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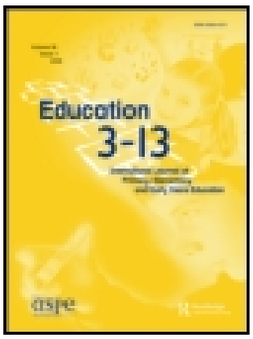

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Re-imagining education: cultivating a triangle of trust and relational pedagogy within a participatory paradigm

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we envision a holistic approach to the education of children within a participatory paradigm, which integrates inner and outer worlds in a new understanding of consciousness. The inspiration for our reimagining arose from a research study undertaken in partnership with Kids Planet Day Nurseries which included inquiring into the impact of Covid-19 on children in early childhood education and care. It was discovered that, although parents and practitioners identified Covid as a traumatic event, there was little awareness of the potential effects on children's inner worlds. Similarly, the government in its post-lockdown policymaking focused on catch-up with learning, rather than addressing wider psychological issues. In this reimagining of the education system, the neoliberal principle of 'profit as primary' has been eradicated, along with its long-term positivist partner 'scientism', which proclaims all valid knowledge is quantifiable. Instead, the focus is on the intra-active dimensions of learning, grounded in the idea of a 'triangle of trust' developed in the early years and continued into a relational pedagogy in primary schools. The challenges involved in replacing a positivist Newtonian worldview with a participatory paradigm, where inner and outer worlds are entangled and equally important, are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Participatory paradigm; neoliberalism; ECEC; consciousness; triangle of trust; relational pedagogy

Introduction

Recently, Alexander (2020) identified COVID-19 as a collective trauma, which takes place when:

> members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander 2012, 6)

This means that people from across the globe, including children, have experienced a distressing life event which has the potential to affect psychological well-being. It is well established that an experience of trauma can disturb a person's neurological, biological, psychological and social development (Paterson 2014). MIND, the mental health organisation, identifies trauma as an event which is experienced as stressful, frightening or distressing. Yet immediately following the final lockdown, the UK government's main emphasis was on 'catch-up with learning' (Gov.uk Website 2022), with parents instructed to return their children to school, whatever levels of anxiety and concern they were having.

In this paper, we use the experience of the pandemic, and the priority given by the UK government to the cognitive learning of children, as the basis for critically analysing the principles that

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guide policy-making in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and in schools. We specifically critique the neglect of children's inner worlds of emotions and feelings. In order to understand why precedence is given to external achievements over psychological well-being, we engage in an in-depth analysis of the historical and political context that has led to the current situation. We argue that the neoliberal philosophy which has driven political decision-making for over 40 years is grounded in the mechanistic principles of Newtonian science, resulting in an alliance which denies the importance of inner lives and is proving intransigent to challenge.

Yet the limitations of this Newtonian worldview are damaging the health and life chances of an increasing number of people, as it fails to address the emotional, economic and educational consequences of those who are unable to successfully compete in such a neoliberal landscape. This includes a disregard for the many ways in which trauma might be experienced, and the adverse consequences on the individual and wider society. It also ignores the significance of consciousness, choosing to see it as a by-product of the brain, rather than being a primary aspect of reality within which we are all interconnected (McGilchrist 2021; Hutchins 2014), and which enables relational ways of being that dissolve the subject–object dualism.

We maintain that this situation will continue for as long as policies and practices emerge from the same mindset. There needs to be a fundamental shift in worldview that takes a holistic approach to the care and education of young children, recognising the indivisibility of their inner and outer worlds. Our thinking draws particularly on the work of Heshusius (1994, 1995), a Professor of Education, and Barad (2007), a philosopher and theoretical physicist with an interest in the implications of quantum physics for how we understand the relationship between ourselves and the world. Our theorising is located within a participatory paradigm, founded on the idea of a participatory consciousness, in which all of reality is entangled and interconnected (Barad 2007; Al-Khalili 2003). We discuss how this paradigm can support the key person role (DfE 2021) and influence the evolution of a dynamic 'triangle of trust' (Early Years Coalition 2021) between child, parent and practitioner in early years settings, where the traditional separation between self and other dissolves into an intra-active experience of *selfother*. The experience of a participatory consciousness can then be continued through a relational pedagogy in primary school education.

