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Opinion

(Re)imagining the social pedagogy within early childhood education and care: a (re)exploration of the power and importance of relationships and connections

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore early years education and care through a social pedagogy approach and to (re)consider the power and importance of relationships and connections. While the importance of relationships and connections may be tenaciously upheld within much grassroots practice, early childhood practitioners are under continuous pressure to navigate personal and professional pedagogy, with often competing policy dictates. This article will discuss how vital to children's and young people's holistic development and well-being social pedagogy and a relationship-centred approach may be. Concepts from Deleuze and Guattari and the notion of *Haltung* will be drawn on to provide a critical discussion and practicable and practical ways forward for early childhood practitioners and early years education and care on every level.

Keywords social pedagogy; relationships; connections; early childhood; rhizome; assemblage; nomad; *Haltung*

Introduction

There is a burgeoning interest in social pedagogy from academics, policymakers and educators in Europe. However, in England, social pedagogy and the role of the social pedagogue are hardly visible, well-articulated or understood (Moss and Petrie, 2019; Stobbs et al., 2023). While Cameron's (2016) analysis evidences inroads towards social pedagogic understanding within research relating to children and family services, Moss and Petrie (2019) have suggested there is less attention paid to the connection between social pedagogy and education. They have further suggested that this inattention within English education institutions and within policy is a disservice on every level. Moss and Petrie (2019) have argued that 'This disconnect seems like a wasted opportunity to develop a productive relationship between education and social pedagogy, which could open up important possibilities for both – for theory and practice, policy and profession' (p. 393). The inexplicable reluctance to prioritise, or even meaningfully consider, social pedagogic approaches at practice and policy level, potentially marginalises educative provision as a whole, including within early childhood education and care (ECEC).

As will be evidenced later in this literature-based discussion, there is a wealth of information that underpins social pedagogy and a relationship-focused approach, which may be vital to children's and young people's holistic development and well-being. While at grassroots level social pedagogy is tenaciously upheld within ECEC, Cliffe and Solvason (2022), Gallagher and Stobbs (2023) and Moss and Cameron (2020) have argued persuasively that dominant sector discourse actively marginalises, or largely ignores, its importance, as well as the importance of developing connections and relationships between children and their worlds. It is amid this context that this article discusses a (re)imagining of social pedagogy and a (re)prioritising of the importance of connections and relationships within ECEC.

As identified by Ball (2010), Bradbury (2019) and Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021), current ECEC and wider education practices in England are weighed down by neoliberalist ideals and accountability and performativity agendas. This article offers a challenge to these dominant discourses initially discussing a (re)connection with relationship-centred practice, followed by an exploration of the concept of *Haltung* (Charfe and Gardner, 2020) and the Deleuzoguattarian (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) notions of rhizomes, assemblages and nomads. Consideration is given to the political nature of social pedagogy, with a final argument addressing alternative approaches, such as the development of wonder, slow pedagogy (Clark, 2023) and child-in-the-moment interactions.

(Re)connecting with social pedagogy and relationship-centred practice

Children do not develop in a vacuum and families do not function in isolation; human beings are constantly in relationship with something or someone. From a theoretical perspective, this is most notably considered in relation to Bronfenbrenner's (1974, 1979) bio-ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner considered the various spheres of influence, at macro and micro levels, that both impact on and are impacted by children. Bronfenbrenner argued that families, communities and the experiences that these relational and cultural encounters engender – in conjunction with society, policy, time, place, space – shape the kind of person we become. Yet, while this considers the importance of contextual and environmental factors, the drive to be sociable and successfully navigate relational worlds may have foundations set before birth. Narvaez (2014) and Rosa (2020) have discussed in detail that children are already part of a complex relational web from the moment of conception. Narvaez (2014) has described the implications of around 11 inheritances ranging from biological, epigenetic and cultural, to evolutionary and ecological in nature. The importance of these from a relational perspective is articulated well when Narvaez (2014) stated, 'Humans begin and end in relationship, whether considered horizontally through time on the tree of life, harkening back to organisms from billions of years ago, or vertically in an individual's lifetime, with all the lifeforms that sustain it' (p. 254).

Rosa's (2020) arguments underpin this notion further, claiming that babies are born to connect from the moment they take their first breath. Further stating the orientation, design and functionality of every part of our body facilitates our ability to engage with, and navigate, our relational worlds. After babies are born, the richness of their environment, the relationships and connections that are afforded to and with them – drawn from inheritances, biological evolution, experiences and environments – play a crucial role in promoting a strong and holistic foundation for children's learning, development and well-being.

