs neoliberalism has, in every sense, been discredited. That is not to say that neoliberalism has disappeared overnight; on the contrary, its assumptions continue to dominate political economy, but they do so now no longer as part of an

⁷⁰ Peter Moss. *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood: An Introduction for Students and Practitioners* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 16-17.

⁷¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 16.

ideological project that has a confident forward momentum, but as inertial, undead defaults.⁷²

To Fisher's point, neoliberalism has lost panache since the 2008 financial crisis. In part this is because within mainstream society, neoliberalism has gradually become more identifiable, more namable, more discussable, and, therefore, more contestable as an ideology. But while the critiques of neoliberalism have become more ubiquitous, the ideology remains largely uncontested in education. Persistent and ardent defenses of neoliberal policy and practices in education are framed as "common sense," and yet, despite the rapid proliferation and increasing visibility of neoliberalism, the ideology's influence remains silent and invisible to most of those who educate, care for, and parent young children. This "un-identifiableness" allows neoliberalism to wield a significant behind-the-scenes influence on ECEC policies and practices. According to Henry Giroux, neoliberal discourses "eliminate democratic policies by making the notion of the social impossible to imagine beyond the isolated consumer and the logic of the market."⁷³

Quality as a Primary, Prominent, and Purposeful Investment in ECEC

Quality, as concept and term, relies on a host of neoliberal technologies to wield meaning in ECEC. Across the United States, quality improvement initiatives in ECEC have proliferated, and these have increasingly articulated and codified a vision of early childhood education as a "service-related industry," which underscores the influence of neoliberalism on the development of ECEC policy. Moss has termed this influence *the quality agenda*.⁷⁴ By defining the parameters of quality in ECEC with economic terms, the language reifies neoliberal ideology by

⁷² Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 78.

⁷³ Henry Giroux. "Neoliberalism as a form of public pedagogy: Making the political more pedagogical" (unpublished manuscript, 2011), https://www.academia.edu/12795711/Neoliberalism_as_public_pedagogy.

⁷⁴ Peter Moss, *Alternative Narratives*.

reimagining ECEC as a potentially profitable industry that peddles a service, which can be assessed in such a way that participation in a rating system is “common sense” because it serves as a marketing tool for individual programs while fostering competition between schools. The quality agenda in ECEC reifies values that are mainstays of neoliberal ideology, including meritocracy, accountability, and privatization, with a reliance on market-based solutions for public problems.

As described by Georgia’s Department of Early Care and Learning, the state’s QRIS “assigns a quality rating (one star, two stars, or three stars) to early education and school-age care centers that meet a set of defined program standards,” which the agency describes as “similar to rating systems for other service-related industries.”⁷⁵ Understandably, educators who work with young children have defended against the neoliberal-oriented perception of early childhood education as a “service-related industry.”⁷⁶ With this defense comes refutation of the assumptions made about children, teaching, and learning that are inherent to the concept of quality.

The essentialized child that is imagined in the quality discourse is not one that early childhood educators encounter in their daily, on-the-ground experiences with children. As such, defining and determining what constitutes ‘quality’ in ECEC has been “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

⁷⁵ “Georgia’s Quality Rated System,” Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning), accessed September 20, 2022, <https://qualityrated.decal.ga.gov/>.

⁷⁶ For further discussion of ECEC educators’ defense of early education as something other than a “service-industry,” see Peter Moss, *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood: An Introduction for Students and Practitioners* (Routledge, 2019); Guy Roberts-Holmes and Peter Moss, *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education: Markets, Imaginaries, and Governance* (Routledge, 2021); and Sally Neaum, “School Readiness and Pedagogies of Competence and Performance: Theorising the Troubled Relationship Between Early Years and Early Years Policy,” *International Journal of Early Years Education* 24, no.3 (2016), 239-253.

parties.”⁷⁷ Teachers are not invited to sit alongside policymakers, academics, legislators, and others who are responsible for determining how quality is defined and assessed.

The Influence of Quality Rated Improvement Systems in the United States

The nation’s first QRIS were developed in the 1990s, and since that time they have proliferated nationwide. In a report published by the Center for American Progress, a progressive think tank located in Washington, D.C., 49 states either had created, or were in the process of creating, ECE QRIS by 2017.⁷⁸ In all of these states, the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (ECERS-3) is an instrument used to measure a program’s “best practices” in ECEC classrooms for children over age 3 (for children under age 3, the *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale* is used). Both assessment instruments are in their third edition, and each has become a standard-bearer for assessment of ECE classroom environments. The ECERS-3 is described with more depth later in this chapter.

Over my 30-year career as an ECEC educator in Georgia, the state’s QRIS (Quality Rated, henceforth QR) has become familiar to me; for that reason, I will focus on Georgia as an exemplar for the influence of QRIS on ECEC policy and practice. Georgia adopted a QR in 2012. According to the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, QR is

a star rating system to improve the quality of early care and education programs as well as provide families with clear information on these programs. Many states have implemented tiered quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) initiatives similar to Georgia’s, with the goals of raising the quality of early care and education and positively impacting child outcomes.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, *Beyond Quality*, 99.

⁷⁸ Simon Workman, “QRIS 101: Fact Sheet,” Center for American Progress, May 11, 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2017/05/11/432149/qr-101-fact-sheet/>.

⁷⁹ Nnenna Ogbu, “An Introduction to Quality Rated: Georgia’s Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System for Child Care Providers,” The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, August 26, 2014, <https://gosa.georgia.gov/introduction-quality-rated-georgias-tiered-quality-rating-and-improvement-system-child-care>.

QR includes five elements: quality standards; a process for monitoring or assigning ratings based on quality standards; a process for supporting providers in quality improvement; financial incentives; and dissemination of ratings to parents and other consumers.⁸⁰ Becoming a QR program involves a year-long process which includes the creation of a program portfolio, a series of classroom observations, professional development plans for all educators, etc. At the end of the assessment period, a program is evaluated and awarded a number of stars, based on its overall score. Programs are rated one-, two-, or three-stars, and this rating is made available to anyone seeking childcare through Georgia's childcare database.

The QR tiered rating system proports to provide parents with important information via the star rating system which will be useful in choosing the best childcare option for their families. As described on the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL)'s website,

Parents and families need an independent, trustworthy resource to help them find high-quality child care, preschool, and Pre-K programs. That's where Georgia's Quality Rated comes in. Quality Rated has an online tool that helps families find child care in their area that have been evaluated by credentialed early childhood experts and deemed high-quality. Families can have peace of mind knowing that any participating child care program is committed to providing children an environment and experience that is best for their development.⁸¹

Another focus of QRIS are the development and implementation of standards. ECEC has not traditionally had a focus on predetermined curricular standards, until those who make policy for ECEC began looking towards K-12 schools for a model of "best practices" in education; at that time, a suspicion seemed to arise that the lack of measurable standards for young children must undermined the quality of their early childhood experiences. The emphasis on standards in QR is seen as essential to elevating the quality of ECEC programs. The Georgia Early Learning

⁸⁰ Ogbu, "An Introduction to Quality Rated."

⁸¹ "Quality Rated," Quality Rated, 2020, <http://www.decal.ga.gov/QualityInitiatives/QualityRated.aspx>.

Standards (GELDS), which are used as the foundation for assessing ECEC programs in the state, are described in the *Quality Rated Child Care Program Manual* as “understandable, measurable, and can be verified.”⁸²

Across the nation, participation in a statewide QRIS is a requirement for ECEC programs to accept federally-funded child care subsidies for low-income families.⁸³ The built-in financial incentives of QRIS serve as a motivator for programs to embrace the “quality improvement effort” (whether they like it or not and/or conceptualize “quality” differently or not) and for parents to search out programs that are QR. According to the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL),

CAPS [Childcare and Parent Services] providers who earn a star rating will receive tiered reimbursement on their CAPS payments. Tiered reimbursement is a quality bonus that increases your total CAPS payment by 10% for one star, 20% for two stars, and 40% for three stars. Families at Quality Rated providers also receive a 15% discount on their family fee.⁸⁴

Quality Assessment: The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale

QRIS use various instruments of assessment and standards of evaluation in determining whether to label an ECEC program high-quality, low-quality, or something in between. Of these instruments, the ECERS-3 is the most well-known and commonly used assessment tool for evaluating program quality in ECEC. In addition to being the instrument used by validators in the process of voluntary National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation, the ECERS-3 is also used in most statewide QRIS. According to the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, in 2016 the ITERS/ECERS-3 instrument was

⁸² “Quality Rated Child Care Program Manual,” Quality Rated (Department of Early Care and Learning, June 1, 2019), https://qualityrated.decal.ga.gov/content/documents/pm_programmanual.pdf.

⁸³ “CAPS Quality Rated Deadline,” CAPS Quality Rated Deadline | Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) (Department of Early Care and Learning, 2019), <https://caps.decal.ga.gov/en/CAPSQualityRatedDeadline>.

⁸⁴ “CAPS Quality Rated Deadline.”

used for QRIS in 31 states (76 percent).⁸⁵ The ECERS-3 was first published in 1980, when the concept of quality was beginning to dominate the discourse in ECEC. The publication is currently in its third edition. In the introduction to the most recent edition, the ECERS-3 is described as “the most widely used early childhood environment quality assessment instrument in the United States and worldwide—used in more than 20 countries and formally published in 16 of those countries, with additional translations currently underway.”⁸⁶

As a tool purported to assess quality, the ECERS-3 offers a specific way of naming, normalizing, and naturalizing the concept of quality in early childhood education. The introduction to the latest edition of the ECERS-3 describes a “basic approach of scoring the set of yes/no indicators of quality and basing the 1-7 point Item scores on the Indicator scores.”⁸⁷ The indicators of quality which the ECERS-3 assesses include space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interaction, and program structure. A single 3-hour observation of each classroom in the school is one of the key tools in the administration of the ECERS-3; it is worth noting that the instructions for the administration of the ECERS-3 explicitly state, in bold lettering for emphasis, “A staff interview is not used when scoring this scale. All scores are based on observation.”⁸⁸ The experiential-based knowledge of the teacher has seemingly been deemed irrelevant in determining what constitutes quality, why quality matters, and how quality is enacted and evaluated in ECEC settings.

The ECERS-3 represents a decades-long effort to quantify the named indicators of quality in ECEC – by classifying and counting materials that are available in classrooms, and

⁸⁵ “QRIS Compendium 2016 Fact Sheets: Use of Observational Tools in QRIS” (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2016), https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/qrisc_observational_tools_2016.pdf.

⁸⁶ Thelma Harms, Richard M. Clifford, and Debby Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2015), 1.

⁸⁷ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment*, 1.

⁸⁸ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment*, 7.

assigning numerical scores (on a scale of 1 to 7) to indicators like staff-child interactions, supervision, safety practices, and the encouragement of children to use language. This effort to quantify the experiences of children, to rationally and objectively score the quality of these experiences, is reductive and essentializing. According to Lorraine Code, claims to know quality through the processes of naming, naturalizing, and normalizing “reduce the child to mere appetite needing to be disciplined, mastered...the extent to which the child’s agency itself shapes developmental processes, from earliest infancy, drops out of sight.”⁸⁹ Similarly, the teacher’s agency is reduced through the ECERS-3 assessment process, as her on-the-ground knowledge is disciplined and mastered through the systematic dismissal of her experiences. The knowledge of quality that might be shared from the unique epistemic location of the teacher is deemed less epistemologically relevant than is the “scientific imaginary” that is reified in the QRIS process for being, in the words of Code, “self-contained and politically neutral” with “normative meanings, customs, expectations, assumptions, values, prohibitions, and permissions.”⁹⁰

The ECERS-3 has emerged as a prominent and frequently used tool that claims to inform the quality agenda in ECEC with an uncontested truth about children, teaching, and learning. Through discourses of developmental psychology, neoliberal technologies have been devised that promote a vision of quality that seeks to name, naturalize, and normalize children, their classroom experiences, and the ways in which educators are expected to engage with them – in predetermined ways, towards predetermined ends. As Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence describe it, “both discourses – quality and child development – are strongly modernist, positivistic in approach and committed to the importance of generating objective forms of knowledge. Both

⁸⁹ Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2006), 154.