This leads us to our reimagining of education, informed by a transformed understanding of the complementary relationship between emotional security and cognitive development, the application of which would enhance the educational development and social flourishing of our children and young people.

Research study

The reflections that led to the writing of this paper have their origins in the findings of a research study undertaken in 2020, in partnership with Kids Planet Day Nurseries (KDPN), an independent nursery chain in the north of England. Realising at an early stage that the pandemic was likely to be adversely influencing the lives of children, they invited researchers at York St John University to inquire with them into the impact of Covid-19 on the early years' practitioners, and the implications for the young children with whom they were working. The research took place during lockdown, when many nursery settings were closed, and schools were only open to the children of key workers. KPDN remained open throughout lockdown although a small number of their settings amalgamated with children and families being transferred to a different setting. Between June and September 2020, a survey was sent out to nearly 1400 employees across over 40 settings, which had a 32% response rate ($n = 455$). Based on the responses to this survey, there were follow-up in-depth, semi-structured interviews, undertaken on-line with 24 practitioners and 12 parents, to gain their perspectives on the effect of the pandemic on the children. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using an iterative thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2014). KPDN gave permission for their name to be used, but all other names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Ten themes emerged from the survey responses and interviews, which were then grouped into four meta-themes: Covid-19 as a traumatic experience; the professional and emotional responses of KPDN practitioners and managers; the experience of Covid-19 from the perspective of parents; and the emotional impact of Covid-19 on children. A second phase took place between October 2020 and March 2021, involving a second survey and further in-depth interviews. It also included a focus group of Managers and Room Leaders, from six different nursery settings. The on-line meetings took place on zoom, for 1 hour per month over a 6-month period. The aim of the focus group was to provide a forum, where the experiences faced during the pandemic as it unfolded could be shared and reflected upon.

A full account of the project is detailed elsewhere (Walton and Darkes-Sutcliffe 2021). In this paper, we are focusing on one specific theme, and exploring its implications in greater depth than was previously possible within a limited word count. This was: *Impact of Covid-19 on young children*, which emerged as a strong theme from the surveys and interviews in both phases. However, what was significant was the range of opinions expressed by the respondents. No consensus nor informed view emerged as to what the impact on children was. Rather, there were widely divergent perceptions, ranging from a belief that they had been affected minimally or not at all, to feeling they had to have been severely disturbed.

Among the former group, a common reason given was their young age:

> Lily is thankfully at that age where she doesn't understand what's going on, to her it's a normal life really isn't it? (Parent 10)

There was the suggestion made that if children did get upset, it was with deliberate intent:

> You can tell some are doing it to get a reaction, and it's naivety – children don't know what's going on, they just want someone to play with and to see their friends. (Key Person/Room leader 2)

Their assumed resilience was often mentioned:

> They are more resilient than we give them credit for. (Key Person 9)

However, there were others who believed that the pandemic had adversely affected the children.

> It's definitely impacted the kids as well as adults because there's so much change. (Manager 8)

Another practitioner said:

> Her daughter is 2 in November and she all of a sudden has a fear of the wind since the pandemic and she loves the outside, so it is having a massive impact on her mental health. (Key Person 4)

Some children became involved in obsessive behaviours:

> One little boy's mum gave him a bottle of anti bac gel for his hands and he's obsessed and constantly asks if he needs to wash his hands, and then obviously when you listen to their conversations they're talking about it but it's about germs and things. (Key Person/Room Leader 6)

Reflections on responses

When discussing the significance of the wide range of responses, we as researchers found that many interviewees had no or limited awareness of the fact that, in experiencing what had been identified as a collective trauma (Alexander 2020), there may potentially be immediate and longer-term adverse effects on their mental health.

This lack of consciousness of the possible psychological consequences of the pandemic on young children concerned us. Children do not exist in a vacuum, and so will absorb the feelings and fears of those responsible for looking after them. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological work on human development makes this clear; the child's development is influenced by the family and communities in which they live, in particular, those responsible for their daily care. So if a young child's parents or

carers are exhibiting anxiety and stress, then they are likely to experience that also. As Carpenter and Carpenter (2020) suggest, it is probable that they were witnessing a 'sea of adult anxiety' which they would be absorbing. They had certainly experienced disruptions to normality – loss of routine, structure, friendships, opportunity, and with that their freedom to play and explore was being seriously curtailed.