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While Bowlby's (1988) notions of early bonding and attachment underpin the importance of feeling loved, getting our deficiency needs met and fostering a sense of belonging to thrive, Trevarthen (2005) and Narvaez (2014) further this with their discussions of the virtues of companionship attachment. Companionship attachment is a biological drive to actively seek out a life with significant others that has both meaning and purpose. They go on to note companionship attachment is essential for development and intrinsic to well-being. It could be argued that the early childhood professionals' (ECPs') role, or the role of that of a social pedagogue, is not only to foster both types of attachment and bonding relationships with children, but also to consider how to support families in developing secure attachments with children, particularly where familial vulnerability is a consideration. The ECP's key role in nurturing families alongside assuring positive outcomes for children, was reported in a Swedish study by Lindskov (2009) and a UK study linked to maintained nursery schools. ECPs not only become role models and experts for children and families to lean on; the development of trusting, open and authentic relationships offering that sense of companionship can also become a secure connection to lean in to when facing challenges, vulnerabilities and difficult conversations.

However, a human-centric approach to companionship attachment may not be the whole story. Social pedagogy and indeed the aforementioned companionship attachment, in its widest sense, moves beyond relationships and connections between humans to encompass that which is other-than-human. This aligns with common world perspectives where the barriers between human and other-than-human are more flexible, therefore enabling relationships and connections to encompass 'people, plants, animals, waterways, climate, land and skies' (Martin, 2007; cited in Taylor and Giugni, 2012, p. 116). The importance of a deeper connection and empathy with other-than-human not only has connotations for social pedagogy but also is epitomised within rising eco-cultural literacy and sustainability explorations within ECEC. Politically, global warming is contentiously debated, yet it remains an issue that is becoming increasingly more pressing (see, for example, the report in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [2018]). Eco-literate approaches to the implications of the Anthropocene are gaining traction to facilitate young children's empathy for each other, the planet and everything in it (Bjerknes et al., 2023; Mcphie, 2019; Ritchie, 2017). However, human-centric trends in educative policy and practice may possibly be supporting an unhelpful divide between humans and nature.

Mcphie (2019) has described the intertwined nature of an individual's physical, emotional and mental well-being with the health of the natural world and the planet. He has argued that humans are being subjected to continued psychological disconnections from nature, that is, a bifurcation, at macro and micro levels, which will almost certainly destabilise their physical, emotional and mental health and well-being. Fundamentally, human beings are nature, and 'humans and other-than-humans have the same ontological status' (Mcphie, 2019, p. 28). It is reasonable, therefore, that the health of both humans and other-than-humans might be inextricably interlinked. This is echoed in Ellyatt (2020), who has argued that human flourishing includes paying attention to: 'living well sustainability; living well together; living well locally; living well personally; and developing well' (p. 2). Furthermore, she considers that consciously or unconsciously individuals are driven to seek not only ways to maintain holistic alignment of head, heart and hands, but also positive orientation with the natural world. Ensuring that children have a deeper awareness of their connection to, and companionship with, nature, cultivates the health and future well-being of both. With planetary survival and human flourishing at risk, it is not overreaching to assume that without adequate nurturing or relationships in ECEC, for both human and that which is other-than human, in genuine caring and authentic relational connections, the future looks uncertain.

The importance of caring apprenticeships

Noddings (2013) has observed that relationship-centred practices function like caring apprenticeships, with the role of the ECP being that of a more knowledgeable guide and role model. Noddings (2013) noted 'training for receptivity involves sharing and reflecting aloud. It involves the kind of close contact that makes personal history valuable … a relationship is required' (p. 122). By accommodating traditional notions of attachment, companionship attachment and wider notions of social pedagogy and relationship-centred practices to include human and other-than-human relational encounters, ECPs foster the development of life-affirming connections. Providing opportunities for children to observe, experience and then practice their sociability and social competences ensures that children have the experiences they need as both the cared for and the one caring. Interestingly, the international

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literature review undertaken by the UNICEF (2021) Innocenti Research Centre explores the learning for well-being framework (L4WB), which considers core capacities that children need to develop to better understand and interact with their world, and to promote holistic development and well-being. These capacities include 'discerning patterns, embodying, empathizing, inquiring, listening, observing, reflecting, relaxing and sensing' (UNICEF, 2021, p. 19). However, in relation to caring apprenticeships, the key findings from the report suggest that while adults support children in developing these core capacities, how adults express their own capacities in their interactions with children as role models can impact significantly on how children undertake the same (UNICEF, 2021). Essentially, taking the time to be in the moment with children, focusing on the quality and nature of what is occurring at the points of connection within relational encounters, listening while children are enquiring and acting as a role model provide a relational blueprint for children both now and in the future.

Noddings' (2013) notion of caring apprenticeships provides opportunities for children to experience living well and in relationship with self, others and the world, while offering examples of navigating conflict that can be an integral aspect of living collaboratively. Navigating unexpected events can be challenging and may require an acceptance that, on occasion, life requires the possibility of living in conflict or discomfort. This may additionally include sustainability challenges and the impacts of Anthropocene as previously outlined (Mcphie, 2019; Ritchie, 2017). Navigating potential conflict regarding wider world issues and facing lifestyle changes, which may be perceived uncomfortable, are skills that children may need to develop to shape the future they want to see. Particularly pertinent as Ritchie (2017) has called for educational reform founded on 'learning to live on a planet under pressure' (p. 289). However, Noddings' (2013) notions of caring apprenticeships suggest learning beyond delivering curriculums and more in keeping with modelling ways of being that connects children to all life in all its complexity.

