

CHAPTER 18

Education and Childhood

This chapter grapples with “the obligation that the existence of children entails for every human society” (Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* [New York: Penguin Books, 1968], 185.) Joseph Dunne begins by considering the dominant views of Western societies about the early years of childhood, the ideas which have shaped primary education practices. Those ideas, he claims, have been shaped by (1) the modern idea of “progress,” with its ultimate goal of “maturity,” and (2) postmodern social conditions which sometimes, for example, “enlist children as consumers,” transforming innocence into knowingness and cynicism.

Dunne labels the two dominant conceptions of childhood as “privative” and “privileged.” The privative view understands childhood as deficient from the viewpoint of adulthood; the privileged view conceives growing up as both loss and gain, with the aim of education being the carrying forward of some childhood qualities. Rather than reject the contributions made by both ways of thinking, he seeks to “reconstruct” childhood, incorporating aspects of both positions. The way to do this (almost in the way that Løvlie valorizes everyday living) is to engage real children at work and play with other children and with adults. Dunne contends that children can consider deeply philosophical and ethical questions, contributing in significant ways to their relationships with other children and adults. He closes by offering how an example, the Reggio Emilia community, might play out to give children and childhood their real due in renewing society.

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JOSEPH DUNNE

Why do we educate our children? Any extended conversation around this question is likely to yield several worthy responses. Some people will claim that particular historical and cultural achievements are especially worthy of appropriation by the young. Others will insist on educators' responsibility to take account of the most pressing challenges of a more or less discernible future for which children now need to be prepared. Still others will propose visions of the good society which education should help to create—with emphasis, for example, on democratic vibrancy, economic prosperity, social equity, environmental sustainability, or civic accord. Particular views about the nature of pedagogy as an interpersonal and intergenerational exchange are also likely to feature. In my discussion of this basic question here, however, such considerations will be displaced, or at least heavily qualified, by views about children themselves. I want to explore how our practice of primary education might be guided by an understanding of childhood and be made responsive to its particular claims as a distinctive phase of the human life span.

If it makes sense to look to childhood as a source of orientation in primary education, this source, we quickly discover, is itself now keenly disputed. Rather than providing a clear-cut normative basis for pedagogical decision making, "childhood" is a site where conflicting beliefs and values collide. Moreover, its virtual monopolization by psychology for most of the twentieth century and its earlier valorization by Romantic philosophy has recently been challenged by contributions of historians and sociologists to "childhood studies" as a newly crystallized area of interdisciplinary scholarship. In this now deeply contested terrain, formerly accepted universal conceptions of "the child," what it means to be a child, and "childhood" as the life-phase of children have come under attack from new ways of thinking and understanding. In this chapter I shall provide a brief overview of these upheavals in "theorizing childhood" and of the previous positions whose dominance they have disturbed,¹ offer some brief interpretative and critical remarks on the upheavals, and sketch a picture of education in (especially early) childhood that is congruent with these remarks and the philosophical perspective that inspires them.

Any single, univocal notion of “the child” is now shattered by fuller exposure to the sheer multiplicity and heterogeneity of actual children. And “childhood” is *deconstructed* through heightened awareness of the extent to which it has always been constructed—has always been a cultural space variously shaped by shifting and interacting forces, economic, medical, demographic, scientific, technological, religious, and philosophical. Thus childhood connotes not a fact of nature but rather a cluster of meanings and values through which young human beings are perceived, responded to, and treated. And the historical variability of these meanings and values is well illustrated in the genealogy that we can now more explicitly trace of a particularly dominant version of Western childhood.