⁹⁰ Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 244-45.

have adopted the assumptions of the natural sciences – with their emphasis on the constructed and local nature of both problems and answers.”⁹¹

The Regime of Quality: What, Why, How, and Who Decides?

In contemporary ECEC, *quality* remains an amorphous concept around which legislators, policymakers, academics, and educators nonetheless have rallied. Because quality is an imprecise concept that has been nebulously defined, it can hold different meanings in different contexts. Nevertheless, *high-quality* has gained traction as a catchphrase that lures parents into school enrollment, creates competition between ECEC schools, and promises ECEC teachers a new kind of professionalism that they have not previously enjoyed. As described previously, the concept of quality serves a function that is common to neoliberal techniques; namely, quality allows a neoliberal agenda to hide in plain sight through what Apple describes as “major shifts in our common sense.”⁹² Neoliberalism hides itself in plain view, behind the assumptions it makes and the stories it tells about what constitutes high-quality ECEC, assumptions and stories have become taken-for-granted common sense. “At the center of neoliberalism is a new form of politics in the United States...a politics that hides its own ideology by eliminating the traces of its power in a rhetoric of normalization, populism, and the staging of public spectacles.”⁹³

The remainder of this chapter will examine how neoliberalism has influenced ECEC policy and practice. Three unique settings provide exemplars through which the assumptions and the consequences of neoliberalism in general, and the quality agenda specifically, are interrogated and made visible. First, the influential Heckman Equation’s return-on-investment rationalizations for funding ECEC are considered. Second, a case study of the Early Learning

⁹¹ Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, *Beyond Quality*, 106.

⁹² Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way*, 35.

⁹³ Henry A. Giroux, “The Terror of Neoliberalism: Rethinking the Significance of Cultural Politics,” *College Literature* 32, no. 1 (2005): 12.

Center in Dekalb County, Georgia is used to explore neoliberalism “in action” in ECEC. Finally, the “neoliberal paradox” of regulation and de-regulation is examined. In this final example, the battle over teacher-to-child ratios in ECEC are considered, a battle which reveals what might be termed the paradox of regulation and deregulation under neoliberalism.

The Heckman Equation: An Influential Neoliberal Imagining of Childhood

What is the value of the formative years of human development, the years of early childhood that philosophy, neuroscience, and psychology, in a rare moment of allegiance, have agreed are precious in the development of individuals and of society? James Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago, has built an extraordinarily successful academic career purporting to have answered this question. In 2000, Heckman was awarded the Noble Prize for Economic Sciences for his work in “the economics of human development.” Based on his research on the economic impact of ECEC, Heckman argues that ECEC has a measurable influence on the value of children’s lives. Heckman quantifies this influence with his description of the “13% ROI [return-on-investment] that high-quality, comprehensive, early childhood programs provide.”⁹⁴

One of the ways in which neoliberal ideology is reified by Heckman is in his conception of *value* as it relates to young children. For Heckman, value isn’t a metaphorical nor a philosophical concept; instead, value is a literal economic indicator of worth. In Heckman’s theorizing, the value of a child’s early experiences in ECEC are translated into the literal worth of the child’s futurized self, a worth that is calculable and sharable. In a December 2014 report entitled, “The Economics of Early Childhood Investments,” the Obama administration repeatedly cited Heckman’s research making the case for public and private funding of ECEC.

⁹⁴ The Heckman Equation, “13% ROI Research Toolkit,” *The Heckman Equation*, October 14, 2021, <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/13-roi-toolbox/>.

This report describes the economic returns to investments in childhood development and early education. Reviewing recent research, it is clear that early education programs in general are good investments. In the short-run, programs have been shown to increase earnings and employment for parents. In the long-run, the programs can benefit participants and society by increasing the earnings and employment of participants, improving health, reducing anti-poverty spending, and reducing crime. *Research shows that past early learning initiatives have provided total benefits to society, including reduced crime, lower anti-poverty transfers, and educational savings, of up to \$8.60 over a child's lifetime for every \$1 spent, and current programs will likely yield similar benefits.*⁹⁵ (italics added for emphasis)

The influence of Heckman's work led to the launch "the Heckman Equation" at the University of Chicago in 2007, described as a

strategic communications initiative [that] has amplified Professor Heckman's research with aims to direct public and private investment toward early childhood programs and innovations. The online resources provided at the Heckman Equation website and social media channels highlight the great gains to be had by investing in the early and equal development of human potential.⁹⁶

The Heckman Equation offers data-driven proof, the darling of the education neoliberal machine, of the positive effects that the "right" kind of ECEC has on society – not only on a child's future earning potential but also, more generally, on their successes in adulthood (which Heckman calls "lifecycle benefits). ECEC might mitigate the economic toll of children's future selves, but the goal is more than economic theorizing. Beyond improving the earning potential of the futurized child, Heckman's Equation promises a host of significant social consequences from ECEC investment, including positive effects in "a wide variety of life outcomes, such as health, crime, income, IQ, schooling, and the increase in a mother's income."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ "The Economics of Early Childhood Investments," Obama White House Archives (Council of Economic Advisers, Executive Office of the President), accessed March 9, 2022, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/early_childhood_report_update_final_non-embargo.pdf.

⁹⁶ "The Heckman Equation Initiative," Center for the Economics of Human Development (The Heckman Equation, July 22, 2020), https://cehd.uchicago.edu/?page_id=237.

⁹⁷ The Heckman Equation, "13% ROI."

The Heckman Equation was developed within a specific context of ECEC and is intended to be used with a specific population of children. The study on which much of Heckman's research is based is the famous Perry Preschool Project, the longest running longitudinal study of ECEC in the United States. Children who participated in the study, which ran from 1962 to 1967 in Michigan,

had to (i) be African-American; (ii) have low Stanford–Binet IQ scores at baseline; and (iii) be socioeconomically disadvantaged according to an index of socioeconomic status based on employment and education levels of the parents as well as the number of persons per room at home. The Perry families were more disadvantaged relative to a majority of African-American families at that time in the United States. However, the Perry families were by and large representative of a substantial fraction of the underprivileged African-American population.⁹⁸

In his later publications, Heckman reminds readers that “the negative effects of a disadvantaged early childhood are similar across races”⁹⁹ as justification for the continued relevance of studies like the Perry Preschool Project for contemporary ECEC policy and practices. Ultimately, however, such justifications seem unwarranted, as the Heckman Equation research is used to rationalize ECEC for all children, across classes, races, and regions.

The Heckman Equation is used persuasively to argue for ECEC investment across the public and private sectors. In public arenas like schools and in corporate settings that subsidize ECEC for employees, ECEC emerges not only as a human resources matter that ensures parental employment, but also as a means of claiming to support the public good by positioning the next generation of citizens to become successful participants in society, especially in the roles of producers and consumers.

⁹⁸ James J. Heckman and Ganesh Karapakula, “The Perry Preschoolers at Late Midlife: A Study in Design-Specific Inference” (working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 2019). https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25888/w25888.pdf p 6

⁹⁹ James J Heckman, “There's More to Gain By Taking a Comprehensive Approach to Early Childhood Development.” (Chicago, IL: The Heckman Equation, 2019), pp. 1-2. https://heckmanequation.org/www/assets/2017/01/F_Heckman_CBAOnePager_120516.pdf

Similarly, arguments for social funding for ECEC rely on the idea that children are investments that quite literally pay off the public coffers in the long run, a pitch that futurizes the investment in the child while seemingly disregarding the child's current reality. With Heckman's return-on-investment results in hand, there emerges a persuasive argument for the increased availability of ECEC and more financial investments in ECEC. But, as noted above, Heckman isn't just talking about any kind of ECEC. The Heckman Equation research repeatedly refers to *quality* as the arbitrator of the value of ECEC. The language of quality is pervasive in policy discussions of ECEC; as an example, in September 2021, the U.S. Department of Treasury released a report entitled "The Economics of Child Care Supply in the United States," which described a need for high-quality ECEC.

Children benefit enormously from high-quality early childhood settings that nurture and support healthy development, all while laying the foundation for future success by supporting early learning skills. An extensive body of research describes large potential economic returns to investments in early childhood education and care for preschool children, especially for children from less advantaged families.¹⁰⁰

And we return to the questions that are repeatedly raised in an examination of the quality agenda. What constitutes high-quality in ECEC? Who decides? How? As with the economic rationality that is used to justify public and private support of ECEC, neoliberal techniques are employed to develop a concept of *quality* and to enact the resulting *regime of quality* that influences ECEC policy and practices. If one of the caveats of Heckman's research is that positive outcomes in ECEC are only possible when the ECEC that is offered is high-quality, what exactly does high-quality mean? How does one differentiate between low-quality and high-quality? Neither the Heckman Equation, the Obama and Biden administrations, nor the U.S. Department of the

¹⁰⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury. *The Economics of Child Care Supply in the United States*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 2021. <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/The-Economics-of-Childcare-Supply-09-14-final.pdf>, 1 (Accessed March 1, 2022)

Treasury offer clues about what constitutes quality in their extensive detailing of the ROI of high-quality ECEC.

This issue of quality in ECE, which is so essential to the positive ROI outcomes that are celebrated by neoliberals, is to be settled elsewhere, away from the economic rationalization of ROI. While defining and enacting quality in ECEC is not the purview of economists, economic rationality intercedes in conversations about quality. Neoliberalism casts a long shadow over the conceptions of what constitutes quality in ECEC.

The quality agenda is used in service of meritocracy, accountability, privatization, deregulation, and other market-based solutions. In what follows, a brief case study of Dekalb County School District's Early Learning Center (ELC) demonstrates how neoliberal policies and practices can be constructed and enacted in an ECEC environment that is widely considered high-quality. Experiences from Dekalb County's ELC are useful for elucidating the ways in which neoliberalism can influence the lives and the experiences of young children in ECEC settings.

The Dekalb County Early Learning Center: Neoliberal Policies and Practices in Action

In August 2018, Dekalb County School District (DCSD) opened the Early Learning Center (hereafter ELC) at Terry Mill Elementary School. Designed as a program for 200 of the district's three-year olds, the ELC was touted as the first program of its kind in the state of Georgia – a free, public school-sponsored option for preschoolers. On the DCSD website, the ELC is described as “a preschool program that addresses the readiness gap which positively impacts the opportunity gap. It also accelerates cognitive and language development in young children.”¹⁰¹ Local news stories acclaim the ELC effort with headlines like “DeKalb Leads the

¹⁰¹ “Early Learning Initiative,” Dekalb County School District, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.dekalbschoolsga.org/early-learning-initiative/>

Way on Early Learning In Georgia”¹⁰² and “DCSD to Celebrate New Early Learning Academy at Terry Mill Elementary.”¹⁰³ Common sense suggests that the creation of a program like the ELC must be the result of good policy, designed to improve the lives of the students who are most in need of ECEC. But with deeper interrogation, the ELC’s policies and its underlying educational philosophy reveal a neoliberal orientation that influences the ELC’s vision of children, learning, and teaching in an ECEC setting.