The notion that a deeper sense of relationship to self, to foster a deeper relationship with others, is not new. Moore (1993) has pointed out that the inability to adjust to life and the challenges that living in relational worlds brings may be the result of not 'attending to the soul' (p. 28). Moore's notion of the soul is not a religious concept but one that aligns with the 'spirit of family' (Moore, 1993, p. 28). Furthermore, Moore (1993) has suggested that inadequate attention to the soul (the spirit of family) may result in individuals being less able to view life experiences with 'critical discernment' (p. 29), leading to a 'blind faith' (p. 29) permeating beliefs, values and actions. Critical discernment plays a significant role in challenging socially unjust behaviours in all relational (and political) arenas. The reality that is engendered in the absence of critical discernment is one that exacerbates social injustice, discriminatory and silencing practices of self and/or others. Even the briefest of explorations of current media and social media uncovers a plethora of judgements, assumptions and intolerance on many levels already in existence within our cultures. Therefore, a greater capacity for acceptance, respect and tolerance must be considered when educating young children if we have any hope for a more nurturing, respectful and sustainable society. However, a more spiritual focus for children's development moves beyond just considerations of tolerance and respect. The UNICEF (2021) review highlights that spiritual development encompass a 'sense of connection to all things' (p. 20), fundamentally becoming the foundational lens from which all other core capacities are experienced and expressed. Ignoring the spiritual or inadequate attention to the soul, therefore, hinders life experiences and ultimately children's well-being.

It may be reasonable to consider here the notion of, and acceptance of, *Other* in regard to more equitable and tolerant relational encounters. Kristeva (1991) suggested that within all of us is Other, a stranger or foreigner that bridges what we know with the unknown and unknowable. She states, 'the foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners' (Kristeva, 1991, p. 1). Kristeva pointed out that strangers and strangeness are not always welcome. Therefore, metaphorically speaking, when difference and diversity are not always comfortable or accommodated, they become Other.

Other can take many forms, including human and other-than-human. However, as Kristeva (1991) and May (2005) suggested, it is not until we accept the Other in ourselves that we can truly and authentically embrace it, in whatever form, in our interactions. Accepting Other is not the same as grasping, controlling, dominating or possessing it, thereby appropriating it and mediating it through our own frames of reference into something that we are more comfortable with. That merely changes Other into something that becomes Same. May (2005) described acknowledging Other as the need to develop an 'ontology of difference' (p. 22) that acknowledges and accommodates the unique, diverse, unpredictable and remarkable in authentic and socially just encounters. Life is complex and living in

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collaboration and in relationship with self, others, nature and the world can be messy. If ECPs can model an acceptance of Other, this will serve as a further example of a caring apprenticeship, providing a blueprint for children on how to navigate a world full of difference and diversity, and work towards a more caring and respectful world.

Exploring with children how to be in relationships eventually leads to fostering the skills needed to effectively live within communities and care for the planet. It facilitates children's capabilities and capacities to take responsibility for Other in all its forms, including themselves, the world and everything in it. While Gallagher and Stobbs (2023) have quite rightly cautioned against the sentimentality of looking to our children for hope in the face of a more dystopian future, (re)focusing on social pedagogic approaches, relationship-centred practices and the importance of connections and 'caring for the soul' may provide the only route out of our current challenges.

Haltung

The concept of *Haltung* encapsulates the notion of authenticity, ethics and values in practice (Charfe and Gardner, 2020). *Haltung* provides a bridge between an ECP, their relationship-centred pedagogic practice and the actions they take within their relational encounters. Charfe and Gardner (2020) have likened *Haltung* to a moral compass that governs a person's thoughts, feelings and interactions, supporting the notion of being fully present in the moment and honouring self and others (and Other). Within ECEC, the concept of *Haltung* is relevant to all levels of provision, including theory, policy and practice at the macro and micro levels. It is fundamentally what drives ECPs' practice either consciously or unconsciously.

(Re)conceptualisations of ECEC and the role of the ECP drawing on *Haltung* can bring about profound change in the way that we think, interact and interpret relationships and relational encounters. Charfe and Gardner (2020) explored *Haltung* in relation to social work and children's services; however, the premise of their arguments applies equally to relationship-focused practice in ECEC. For example, an ECP's individual *Haltung* influences the sector discourses they challenge and accept, whether practice is driven by deficit thinking or strengths-based approaches for instance, or whether practice works *with* children and their families, or *on* and *for* them. Even views about children, childhood and the purpose of education provide timely examples of *Haltung* in ECEC – are children seen as rich, capable agents of change or passive, blank-slate learners? The former promotes in-the-moment learning with education becoming a collaborative endeavour with opportunities to negotiate sense and meaning to the empowerment of child and ECP. The latter aligns with banking or transmission-based approaches to education, which might ultimately be reductive, merely promoting didactic teaching and passive, predetermined rote learning. Deleuze (1994) described this latter approach as dogmatic, only inspiring thinking that 'harms no one, neither thinkers nor anyone else' (p. 172).