The significance of trauma in early years is not a new realisation (Kaplow et al. 2007; Gregorowski and Seedat 2013; Lanius, Vermetten, and Pain 2010). Bessel Van Der Kolk, an American psychiatrist and researcher who has spent his professional life studying how adults and children respond to traumatic events, was already claiming, several years before the pandemic, that childhood trauma was the nation's single most important public health challenge. He investigated in depth the relationship between distressing experiences and our inner psychological world:

> We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present. (2014, 21)

More recent research into the impact of trauma on young children's brains, learning and development is reinforcing the magnitude of the problem (Dye 2018; Zarse et al. 2019; Johnson and Brooke 2021; Jarvis 2020). In her book *Early Childhood and Neuroscience*, Mine Conkbayir (2021) examines in detail the relationship between trauma and brain development, and the need for practitioners to be knowledgeable about this relationship. She identifies that, at a 'neurobiological and physiological level, *children under stress cannot learn* and they will fail to thrive' (91, italics in original).

The attention that needs to be paid to a diverse range of adverse childhood experiences, and the consequent need for trauma-informed practice, is also increasingly being identified and developed in innovative professional learning programmes (National Children's Bureau 2022). Yet our research found that this knowledge had not reached many practitioners in wider early years settings. On reflection, we came to the conclusion that this lack of awareness was completely understandable, and not the responsibility of the practitioners themselves. The professional training of early years' practitioners, as with school teachers, is subject to the philosophy and policies of the government of the day. The organisation with whom we were researching is located in England; and all early-year services in England inhabit a political context where there was, at the time of writing this article, no mention of trauma-informed practice or training in any early years policy document or statutory guidance.

Before we were able to re-imagine what an education system would look like that perceived an awareness and understanding of trauma to be integral to policy-making and practice, we firstly engaged in an analysis of the reasons for its absence. For this, we needed to move away from education itself, and into the wider historical, political and economic context within which education is located. What we discovered was a deeply rooted and powerful alliance between neoliberalism and science, which ultimately impacts on education; or more specifically, an alliance between a neoliberal ideology, and a belief that the scientific method is the only valid way of gaining knowledge. The partnership between these two has – perhaps somewhat unexpectedly – its roots in the rise of neo-classical economics at the end of the nineteenth century. It is this partnership that we claim is responsible for creating and perpetuating the prevailing mechanistic worldview which privileges the external and quantifiable, relegating the qualitative dimensions of life to the margins. This manifests itself in many ways in the social and educational world, including in the datafication of early years, where teachers experience a conflict between their child-centred values, and the expectations placed on them to measure children's progress through testing and classification (Roberts-Holmes 2015; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury 2016). In the following section, we provide an explanatory account of our analysis and conclusions.

An alliance between neoliberalism and scientism

The nature and impact of neoliberalism on early years education has been comprehensively discussed (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021; Sims 2017). What has been less extensively analysed are

the reasons why, after over 40 years, neoliberalism continues to be deeply embedded in the western world, with global influence, despite the many critiques of it as an ideology (Brown 2015; Venugopal 2015; Monbiot 2016). We felt this required greater investigation.

After studying the historical and political context within which neoliberalism was founded and has developed, we came to understand that its resilience is a consequence of its connectedness with science. Science provides an objective, mechanistic model of the universe that has proven to be highly successful in gaining knowledge about the natural world. Neoliberalism, in linking its economic model to science, promoted the conviction that it too would be equally successful in the social world.

We trace this relationship back to the rise of classical science, which can be symbolised by the printing of Isaac Newton's book *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* in 1687. The successes of science that emerged from that time led to a certainty that scientific methods were the only valid way of gaining true knowledge (Gribbin 2002).

This belief led to 'scientism', which according to Habermas is 'science's belief in itself; that is, the confidence that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science' (1986, 4).