One of the taken-for-granted, ever-present rationalizations that neoliberalism uses to justify its market-based education policies is closing the school readiness and achievement gaps. As in Heckman’s research, these gaps are used to illustrate disadvantages in certain populations, and to justify the adoption of “common sense” neoliberal policies that promise to ameliorate the gaps. This is the story my friend the police officer was telling about education, the commonly-held belief that essentialism is “best” for children living in poverty; as I will show later, there is persuasive evidence to the contrary. And yet, even if the claim were true without doubt that a program like the ELC is beneficial for the children who attend, the transportation policy at the ELC demonstrates how little is done in the program’s enrollment policies to ensure that those children who are most economically and socially disadvantaged – and, therefore, according to their own data, the children most likely to experience school readiness and achievement gaps – are the ones who are served by the program. If, indeed, the effort is to close gaps for poor children, the ELC’s transportation policy for enrolled families calls into question the sincerity of this effort. Enrollment in the ELC “is open on a first-come, first-served basis to parents who can

¹⁰² Martha Dalton, “DeKalb Leads the Way on Early Learning in Georgia,” WABE News, October 2, 2019. <https://www.wabe.org/dekalb-leads-the-way-on-early-learning-in-georgia/>

¹⁰³ “DCSD to celebrate new Early Learning Academy at Terry Mill Elementary,” On Common Ground News, last modified June 20, 2018, <http://ocgnews.com/dcsd-celebrate-new-early-learning-academy-terry-mill-elementary/>

provide their own transportation.... For parents who don't drive, the academy is about half a mile from MARTA Bus Route 107, which stops on Glenwood Road."¹⁰⁴ For parents who do not have access to a personal vehicle and must rely on public transportation (which would undoubtedly be a large number of the impoverished families who enroll), attendance in the ELC would require two one-mile-long walks between the bus stop and the school; a full mile of that daily trek would be spent with a three-year old in tow. For obvious reasons, the challenges of getting a young child to and from the ELC may discourage enrollment for families who are facing the economic challenges of living and working in a large metropolitan area with less-than-ideal public transportation. In theory, the very families that the ELC should target for participation should be those families that experience the economic fragility and the social challenges inherent to life without reliable transportation; in actuality, these vulnerable families are left on their own to maneuver the challenges of transportation for their children. The transportation challenges at the ELC offers an example of how neoliberalism embraces meritocracy as value; parents who want to access a program that is designed to improve their children's educational outcomes are left to "pull up their own bootstraps" to make program accessibility a reality for their child.

Former Dekalb County School Superintendent Stephen Green, under whose leadership the ELC was formed, addressed the lack of school transportation for ELC students when he spoke of a desire to secure external funding for busses from a corporate sponsor. In this effort, the emergence of "a second variant of neoliberalism" becomes apparent, in which there is a willingness to make resources "available for 'reforms' and policies that further connect the

¹⁰⁴ J. F. Parker, "Early Childhood Academy for 3-Year-Olds Offered," Crossroads News, accessed September 2020, http://www.crossroadsnews.com/news/local/early-childhood-academy-for--year-olds-offered/article_c2a84570-759d-11e8-a768-df089f387c54.html

education system to the project of making our economy more competitive.”¹⁰⁵ To quote former Superintendent Green, “Our doors are open to grand opportunity, and also to sponsors... We may invite corporate sponsors to help us—philanthropic organizations that want to join and help us expand this model.”¹⁰⁶ Green also described the ELC as “a proven model of success... that he wants to replicate... as quickly as they can. ‘But at the same time, we have limited resources,’ he said. ‘If we want to see it accelerate, we are going to need help.’”¹⁰⁷

As is often the case in contemporary American public education, the source of this help is envisioned as coming from corporate entities, which begs the question: to what end would corporate sponsors want to see the ELC “accelerate,” as Green describes it? Dr. Zack Phillips, the director of the ELC, gives insight into corporate motivation to support the ELC as he describes the curriculum, in which children will be “exposed to science, technology, engineering, math and coding, and in their second year, to a foreign language.” As he describes the STEM-focused curriculum that has been devised for three-year olds, Phillips succinctly cites a prevailing motivation for the corporate sponsorship of education: “The return on investment will be powerful.”¹⁰⁸ The Heckman Equation’s ROI rationalizations surface in support of the enactments at the heart of neoliberal market-based education policy; the human-as-capital mindset dominates discourse while the mindset that sees education as an act of humanization is recast as unrealistic, “a conspiracy... to deny the truth” and an effort to practice “fashionable” political correctness.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Apple, *Educating the “Right” Way*, 34.

¹⁰⁶ Derek Smith, “DeKalb School District Debuts New Early Learning Academy,” *The Champion Newspaper*, July 12, 2018, <http://thechampionnewspaper.com/news/local/dekalb-school-district-debuts-early-learning-academy/>

¹⁰⁷ Parker, “Early Childhood Academy.”

¹⁰⁸ Smith, “DeKalb School District Debuts.”

¹⁰⁹ Apple, *Educating the “Right” Way*, 58.

Another way in which neoliberalism informs ECEC policy is through audit culture, in which “the use of indicators, measurements, and rankings have become increasingly pervasive, both as instruments in the internal management of organizations and in the external representations of their quality, efficiency, and accountability to the wider public.”¹¹⁰ Under the influence of audit culture, educational environments are constructed which disregard the developmental needs of children in favor of the potential profit of assessment and the opportunity to devise new technologies to address assessment outcomes. In education, assessment also serves a unique role in the creation of value-added educator evaluations, another example of a neoliberal technique in action. In fact, Green was charged by the DeKalb county school board upon his hire in 2015 to “develop a merit-based bonus system” for teachers.¹¹¹ As Apple reminds us, “neoliberalism requires the constant production of evidence that you are doing things ‘efficiently’ and in the ‘correct’ way.”¹¹² To this end, the ELC uses “the Georgia Pre-K Work Sampling System Assessment Program to gauge the success of the school.”¹¹³ The Pre-K Work Sampling System Assessment Program is distributed by Pearson Early Learning. As is true throughout P-12 public education, Pearson is the corporate beneficiary to the burgeoning assessment industry that has emerged in early childhood settings. Because three-year old children have always been considered “pre-school aged,” they have traditionally been exempted from the testing mechanizations of modern day schooling; in the neoliberal era, however, preschoolers increasingly represent an untapped source of profit for Pearson and other giants in the testing/assessment industry.

¹¹⁰ Cris Shore and Susan Wright, “Audit Culture Revisited: Rankings, Ratings, and the Reassembling of Society,” *Current Anthropology* 56, no. 3 (June 2015): 421.

¹¹¹ Walker, “School Chief Green to Exit.”

¹¹² Apple, *Educating the “Right” Way*, 99.

¹¹³ Smith, “DeKalb School District Debuts.”

With this emphasis on assessment, the ELC naturally focuses a great deal of its efforts on academic preparedness; the ELC describes its approach to academics with its population of three- and four-year old children on the program website:

The subjects that are taught are Literacy, Mathematics, STEAM, Social Studies, along with a Conscious Discipline/SEL component that is embedded within our curriculum. Students receive both whole and small group instruction along with one-on-one remediation and/or acceleration via data driven instruction. We also offer a plethora of connection classes for our students to experience ranging from Physical Education, Art, Computer Lab, and the Media Center. Everything that we do instructionally is intentional and caters towards our student's learning continuum, learning modalities, and early readiness skills.¹¹⁴

In its effort to close school readiness/achievement gaps and to increase children's scores on academic assessments, the ELC has created a troubling policy for the three-year old children that it serves, a policy which the ELC educators refer to as "double dosing." ELC director Phillips explains, "For students who fall behind a little, the teachers use what's called 'double dosing' at naptime. Teachers work with kids for 10-15 minutes on skills they need extra help to master."¹¹⁵ And what are the skills for which 36 to 48-month old children are held responsible and for which they may have naptime revoked in school? Green referred to letter sounds and learning to count to 20 as the kinds of "school readiness" skills that children need to before they begin Kindergarten; these are the kinds of skills that the ELC prioritizes for its young students at the expense of their sleep and, one might argue, their overall wellbeing.

Regulation and Deregulation: A Neoliberal Paradox

Another example that illustrates the influence of neoliberalism on ECEC policy and practices is the ongoing debate over adult-to-child classroom ratios. An effort of neoliberalism is

¹¹⁴ Dekalb County School District, "Academics in the Early Learning Center," accessed September 19, 2023. <https://elc.dekalb.k12.ga.us/academics.aspx>.

¹¹⁵ Dalton, "DeKalb Leads the Way."

typically to reduce regulations because regulations tend to reduce profits. Regulations require oversight, which might require costly equipment, adjustments to practices, or the hiring of more employees.

Unlike other forms of schooling, many ECEC settings are operated as for-profit businesses by private owners. With profit as the motivation for decisions and action, childcare owners have become a formidable foe against regulation that decreases their profitability. And yet, at the same time, pressure for regulation has increased alongside neoliberal demands for accountability, measures of quality, means for competition, and accreditation for auditing. Increasingly, curriculum and assessment companies have set their sights on ECEC as an untapped source of revenue, but this comes with new sorts of assessments and program evaluations, which are new to ECEC and which necessitate new neoliberal technologies for their implementation. It appears the companies that create the assessment tools are winning a battle against the childcare center owner-operators' interests and potential profitability, although there continues to be strong support in some policymaking corners for this group's economic interests in ECEC.

Public policy thinktanks like the Cato Institute and the Center for American Progress publish glossy reports that describe the effect that deregulation of ECEC would have on accessibility, affordability, and (of course) profitability. Ryan Bourne of the Cato Institute uses neoliberal rationalizations to argue for deregulation in ECEC:

Suppose a regulation increases the staff-child ratio [which]...could theoretically increase quality by increasing staff interactions with individual children...Yet at the same time, raising the staff-child ratio may restrict the wages of caregivers by restricting the revenue potential of each caregiver.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Ryan Bourne, "The Regressive Effects of Child-Care Regulations," The Cato Institute, 2018, <https://www.cato.org/regulation/fall-2018/regressive-effects-child-care-regulations#cost-effects-of-deregulation>

Bourne's description of childcare providers who have been incentivized to want deregulation because of threats to their profits, makes a taken-for-granted assumption that is foundational to the project of neoliberalism: maximizing profits is the only incentive for a rational human being. From a neoliberal orientation, it seems unfathomable, indeed impossible, that someone might be motivated by factors other than profit to provide education and care for young children.

Unfortunately, Bourne has not been proven entirely wrong in his assumptions; a regulatory issue that has long been a site of resistance for owners and operators because of its ramifications for profit is that of class sizes and adult-to-child ratios. Georgia is a case for consideration, with legal adult-to-child ratios that are among the highest in the nation and which do not meet the minimum standards recommended by the National Association for Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC, the preeminent professional organization in ECEC, recommends an adult-to-child ratio of 4-to-1 in a classroom for children under age 1; Georgia allows for a 6-to-1 ratio for this age group. The owners of for-profit ECEC centers in Georgia have long and successfully waged battles against any legislative effort to decrease allowable classroom ratios.

And yet in the efforts for deregulation, a sort of "neoliberal paradox" has emerged in which competing market players have competing agendas. Regulation is *also* responsible for the emergence and persistence of many neoliberal technologies. Accountability, comparison, competition – foundational neoliberal efforts – are only possible if there is a metric of measurement to make the acts of accounting, comparing, and competing possible. These metrics, by definition, require standards and tools to assess standards, in order to make comparisons that set up the conditions for competition. Accreditation requires standards, and standards require regulation, but regulation according to standards can compromise profits. "What is a neoliberal to do?" is a rhetorical question worth posing.

Neoliberal education policy does not only serve to create competition, to challenge regulation, and to develop “school readiness” in young children, In the next chapter, I take up the pedagogical implications of the neoliberal quality agenda in ECEC. The assumptions of the ECER-3 about what constitutes quality in ECEC is interrogated by the philosophy and practice of progressivism.

CHAPTER 4

PROGRESSIVISM AND THE QUALITY AGENDA: IRRECONCIALABLE VISIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

I contend that progressivism offers a counternarrative to the quality agenda's essentialist view of the form and function of education. I have given a historical perspective on the changing beliefs about purposes for and practices in education, which has demonstrated the changing notions of the nebulous concept of quality in ECEC. In this chapter, philosophical analysis will be used to allow progressivism's foundational concepts and theories to "interact" with concepts and theories that are foundational to essentialism's quality agenda. My aim in using this combination of historical and philosophical approaches is to generate a robust rearview for understanding how the quality agenda arose, while giving a similarly robust forward-facing view of how the quality agenda restricts the development and implementation of progressive educational practices in ECEC. As described previously, I will interrogate a specific tool that has been commonly used in service to the quality agenda since its introduction in the 1980s: the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*.