Charfe and Gardner (2020) noted that there are two pillars of *Haltung*: empathic understanding for situations and people; and elements of positive regard. These are reminiscent of the person-centred unconditional positive regard discussed by Rogers (1951). Furthermore, Roberts (2017) discussed 'reflective listening' and hearing in 'non-judgemental' and 'non-threatening' ways (p. 8), whereas Brown (2018) described 'listening with the same passion we want to be heard' (p. 15). By approaching relational encounters in this way, ECPs suspend judgements and assumptions that often impede value-laden work with children and families, and work towards accepting ways of life that they may not have personal experience with (accepting Other).

Honest, heartfelt practice, promoted within the two pillars of *Haltung*, can require ECPs to accept and own a level of fallibility in practice and interactions that can lead to a sense of vulnerability. Being comfortable with vulnerability requires that ECPs become more comfortable with the unknown and find confidence in functioning outside their comfort zone. This, as noted by Dewey (1910), is not always easy. Dewey claimed that grappling with uncertainty takes courage and a willingness to embrace uncomfortableness and 'endure a condition of mental unrest' (p. 11). However, Brown (2018) has recognised that brave practice requires courageously joining others in their messy muddle of things, while often challenging, it cultivates environments where everyone 'feels safe, seen, heard and respected' (p. 20). Brown (2018) has observed that 'you can't get to courage without a rumble with vulnerability' (p. 15), and leaning into vulnerability builds positive trusting relationships. Drawing on the two pillars of *Haltung* supports ECPs in fully accepting and accommodating Other and facilitates working in full

partnership for transformative practice. Interestingly, Ellyatt (2020) has suggested that vulnerability is not only the hallmark of authentic relationships, but also a fundamental part of human flourishing and holistic growth. Sharing thoughts, feelings and emotions and developing the capacity for empathy support positive self-worth and are a vital part of what it means to be human and experience our world.

However, *Haltung* is not merely about reflecting on or uncovering ethics and values, there needs to be an understanding of how practice is then driven forward. Freire (2001) has argued 'words not given body (made flesh) have little or no value. Right thinking is right doing' (p. 39). This implies that authentic, transformative education begins with a willingness to challenge and change; espoused theory (what we say we believe) has to relate to practice actions (what we actually do) – essentially we need to walk our talk. If ECPs are to challenge their own practice and (re)imagine possibilities in relational encounters within ECEC then, as Dewey (1910) implied, it may not be a process of 'thinking harder … but thinking differently' (p. 12). *Haltung* affords ECPs the opportunities to think differently, while being guided by their own moral compass.

Acknowledging the moral and ethical nature of *Haltung* may offer additional challenges for ECPs. Many practice challenges exist for value-laden educators, for instance balancing and responding to the dichotomous constraints of future-focused, rational-technical policy dictates, against child-centred, in-the-moment practice encounters. Furthermore, navigating ethical dilemmas, dealing with the unknown and accommodating Other can leave ECPs feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped in their practice. Often, teacher training and practice preparatory programmes do not always support students in feeling well-equipped to deal with the realities of practice (Barron, 2016; Cliffe and Solvason, 2021; Malone, 2020; Ribers, 2018). ECPs and trainee teachers do not always have access within higher education programmes to detailed and in-depth explorations of ethics, values and relationship-focused practices. Potentially, this results in ECPs experiencing moral distress and disheartening ethical and professional disillusionment and disempowerment on every level. So, while *Haltung* may offer many strengths in regard to ECEC, how to draw on this to enact changes to practice and to do the right thinking and the right doing in real terms may be less clear. Although, there are now higher education programmes striving for change (Gallagher and Stobbs, 2023; Stobbs et al., 2023).

Rhizomatics, assemblages and nomads

Drawing on Deleuzoguattarian concepts such as rhizomes, assemblages and nomads may provide ECPs with more tangible ways forward in their practice to support a deeper focus on relationships and connections. While different from *Haltung*, these concepts can be complimentary in providing practical ways of uncovering and navigating values-based practice, in the complex and often competing challenges inherent within ECEC. Deleuzoguattarian concepts also provide key insights into the very nature of exactly what goes on within the in-between spaces of relational connections.