Major “moments” in this genealogy include the new emphasis at the Renaissance on “civilized” behavior and literacy as desirable achievements for children of European elites; the Reformation’s reinforcement of new kinds of interiority and privacy and its targeting of the young as objects of anxious indoctrination; the later emergence of the bourgeois family and of childhood as a privileged space of nurture, pedagogy, and play secured through newly esteemed parenting, especially mothering, roles; a radical secularization of time in which the future came to seem more open and worth investing in, with birth replacing death as the crucial personal event and with children coming to seem the main investment, the real afterlife; the development of a new conception of individual dignity whose attribution would eventually be extended to children, inspiring various Reform Acts and the entrenchment of “children’s rights”; and, of course, the creation by nation-states of school systems expected to shape young citizens according to strong cultural and economic agendas, an expectation to be realized under the guidance of increasingly “scientific” pedagogy.

Two quite different responses to childhood as the complex outcome of this genealogy (itself so bound up with the emergence of Western modernity and especially of liberal democratic polities) have been notable. First, there has been a spate of books announcing—and lamenting—the “erosion,” “fall,” or “disappearance” of childhood.² Reflecting Philippe Aries’s well-known thesis that childhood (or at least anything close to what we would recognize as such) did not yet exist in the Middle Ages, these books claim that it *can no longer* exist in contemporary societies in which literacy and the culture of the book recede before a new culture of the electronically mediated image. The argument goes that electronic culture is more immediate, undifferentiated, and ever harder to police. The private zone of the family and the

separate space of the school have become increasingly porous to powerful market and media forces that enlist children as consumers and prematurely eroticize them, transforming innocence into knowingness and cynicism. Moreover, the kind of stable family that might even attempt to shield children from these forces is itself showing huge fissures. Those who provide this account of it as a now endangered state and status would like to be able to *defend* “childhood” as the proper entitlement of every child—there should be no “children without childhood”;³ and they see the source of endangerment in what might be called the social conditions of postmodernity.

But there is another, very different and now much more influential response to the genealogy of childhood outlined above that unmarks it as a narrative of progress, disclosing instead the layers of power and coercion that it both carries and conceals. This *critique* of childhood is directed less at social conditions in which childhood is lived out than at “discourses” through which it has been represented, conceptualized, and legitimated; and it draws heavily on the conceptual resources of a theorized postmodernism.

Two Conceptions of Childhood

Two discourses have been especially dominant in shaping the modern conception of childhood and the pedagogical theory and practice most closely associated with it. The first, which I shall call the “*privative*” discourse, is committed to a strongly teleological conception of the human life course; that is to say, it assumes that this course is properly aimed at a specific purpose (*telos*) which lays down for it a linear pathway of growth. Within this, the early years are seen as relative *lack* or *deprivation*, a period when one is *without*, or does *not yet possess*, the most humanly worthwhile qualities. With important antecedents in Greek philosophy,⁴ this privative view has found its most influential modern expression in developmental psychology, more specifically in Piaget’s mapping of “stages” of cognitive development and Kohlberg’s marking of parallel developmental stages in the moral sphere. In these developmental models, there is a succession of hierarchically ordered capacities and achievements, with earlier ones being definitely superseded by later and better ones. From the viewpoint of adulthood as the destination point of this development, childhood is seen as deficiency—or at best as potentiality for what rightly (all going well) comes later. There is a normative conception of what constitutes mature competence and an account of a development toward it through various kinds

of incompetence, or intellectual and moral deficits, ordered in a progressive series that maps onto the progression from early, through middle, to late childhood and beyond. This progression involves an invariant and irreversible sequence: each stage must be reached and outgrown consecutively (no stage skipping) and a later stage, once securely reached, does not allow regression to an earlier stage.

Exemplifying a new seriousness of engagement with children as objects of systematic research, Piaget's and Kohlberg's work led to an unprecedented awareness of the differences between children's and adults' thinking. For this reason it could be assimilated into child-centered pedagogy: it was assumed to enable adults, in thinking themselves into the ways of children, to put aside their own ways, thereby disabusing them as teachers of unrealistic expectations and sensitizing them to the newly important concept of "learning readiness." That all this can be represented as a gain for children should not distract from the fact that it remains committed to a privative view of childhood. For the movement from earlier to later is also always a movement from lower to higher (so that slippage backward, were it possible, would have to be recognized precisely as regression).