At the end of the nineteenth century, an early application of Newtonian principles to the social world took place with the introduction of neo-classical economics, where economic principles were explicitly built on scientific principles (Fullbrook 2007; Walton 2021, 2022). Walras, one of the founders of neo-classical economics, was clear about his theoretical groundings: 'This pure theory of economics is a science which resembles the physic-mathematical sciences in every respect' (1874 [1984], 71).

The idea of free-market principles, then, so central to neoliberalism, was built into an economic model that emulated the cause-and-effect principles of science and guided the meeting of economists in 1938, where the term 'neoliberal' was created (Monbiot 2016). The concept was further developed in 1947 with the founding of the Mount Pelerin Society (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009), following which the relationship between economics and the principles of Newtonian science was continually emphasised:

> Positive economics is, or can be, an 'objective' science, in precisely the same sense as any of the physical sciences. (Friedman 1966, 4)

This bringing together of science and economics was central to the policy-making of Margaret Thatcher, when she became Prime Minister in the UK in 1979, closely followed by Ronald Reagan as President of the USA in 1984, resulting in 'the dramatic consolidation of neoliberalism as a new economic orthodoxy regulating public policy at the state level in the advanced capitalist world' (Harvey 2007, 22).

It is this well-established intertwining relationship between scientism and neoliberalism that we see as contributing to the entrenched mechanistic view of the universe, which is built on the principles of separation, determinism and reductionism. For example, Vandenbroeck, when talking about the early years, asserts that the mechanisms of neoliberalism – competition, 'choice', accountability, standardised testing, monitoring and inspection – has had a

> profound influence on the daily practices in early childhood education, on its funding mechanisms, on what data are produced, on inspection, performance and accountability, on the image of the child, the image of the parent and the image of the early childhood workforce. (2021, xii)

The influence that the scientific principle of mechanism has had on education can be seen in the thinking of educational researchers such as Slavin (2002), when he states that adherence to science has the 'potential to profoundly transform policy, practice and research', maintaining that:

> Once we establish replicable paradigms for development, rigorous evaluation, replication and dissemination, these mechanisms could be applied to any educational intervention or policy. (2002, 17)

We can relate to Robert-Holmes and Moss, when they state: 'neoliberalism is deeply problematic, eminently resistible and eventually replaceable' (2021, 4). We are also sympathetic to their view when they continue:

> We think neoliberalism has little or no future and turn to alternatives; for if the neoliberal mantra has been 'there are no alternatives', ours is that 'there are alternatives'. (2021, 149)

The problem is, though, that however much we might believe this as a principle, we need to realise that it is not just neoliberalism as an ideology that needs confronting; we are also faced with the challenge of finding a way to get to the roots of the powerful alliance of scientism and neoliberalism. It is our contention that creating a 'politics of refusal' which includes a refusal of the 'categories and norms which seek to represent us' (Ball 2016, 1141) are necessary but not sufficient. Unless we are able to understand and eradicate the stranglehold that the neoliberal-scientistic partnership has on our western psyche, and its expression through a materialist Newtonian worldview, then our efforts to create a different kind of society will remain on the margins.

Introducing a new 'participatory consciousness' worldview

The argument that we are making is that, if we are to radically challenge the dominant Newtonian paradigm, and the scientistic-neoliberal partnership it supports, we need to replace it with a very different worldview. The Newtonian paradigm has had the consequence of encouraging us to see ourselves as separate from each other and the wider world. As we have seen, it imposes on us both a philosophical and a scientific justification for processes such as the datafication of education, which separates the internal emotional worlds of children, from the external world in which they are tested and measured.

The worldview that is being proposed here is one that is based on a transformation of our understanding of consciousness. Consciousness research is an exciting and expanding area of investigation (Chalmers 2021; Velmans 2016) and has immense implications for education (Heshusius 1994, 1995; Gallagher 2015). This understanding of consciousness is rooted in science; but in quantum physics rather than in classical Newtonian science, so it is grounded in a very different view of reality (Rosenblaum and Kutter 2006). Instead of the world existing of objects separated in time and space, reality is essentially an ultimate unity in which we are all interconnected, and where there is a dissolution of the subject/object divide. This is expressed – for example – in the view that I as an individual do not exist independently of the world I inhabit (Al-Khalili 2003). There is a growing literature which indicates that consciousness may exist independently of the brain (Walach 2020; Kastrup 2019). It seems possible that the brain permits consciousness rather than creates it (McGilchrist 2021), somewhat analogous to a radio transmitting sound waves.