Rhizomes

Within nature, rhizomes are subterranean tubers or bulbs that grow in any and all directions. If growth or a connection is interrupted, it will begin anew along an alternative route. This means rhizomes are constantly (de/re)territorialising terrains in a ceaseless proliferation of multiplicitous connections, endlessly mapping, never retracing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). There are no beginnings and endings within rhizomes 'or points and positions … only lines' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 7), mappings of lines with multiple entries and exits. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have asserted, 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be' (p. 5). From a theoretical perspective, rhizomes are figurations that draw on these key features to promote approaches to practice that are more flexible, fluid and multiplicitous in nature. Through a rhizomatic lens, many layers of meaning within relational encounters can be accommodated by focusing on how something works, critically asking what else might be occurring? Employing the conjunction 'and … and … and' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 26). Essentially, rhizomatic thinking affords ECPs opportunities to reflect on what occurs within connections and in-between spaces, rather than becoming entrenched in fixed or binary positions. A rhizomatic approach has the potential to open up practice to consider what is possible, even accommodating competing priorities and pathways to sense and meaning, while maintaining a respect for diversity and Other.

Assemblages

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have maintained that life is made up of a series of constantly (re)evolving encounters that are generated by assemblages combining and converging together. Assemblages emerge from the collation of elements that make up the complexity of our lives and experiences. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argued that assemblages encompass 'content [and] expression, bodies, actions, passions, intermingling and reacting, [with] actions and statements' (p. 102). These elements coalesce or territorialise briefly before dispersing – (de)territorialising and (re)forming – (re)territorialising as something new, in a continuously changing cycle of expression (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Assemblages exist in a moment for a moment, before (de/re)territorialising in ways that are never fixed or retraced, but always impactful as the historic experiences of what has gone before. Each individual might be considered as their own assemblage as well as being considered part of the greater configuration of assemblages that make up each relational encounter. According to Honan and Sellers (2007), childhood and ECEC curricula function rhizomatically as converging assemblages. The curriculum assemblage, for example, becomes 'every situation, event, person, artefact, happened upon during children's learning journeys as well as the journey itself and the territory negotiated' (Honan and Sellers, 2007, p. 148). In assemblages everything has both equal value and importance. Therefore, the focus shifts from individually centred needs to reflect on the connection within and between assemblage parts, how they function together and apart.

Nomad

The nomad is a conceptual persona that can be adopted or drawn on by ECPs, allowing them to follow many directions and pathways in their practice. Nomads, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), function in the in-between spaces, their focus always on the journey rather than the destination. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have stated that 'The life of the nomad is the intermezzo … the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory … the nomad is the deterritorialised *par excellence*' (pp. 443–4).

Braidotti (2011) captured the abstract nature and purpose of the nomad claiming the nomad 'reasserts the dynamic nature of thinking and the need to reinstate movement at the heart of thought' (p. 7). Allowing movement back into the heart of thinking to not 'think harder … but to think differently' (Dewey, 1910, p. 12) promotes a level of fluidity that has the power to (re)imagine pedagogic practice. Within ECEC the nomad affords ECPs with the ability to (re)negotiate many pathways to sense and meaning, supporting children's excursions into deeper learning encounters that often occur in, or as a result of, interactions with in-between spaces. Nomadic approaches challenge and problematise practice tensions when needed, allowing ECPs opportunities to reconcile their own ethical and pedagogic identities in what can be a constantly changing landscape within ECEC.

These Deleuzoguattarian concepts are not synonymous with *Haltung* but, as previously stated, can be considered as complementary in supporting a deeper focus on the power and importance of relationships and connections and social pedagogic approaches to ECEC. While *Haltung* may ensure ECPs have a moral and ethical compass that drives notions of socially just practice, the flexibility and fluidity of the rhizome and the nomad uncover mutliplicitous ways in which practice can be expressed and learning acknowledged. The many ways assemblages converge and interact open up possibilities in practice that often get overlooked or ignored in favour of academically driven practices, many of which overshadow the importance afforded to social pedagogy and children's relational worlds.

Social pedagogy is always political

As stated in Cliffe and Solvason (2021) and Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021), despite not always being a comfortable thought, ECEC is inherently political at practice and policy level. In the UK, ECEC occupies a rather dichotomous and, it could be argued, even openly contradictory position with regard to underpinning pedagogy and principles. On the one hand, the cornerstone of ECEC is enshrined within unique child principles and child-centred practices (DfE (Department for Education), 2023). On the other, it is becoming increasingly homogenised, which therefore lacks full acknowledgement of diversity, difference and individualisation (Robert-Holmes and Moss, 2021; Stobbs et al., 2023). Future-focused, assessment-driven practices that prioritise intellectual and academic capacities over social competences

take centre stage. Thereby, neoliberal priorities and discursive dominant discourses are brought to bear in curricula provision. Robert-Holmes (2020) has described this as the 'school readiness factory' (p. 235) approach to ECEC. While Deleuze (1994) might have described it as further examples of dogmatic education, supporting reductive approaches to knowledge construction. Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021) suggested approaching ECEC in a way that invests in the image of 'poor child … [who is merely] … a reproducer of knowledge, values and identity, and yet to be realised human capital' (p. 106).