The ECERS-3 identifies six indicators of quality: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interaction, and program structure. I have correlated four of these indicators with a fundamental tenet of progressivism, and this serves as a useful framework in my analysis of the irreconcilable differences that exist between a progressive view of education and a view oriented in the quality agenda. These differences are the product of countervailing images of the child, visions of teaching and learning, imaginings of the role of the teacher, and views on the overall purpose of ECEC.

This chapter is structured in a series of sections, which are titled based on the indicators of quality in ECERS-3 and the analogous countervailing indicators of quality that originate in progressivism, as follows:

- Space and Furnishings, or the Role of the Environment
- Language and Literacy, or Communication
- Learning Activities, or Inquiry and Experience in ECEC
- Interaction, or Relationships

Framing the presentation of my research in this way offers a clear and provocative strategy for giving visibility to and making meaning of the contradictory views of quality represented in essentialism and progressivism. My philosophical approach to the analysis of ECERS-3 seeks to unpack what Foucault called *dominant discourses* in order to uncover the ways in which power is exercised through *regimes of truth*. As Moss describes it,

...Foucault's concept of 'dominant discourses'...[is] the way that certain perspectives or stories claim to be the only way to think, talk and behave about a particular topic, subject or field...Such dominant discourses think, talk and act as if they represent the incontrovertible truth, as if they provide the only valid meaning, as if they are the authorized version on the topic at hand: they act, to use another term coined by Foucault, as regimes of truth.¹¹⁷

Examining dominant discourses of children and childhood – e.g., asking how specific discourses become dominant and why those discourses have proven so compelling in the construction of an image of children – is essential for understanding the societal attitudes about children and the decisions made on their behalf. By looking more closely at these discourses, regimes of truth become identifiable. “One story or discourse will come to dominate and constitute a ‘regime of truth’ consisting of claims to real or true knowledge and best practice that are passed off as

¹¹⁷ Moss, *Alternative Narratives*, 90.

neutral (value-free), natural (incontrovertible), and, therefore, self-evidently (uncontestably) correct.”¹¹⁸

Discourses about children and childhood are created in many cultural spaces, including schools, media, advertising, public policy, and entertainment. One space in which these discourses can be especially provocative is in the assessment documents and tools that are created and disseminated in service to the quality agenda in ECEC; the ECERS-3 represents such a document. Analyzing the ECERS-3 assessment instrument is essential for understanding *how* young children and their education are envisioned in a society that has systematically enacted and reified essentialism and the quality agenda with a sweeping rejection of progressivism as a viable approach to the education of young children.

Space and Furnishings, or the Role of the Environment

In the ECERS-3, a specific image of a classroom is described as an embodiment of high-quality. In this classroom, “quiet and noisy play areas are all separated from one another,”¹¹⁹ “space(s) [are] arranged so that different activities do not interfere with one another,”¹²⁰ and “chairs and tables are child-sized for 75% of the children” while “providing a substantial amount of softness.”¹²¹ As with other indicators in the ECERS-3, there is an emphasis on quantification and counting, from how many pieces of furniture designated for a specific activity are necessary (three), to how many “interest centers” should be observed in use during the observation period (five), to how many “minor hazards” are acceptable on the playground (four). This is a formulaic environment, one in which “natural light should be controllable”¹²² and curriculum should focus

¹¹⁸ Moss, *Alternative Narratives*, 92.

¹¹⁹ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 19.

¹²⁰ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 25.

¹²¹ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 17.

¹²² Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 14.

on pre-determined units of study. like those represented in the much of curricula approved for Georgia's state-funded pre-kindergarten program.¹²³ The ECERS' imagining of the ECEC classroom is not one that is built around listening as an important pedagogical act through which the interests of children are documented and used to fuel long-term explorations. The ECERS-3 view of curriculum design and implementation makes for a very different educational effort than the one made in the progressive ECEC classroom; for example, the ECERS mandates that "the topics of interest in a classroom must change regularly, and evidence of this should be observed,"¹²⁴ while progressive classrooms often make use of displays and documentation that remain unchanged over time in meaningful ways and for intentional purposes that might not be noticeable to those who spend a single, silent 3-hour observation period.

ECERS-3 is looking for evidence of a breadth of curricular reach, while progressive education seeks depth. Keeping focus on the same topic of interest over an extended time, as well as giving visibility to the documents and artifacts from previous experiences, is, in fact, central to and intentional in the effort of progressive education. Dahlberg describes this intention as she has observed it in Reggio Emilia:

Because documentation can be kept and revisited and must be seen all the time as a living record of educational practice, the process of pedagogical documentation can also function as a way to revisit and review earlier experiences and events...it creates not only

¹²³ Much of curricula approved for Georgia's state-funded pre-kindergarten program is predetermined, themed-based, and not emergent in the manner that is typical of the progressive tradition. Georgia's approved Pre-K curriculum list include those that are essentialist in philosophy and neoliberal in orientation. Each curriculum has an initial cost of thousands of dollars, and many also encourage schools to purchase additional teacher training, supplemental materials, and resource books. Examples of Georgia's approved Pre-K curricula includes:

***AlphaSkills Pre-K Curriculum, which advertises 30 thematic units that "include activities matched carefully to each instructional area of language and literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies."

***Frog Street Curriculum, which describes itself as "a comprehensive, research-based program that integrates instruction across developmental domains and early learning disciplines...and is easy to implement.

***Kaplan's Connect4Learning: The Pre-K Curriculum, which includes six interdisciplinary units that address 136 learning objectives and support growth of 10 fundamental cognitive processes."

***WINGS Curriculum, which sells schools "monthly lesson plans with activity ideas for large and small groups, outdoor play and learning centers, plus a Honey-Do list to support implementation, stakeholder engagement, and inclusion."

¹²⁴ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, 22.

memories but also new interpretations and reconstructions of what happened in the past.¹²⁵

The displays of children's words, drawings, stories, maps, etc. that are found in the schools of Reggio Emilia are traces of projects, explorations, and experiences, some of which are central to the identity of the school; it is not unusual for projects to extend from one school year into the next. Documentation displays tell a story of the school and its protagonists, offering opportunities for reflection and memory-sharing, preserving history, and encouraging the revisiting of experiences as a metacognitive pedagogical strategy. When this vision is juxtaposed with the ECERS-3 emphasis on "topics of interest in a classroom [that] must change regularly," there is clear evidence of conflicting visions of quality, which underscores the quality agenda's essentialist understanding of quality versus the child interest-led, reflective conception of quality that centers progressive education.

In Reggio Emilia the role of the environment is essential in the educative process; there is frequent reference to the "environment as the third teacher," a vision for schoolwide spaces that may have been inspired by Dewey's imagining of school as a series of laboratories in which children might research independently and in groups. The influence of Dewey's ideas on Malaguzzi's emerging conception of school is clear, and surely Dewey's ideas about democracy and progressive education were influential in the creation of the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia and the ways in which school environments were designed. Aspects of the environment in Reggio Emilia that may have roots in Dewey's conceptualizations about school include:

¹²⁵ Gunilla Dahlberg, "Pedagogical Documentation: A Practice for Negotiation and Democracy," in *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation*, ed. Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 226.

- A rich and diverse array of materials intended to offer possibilities.
- Spaces that connect the outside and inside worlds.
- Spaces that emphasize the value of daily experiences, “occupations,” and pedagogical investment in quotidian life.
- Environments that encourage exploration, experimentation, and inquiry.
- Spaces that foster community within the school, with an emphasis on social exchange over individualism.
- Specially-designed spaces for specific types of experiences (ateliers, workshops, studios, etc.).

A more in-depth analysis of the influence of Dewey on the development of these specific aspects of the environment in Reggio Emilia, while not the purview of this work, would provide interesting considerations for future work.

The educational environments and spaces in the schools in Reggio Emilia are designed to express a pragmatic and progressive theoretical orientation that is built on a strong image of the child. Malaguzzi’s articulation of a strong image of the child, when seen paralleled with the weak societal image of the child that is typical, gives additional insight into how environment might serve the intelligent and ambitious child he describes:

It’s necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold. Those who have the image of the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass gain something from this belief only for themselves. We don’t need that as an image of children.¹²⁶

Indeed, educators from other contexts who are encountering the schools of Reggio Emilia for the first time are often drawn to the aesthetic dimensions and organization of the physical spaces

¹²⁶ Loris Malaguzzi, "Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins," *Child Care Information Exchange* 3 (1994), 54.

within and around the school. After a visit to Reggio Emilia, an educator's desire to return to their school context and "make it Reggio" is almost stereotypically common. Veia Vecchi, the founding *atelierista* (often translated to "art studio teacher" in American contexts) at the Diana School in Reggio Emilia, notes that "attention towards physical environments has been a kind of starting point from which to begin a journey of evolution for many groups of educators."¹²⁷ Since the inception of the schools to the present day, however, educators from Reggio have cautioned against using their approach as a "model" to be copied and replicated in contexts thousands of miles away. This caution is, at its roots, a warning about the superficiality of focusing on any aspect of education without first a deep, collective examination of beliefs about children – their capabilities, their powers, their competencies – and aligning these beliefs with the values of the community in which the school is situated.

To create the kind of environment to which children have a right (and the rights of children is another strong value expressed in the Reggio Emilia educational project), educators must confront their culturally bred "image of the child." Americans are inundated with images of children that characterize them as weak, needy, bratty, loud, unpleasant. In Reggio Emilia, this narrative about children has been challenged through processes of observation and documentation of children at school and in their community. Such experiences in observation and documentation create a kind of organic encouragement of look anew at spaces created for teaching and learning. A reconsideration of the school environment with pedagogical support from those who have been part of the Reggio Emilia educational project or from those who have studied the Reggio philosophy, can serve as a meaningful pedagogical tool for examining beliefs

¹²⁷ Veia Vecchi, *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the Role and Potential of Ateliers in Early Childhood Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 83.

about teaching and learning. For many educators who encounter Reggio Emilia, this process communicates the value of experimentation in the creation of progressive educational environments.

The experimental approach to the physical design of school spaces that is seen in Reggio Emilia challenges the static, prescriptive environment of ECERS-3, and it reflects Dewey's intentions as he approached schools with a laboratory mindset. As Laurel Tanner said, "Arguably, the most important lesson from Dewey's Laboratory School is the idea of a laboratory school itself."¹²⁸ Dewey's vision for school-as-laboratory was imbued with the traditional idea of a scientific laboratory, and what he imagined this view of school could mean for education. The laboratory school concept represented the possibility that Dewey saw in the intersection of theory and practice, a place where educators could, according to Dewey, "make discoveries about the education of the child by putting theory into practice in an experimental setting and modifying theory by what is learned."¹²⁹

The kind of experimentation with environment that Dewey encouraged is a hallmark of the Reggio Emilia approach. In telling the story of research undertaken in the 1990s by educators and architects with the Domus Academy Research Center in Milan, Vecchi describes educators' "need to take up reflection on environments once again" as a reaction to the pedagogical research they had undertaken regarding environment. As part of their research, educators and architects from Reggio Emilia opted to focus on two areas that are often overlooked in the discussion of pedagogical spaces: school entrances and bathrooms. Vecchi describes the insights that originated in the research of these banal school spaces, including "environments often designed

¹²⁸ Laurel N. Tanner, *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1997), 18.

¹²⁹ Tanner, *Dewey's Laboratory School*, 19.

without sufficient attention paid to spaces that children find important. ...in fact, the way these spaces were perceived and inhabited by children and adults was documented, clearly revealing the extent to which bathrooms are spaces children frequent joyously and that are almost always underestimated in school design.”¹³⁰ Some fifteen years after his death, Vecchi echoed Malaguzzi’s sentiments about the intersection of an educator’s image of the child and their approach to designing the environment as a third teacher: “The care we take when we design environments and the care we take when we inhabit them derive from and correspond to an image of the child (and humanity) that is the foundation of the educational philosophy we refer to.”¹³¹

Choosing to focus attention on spaces that are typically seen as banal and unworthy of attention, beyond their apparently simple and necessary function, is a statement about the way in which educators in Reggio Emilia value quotidian experiences as educative experiences. Without a doubt, this focus on everyday experiences in Reggio Emilia owes a nod to Dewey and his belief that the experiences of daily living were sources of inquiry, which led the way towards the organic and meaningful experiences that are the mark of progressive education.