Learning is now tied to development as an inexorable movement onward and upward. To be sure, the present stage of a child's competence is under a keen spotlight: less, however, as a stage with its own possibilities to be explored and expanded for the valuable learning unique to it than as an unavoidable staging post to the next, higher stage that will supplant it. Piaget speculates on similarities between young children's thinking and that of "prehistoric man," while Kohlberg compares the differences between a person operating at the higher ("post-conventional") level of moral judgment and a child operating at the lower ("preconventional") level with differences between technically advanced—that is say "modern"—cultures and their pre-modern counterparts. And in both cases, that of the child and that of the pre-historic or pre-modern culture, there is no sense of anything other than gain accruing when they are replaced by their more "developed" or "advanced" successors.

The second discourse to be adverted to here has given us what I'll call the "*privileged*" conception of childhood. So far from defining it as a period of deprivation, this discourse represents childhood as a time when one is uniquely gifted with positive qualities all too easily lost in the passage to adult life. Deriving mainly from eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism—though with significant roots in earlier religious and spiritual traditions—this representation has been hugely

influential as an inspiration of progressive and “child-centered” education. While much of its élan was already apparent in the founding text, Rousseau’s *Emile*, it was more fully elaborated by later figures such as Froebel and Pestalozzi and later again by Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner.

“Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling; nothing could be more foolish than to try to substitute our ways”; “allow childhood to ripen in your children.” These famous sentences from *Emile* (1762) announce this privileged paradigm. But what are these “ways” that are not to be substituted, and what—somehow already there in children—is to be allowed to “ripen”? The answer, on behalf of this whole tradition, would highlight qualities such as these: relative simplicity and wholeness; freedom from debilitating self-consciousness, from the fragmentations that can cause painful conflict between mind and body, thought, and feeling, self and others; greater readiness to trust and greater ability to feel and to express the “here and now” quality of experience; an immediate and alert presence to the sensuous world that may be all the fresher and more intense for being less under the mediating influence of conceptual and linguistic schemes; wonder, a capacity to be captivated and transported by the ordinary wonders of the available world and an inclination to explore them repeatedly and without boredom through direct embodied engagement as well as through a torrent of questions and conjectures that, unbound to “yeastless factuality,” open the possibilities of being; a capacity for deep undistracted absorption that is both play and work, or rather a form of experience in which the distinction between work and play is undercut—for it is without the distancing calculation that sees work as laborious and play as “recreation” enabling one all the better to return to work (play, Froebel says, *is* the serious business of childhood).

With reference to qualities such as these, one might say that children are not just to grow up into adulthood but to grow down into childhood; for “growing up,” it is realized, can entail severe losses underneath the more obvious gains. Minimizing losses as well as maximizing gains becomes an important educational responsibility—a theme long in the mainstream tradition of child-centered education and taken up again recently by writers as different as Kieran Egan, for whom layering rather than linearity is the appropriate metaphor for development, and Gareth Matthews, who argues that children’s capacities for bold philosophical speculation and artistic creation *decline* after the early years.⁵ This theme of loss and gain not only alters the valences in the

pedagogical relationship but, more generally, reconfigures the relationship between adulthood and childhood and indeed the whole process of human growth.

Adulthood can no longer be conceived as simply a leaving behind or “putting off” of childhood things; even if they cannot be preserved in their childlike state, these qualities must somehow be carried forward and integrated (“sublated”) into what can properly be called adult maturity. The idea of linear progress may fit scientific and technological advances. But part of the Romantic critique of Enlightenment is to argue that (aside from the fact that these are not in themselves unambiguous goods) human development, whether on the historical plane or in an individual biography, has a more complex, spiral structure. It entails separation and division—through the emergence of “reason” and “autonomy”—that must be transcended through an ultimate reconciliation in which wholeness is restored. While far from this recovered wholeness, childhood is still a powerful prefigurement of it—for poets (e.g., Blake, Wordsworth) as much as for philosophers (e.g., Herder, Schiller). A memorable invocation of it is given by a later poet, William Butler Yeats, in the closing stanza of “Among School Children”, a poem prompted by his visit to a pioneering, Montessori-inspired primary school in Waterford in 1925:

Labour is blossoming and dancing
 Where body is not bruised to pleasure soul
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil . . .
 Oh body swayed to music, oh brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Challenges to the Two Conceptions of Childhood

Over the past two decades, both the privative conception of childhood enshrined in the developmentalist account and the privileged conception spawned by Romanticism have been subjected to severe criticism. The critique of developmentalism has challenged its contention that a “scientific” method of inquiry can establish an invariant structure of stage-like development with universal, transcultural

validity. This challenge is directly related to the wider critique of positivism and especially the contention that the methods of observation, measurement, and explanation developed in the natural sciences can deliver equal success in the human or social sciences. This critique targets, then, the “naturalized” child, so easily linked to the biological roots of Piaget’s psychological interests. And it seeks to highlight researchers’ inattention, or insufficiently reflective attitude, to several important factors: for example, the norm of rational competence against which they measure children, the life-world contexts in which children’s own sense-making capabilities are embedded, and the imbalance of power in the research process itself between adult-researchers and child-subjects.

The claim here is that methods that are more interactive and hermeneutically sensitive (i.e., more attentive and attuned to the difficulties of any process of *interpretation*) would be more resourceful in catching what children say or do in contexts where they themselves can take the initiative or demonstrate a wide range of responsiveness in many varied situations involving other children as well as adults. Such methods, researching *with* rather than *on* children, would do more to honor and elicit children’s individual and collective *voice* and *agency*. But the concern here is not only to empower children within the research process itself but also to contest the power of developmentalism across interconnected networks of research, policy, and practice. For this kind of research has had huge influence and prestige in establishing developmental norms for different “stages” of childhood, thereby supplying criteria by which to determine what is normal (and abnormal) functioning for children of different ages—criteria that have been embraced by policymakers and incorporated by practitioners in pre-school and primary education, as well as across a wide range of institutionalized child-care services.

This line of critique regularly invokes the concept of “normalization” developed by Michel Foucault in exposing the “disciplinary” effects of “truth regimes.” In the light of these ideas, it is not difficult to entertain large suspicions about the ways in which stages of attainment have been identified as supposedly natural and normal—inscribed, so to speak, in the very being of children at four or seven or nine or eleven, independently of cultural, social or economic contexts—providing “developmentally appropriate” and scientifically accredited educational targets and learning outcomes, to which whole populations of children are to be subjected, and in relation to which they are to be graded and selected. Moreover, critics have offered Foucaultian interpretations of the school

(and the pre-school and *crèche*) as a currently prevailing example of the disciplinary, normalizing institution, on a continuum with the prison or the psychiatric asylum. And they may go so far as to construe “childhood” itself as an irredeemably oppressive category, serving the interests not of young people but of adults, the state, or the market economy. Like the school, then (and indeed much else that is confidently modern), childhood is in need of “deconstruction.”

The critique of the “privileged” conception of childhood has shared some common ground with the critique of the “privative” conception just outlined, both being conducted across two main areas of theoretical discourse, the “new social studies of childhood” and the “new paradigm” now being developed in the field of early childhood education.⁶ In both cases there is a charge of “essentializing” or “naturalizing” “the child.” And both highlight the fact that while these conceptions are *about* children and are constructions *of* childhood, they have been constructed by adults—being therefore all too likely to carry, even if unwittingly, adult priorities and projections. There has been a specific twist to this suspicion in the case of the privileged paradigm: that it has been the obverse side of a particular experience of *adult* privation, or a disguised response to quite specific adult needs.