Eichsteller and Holthoff (2011) considered that the purpose of education is to create a 'thriving garden for children' (p. 33), where children are nurtured and can flourish. They have considered the foundations of education from a social pedagogic lens as 'enhancing individual and collective well-being and human dignity' (p. 39). This view is somewhat supported by Biesta (2012) who has argued that education should focus on the quality, power and importance of what occurs 'in-between a child and their world' (p. 95). The preoccupation with more technicist approaches to ECEC have little, if anything, to do with social pedagogy.

Social pedagogy, as suggested by Moss and Petrie (2019), considers how ECPs, policy and wider society serve their children and young people. However, it could be argued that in the marketisation of ECEC and the perpetuation of neoliberalism, the focus has shifted primarily to how children and young people might serve society. Global competitiveness and social capital at individual and societal levels are essential for economic growth, and one could be forgiven for believing that governments already know the future workforce needed to shore up this reality (Campbell-Barr and Nygard, 2014; Moss and Cameron, 2020; Robert-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Policy, therefore, becomes more about reproducing a desired reality that fits these dominant discourses and ideals. The implications of this are articulated well by Sellars and Imig (2021) who argued:

> The tenets of neoliberalism … competitiveness, conformity, conservatism, convention and commerce … is an educational paradigm devoid of child-centred pedagogies of love and care, lacks moral purpose and, consequently, is an inadequate context in which to prepare children and young people to meet the challenges of current and future global, societal and personal challenges. (p. 1158)

Robert-Holmes (2020) and Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021) have voiced concerns that grounding ECEC in neoliberal ideals carries a risk of losing sight of the complex and relational child. Hayes and Filipović (2018) noted similar concerns over losing the present or in-the-moment child. Clark (2023) explored the discursive impacts of this in relation to the unhurried child. Moss and Cameron (2020) have cautioned that neoliberalism and outcomes-driven, future-focused discourse is failing children. They have argued that it merely 'assumes a future of more of the same … prioritising ideas of what children should become at the expense of what is valuable and meaningful to children in the present' (Moss and Cameron, 2020, p. 297). In light of this context, Stobbs et al. (2023) provided a rallying cry for less critique and more action to (re)imagine provision to include social pedagogic principles that nurtures all children. However, this would require a fundamental shift in educative focus at policy and societal levels.

Barrett (2020) built on the notion of Maslow and adapted his theory to consider seven levels of consciousness that govern behaviour and development for individuals, organisations, governments and nations. He has argued the values upheld by national policy correspond to the level of conscious development of a particular nation and its people. Transformative cultural change can only happen when the consciousness of the nation shifts to a 'higher stage of psychological development' (Barrett, 2020, p. 47). However, Gallagher and Stobbs (2023) argued that within polices and legislation, there is often a hidden utopian intention that, when critically engaged with, can provide key messages regarding political climates. Once uncovered, this information could support ECPs in knowing how and when to challenge practices, as well as what to accept and what to resist in regard to discourse; essentially, how to (re)imagine a better future for ECEC that aligns with their *Haltung* and professional identities. By engaging with ECEC practice and interactions with young children differently, in ways that honour the principles of social pedagogy, relationships and connections, it is possible to change the tide of societal values, to create the change that we want to see.

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The implications of molar and molecular lines

To problematise and challenge normative policy and practice, Strom (2018) has applied the Deleuzoguattarian perspective of molar and molecular lines and lines-of-flight to educational contexts. Molar lines represent 'institutional structures … or internalised discourses' (Strom, 2018, p. 109) that serve to preserve dominant discourse. Molecular lines chart the ways in which the molar line is reinforced though daily practices. Lines-of-flight identify the points at which practice breaks away into something new and innovative, where difference and unknown territories emerge. Lines-of-flight can be nomadically followed to open possibilities in practices or regrafted back to the molar line – for instance, when learning is focused on predetermined goals and future-focused practices (Strom, 2018).

Within ECEC, molar lines could be encapsulated within neoliberal priorities that permeate policy and practice. The molecular lines would then represent how this is expressed in ECEC practice, for example, in transmission-based learning, assessment practices or overly focusing on academic attainment. The two function together to ensure conformity, thereby perpetuating practice constraints, particularly in relation to the discursive impacts of performativity. A line-of-flight might emerge when these practice tensions are challenged. This may occur when ECPs engage nomadically in relational encounters with children or (re)negotiate play spaces that challenge the fixed positions of the molar line. In doing so ECPs reconcile their own moral and ethical compass with the often-competing practice dictates of the molar line. In this way, lines-of-flight occupy new and different educational terrains where (re)conceptions and (re)imaginations of ECEC can be nurtured. Nomadically following children's lines-of-flight allows ECPs and children to enjoy and focus on 'travelling the pathways rather than the destination' (Hayes and Filipović, 2018, p. 225), leading to the empowerment and deeper learning of both.