This vision of the possibilities and potentials for educative spaces challenges that which is articulated in the ECERS. Both Dewey and Malaguzzi embraced experimentation as a key to intersecting theory with practice, thereby generating new theory. This disposition towards experimentation is expressed strongly in their envisioning of spaces and places in a school. This experimental disposition towards physical space and surroundings that is characteristic of the Reggio Emilia educational project is an echo of Dewey’s approach to designing the University Lab School with the intention that a spirit of experimentation would be brought to daily practice,

¹³⁰ Vea Vecchi, *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 91.

¹³¹ Vecchi, *Art and Creativity*, 89.

in an effort to intersect theory and practice on a daily basis and in authentic ways, thereby generating new theory for practice. Dewey's approach to all aspects of the school was grounded in a laboratory approach, in which practice and theory can be refined, reconsidered, relaunched. In acknowledging the difficulty of creating a school that is designed on progressive values that challenge the traditional approaches, Dewey offers a hopeful interpretation of the kind of place schools can be, an interpretation that may have inspired Loris Malaguzzi as he launched the progressive educational project in Reggio Emilia that is now entering its 56th year:

...art is long...Here again we must fall upon the idea of the laboratory. There is no answer in advance to such questions as these. Tradition does not give it... Mere reasoning cannot give it... It is only by trying that such things can be found out. To refuse to try, to stick blindly to tradition, because the search for the truth involves experimentation in the region of the unknown, is to refuse the only step which can introduce rational conviction into education.¹³²

Dewey's and Malaguzzi's visions of the school environment can be viewed simultaneously as representative of the view of the physical environment in progressivism, a view with an embedded "image of the child" that urges the creation of places and spaces that are worthy of children's time, attention, interest, and inquiry. Is the environment for young children as conceived and articulated in the ECERS-3 (controlled lighting, spaces that reflect a siloed imagining of content areas, strictly age-segregated classrooms, etc.) compatible with the vision of the "environment as a third teacher" that characterizes progressivism? At best, it seems a challenge to reconcile the two visions; at worst, it seems impossible.

Language and Literacy, or Communication

From his experiences with educators and children at the school at the University of Chicago, Dewey refined a theory of learning that centered around what he described variously as the four impulses, instincts, and interests, which he believed were naturally occurring in humans

¹³² Dewey, *The School and Society*, 64.

from birth. He described these at the impulses or interests “in conversation, or communication; in inquiry, or finding out things; in making things, or construction; and in artistic expression.”¹³³

Each of these impulses should be connected to the means of education. They were taken into account in the design of educational experiences, the classroom environment, and other aspects of schooling. Juxtaposing what Dewey termed the communication instinct with the correlated vision of language and literacy that is described in ECERS-3 makes evident the dissimilarity in these two views, and what that might mean for how quality is understood from the progressive and the essentialist orientations.

In ECERS-3, “Language and Literacy” indicators are divided into two areas: oral communication/the use of verbal language, and the use of books/familiarity with print. As the source for analysis here, I will focus on those indicators related to oral communication/the use of verbal language. Indicator 13 (“Encouraging children to use language”) includes the following instructions for the assessor in determining where the classroom falls on the “inadequate” (1 point) to “excellent” (7 points) continuum that ECERS uses to quantify quality.

In order to give credit for conversation, there must be some talking between a staff member and an individual child, or a small group of children, one listening, the other communicating either verbally or nonverbally... There must also be a common topic or interest for the conversation... [and] staff and child must take turns for the interaction to be considered a conversation.¹³⁴

Within an essentialist ECEC classroom, conversation is used in service to the development of skills which assumably will be useful in the child’s imaginary future as a student and an employee. In order to even warrant a score that meets minimal evidence (a rating of 3 or 4) for the indicators related to encouraging children to use language, the ECERS assessor must “see if staff challenge more developmentally advanced children to use more complex language and

¹³³ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 31.

¹³⁴ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 38.

longer sentences, and to take more turns in conversations, while challenging children with less ability to talk at their own level of ability and comfort.”¹³⁵ This is not conversation that has its intention in engaging children in the joyful exchange of ideas; this is conversation with an explicitly educative intent of “teaching” children the skills of communication and scaffolding their abilities as conversationalists.

The ECERS view of communication – its function and its intent – can be set beside that which Dewey describes, with the popular terminology of 1915, as his vision of “the recitation.” To begin, he explains what recitation “has been – a place where the child shows off to the teacher and the other children the amount of information he has succeeded in assimilating.” This description calls to mind what teachers in a contemporary ECEC classroom might think of as a *morning meeting* or *circle time*; namely, it is a time when all the members of the classroom community gather routinely each day, as a specified time, for a purpose. In ECERS, this purpose is described as “learning activities where all children basically do the same thing at the same time,” and can “even be done [by children seated] at separate desks all doing the same activity.”¹³⁶

In *Resisting the Kinder-Race: Restoring Joy to Early Childhood Education*, Christopher P. Brown shares his years of research into the increasingly essentialist Kindergarten classroom, and he examines the meaning of this philosophical turn for contemporary understanding of the purposes of ECEC. In his book, Brown offers a snapshot of what he terms “a typical day” in an essentialist ECEC classroom, and the example of morning meeting that he provides is characteristic of the type of meeting experience that indicates “high quality” in ECERS. In this Kindergarten classroom, time is scheduled daily from 8:05am-8:10am for what the teachers calls

¹³⁵ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 38.

¹³⁶ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 82.

“calendar time.” Students “gather on the carpet in assigned spots” to do tasks like “count the days in the month to figure out what day it is” and then “to help the students” figure out what day of the week it is, the teacher “on a daily basis throughout the year, leads them in the days-of-the-week song, which mimics [the tune of] the Addams Family” theme song.¹³⁷ The objective is based, assumably, on a belief that an early understanding of calendars is essential in the education of a 5-year old child. Given the neoliberal understanding of children as *homo economicus*, the logic of prioritizing the learning of a tool like a calendar over any number of other possibilities, like creative expression, cooking, or drawing, is not without philosophical basis and ethical implication.

Dewey’s conception of the purpose of conversation in the classroom is much different than that which is imagined in ECERS; both the means and the ends differ, as evidenced in his description of the style of recitation that was common at the University Lab School:

The recitation becomes pre-eminently a social meeting-place; it is to the school what the spontaneous conversation is at home...where experiences and ideas are exchanged and subjected to criticism, where misconceptions are corrected, and new lines of thought and inquiry are set up. This change of the recitation, from an examination of knowledge already acquired to the free play of the children’s communicative instinct, affects and modifies all the language work of the school...it hardly needs to be said that language is primarily a social thing, a means by which we give our experiences to others and get theirs again in return. When it is taken away from its natural purpose, it is no wonder that it becomes a complex and difficult problem to teach language.¹³⁸

To put it more succinctly, “There is all the difference in the world between having something to say and having to say something,”¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Christopher P. Brown, *Resisting the Kinder-Race: Restoring Joy to Early Learning* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2021), 88-39.

¹³⁸ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 34-35.

¹³⁹ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 35.

In Reggio Emilia, this time for gathering is called an assembly, and the purpose, function, and form of the assembly both echoes Dewey's vision and challenges the imagining of the essentialist ECEC classroom.

Children's intelligences, if we are willing to acknowledge them, require interesting educational contexts; they need places where they can be put to the test, develop and grow. The morning assembly is certainly one of these contexts, a "forum of ideas", as Loris Malaguzzi wrote, a forum of intelligences. A school that begins with an assembly every morning, or almost every morning, declares that exchanging ideas, listening to each other, and being together are very important. The assembly is a sort of exercise, both cheerful and serious, in democracy and participation, but it starts from the ideas and thoughts of the children, the pauses, things that have been done and things that are dreamed of. A comment made by a child at the Iqbal Masih Preschool...nicely sums up what we are talking about: *To do an assembly we have to organize together.*¹⁴⁰

In a class assembly organized by educators in Reggio Emilia, children's experiences and thoughts are centered in the experience, and rote instruction of factual information like the days of the week or the months in a calendar year, are not the point. These are adults who maintain a strong image of the child, and it is this image that discourages them from "directing" the meeting in the way that Brown describes is done in a contemporary essentialist Kindergarten. Like Dewey, Malaguzzi understood communication as an impulse in humans, and he emphasized the pleasure that children experience when engaged in communication that "can go in infinite directions [and] includes all the possible forms of communication."¹⁴¹ While verbal language and print literacy is an aspect of communication in the progressive classroom, this is a wider vision of communication that allows for the integration of Malaguzzi's theory of "the hundred

¹⁴⁰ Reggio Children, *The Many Faces of the Assembly: A Study on the Human Figure in Drawing, Clay, and Photography* (Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children, 2017), 12.

¹⁴¹ Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*, 310.

languages – the many ways that children express themselves, tell stories, and experiment in situations.”¹⁴²

Learning Activities, or Inquiry and Experience in ECEC

Under the section of indicators named “Learning Activities,” the ECERS-3 provides for the rating of specific content areas that are common to the ECEC classroom: fine motor, art, music and movement, blocks, dramatic play, nature/science, math materials and activities, math in daily events, understanding written numbers, promoting acceptance of diversity, and appropriate use of technology.¹⁴³ In the indicators provided in the “Learning Activities” section, there is no provision made for experiences outside the classroom. For the purposes of the analysis of this section, I would like to juxtapose it with the emphasis placed in progressive education on children’s experiences in and interactions with the world beyond the walls of their classroom. While the ECERS-3 makes no allowances for or suggestions that experiences in the community are essential components in the education of young children, both the University Lab School and the preschools of Reggio Emilia are explicit in the role that community plays in children’s epistemological development.

My analysis of the “Learning Activities” section focuses on the Nature/Science indicators, which are juxtaposed with the place-based pedagogy that characterizes progressivism. To begin, this is the evidence for which an ECERS-3 assessors is looking in order to rate a classroom a 7 (“excellent”) on the Science/Nature section:

¹⁴² Lella Gandini, “The Observant Teacher: Observation as a Reciprocal Tool of Professional Development: An Interview with Amelia Gambetti,” in *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach in Transformation*, eds. Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 176.

¹⁴³ It is interesting to note that “Language and Literacy” components of ECEC content are awarded their own subsection and do fall under the more general “Learning Activities.” This makes clear the privilege given to oral and written communication over other possible languages (like drawing, dancing, sculpting, and dramatic play) which might also allow children to communicate knowledge, understanding, and meaning-making.

7.1 Staff initiate activities for measuring, comparing, or sorting using nature/science materials (Ex: show children how to sort seashells by color, shape, or size; arrange pinecones from biggest to smallest; chart rainfall for a month to discuss dry and wet times; predict weights of various natural objects).

7.2 One or more pets/plants present so that children can easily observe, help care for, and that are talked about with the children (Ex: classroom fish tank, hamster, gerbil; birds that are seen visiting filled bird feeder). *Observe once*¹⁴⁴

Other indicators that are necessary for to receive a 7 on the Nature/Science section include the expectation that staff will “model concern for the environment (ex: remind children to turn off water or turn off light to save resources; recycle; discuss how insects can be helpful),”¹⁴⁵ and the availability of at least 5 nature/science books. The ECERS-3 categorizes nature/science materials into four categories: living things, natural objects, factual nature and science books/picture games, and sand or water toys; the indicators specify a minimum of 15 these nature/science materials in the classroom, as well as the time duration for these materials to be accessible to children (at least 1 hour).

The attempt to quantify children’s experiences with science/nature as a key indicator of “quality” in their education would likely baffle Dewey or any educator who is committed to progressive education. To illustrate, let us turn to how Dewey describes the purpose of what he terms “nature study.”