Max Planck (1858–1947), a founder of quantum theory, said:

> I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness. Everything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing, postulates consciousness. (Sullivan 1931, 17)

John Wheeler (1911–2008), a theoretical physicist and a colleague of Einstein's, also understood the implications of findings from quantum physics for our views of reality:

> The quantum principle has demolished the once-held view that the universe sits safely 'out there' … We have to cross out that old word 'observer' and replace it by the new word 'participator'. In some strange sense the quantum principle tells us that we are dealing with a participatory universe. (Wheeler 1994, 126)

The idea of a participatory consciousness within an educational context, although under-developed, is not new. Lous Heshusius, formerly Professor of Education in Canada, explored the concept in depth in an article entitled *Freeing Ourselves from Objectivity: Managing Subjectivity or Turning*

Towards a Participatory Mode of Consciousness. She discusses the relationship between consciousness and feelings of alienation:

> The belief that one can actually distance oneself, and then regulate that distance in order to come to know, has been referred to as an alienated consciousness … a mode of consciousness that has led to undreamed of technological advances, but has also left us alienated from each other, from nature, and from ourselves. (Heshusius 1994, 16)

The idea of an alienated mode of consciousness is reflected in the ethos of individualism and competition that epitomises neoliberalism. This distancing – the separation of self from other – makes sense, says Heshusius, if there is a desire to control others, and wield power over them.

Heshusius explores the implications of a participatory consciousness:

> Participatory consciousness is the awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known … … one is turned towards the other (human or nonhuman) without being in need of it or wanting to appropriate it to achieve something … … .(it) results in rethinking the boundaries of self and other in the knowledge of their permeability. Reality is no longer understood as truth to be interpreted but as mutually evolving … … ..participatory consciousness is the recognition of kinship and therefore of ethics … … ..it renders the act of knowing an ethical act … mutuality and ethicality are at once embedded in a participatory mode of consciousness. (1994, 16–20)

In a later (1995) article, Heshusius consider what this transformed worldview means for the teacher–student relationship. She was working with trainee teachers, who, she found, tended to maintain a distance between a child and themselves, between 'self' and 'other'. Her view was that seeing the other as a 'fixed entity can severely limit the access we have to others, and can foreclose the possibility of joining a larger *selfother* reality that enriches and changes the self' (1995, 122). She encouraged her trainee teachers to suspend their inclination to maintain control of the relationship, and instead to just 'be' with the children, give them their full attention and see what emerges:

> It is about boundaries we habitually draw around the self in order to keep ourselves separate and distinct from the other, and it is about the possibilities of *dissolving* those boundaries, so that we may come to know the other, and paradoxically also the self, more fully. (1995, 121, italics in original)

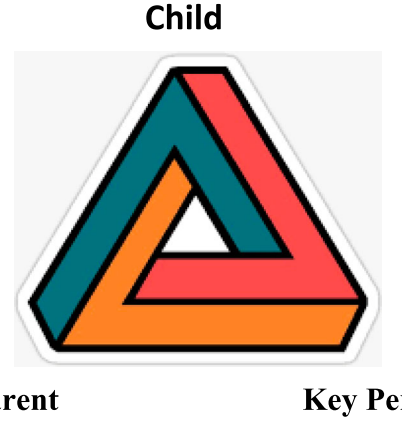
If teachers are able to do this, she argues, the teacher–student relationship is enhanced, to the mutual benefit and learning of both.

So it is against this ontological backcloth, which transforms understanding of ourselves in relation to each other and the wider world that we return to the research study and the analysis and reflections that emerged from it.

Cultivating a triangle of trust and relational pedagogy with a participatory paradigm

Our aim in this section is to demonstrate how a participatory paradigm, which sees consciousness as central, can provide an ontological and epistemological context for researchers and professionals who know at an intuitive level that the universe is intrinsically relational and ethical; and that *selfother* is a more appropriate linguistic representation for reflecting the sense of connection that is experienced in the best educational relationships, than the separation of terms 'self' and 'other'. We propose the concept of a 'triangle of trust' as a metaphor that allows for the nourishing of a deeper level of kinship between child, parent and early years practitioner, which in turn forms a secure and reliable foundation for a relational pedagogy when the child moves into primary school.