The cultural historian, John Gillis, for example, has argued that this conception of childhood was mainly promoted by highly literate adult males in the nineteenth century, who were simultaneously losing their religious faith; being deprived by industrialization and imperial conquest of the last places on the inhabited earth on to which they could project fantasies of untarnished natural simplicity; *and* being expelled from the newly feminized spaces to which children were increasingly being confined.⁷ In response to all this, paradise lost became childhood lost, as the fixated object of displaced sentiment and intense nostalgia, what Gillis calls the “mythic country called childhood,” was discovered. This idealized childhood had little or nothing to do with real children—apart from the damage it could cause them. For the idealization could all too easily be a prison for the child who seemed to fit it and provide a basis for demonizing the child who did not—the devil or monster as the angel’s unassimilated “other.”

What is to be made of these critiques of theoretical understandings of childhood on which—albeit in uneasy tension, if not outright conflict—the practice of primary education in most Western societies has been so heavily based for most of the last century? I believe that critical reflection on the scientific study of children has valuably exposed its limitations and practical distortions as well as the futility of its

ambition to provide, for the practice of education, the kind of reliably predictive basis that the natural sciences provide for advanced material technologies. I believe too that criticism of the privileged paradigm of childhood has brought valuable insight into the need for greater vigilance about any boundary drawn between childhood and adulthood and about the often hidden ways in which they can inflect (or infect) each other. For instance, if we too easily see children as paragons of play, spontaneity, and wonder, and adults, then, as the experts in rational thought and effective action, this neat, age-based parceling out of qualities impoverishes *both* children and adults: we won't then expect children to think critically or act responsibly while adults, well adapted to the "real" world, will have put wonder and play behind them.

However, I have no desire to endorse the kind of outright, blanket rejection of universality and truth that drives much of the critique of Piagetian developmentalism. Nor do I want simply to jettison the emancipatory thrust running through the Romantic inheritance—even if it can be badly sentimentalized, as much of the writing and art around children over the past two centuries makes manifest. More broadly, I believe that childhood's exposure in the crossfire of recent ideological and meta-theoretical debates has been a decidedly mixed blessing.

This is not because we should or ever could inoculate childhood against infection by *some* philosophical presuppositions. It is rather because, in my view, we can get critical purchase on the pretensions and debasements of modernity—if only by better understanding how deep are the tensions between some of its defining ideals, for example, rational control and authentic subjectivity—without surrendering to postmodernist excesses. Postmodernism may be little more than a contemporary and particularly energetic version of a recurrent countermove that has always been possible in Western philosophy—and that is fated always to be overtaken by a fresh move in the endless interplay between "the one and the many" (Plato). If "deconstruction" is the current name for this countermove, what we now need, perhaps nowhere more than in our understanding and practice of primary education, is *reconstruction* (which must, to be sure, incorporate any gains of the latest countermove).

Reconstruction in Childhood and in Education

"Reconstruction" is of course a key category in the philosophy of John Dewey, who well understood that education, in addition to being the main medium for reconstructing childhood, itself needs to be

continually reconstructed. A particularly rich theoretical resource for reconstruction in contemporary education, I believe, is offered by the hermeneutical tradition and the “philosophical anthropology” developed within it.⁸ Without attempting here to elaborate or justify this philosophical style, I shall try to indicate very briefly how thinking about the education of children—and especially about how to recognize and cultivate their “voice” and “agency”—might keep company with its characteristic reflections on speech and action as essential realizations of our humanity.

Words count as genuine speech only as they reveal the speaker’s meaning or, as is nearly always the case, as they reveal (or rather partly create) what we *are trying* to mean: speech only partly as declaration and so also as probe, experiment, play—our meaning always slightly beyond us as we are stretched out in language toward it.⁹ This is living, serious, meaning-making speech, which can also be light and effortless, words falling incongruously together and complex syntax doing its work unnoticed. It is the kind of speech that young children latch onto early on—when they are not answering ritual questions, repeating mind-numbing formulae, or being tied to a recitative script that deflects the trajectory of their actual interest. It is speech as directed to others and as responding to them: locution as inter-locution.