The object is to arouse his spirit of curiosity and investigation and awaken him to a consciousness of the world in which he lives, to train the powers of observation, to instil [sic] a practical sense of methods of inquiry, and gradually to form in the mind images of the typical moving forces and processes involved in all natural change. The results thus far show an eager and definite response [among preschool-aged children at the Dewey School] to this mode of approach.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 57.

¹⁴⁵ Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, 57.

¹⁴⁶ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 6

Dewey also describes what “nature study” might look like, with an example that embraces a place-based pedagogy in which the study of nature explicitly involves experiences and encounters in the child’s world beyond the walls of the school. While Dewey’s discussion of the study of changing seasons reflects the now outdated norms of American society in the 1890s, it nonetheless offers an analogy for thinking about how the study of seasons might be authentically and organically anchored to the lives of children.

In the autumn, when the activities of the world of both nature and man are inspired and influenced by the need of preparing for the cold days of winter, the thoughts of little children are easily directed to the seasonal changes....It was easy for the children in these groups to see the connection between the squirrel in the park, busy storing nuts in the hollow tree, and their mothers preserving fruit in their own kitchens.¹⁴⁷

Dewey writes of how the studies of seasons in the classroom “open paths into one main avenue which led back to the farm. [Children and teachers] made a trip to the farm and saw the orchards, the harvesting of fruit, and the fields with their shocks of corn.”¹⁴⁸ Following this trip, groups of children pursued several directions that connected their nature studies to “many activities, which varied, of course, with teacher, children, and circumstances,”¹⁴⁹ including cooking, sewing, and woodworking that are necessary in anticipation of the seasonal change from autumn to winter.

In Reggio Emilia, the role of the community in the life of the school, and vice versa, has strong historical roots in the region, which make the community a primary location for learning experiences. Within a sociocultural and political context that has historically emphasized co-operation, place-based pedagogy is normalized, and the walls of the school are permeable to the city itself. The former *pedagogista* and director of the Reggio Emilia educational project, Sergio Spaggiari has attributed this to the agrarian traditions of the region and said in an interview,

¹⁴⁷ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 64.

¹⁴⁸ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 64.

¹⁴⁹ Mayhew and Edwards, 64.

Community-based participation in infant-toddler centers and preschools goes back a long way [in northern Italy]. We can trace the roots back to the extraordinary educational experiences that developed immediately after the Liberation of Italy in 1945 in certain regions of Italy (Emilia Romagna and Toscana)... These initiatives embraced people across the social spectrum and from the very beginning emphasized the values of cooperation and involvement.¹⁵⁰

In Reggio Emilia, young children regularly venture into the community in small groups as part of the pedagogical efforts of the schools; this was, in fact, an early strategy that Malaguzzi and others adopted, to give visibility to and thereby build support for the preschools.

...we had to find out cultural identity quickly, and make ourselves known, and win trust and respect... Once a week, we would transport the school to town. Literally we would pick ourselves, the children, and our tools into a truck, and we would teach school and show exhibits in the open air, in the square, in public parks, or under the colonnade of the municipal theater. The children were happy. The people saw; they were surprised, and they asked questions.¹⁵¹

Juxtaposing the University Lab School and Reggio Emilia's progressive approach and the essentialist approach that characterizes ECERS-3 is illuminating for what it says about the differences between these two philosophies of education in how the concept of quality is reflected in pedagogical choices. In the neoliberal-oriented conception of quality characterized by the ECERS-3, much of what constitutes quality is simply a matter of quantity – e.g., a specified number of materials available for a specified amount of time. The types of experiences that are seen as educative in these two philosophies are radically different. While progressivism relies heavily on children venturing outside of the school to guarantee quality in their educational experiences, the ECERS-3 makes no allowances for these kinds of activities. During the 3-hour

¹⁵⁰ Lella Gandini, "Parent Participation in the Governance of the Schools: An Interview with Sergio Spaggiari," in *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation*, ed. Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 118.

¹⁵¹ Lella Gandini, "History, Ideas, and Basic Principles: An Interview with Loris Malaguzzi," in *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation*, ed. Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 31.

window of observation in the ECERS-3 assessment, it is only that which happens *within* the classroom that can be used for determining the degree of quality in children's education. For progressive educators, place-based pedagogy is an essential component of curriculum development, and connecting children with their community is an essential pedagogical maneuver. Without an appreciation of this aspect of quality that originates in a progressive point-of-view, an essentialist tool like the ECERS-3 will be largely unable to accurately reflect the quality of the progressive program.

Interaction, or Relationships

In 2019, a comparative analysis of the ECERS-3 and its predecessor (the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised*; henceforth, ECERS-R) was published by researchers from both academic settings and governmental agencies in which statewide QRIS has been successfully implemented. The effort was to determine what relationship exists between these two versions of the ECERS; specifically, the researchers were looking for systematic differences and correlations between the two instruments, in order to determine whether the instruments were interchangeable in their determination of what constituted quality. After analysis,

the overall findings from this study...seem to indicate that the ECERS-R and the ECERS-3 are two distinct quality measurement tools.... The differences between the two scales, particularly related to the emphasis on teacher-child interactions within the ECERS-3, reflect an evolution in the concept of quality within the field of early childhood education.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Jennifer Neitzel, Diane Early, John Sideris, Doré LaForrett, Michael B Abel, Margaret Soli, Dawn L Davidson, et al. "A Comparative Analysis of the 'Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale--Revised' and 'Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition'" (*Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 17, 2019), 416.

One of the revisions that researchers identified as particularly noticeable was the elimination of the staff interview as part of the ECERS assessment. Neitzel *et al.* describe the process of the classroom observation with the use of the ECERS-R,

[which] is generally administered over a 3-hour period in which observers respond to hundreds of yes/no indicators. Following the observation, staff are asked a variety of questions about activities that typically occur but not have been [*sic*] observed, and their responses are used to answer any of the yes/no indicators that remain unscored.¹⁵³

In the ECERS-3, however, the voices of teachers have been effectively silenced. "...there is no longer a teacher interview component. All items are scored solely based on what is observed during the 3 hours...[and] all observations now last exactly 3 hours (rather than 3 or more hours)."¹⁵⁴ While noting that an "emphasis on teacher-related behaviors reflects the evolution of how quality is currently defined,"¹⁵⁵ Researchers nonetheless credit the ECERS-3 with "including additional and more difficult indicators that were intended to be more related to teacher behavior rather than the provision of materials."¹⁵⁶ Surely the irony is not lost for the reader, as there is a recognition of the importance of teacher behaviors and interactions as an indicator of quality in ECEC, but there is simultaneously a silencing of the voices, thoughts, explanations, and professional points of view of these very same teachers with the implementation of the ECERS-3.

Juxtaposing the ECERS-3 vision of teachers – as vital but silent "ingredients" for quality in ECEC – with the vision of teachers that is articulated in Reggio Emilia is illuminating for highlighting the irreconcilable difference in progressivism and essentialism, and how the concept of quality might be envisioned differently between the two. "For us in Reggio the school is...a

¹⁵³ Neitzel et al., "A Comparative Analysis," 410.

¹⁵⁴ Neitzel et al., "A Comparative Analysis," 411.

¹⁵⁵ Neitzel et al., "A Comparative Analysis," 419.

¹⁵⁶ Neitzel et al., "A Comparative Analysis," 417.

place where values are transmitted, discussed, and created.”¹⁵⁷ In a system in which teachers’ responsibilities are broadly visionary and explicitly political in nature, teacher interactions and their relationships within the educational system simply are not observable in a single 3-hour period, particularly a period in which their description of what they do, how they make decisions about what to do, and why they make the choices they do is deemed irrelevant for determining the quality of what they do as a teacher. Juxtaposing this with Rinaldi’s emphasis on the value of subjectivity is enlightening. According to Rinaldi, it is the subjectivity of the teacher, which

clearly highlights the relational and reflexive aspects involved in the construction of the individual subject. Each subject, then, is a construction, both self-constructed and socially constructed within a context and a culture... Therefore, it is necessary to be receptive to this subjectivity, to recognize and support it.¹⁵⁸

With this image of the teacher, it is implausible to imagine that classroom practice can be understood and assessed unless the voice of the teacher is centered in the evaluation. The teacher is valuable not only as a guarantee of quality but as a capable, intellectual being who has something valuable to say, based on their experiences, about the means and ends of education as well as the characteristics of what is termed high-quality in ECEC.

Dewey often praised teachers and asserted the belief “that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth.”¹⁵⁹ This is a teacher who offers educational contexts that support the “continual training of observation, of ingenuity, constructive imagination, of logical thought, and of the sense of reality acquired through first-hand contact with actualities.”¹⁶⁰ Separating the perceived quality of the school, the environment, and the

¹⁵⁷ Rinaldi, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia*, 101.

¹⁵⁸ Rinaldi, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia*, 102.

¹⁵⁹ Dewey, *My Pedagogic Creed*, 17.

¹⁶⁰ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 8.

activities from the thinking of the teacher is an asinine proposal for progressive educators. Dewey described how, at the University Lab School, “the development of concrete material and of methods of dealing with it was wholly in the hands of the teachers...After the school reached a suitable size, there was a head who was primarily responsible. But she worked in cooperation with all teachers carrying out the details.”¹⁶¹ Assessing the quality of the University Lab School or a school in Reggio Emilia would be a fool’s errand in progressivism unless the voice of the teachers are centered. Under the essentialist conception of quality, such insight is deemed irrelevant and perhaps the source of insight that might bias an otherwise supposedly objective observer, thereby interfering with the validity the ECERS-3 proports to offer in the assessment of quality.

Malaguzzi cautioned about what he called a “prophetic pedagogy,” which existed outside of, or perhaps in spite of, the daily experiences of children and teachers. This is a “pedagogy of a behaviourist nature, which is a pedagogy that has had the good fortune of being very easily applied, and had great success because it is simple easy teaching.” This is the essentialist pedagogy that is reified in the ECERS-3, and Malaguzzi does not refrain from strong criticisms of this approach.

‘Prophetic’ pedagogy knows everything beforehand: it knows everything that will happen. It knows everything and it has no uncertainty, it is absolutely imperturbably, it contemplates everything and prophesies everything and sees everything; everything to the point that it is capable of giving recipes for the parts of an action, minute by minute, hour by hour, objective by objective, five minutes by five minutes. This is a coarse and cowardly thing, which is humiliating to teachers’ ingenuity and a complete and visible humiliation of children’s ingenuity and potential.¹⁶²

The “prophetic pedagogy” that Malaguzzi describes is the very kind of educational environment that ECERS-3 would likely designate as high-quality, not least of which is due to the ways in

¹⁶¹ Mayhew & Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 367.

¹⁶² Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*, 422.

which which the experiences and impressions of children and teachers are deemed irrelevant in quality assessment compared to quantified measurements of materials and time.

CHAPTER 5

REUNITING QUALITY AND PROGRESSIVISM: IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE

Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences...Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.¹⁶³

– John Dewey, *Experience and Education*

Associated with the ECERS-3 is website, which includes details about national trainings for those interested and/or required to become certified in administering the assessment, as well as various other resources that can be used by schools to support their efforts to successfully navigate the ECERS-3 assessment. Also included on the website is an FAQ section; on this page, a question about the compatibility of the ECERS-3 view of quality with pedagogical approaches that resist the practices of essentialism and the associated view of quality. According to the website,

We often have questions inquiring about the suitability of using the Environment Rating Scales in...programs with a strongly focused philosophy. ...These scales have been used in a wide variety of programs, including many Montessori programs [and] Reggio (including those in an Italian study of quality)...it is true that [these] program's philosophy or chosen curriculum usually focuses more on one aspect of quality than another...Thus, a program that values creativity above all else may find that it needs to concentrate more on cleanliness and organization in order to strike a good balance. Similarly, a program that stresses social development may find that it needs to pay more attention to cognitive skills, or vice versa...Since the Environment Rating Scales are comprehensive or global measures of process quality, they measure how well all programs, no matter what their philosophies emphasize, meet children's needs in a variety of ways."¹⁶⁴

I would argue that the sentiment in the last sentence above is in direct conflict with the point made earlier about philosophies valuing and focuses on different programmatic and theoretical

¹⁶³ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 27.