Wondering, slow pedagogy and the power of the moment

Currently, education can be an uneasy mix of behaviourist approaches for managing behaviour (Stobbs et al., 2023) and Piagetian and Vygotskian notions of constructivist pedagogy. These approaches are promoted almost entirely through cognitive development, sustained shared thinking and metacognitive approaches to practice (Cliffe and Solvason, 2019). Despite the previous claims as to the purpose of education, it cannot be denied that the top-down pressures of datafication and performativity (Ball, 2010; Bradbury, 2019; Robert-Holmes and Moss, 2021) often foreshadow 'child-in-the-moment' interactions (Clark, 2023).

While ECPs play an active role in tenaciously upholding the value of present child, as outlined in Hayes and Filipović (2018) and Clark (2023), having the courage to challenge and step away from dominant discourse and practices can be difficult. Ribers (2018) described this as a 'plight to dissent', which is 'having the courage to say no … and dissent when actions violate professional [and personal] ethical guidelines' (p. 897). Rhizomatically, a plight to dissent echoes Strom's (2018) notions of challenging the political and internal constraints of the molar line. This requires ECPs to actively and often nomadically seek and follow a new line-of-flight, deviating from more traditional (molecular line) approaches towards learning and educative endeavours. In many ways this would be the same as acknowledging that practice was incongruent with personal and professional *Haltung* (Charfe and Gardner, 2020) and taking action accordingly.

However, challenging dominant practice require ECPs to be brave, courageous and vulnerable in their practice (Brown, 2018). This can be counterintuitive for ECPs and assumes an *a priori* willingness and capability to step outside their comfort zone. Furthermore, the constraints of performativity are not insignificant, particularly when assessment and attainment dictates are often conflated with quality learning and ECPs' professionalism and skills (Bradbury, 2019). Ball (2010) articulated the damaging implications of performativity when stating that 'performativity works most powerfully when it is inside our heads and souls' (p. 125). It becomes the mechanism by which educators weigh, judge and measure their own self-worth and that of others, often against unrealistic standards. Performativity can result in disheartening disillusionment and disempowerment on every level. Therefore, the pressure and fear of what might, or might not, occur when adopting more nomadic positions within learning and education, to explore new or (re)imagined territories, is real. Having the courage to challenge the status quo

for what may be perceived as an unknown learning outcome may even be considered by ECPs as a perilous undertaking.

Yet L'Ecuyer (2014), Schinkel (2018, 2019) and Bjerknes et al. (2023) have discussed the notion that contemporary neurobiological understandings acknowledge that traditional approaches to education may be reductive to learning in more unexpected ways. For example, they argue that experiences with predetermined and current educative approaches may in fact stifle children's sense of wonder. They suggest that while curiosity may still be somewhat encouraged, as this supports cognition and knowledge construction, it is wonder that fosters the development of a deeper meaning derived from experiences.

Bjerknes et al. (2023, p. 10) have argued that academic achievement can inhibit wonder, as children shift focus from initial intrigue and enjoyment to responding to external motivations and predetermined goals. Curiosity seeks a right answer and has a definite end point, it becomes a task that can be completed and thereby fail to encourage a second or deeper look. Yet wonder and wondering have the potential to explore new and uncharted territories (L'Ecuyer, 2014). Wonder encourages a search for meaning and a deeper contemplation that drives us to question and explore something again and again, making even the familiar appear strange (L'Ecuyer, 2014). Rhizomatically, wonder generates lines-of-flight that engenders a pause, a moment to stop and contemplate more deeply, to ponder for the sake of pondering, which too offers deeper learning. Schinkel (2019) adeptly articulated the power and importance of wondering in the following:

> Wonder essentially entails an openness to the world, and this makes it educationally important, since to open up the world – allowing us to perceive more, understand more, appreciate more, and act and move about in it more competently – is (arguably) what education is ultimately about. (p. 307)

Wonder respects the whole child, encouraging them to engage with the emotional aspects of learning that, while often ignored in traditional educative approaches, play a significant role in developing new knowledge (Cliffe and Solvason, 2020). The Deleuzioguattarian concept of assemblages lend themselves to experiences of wonder. In assemblages, everything has both equal value and importance; the focus, therefore, shifts to reflect on and to wonder about what occurs within the connections and in-between spaces, how different elements, different assemblages converge and function in the moment. Being open to the ways in which children wonder at and wonder about or wonder how, supports children to engage in experiences to their fullest potential, opening up the possibility to nurture thinking that has never been thought before.

Similarly, Clark (2023) has noted that deeper thinking and engagement in education is needed if children are to do more than just skim the surface of learning. Banking information and full deep understanding are two quite different process; the former relying on quantity and reproduction, the latter focusing on quality of learning and development of critical thought. Hayes and Filipović (2018) have argued that children require 'holistic, embodied and integrated' (p. 221) experiences and have the 'right to actively contribute to the process of learning' (p. 221), rather than being passive recipients in predetermined curricular endeavours. Learning is not something that just occurs in the brain, deep, purposeful learning engages children's minds and hearts in meaningful encounters (Sellars and Imig, 2021). It is a notion reminiscent of Pestalozzi's head, heart and hands approach (Sellars and Imig, 2021), which supports a richer, more holistic and authentic learning experience.