We see the construct of 'key person' as being central to our envisioning of early years, and to the concept of the triangle of trust:



Since 2008, the adoption of a key person system has been a mandatory requirement for all early years' settings in England (DCSF 2008; DfE 2021). It is interesting to note, however, that the terms 'key worker' and 'key person' are both used, often interchangeably. A key worker fits in with the Newtonian paradigm, as it is often seen as a task-oriented role, becoming the lead contact for a family to gather necessary documentation to support organisational strategy. However, being a key person has different requirements, more in keeping with a participatory paradigm. It is about investing in an emotional relationship, an involvement, a reciprocal commitment between a named member of staff and a family (Elfer 1996; Manning-Morton and Thorp 2015).

The emphasis on the physical safety of children during lockdown, without paying equal attention to their psychological well-being, reflects a worldview that perceives the external world to 'matter' more than the internal worlds of feelings and emotions. In our reimagining of education post-Covid, we envision more balance between the two, with an acceptance that they are essentially inseparable. Research tells us that physical conditions alone are not sufficient; it is only through the establishment of secure, trusting and loving relationships that learning templates are formed in the brain in order for learning to take place (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2018).

However, our study revealed that concern for the physical took precedence. Many managers spoke about the need to prioritise ratios, as represented by one manager who said:

> So it's just, it's a bit of a juggling act at the minute with COVID, having to move staff around. So, we're doing our best to make sure that everyone's in ratio, which is the main thing really. (Manager 3)

Parents were no longer allowed within nursery buildings and had to leave their child at the entrance door which for most families, meant they were unable to meet with their child's key person.

> We dropped them at the front door. Someone who she hadn't known, or I didn't know actually … was coming to greet us at the door. And then all of a sudden they were pointing this gun like thermometer at her head. And I think it was just different and overwhelming. And it just became a really big issue for weeks. I would say genuinely the minute her keyworker [*sic*] came back … I noticed a big change then … I think she felt, she feels safe with what was familiar. And I think that's probably what was lost. (Parent 7)

Our findings highlighted how vulnerable the key person role was to discontinuity and disturbance throughout the pandemic, with increased feelings of psychological and emotional distress in practitioners, children and parents. Throughout the different phases of the pandemic, it was difficult to establish and maintain relationships with families. Those working with babies found this particularly worrying because there was so little time to meet with parents during transition visits and get to know the child and family before they started.

> We have noticed a difference in the wellbeing of new babies and new starters … we've had to cut our pre-, what we call pre-admission. So their visits into nursery with the parent, [is] down to 15 min. This is not a very long time to pass over all the information when a baby has potentially never been with any other adult before. They've only ever had cuddles off mums and dads. (Manager 9)

Forming relationships with the parents became an impossible task, with one practitioner reflecting what was happening:

> I think it's because we aren't allowing parents to come into the setting. So they don't get that kind of relationship with the staff in the room (where they can ask questions about their child). (SENCO 5)

Even without a pandemic to cope with, 'that kind of relationship' between a key person and parents is not necessarily easy to establish, and misunderstandings can often arise. In her research based in two Children's Centres, Liz Brooker (2010) highlights how the anxieties and tensions felt by many of the working mothers in her study, coupled with the continuing status differentials between professional groups, created barriers to developing trusting and reciprocal communication. Brooker explains how Levinas' notion of 'the ethics of an encounter' (Dahlberg and Moss 2005, 80) is used to conceptualise a meeting with 'the other' – be that parent or child – where the professional's role

> is not to know, or grasp the other but to respect and 'welcome' the other as a stranger. In offering a respectful welcome, the professional is open, attentive and caring at the same time as safeguarding the other's difference and individuality – in effect, taking care not to try to make the Other, whether child or parent, into 'someone like us'. (Brooker 2010, 80)

She goes on to explain that such ethical re-definitions of care are different in nature to 'traditional models of childcare in which a more competent and able individual (an adult) 'cares for' a weaker and less competent individual (a child)' (Brooker 2010).