¹⁶⁴ "Frequently Asked Questions," ERS Institute, 2023, <https://www.ersi.info/faq.html>.

constructs in realizing their vision of quality education. Under the ECERS-3, there are predefined aspects of quality, and a philosophy that imagines other definitions for what constitutes quality is going to be less successful on a measure of quality unless they bend their values, vision, and focus towards the will of the assessment and the vision of those who devised it. As demonstrated, this has ramifications for schools who attempt to operate outside the “common sense” of neoliberal-oriented essentialism.

Neoliberalism, Reconstructed Common Sense, and ECEC

Moss critiques popular narratives in ECEC through a neoliberal lens. In his *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood* (2019), he offers a description of neoliberalism and its influence on education:

The story of neoliberalism...is about how life in all its many facets – including personal relationships – can and should be reduced to economic relationships, based on the constant exercise of competition, choice and calculation by individuals, each one understood to be a unit of human capital and to act in life as ‘homo economicus’ or economic man or woman.¹⁶⁵

A primary effort of neoliberalism is to create discourse that can be used to advance market-based solutions to what are often manufactured problems. In neoliberal ideology, “responsibility is often exclusively judged through an individualistic perspective emphasizing a person’s decisions and choices made irrespective of examining the exploitative practices and inequitable institutional practices and policies that create the social conditions that present limited choice(s) to individuals.”¹⁶⁶ The widening influence of this ideology on ECE policy discourse is evident. The quality agenda narratives are built on a neoliberal foundation of meritocracy and accountability. A focus on human capital drives education policy in the direction of the free

¹⁶⁵ Moss, *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood*, 16-17.

¹⁶⁶ “New Year Brings Stricter Background Checks For Georgia’s Child Care Workers.” Georgia Public Broadcasting, January 1, 2014. <http://www.gpb.org/news/2014/01/01/new-year-brings-stricter-background-checks-for-georgias-child-care-workers>.

market, where meritocracy is generally accepted as truth, and where policies can be engineered to perpetuate the systemic and institutional creation of knowledge by Foucauldian “forces of domination” that use discourse to enact power.

I have argued that neoliberal “quality agenda” discourse has “reconstructed common sense” about children, childhood, and the purposes of ECEC. The “reconstruction of common sense”¹⁶⁷ is a theoretical construct that is useful in the analysis of the influence of neoliberalism on ECEC policy. David Gillborn described common sense as “a powerful technique...[that] assumes that there are no genuine arguments against the chosen position; any opposing views are thereby positioned as false, insincere, or self-serving...the moral high ground is assumed and opponents are further denigrated.”¹⁶⁸ As Michael Apple describes it, through neoliberal rhetoric, traditional “common sense” about education has been co-opted in favor of a reconstructed common sense that creates a version of truth that “tacitly [implies] that there is something of a conspiracy among one’s opponents to deny the truth or to say only that which is ‘fashionable.’”¹⁶⁹ What makes the reconstruction of common sense so worrisome is how willingly people acquiesce to the “new truth” that it offers. Apple describes the current reality of education as part of a larger ideological change throughout society. “A large-scale ‘educational project’[is underway] to radically change common sense... In this social and pedagogic project, we are to be convinced that there are no realistic alternatives to the neoliberal and neoconservative projects and outlooks.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Apple, Michael. *Educating the ‘Right’ Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006, 56.

¹⁶⁸ Gillborn, D. Racism and Reform: New Ethnicities/Old Inequalities? *British Educational Research Journal* 23, no. 3 (1997), 353.

¹⁶⁹ Apple, 58.

¹⁷⁰ Apple, Michael. *Can Education Change Society?* New York, NY: Routledge, 2013, 28.

In the not-so-distant past, common sense told us that children needed time to play, to pretend, to be physically active, to build relationships with other children and with caring adults. In 2023, reconstructed common sense around ECEC tells us that education for 3-year old children should focus on “school readiness” and should immerse them in STEM curriculum from the earliest age in anticipation of their future as “college and career ready” citizens. In early childhood education, the quality agenda has grown around this reconstructed common sense that makes the early academicization of young children not only permissible but demanded and expected. Meanwhile decades of research demonstrates how children learn best – through play¹⁷¹ and multisensory experiences¹⁷² that allow for constant hands-on exploration¹⁷³ and opportunities for authentic interactions that can be used to reinforce positive social/emotional behaviors.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, contemporary research of learning and brain development – as was exemplified in Dewey’s theories of progressive education; nonetheless, the vision that characterized progressivism is often ignored by policymakers and practitioners as they emphasizes the economic and consumeristic potential of the child, who represents little more than “human capital.”

The Problem with Quality and the Quality Agenda: Lessons from Tennessee

In January 2022, the latest round of results from a landmark longitudinal study of the short- and long-term effects of state-funded pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs in Tennessee was

¹⁷¹ For example, K. Wohlwend and K. Peppler. “All Rigor and No Play Is No Way to Improve Learning,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 96, no. 8 (2015). 22-26.

¹⁷² For example, John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking. “How People Learn Brain, Mind, Experience, and School.” National Center for Biotechnology Information. U.S. National Library of Medicine, January 1, 1970. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK223290/?report=printable>.

¹⁷³ For example, C. Stephens. “Looking for Theory in Preschool Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 31, no. 3 (2012), 227-238.

¹⁷⁴ For example, S. A. Denham and C. Brown. “‘Plays Nice with Others’: Social–Emotional Learning and Academic Success. *Early Education and Development*, 21, no. 5 (2010), 652-680.

published in the journal *Developmental Psychology*.¹⁷⁵ The research results raised questions about whether the concept of quality in ECEC should be considered less a technical matter and more of a philosophical issue. Since 2009, researchers from Vanderbilt University have been studying a population of 2900 children from low-income families in Tennessee who were eligible and applied for state-funded pre-K, which was designed to be high-quality according to the QRIS conception of quality. While early assessments demonstrated some positive effects from pre-K attendance, all of those positive effects diminished over time. By the time the children were matriculating from sixth grade, not only had the positive effects correlated with pre-K participation disappeared, negative effects had begun to emerge in every domain, including academic skills, attention and working memory, and behavioral outcome. Indeed, the positivistic and quantifiable knowledge claims about the experiences of the children in the study were the result of assessment efforts that, ironically, originated with the conception of quality that was used to design the Pre-K programs. The study's authors concluded the reporting of their research with a warning that suggested the results

should lead, at minimum, to questions about the content and pedagogical strategies currently employed in pre-K classrooms nationwide...Our results are robust and contrary to the claims made by many advocates for the universally positive effects of pre-K participation...The whole package of outcomes we have found is disconcerting.¹⁷⁶

In light of the Tennessee Pre-K study results, this question gives visibility to a paradox of the neoliberal governance of ECEC: the very tools of neoliberalism prove ineffective for rationalizing the continuation of neoliberal policies and practices. Indeed, the study's authors issued a caution to those who have used the quality agenda to craft a certain type of educational

¹⁷⁵ Kelley Durkin, Mark W. Lipsey, Dale C. Farran, and Sarah E. Wiesen, "Effects of a Statewide Pre-Kindergarten Program on Children's Achievement and Behavior through Sixth Grade," *Developmental Psychology* 58, no. 3 (2022).

¹⁷⁶ Durkin, Lipsey, Farran, and Wiesen, "Effects," 13.

experience for children. The authors described this overarching goal for ECEC as “improving the life outcomes of children from impoverished circumstances.”¹⁷⁷ But what if changing the means – that is, a curriculum that is based on the assessment of standards and norms – also requires a change in the goals for young children and their schooling? New goals would need to be formulated, ones that are not constructed around a return-on-investment ideology about children’s “readiness” for school. The challenge, in part, is to recognize and resist neoliberalism’s organization around the production and creation of data in service to a very specific vision of the world.

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence describe the *problem with quality* as “a sense and unease that what has been approached as an essentially technical issue of expert knowledge and measurement may, in fact, be a philosophical issue of value and dispute. Rather than discovering the truth, and with it certainty, we encounter multiple perspectives and ambivalence.”¹⁷⁸ And example of this sort of problem is evidenced in the Tennessee Pre-K programs represent the very kind of high-quality ECEC that is currently imagined in legislative, policy, and academic circles as “best practices.” To echo the conclusion of the study’s authors, “If we are serious about the goal, the means to attain it may have to change.” In the age of neoliberalism, is it possible for another way to emerge? According to Wendy Brown, “Within neoliberal rationality, human capital is both our ‘is’ and our ‘ought’ – what we are said to be, what we should be, and what the rationality makes us through its norms and construction of environments.”¹⁷⁹ In this rationality, human experience that is appreciated over market-based values and outcomes, is not possible. As Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence argue, quality represents

¹⁷⁷ Durkin, Lipsey, Farran, and Wiesen, “Effects,” 13.

¹⁷⁸ Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, *Beyond Quality*, 6.

¹⁷⁹ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 36.

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’ prioritized.¹⁸⁰

The critiques of how the researchers from Vanderbilt interpreted outcomes of their study and made recommendations for further considerations based on the study were immediate. Within days of the January 10, 2022 publication of “Effects of a Statewide Pre-Kindergarten Program on Children’s Achievement and Behavior through Sixth Grade” in the journal *Developmental Psychology*, swift rebuttals and critiques were mounted by organizations like the Center for the Economics of Human Development at the University of Chicago, the Heckman Equation, the Brookings Institute, the Hechinger Report, and the Fordham Institute.¹⁸¹ While these critiques of the Tennessee Pre-K study may be valid and certainly deserve consideration, they are largely built on neoliberal assumptions about the purpose of ECEC, with a heavy reliance on a return-on-investment utilitarian ideology and a vision of the child-as-economic-indicator to rationalize ECEC, rather than a more humanizing perspective harkening back to John Dewey’s assertion that a school should function as social unit and “the radical reason that the present school cannot organize itself as a natural social unit is because just this element of common and productive activity is absent.”¹⁸² Within the quality agenda, not only is the current work of ECEC oriented towards the future of the child, the child themselves appears contextless and reflective of a normative rationalization of childhood as a merely a stage in a human development that is oriented toward a slow but steady climb towards the ultimate goal: tax-paying, law-abiding,

¹⁸⁰ Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, *Beyond Quality*, 105.

¹⁸¹ For example, see the <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/vanderbilt-pre-k-study-you-get-what-you-pay-for/>, <https://hechingerreport.org/behind-the-findings-of-the-tennessee-pre-k-study-that-found-negative-effects-for-graduates/>, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2022/02/10/what-does-the-tennessee-pre-k-study-really-tell-us-about-public-preschool-programs/>, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/about-tennessee-pre-k-study>.

¹⁸² John Dewey, *The School and Society*, p.10.

employable adults. Childhood is of little value, and there is a marked disregard for the nature of the child to which Dewey and other progressivists are drawn –the imaginary of the child-as-scientist, constantly experiencing and inquiring with an active, busy, curious body and mind. The child as hypothesizer, question-poser, problem-seeker does not seem to be the image of child to which the quality agenda ascribes, as I show in my dissertation.

Confronting the Quality Agenda and Envisioning Other Possibilities

The Tennessee Pre-K study’s authors issued a warning in conclusion to the reporting of their research, suggesting that the results

should lead, at minimum, to questions about the content and pedagogical strategies currently employed in pre-K classrooms nationwide...Our results are robust and contrary to the claims made by many advocates for the universally positive effects of pre-K participation...The whole package of outcomes we have found is disconcerting.¹⁸³

What happens when metrics that are neoliberal in origin do not, in fact, support the continuation of neoliberal policies and practices? The results of the Tennessee pre-K study demands considerations of this question, and in those considerations, another paradox of the neoliberal governance of ECEC becomes visible: the very tools of neoliberalism prove ineffective in rationalizing the continuation of neoliberal policies or practices.