The realness and range of interlocutory stances available to children is crucially important: that they can ask questions, volunteer opinions, entertain conjectures, interject a comment, seek clarification, amplify or challenge what others have said, give the conversation a fresh twist, or bring it back on course—and be in a position to have all these kinds of speech acts directed towards them. Plato has the fine image of dialogue as the rubbing together of two fire-sticks, neither of which, on its own, can produce the illuminative flame (*Republic* 435a). And Vygotsky teaches us that we are who we have become in relationship; it is on the plane of the *inter* (the between) that the *intra* (the within) is formed.¹⁰

Relationships connect us with others. But also it is very largely in and through them that the world opens up to us and that we are opened to it. A small child will explore the immediate sensuous world on her own, a world of very small things minutely observed, of vivid colors, interesting textures, spectacular shapes. But the small child also *makes sense* of her world, sometimes in very big ways. To my wife’s frustrated cry in the garden, “I hate ants,” her four-year-old granddaughter immediately retorted, “but, Biche, you shouldn’t hate anything.” I know another four-year-old who proposed to her parents that the Traveller family who called every Saturday for food should be given the upstairs part of their

house to live in; and a two-and-a-half-year-old, brought with her mother to the butcher to collect the Christmas turkey, who, overcome with tears by the sight of hanging dead birds, implored that they find some other way of celebrating the feast. What is striking about such examples, which can be multiplied many times over, is first, that, freed from complete bondage to the factual *is*, they are already responsive to the demand of an ethical "*ought*"; second, the inclusiveness of their identifications, what might be called their intuitions of "all" (all people, all living beings); and, third, the immediacy and forthrightness with which they are tossed to the other person, the adult who thereby finds herself pitched into a deeply ethical—and potentially political—conversation.

The utterance "you shouldn't hate anything" did not just spring up from somewhere deep within the child herself; she had already been party to conversations in which "hate" and "love" had occurred—sometimes in the context of feelings and dealings toward her younger brother that would have given her some quite personal purchase on what "hate" means. But here she was now, at four, having somehow taken hold of this concept, deploying it in a new context and returning it, with interest, to an adult. We should not doubt the force of the challenge to us adults, and our more or less confused and compromised moralities, that will come regularly if we engage in real conversations with quite young children—conversations in which, if our thinking can pick up some of the candidness and mobility of theirs, we too may have much to learn.

"Catching the ball that the children throw us" is a favorite metaphor of Reggio Emilia, the impressive and influential communal project in early childhood education in Northern Italy; it is also the image in a stanza of one of Rilke's poems that the great German philosopher of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, took as epigraph for his *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method*. "They [the Reggio Emilia community] like to use the metaphor of the children and teacher participating in a game of ping-pong," Carolyn Edwards writes. And she goes on: "All of the . . . supportive adult interventions are based on keying in to the rhythm of the game and modeling an attitude of attention and care."¹¹ It is an extraordinarily imaginative achievement to have built a rich, variegated pedagogy—with so many themes, across so many areas, and in so many media—as Reggio has done, with this metaphor of a game as a basic inspiration. You can't play the game from the outside, and everyone inside the game is a player, a partner, or co-protagonist—sometimes stronger or weaker but always capable, when the other player is responsive, of progressing in the myriad of ways that the game itself keeps open. This model of learning and of pedagogy, embodying solidarity

and reciprocity in a shared project, is completely different from the consumption model: the pupil as consumer and the teacher as transmitter or vendor. It also rectifies a key weakness in—and thus helps to “reconstruct”—the two modern models of childhood I outlined earlier, both of which conceive “the child” too much outside the context of relationships, with other children as well as with adults.

I have emphasized speech here because of its defining human significance and because children from early on are such natural oralists. In putting speech at the heart of education we need to be aware of it as a medium through which we can muse, ruminate, clarify, conjecture, discuss, argue and persuade—while not neglecting its role in telling stories, making jokes, creating rhymes, or all the other freewheeling ways in which it can work and play for children. And we also need to make a place for *action* as the complement of speech. Speech itself of course often *is* action as, for instance, when a child finds the courage to say something that he truly thinks or feels even when it conflicts with the prevailing view in his group. Not all behavior is action in the sense intended here, a sense clarified by another thinker with strong roots in the hermeneutical tradition, Hannah Arendt. An action is a venture or initiative: it begets something new. It makes something happen that was not there before and in doing so it realizes the agent, and reveals her to herself, and to others, in a new way.