Regardless of dominant discourses, learning can happen within the moment and within everyday activities, often taking time to mature and develop. This was powerfully expressed by Clark's (2023) explorations of the relationship between education and time, and in what she and Rosa (2020) considered as the impacts of an accelerating world. Rosa (2020) described an almost insatiable drive to increase what we have on every level, to expand on social capital individually and nationally and to compete and maintain global power and position. This is evidenced with ECEC in the fixation on ever-changing learning and development benchmarks and outcome goals. Clark (2023) has argued that today's achievements become tomorrow's benchmarks, in a never-ending quest for better or for more, further stating that 'not only do we find a desire to put as much world as possible into the child … We find a desire to do this as quickly and cheaply as possible' (p. 5). Therefore, traditional transmission-based approaches to learning become more persuasive in the desire to impart more wisdom and at a faster pace. This not only marginalises the richness, potential and possibility within each child-in-the-moment encounter, but also fosters more didactic and dogmatic approaches to education (Deleuze, 1994).

Counteracting this fast-paced reality, Clark (2023) has proffered the concept of 'slow pedagogy', which (re)focuses on relationships and connections and the power and richness of now. Slow pedagogy does not mean moving slowly; this would be a rather reductionist view of what Clark is suggesting. In many respects slow pedagogy takes time out of the equation altogether, to be in-the-moment with children at a pace (fast or slow) that is right for each and every encounter. Children experience learning as a child rather than as an-adult-in-waiting, promoting a 'timelessness' within the learning process that allows both parties to 'wallow' in experiences (Clark, 2023, pp. 28–30). In this way, children are supported in developing core capacities for learning and well-being, such as embodiment from 'wallowing' in sensory experiences (UNICEF, 2021, pp. 29–30) and empathising through observing and emerging resonance relating to exploring feelings, curiosity and thinking (p. 32). Slow pedagogy, as defined by Clark (2023), supports the enjoyment experienced by ECPs and children in (de/re)territorialising learning and learning spaces together, freeing up time to nomadically follow diversions in play and alternative pathways to sense and meaning. In short, the antithesis of the hurried child, the blank slate waiting to be filled with the world as fast as possible, for fear the learning opportunity may be lost.

Experiencing learning as a more timeless endeavour aligns with Csíkszentmihályi's (2014) notions of being in flow, a state of immersion in experiences to the exclusion of all else. Working in flow is such a deeply personal experience that it cannot be prescribed or arbitrarily assigned by others. Being in flow is considered the only space from which anyone can experience a deep, abiding happiness that positively impacts on well-being. Through a rhizomatic lens, taking time to wallow in experiences or to be in flow, provides conceptual opportunities for children to follow alternative lines-of-flight in regard to purposeful learning.

Children and ECPs have a hundred different languages of expression and a hundred different ways to experience the world and education. Slow pedagogy, flow and wonder provide time for ECPs and children to fully explore the assemblages of 'expressions, bodies, actions, passions, intermingling [and] reacting, [with] actions and statements' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 102) that they bring with them. All powerfully interweaving from 'every situation, event, person, artefact, happened upon during children's learning journeys as well as the journey itself and the territory negotiated' (Honan and Sellers, 2007, p. 148). Slow pedagogy affords ECPs time to critically consider layers of meaning within learning territories that are (de/re)territorialised, providing time to ask, what is going on here? How does it work? 'And … and … and' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 26). The power of this approach for (re)imagining possibilities in ECEC provision is encapsulated within Clark's (2023) question, 'what would learning look like if the relationships were visible?' (p. 126).

Concluding thoughts

The purpose of this article is to explore ECEC through a social pedagogic lens in an attempt to (re)consider the power and importance of relationships and connections. While competing policy dictates provide challenges for ECPs in engaging with relationship-focused practices, the discussion here has considered why relationship-focused approaches are so important and practical ways that they may be considered. Moss and Petrie (2019) suggested the social pedagogy and education disconnect, that it is a wasted opportunity within theory and practice. Furthermore, Stobbs et al. (2023) called for 'radical steps … to overhaul the education system in England … [stating] changes to existing systems are not enough; our entire approach needs to be re-imagined' (p. 7). Drawing on social pedagogic principles within ECEC could provide fertile ground in which theory and practice could purposefully meet and radical change could emerge.

ECEC should set a strong foundation for children's relational well-being and their ability to care for themselves, the planet and everything in it (Ellyatt, 2020; Mcphie, 2019; Ritchie, 2017). Wider considerations of companionship attachment and caring apprenticeships (Noddings, 2013) could provide a guiding blueprint for children now and throughout their lives. It is entirely up to us, as educators, what this blueprint says about the world we dare to (re)imagine. If we want children to thrive and flourish and to feel loved and respected, then approaches in ECEC matter more than ever before. Social pedagogy, relationships and connections matter more than ever before. The power for change does not rest with children but with us. We must decide how we will use it and use it wisely.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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