The implications of the Tennessee pre-K study results have not only reverberated through the academic and policy circles in ECEC, but have gained a foothold the popular media. On February 10, 2022, NPR reported on the Pre-K research with a headline reading “A Top Researcher Says It's Time to Rethink Our Entire Approach to Preschool,” while Fox News’s reporting on January 25, 2022 led with a headline that warned “‘Alarming’ Study Finds Children Who Attended State-Funded Pre-K Worse Off Than Peers.” Durkein, Lipsey, Farran, and Wiesen cautioned those in and outside of academia.

¹⁸³ Durkin, Lipsey, Farran, and Wiesen, “Effects,” 13.

If the programs we have created do not produce the desired effects, the findings themselves should not be dismissed simply because they were unanticipated and unwelcome. Rather, they should stimulate creative research into both policies and practices... The goal remains the same. If we are serious about the goal, the means to attain it may have to change.¹⁸⁴

The goal to which the authors are referring is “improving the life outcomes of children from impoverished circumstances.”¹⁸⁵ But what if changing the means also requires a change of the goals? What if the goal was no longer constructed around a return-on-investment ideology about poor children’s “readiness” for school? The Heckman Equation, in its efforts to meet this same goal, has insisted on reducing the lives of children to the concept of value while constructing their here-and-now experiences around a futurized imaginary of their lives. What if the Heckman Equation was no longer the rationale to justify allocating resources to young children? What if ECEC wasn’t envisioned as an investment in *homo economicus* at all but was re-envisioned as a public good that imagined happy children as its goal rather than productivity? What if ECEC became a proving ground for more humane policies and practices, in which the taken-for-granted assumptions of neoliberalism could be understood as, in the words of Susan George, “not the natural human condition” but instead as something that “can be challenged and replaced because its own failures will require this. We have to be ready with replacement policies”?¹⁸⁶

In Chapter 1, I described the Counsel Method, an approach to Critical Policy Analysis that centers the knowledge of practitioners in the development of policy initiatives. The Counsel Method focuses on how policies have emerged, in order to understand how to move policies in new directions in response to new knowledge and understandings. This form of CPA gives

¹⁸⁴ Durkin, Lipsey, Farran, and Wiesen, “Effects,” 13.

¹⁸⁵ Durkin, Lipsey, Farran, and Wiesen, “Effects,” 13.

¹⁸⁶ Susan George, “A Short History of Neo-Liberalism: Twenty Years of Elite Economics and Emerging Opportunities for Structural Change” (paper presented at the Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a Globalizing World, March 24, 1999), https://base.socioeco.org/docs/doc-94_en.pdf

visibility to the ways in which neoliberalism is organized in ECEC, and illuminates how essentialism produces data in service to a very specific vision of the world that neoliberals hope to create. And yet the Tennessee Pre-K study raises urgent questions. What happens in the face of this data when it fails to demonstrate that the neoliberal way of doing things is the best alternative? What happens when the very evidence that is prized and prioritized doesn't work in service to the values most adored within the system— in this case, competition, investment, standardization? What do you do when the common sense you have constructed becomes foolhardy, when the narrative doesn't fit your own standard of proof?

The pre-K programs that were studied in Tennessee are of the same sort as those which have emerged in states across the country that offer state-funded pre-K, of the same sort as the federally-funded pre-K that was proposed in President Joe Biden's unsuccessful Build Back Better Bill, and of the same sort as the ELC in Dekalb County, which proudly describes itself as “a preschool program that addresses the readiness gap which positively impacts the achievement gap [that] also accelerates cognitive and language development in young children.”¹⁸⁷

The troubling outcomes from the evaluation of the Tennessee Pre-K programs represent the very kind of ECEC that is currently imagined in legislative, policy, and academic circles as high-quality.¹⁸⁸ To echo the conclusion of the study's authors, “If we are serious about the goal, the means to attain it may have to change.” In the age of capitalist realism and neoliberalism, is it possible for another way to emerge? Or, as Margaret Thatcher declared in her defense of the free market and of the values of capitalism, is there “no alternative” to the goal and the means of

¹⁸⁷ “Early Learning Initiative.”

¹⁸⁸ While not the purview of this research, critical consideration and analysis of the quality agenda through the lens of race and class is imperative. Priority enrollment in state-funded Pre-Kindergarten programs is often given to the most economically disadvantaged children, as was the case in Tennessee, and the quality agenda emerges as a social justice issue that causes direct harm to our most vulnerable children.

neoliberalism? According to Wendy Brown, “Within neoliberal rationality, human capital is both our ‘is’ and our ‘ought’ – what we are said to be, what we should be, and what the rationality makes us through its norms and construction of environments.”¹⁸⁹ A different rationality, which centers humans above profits, is possible. As American novelist Ursula Le Guin famously said in a speech to the National Book Foundation, “We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”¹⁹⁰

An Alternative Imagining: Quality Defined through Progressive Theory and Practice

In a charter drafted in 2021 by Fondazione Reggio Children ¹⁹¹ and entitled “Quality Education, A Global Challenge,” the concept of quality is addressed head-on by those involved in the Reggio Emilia educational project, and the vision of quality that is described is, in both means and ends, markedly different than that which is defined within the context of the quality agenda. The charter describes its purpose “to re-imagine the central role of quality education starting from early childhood and throughout life, as a fundamental right and a public fact.”¹⁹² The document is framed around a collection of “visions” for education, which visions of children, of school, of parents and families, of the community; the description given to the vision of quality education is a statement of values and philosophy, a theory of education that evolves through practice and listening. A vision of quality education is also articulated as follows:

The quality education recognizes the uniqueness of each child.
 The quality education:
 begins with educational services but is completed within the educating community;
 recognizes the potential of children and their Hundred Languages through which they

¹⁸⁹ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 36.

¹⁹⁰ Ursula Le Guin, “The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters,” Ursula K. Le Guin, November 19, 2014, <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/nbf-medal>.

¹⁹¹ To learn more about the history, mission, and work of Fondazione Reggio Emilia, visit <https://www.frchildren.org/en..>

¹⁹² “Quality Education, a Global Challenge,” Fondazione Reggio Children, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://www.frchildren.org/en/charter-quality-education>.

express themselves and, in communication with Others, get to know the world;
 fosters learning as a process of reciprocity and research;
 promotes the joy of learning through play and experience, with the mind, hands, and
 heart, integrating the different dimensions – real and virtual – of knowledge;
 proposes a quality learning environment, a place of beauty and culture, so as to be offered
 as a third educator;
 is based on the responsibility of the educating community: children, parents and families,
 teachers, school personnel, associations, businesses, institutions, the surrounding
 area and the city;
 measures up to the specifics of the contexts so as to create favourable, engaging,
 and welcoming learning conditions;
 welcomes fragility and differences, encourages encounter and dialogue with the
 Other, develops autonomy, resilience, and solidarity;
 fosters the ability to build relationships and networks of solidarity among people
 and all living beings;
 sets up the essential elements for the social reconstruction of fragile communities.

Our request, our commitment

Bringing quality education experiences into contexts of educational poverty and
 educational emergency, due to health, climate, political reasons and economic, social, and
 cultural marginalization.¹⁹³

This is not a vision of quality in which skills-based preparation for an imagined future is the
 means and readiness is the goal. This is an understanding of quality that honors the present
 moment and recognizes all that it offers for the necessary development of the strong community
 participation that is essential for democracy. To borrow a phrase from Dewey, this is education
 as “associated living.”¹⁹⁴

On page 7 of Fondazione Reggio Children’s 11-page charter, there is a full-page photo of
 a group of children, appearing immediately after the section entitled “Our Vision” and
 immediately before the section entitled “Areas of Research and Aims.” The photo is a candid
 one, taken in the middle of one of the city’s *piazze*. There is a circle of what appear to be long
 strips of fabric, and within the circle there are four children who are running joyfully together. In

¹⁹³ “Quality Education, a Global Challenge.”

¹⁹⁴ See Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* for discussion of his theory of democracy as “associated living.”

the background of the photo, you can see small groups of adults and children, gathered in conversation; none of these bystanders have their eyes on the children in the circle, and the children seem unconcerned with the bystanders. Other than the eye of whomever is documenting this moment behind the lens of a camera, the children seem to be sharing a moment that is purely their own. They appear simply as citizens, with the same rights to community, to connection, to conversation as any of the adults that they foreground. And yet...this moment is captured because an adult (most likely) took notice of it and documented it, and also because these long and colorful scarves were available to the children to foster just a moment like this one, in which associated living can emerge organically, joyfully, and intentionally. Featuring this photo in the midst of the charter – in full-color and dominating a full page of the document, with no accompanying text – is a choice that speaks to how central the rights of young children are not only to the educational project in Reggio Emilia, but also to the identity of the city itself. Reggio Emilia is unique as a municipality in its efforts to educate young children well, based on an explicitly stated and shared “belief in quality education as the first tool to a mission of creating a democratic, inclusive, forward-looking society and citizenship.”¹⁹⁵ This dissertation has juxtaposed this conception of quality – and the practices that derive from it and are visible in the historical documentation of the University Lab School and the ongoing educational project in Reggio Emilia – with the neoliberal-oriented, essentialist beliefs that characterize the quality agenda, with its focus on the “college and career readiness” of 3-year olds. For educators who are working in ECEC now, who are inspired by the vision of Dewey and Malaguzzi, and the stories from the University Lab School and the Reggio Emilia educational project, rejecting the

¹⁹⁵ “Quality Education, A Global Challenge.”

quality agenda that is promoted in QRIS and reinforced in the administration of the most common tool of evaluation that supports the quality agenda.

In Chapter 1, I wrote about a discussion I had with a police officer about what type of education might benefit the children around whom he works, most of whom are living in poverty and with the associated challenges. In his estimation, it seems like common sense to focus on academic preparedness in a child's earliest years of school and to wait until late in adolescence to for additional time in school to focus on the development of critical thinking. This view undoubtedly has been influenced by the story of quality that neoliberalism tells, a story that "reconstructs common sense" about the means and ends of education, and of the purposes of school in the lives of young children. Questioning the quality agenda's assumptions about what constitutes quality becomes difficult at a time when standardized assessments are used to measure and compare children, their classrooms, and their teachers, with little consideration of what these tests measure. In the reality created under neoliberal governance, quality is based on and determined by that which is easiest and most efficient to measure. How many wooden blocks are in the classroom? How many seconds does handwashing last? How many hazards are on the playground? How many photos display diversity? How many categories of art supplies are available? How many "math words" do teachers use with children? How many transitions are there during the day? How long do transitions last? Much of the focus on defining quality within the quality agenda is, by design, on quantity – of time, materials, space, teachers. But what about the other, non-quantifiable, subjective aspects of ECEC, which are the mark of quality in progressive education – the relationships with and explorations in the community, the view of conversation as democratic participation, the extended time spent observing and documenting, the way that children's interests center the curriculum?

I have argued that under the vision of quality that is characteristic of the quality agenda, and the sway of the assessment tools that are designed around and within the quality agenda, children are disadvantaged. Their education is compromised when the purpose of ECEC is “school readiness,” as if young children are not already engaged daily in a life in a school for which they arrive ready each day, filled with competence and curiosity. Increasing identification of readiness as a motivation, goal, and a driver of curriculum has resulted in anemic practices in schools that disadvantage children. The Tennessee Pre-K study gives evidence to reinforce the findings of previous research: a vision of quality in ECEC that focuses on academic skills, “school readiness,” standardization, competition is more common and has more influence than ever on educational practice in ECEC, and the meaning of this for the formative experiences of young children is important.

Malaguzzi cautioned about offering young children and education based on “persistent old prejudices [and] which have always been hegemonic and up to now have found an indistinct, indefinable, poor, *tabula rasa* image of childhood to be convenient.”¹⁹⁶ ECERS-3 offers such a prejudicial view of children, childhood, and learning. Progressivism, as actualized in the University Lab School and the schools of Reggio Emilia, originates in a different core value that promotes the right of children to schools that imagine them to be capable, competent, and powerful, and that meet these characteristics with thoughtful curriculum, with well-designed educational environments that extended into the larger community, and through the development of authentic relationships with others.

¹⁹⁶ Malaguzzi, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*, 375.

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