This kind of action is then a spring of development; it is most significantly through my actions that I am changed, becoming who I am. Actions are inserted into webs of relationships, evoking responses from others and unleashing chains of consequences that can never be fully determined in advance. Every action is an *event* in the original sense of a coming-into-being. And it is closely related to story. For through our actions, we enact our histories; stories are not prescribed—they narrate what has *emerged* through actions, different actions of different agents gradually defining their individual characters and interlocking with each other to form the plot that no one agent on her own could have anticipated or devised.

It is not easy to ensure that action will be at the centre of education. And that is why, understandably, we rely on plans. But plans (of the usual linear kind) bring about “outcomes”—which are almost the opposite of “events.” One of the remarkable feats at Reggio Emilia is—against the force of gravity, as many might have supposed—to have created a form of education in which young children can and do act.¹² In the projects that are a central part of the work, for instance, children are enabled to try things out, to explore possibilities, to experience the

responses of other children, confirming, or conflicting with, or running at a tangent to their own. What takes shape emerges as a function of their interests, suggestions, interventions, their considerations and reconsiderations, their ways of taking up and developing what has been contributed by others, their ability to stay with stuckness when it happens and to work their way through or around it, their readiness to face and deal with conflicts along the way; and, in and through all of this, their engagement in an enormous amount of multifaceted and never entirely predictable learning.

But one should not focus only on the children in Reggio Emilia—who in themselves may not be so different from children elsewhere. The really remarkable aspect of this educational undertaking is the work of the *adults*, the teachers who make all this possible for children through a combination of imaginative and painstaking preparation of resources, ideas and hypotheses; sensitive listening; the most delicate judgment of when to intervene and when to hold back; pitching an intervention so that it is just within a child's reach and less a solution to a problem than a spur to further thoughtful action; enough trust to forego the security of pre-specified outcome—trust in the children, in themselves, and in the fecundity of the game; careful documenting of the children's activity and speech so that, when played back to them, it can help them to recognize what they have accomplished and be motivated to elaborate it further; sustained reflection on what they are doing and not doing (aided partly by this same documentation), and readiness to extend this reflection in critical discussion with colleagues and parents. All of this is done in the closest rapport with the children and all for the sake of ensuring that they will, in the greatest possible degree, be active protagonists in their own learning.¹³

I have just been stressing the ungainsayable fact that what children become is in very large measure what adults enable or allow them to become. And children's dependence on quite focused help is greater as they make the transition from intuitive, embedded structures and styles of understanding to more scholastic or disciplinary forms of knowledge. But even in making this transition, children will be well helped only by a pedagogy that directly engages, and does not always displace, their already robustly established informal "theories" (about well-nigh everything) and that seeks "to preserve the most remarkable features of the young mind—its adventurousness, its generativity, its resourcefulness, and its flashes of flexibility and creativity."¹⁴ A necessary emphasis on childhood's constitutive relationship with adulthood does not obviate adults' need to understand—however

hermeneutically fraught the conditions of such understanding—the nature of childhood itself.