Drawing on the work of Tronto (1993), Cameron and Moss (2020), develop this further by proposing an 'ethics of care', seeing this not just about 'particular acts of caring', but also involving 'a general habit of mind that should inform all aspects of life, which includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness' (Cameron and Moss 2020, 224). This is important work for educators, which involves developing a way of seeing, listening, connecting and responding with others to understand the individual and collective meanings we bring to our lives and how we make sense of these (Gallagher 2015).

Building a professional relationship of trust is developed from day-to-day encounters with a child and their family, in which the focus is on enabling and supporting close attachments and a deeper understanding of the other. The key person supports the child to feel 'emotionally secure when away from home' and provides a reassuring point of contact for the parents (Early Years Coalition 2021, 30). An aspect of this way of working will also include responding to the child at times of stress or challenge, acting as a 'container' for their distressed or uncomfortable feelings (Miller, Rustin, and Shuttleworth 1989; Manning-Morton and Thorp 2015).

In other words, there is an entanglement between educator, parent, child and their internal and external worlds. 'Entanglement' is a key concept in quantum physics, which Karen Barad describes as thus:

> To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with one another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled inter-relating. (Barad 2007, ix)

Within this context, 'intra-action' is seen as a more appropriate term than 'interaction'. Intra-action '*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*' (Barad 2007, 33, italics in original). Knowing, agency, objectivity, subjectivity and ethical engagement are reconceptualised in ways that enable their mutual and dynamic entanglement to be recognised.

The principles of intra-action apply to all aspects of reality, and – resonating with Heshusius's idea of *selfother* – removes the dualism between subject and object, matter and meaning. This leads to

the idea of an 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology', which recognises the need for an intertwining of ethics, knowing and being, because:

> Each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter. (Barad 2007, 185)

This accords with Heshusius's perception of ethics and epistemology as inseparable within a participatory mode of consciousness:

> When one forgets self and becomes embedded in what one wants to understand, there is an affirmative quality of kinship that no longer allows for privileged status. It renders the act of knowing an ethical act. (1994, 19)

If this philosophy is applied to the role of the key person, it puts, suggests Brace (2020, 2): 'the *relationship* between the practitioner and child at the centre of good early years practice'.

As Taguchi contends, we need to see and position learners in a new way, by rethinking the nature of our being in the world, to see we are all 'beings in a state of interdependence and entanglement with the rest of the world for our learning and being.' (Taguchi 2010, 30)

> It is, as Barad writes, simply about acknowledging, understanding and making use of entanglements: because learning, as existence, is not and can never be an individual, isolated or independent affair. (Taguchi 2010)

It is this notion of entanglement, within the ontological framing of a participatory ontology, and the intra-action of ethico-onto-epistemology, that we see as providing the framework for a participatory paradigm, which allows us to re-imagine education very differently to how it is constructed within the neoliberal-scientistic alliance.

Conclusion

Our discussion in this paper has emerged from reflecting on the research we undertook in partnership with Kids Planet Day Nurseries, in relation to one of the main themes that emerged from our analysis: *the impact of Covid on young children*. What we discovered, though, was that although many respondents spoke about issues related to the impact of Covid on children, their perceptions of what this meant varied greatly. Most assumed that the pandemic had not affected children, due to them being too young to understand, or to a built-in resilience. Others thought that the response of the child depended on a number of variable factors. Of particular note was the special relationship the child had with their key person, and the importance of that being consistent.

Even without facing the challenges of Covid and lockdown, creating opportunities for children to make attachments is complex. Many researchers such as Jools Page and Peter Elfer have commented on the 'woeful lack of recognition of the complex nature of professional roles in attachment work' (Page and Elfer 2013, 556). Other research has demonstrated the challenges and complexities involved in establishing an open and honest dialogue with parents (Devlieghere, Li, and Vandenbroeck 2020; Sims-Schouten 2016; Whalley 2007). What we believe we have learned from Covid-19 is that traumatic events in a child's life can take many forms, but generally include a disruption to their feelings of emotional security and safety. More importantly, to safeguard a child from trauma requires awareness of what might contribute to it from those involved in their care and education, and a commitment to develop relational ways of working that nourish and support a child's attachment to the key people in his or her life. It involves thinking deeply about the children and families at individual and setting level; thinking deeply about how to build a triangle of trust with the families that are part of the nursery – each of whom will have faced their own unique set of circumstances. Each child and each family is different – but their relationship with the early years' practitioner, their key person, is central.