“Nature” is a term we scarcely dare to use anymore—so intimidating now is the charge of “essentialism,” one of the more damning terms in the postmodernist lexicon of excoriation. Curiously, however, Jean-Francois Lyotard, author of *The Postmodern Condition* and other important postmodernist texts, has not felt disbarred from writing of childhood as “the season of the mind’s possibilities.” “Philosophizing,” he tells us—and he would include all creative work in any medium—“responds to a demand for a return to the childhood of thought . . . [but] what would happen if thought no longer had a childhood? If those who pass for children . . . ceased to be the milieu of man’s uncertainty, the very possibility of ideas?”¹⁵ Here Lyotard is pointing to something many of us perhaps intuitively recognize: the deep connection between childhood and our still open and best possibilities—and the fact that, nonetheless, for real children these possibilities can all too easily and quickly be closed down. A similar point is made by Martin Buber, a thinker with a more richly rounded understanding of education than Lyotard. “In every hour, the human race begins,” Buber writes in a great essay, referring to the thousands of children born hourly. And he goes on: “what greater care could we cherish or discuss than that this grace may not henceforth be squandered as before, that the might of newness may be preserved for renewal?”¹⁶ Buber’s question here points to a most essential task of primary education: to recognize and respond to the gift and power disclosed in childhood and *thereby* to contribute to a renewal of the whole society.¹⁷

NOTES

1. *Theorizing Childhood* (by A. James, C. Jenks, and A. Prout [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998; 2006]) is the title of one of the books in the new social studies of childhood that has most trenchantly criticized older viewpoints and canvassed “childhood” as a scene of deeply ideological contest.

2. See V. Suranski, *The Erosion of Childhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); N. Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982); and J. Somerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1990).

3. The title of a well-known book by Marie Winn (New York: Random House, 1983).

4. In classical Greek thought, children appear (insofar as they *do* appear) as conspicuously lacking the qualities that make one admirable as a human being or indeed—when a human being is defined as a rational animal (*zoon logon echon*)—that make one human at all. Following Plato’s low esteem for children, Aristotle, for example, makes short shrift of arguing—if he does not just assert—that, being unable to exercise deliberate choice (since they are creatures of whim and appetite and subject to the immediate vagaries of pleasure and pain), children are incapable of happiness (*eudaimonia*), for him the highest good and ultimate end of human living.

5. See Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Gareth Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

6. In the new social studies of childhood, various texts by A. James, A. Prout, and C. Jenks have been important (see note 1 above); for the new paradigm in early childhood education, see, e.g., G. Dahlberg, P. Moss, and A. Pence, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge Falmer, 2002) and G. Mac Naughton, *Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies: Applying Poststructuralist Ideas* (London: Falmer Press, 2005).

7. See John Gillis, "The Birth of the Virtual Child," in *Childhood and its Discontents: The First Seamus Heaney Lectures*, ed. Joseph Dunne and James Kelly (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002). Apart from the critiques of both paradigms mounted in the new social studies of childhood and in the new paradigm of early childhood education, more specific critiques of the privative conception have emerged within psychology itself, and of the privileged conception within recent reevaluations of Romanticism in literary studies. For the former, see e.g., W. Kessen, *The Rise and Fall of Development* (Worcester, MA: Clark University Press, 1990); E. Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1994); and J. Henriques et al., eds., *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). For the latter, see e.g., A. Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); J. H. McGavran, *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuities, Postmodern Contestations* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999); and J. Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

8. "Philosophical anthropology" is a term frequently used to characterize his own work by an outstanding contemporary hermeneuticist, Charles Taylor. For Taylor's cogent critique of positivism and naturalism in their many diverse manifestations in the practice of social science and for his sympathetic but highly nuanced treatment of the Romantic tradition, see especially *Philosophical Papers 1: Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

9. See J. Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), ch. 5.

10. L. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

11. C. Edwards, L. Gandini, and G. Forman, *The Hundred Languages of Childhood: The Reggio Emilia Approach—Advanced Reflections* (Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing, 1998), 181–82.

12. I should acknowledge here that for all the fruitfulness of "action" in Arendt's analysis—and despite her sense of its deep affinity with birth ("natality")—she herself was anxious to preclude any invocation of it in the education of children. See "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

13. See Edwards et al., *Hundred Languages*, and C. Rinaldi, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

14. H. Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (London: Fontana, 1991), 111.

15. J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, trans. and ed. J. Pefanis and M. Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992), 120.

16. M. Buber, "Education," in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 83.

17. This chapter draws heavily on my article, "Childhood and Citizenship: A Conversation across Modernity," *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (2006): 5–19.