> You have to sort of look at everything and I think that's the thing that we found … You have to look at every family and things differently in a way because you have to look at what their experience is and what their

> past experience has been to almost see maybe how they will become, or how they will change and how things will affect them as they go back to normality as such. (SENCO/Manager 2)

Sensitive and responsive interactions between adults and children are at the heart of effective practice (Mathers et al. 2014; NSCDC 2018). The development of secure attachments is essential to a child's well-being and learning; but supporting children's emotional well-being requires time, consistency and great empathy (NSCDC 2004; Page, Clare, and Nutbrown 2013). Observing not only the child's outer world but 'tuning-in' to their inner world of thoughts and feelings – being aware of the mind of the other, and being responsive in order to adapt to the child's changing needs and status (Rose, Gilbert, and Richards 2015). Practitioners and teachers need to have support and opportunity to develop self-knowledge and reflect on the links between their own experiences, feelings, values and beliefs and those of the children with whom they work. This will benefit from developing an understanding of trauma-informed and emotionally intelligent practice (Manning-Morton 2006).

However, while living in a society dominated by a linear, mechanistic worldview that is sustained and reinforced by a neoliberal ideology, it is hard to gain political engagement in conversations that take seriously the importance of a relational pedagogy. It is hard to gain political acceptance in a meaningful rather than a rhetorical way that emotional well-being and feelings of security provide the soundest base for all learning. Relational pedagogy conflicts and challenges the dominant neoliberal, outcome-based discourse. Currently, the Government's vision for schools and early years' settings can be seen in the Schools White Paper *Opportunity for All* (DfE 2022). It plans structural reforms by developing regulation plans and expanding the reach of multi-academy trusts. The emphasis is placed solely on academic achievement, focusing on expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics.

The White Paper includes a 'Parents Pledge' that 'Any child that falls behind in English or maths should receive timely and evidence-based support' (DfE 2022, 37), and where 'great teaching' means informing parents of their child's progress and telling them what they should do at home to support the school's interventions. This approach seems to be more on providing the parents with information rather than exchanging views and co-constructing understandings together. For early years, the priority is placed on a school readiness agenda which fails to acknowledge the essential need to ensure emotional well-being, security and stability as a basis for all learning. There is no sense, either implicit or explicit, of a relational and mutually respecting dynamic between educator, parent and child.

Because we are strongly committed to the transformation of mindsets that see education in such an arid way, we have been arguing for a change in worldview, which is based on the idea of a participatory consciousness that removes the subject -object duality. Within this new worldview, the concept of 'intra-action' (Barad 2007) reflects the principle that there is a dynamic intertwining of 'entangled agencies' (Barad 2007) within a relational ontology.

Our reimagining of education, then, envisions a holistic approach to the education of children, which integrates inner and outer worlds within a new understanding of consciousness. Cognitive learning and emotional well-being exist in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship, with both given equal attention within an ethos that has mutual caring at its core. In our reimagining, the neoliberal principle of 'profit as primary' has been eradicated, along with its long-term partner 'scientism' that proclaims all valid knowledge has to be supported by quantifiable scientific evidence. Instead, the focus is on the intra-active dimensions of learning, integrated into the idea of a 'triangle of trust' developed in the early years, and continued into a relational pedagogy in primary schools.

There are many thinkers and writers who naturally relate to this way of understanding the world and are motivated to create methods of resistance to the dominant paradigm (Kotsko 2018; Chandler and Reid 2016; Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021). A major point being made here, though, is that if we are to break through the powerful and deeply embedded neoliberal narrative, we need to be aware of the roots of that narrative, in order that we know what we are seeking to dig out, and can argue why and how it needs replacing. This paper aims to make a contribution to that

endeavour, and join with the voices of others who know that there are alternatives to neoliberalism, and are committed to creating and implementing them.

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