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Mothers, teachers, maternalism and early childhood education and care: some historical connections

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Abstract

Many current debates in Australia regarding the policy, politics and practicalities of child care provision are embedded in dominant discourses of maternalism. This paper places these debates within some historical contexts, emphasising the long history of these debates and the enduring centrality of maternalism – where the most revered of roles and relationships a woman can have is that of mother and one-on-one carer for her young child. In this paper I discuss some of the historical points at which maternalism came to dominate early childhood education and care. I consider Froebel, and the women who spread his word, nation building and the rise of psychology, making links between these and current debates in Australia.

In Australia, the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is historically embedded in maternalist discourses of motherhood and the ways in which women's place in the paid labour market is understood. In this paper I aim to begin developing some historical links between understandings of motherhood, women's paid labour, and maternalist discourses surrounding the politics and policy of ECEC. Steedman (1987, p. 120) suggested that one problem with histories of education is that they tended to focus on institutions in ways that treat the 'field of inquiry as separate from general social and political life'. The exploration provided in this paper, therefore, is situated beyond institutions, such as child care services and kindergarten teacher education institutions, to a consideration of some parts of the wider picture of ECEC. Given Australia's nation building emphasis at the turn of the 20th century and Australia's continued reliance on the UK, as well as Europe and the USA for guidance on a range of government issues, it is important to discuss these trends with a broad brush, at least for the purposes of this paper. This paper does not offer detailed analyses of the historical realities of day-to-day life in an early childhood educational setting or even a historical version of the establishment of ECEC in Australia. Rather, I aim to discuss some of the ways in which discourses of maternalism and what it means to be a good teacher/mother have been embedded in discourses of ECEC.

In this paper I consider motherhood to be the relationship of a woman parenting a child, while maternalism refers to the cultural understandings attributed to this role by society. For example, in Australia one dominant idea that contributes to maternalism is the notion that mothers are the single most important carer of their child and that this relationship must be defended at any cost. This relationship is defended through the perpetration of the idea that mothers should stay at home caring for their children, at least for the first few years of the child's life. Koven and Michel (1990, p. 1079) provided a useful description of maternalism as

ideologies that exalted women's capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance, and morality. Maternalism always operated on two levels: it extolled the private virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women's public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace.

Across the public and private spaces of home and ECEC it could be argued that woman is 'the high priestess of the cult of childhood' (Theobald, 1996, p. 19), an ideal that is embedded in the history of ECEC practices.

Acker (1995, p. 21) suggested that there are 'persistent maternal analogies found in accounts of teaching young children.' As such, women in ECEC have worked within, through and sometimes against the discourses of maternalism embedded in the institutionalised and public definitions of their work. I turn now to a discussion of Froebel and his ideas, followed by a discussion of maternalism and ECEC in the context of some of the shifts that occurred during the first half of the 20th century, including the rise of psychology and the importance of nation building. I then conclude by beginning to make some links between the historical embedding of maternalism in ECEC and current debates over ECEC policy in Australia.

Froebel: producing the motherly teacher

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) is arguably the most influential individual among historical early childhood education figures. He is remembered for introducing a range of ideas, amongst them the development of his 'gifts and occupations', and the establishment and naming of kindergartens. Froebel managed to produce and define an approach to ECEC practices that fitted into the space between home and school. It was, in part, an approach to ECEC practice that he had carefully observed, collected and classified from the daily lives of mothers and their young children. It also reflected his belief in the natural unfolding of human life, from infancy through childhood to adulthood.

Steedman (1985, p. 149) points out that it was Froebel who first suggested that the ECEC teacher should operate as 'the mother made conscious'. Froebel emphasised the training of young women for their place in the early education of children. He asserted that

The age from seventeen to twenty odd years seems best for this training. More important than school education, however, is the girlish love of childhood, an ability to occupy herself with children, as well as a serene and joyful view of life in general. There ought also to be a love of play and occupation, a love and capacity for singing. It goes without saying that purity of intentions and a lovely, womanly disposition are essential prerequisites (in Wiebe, 1896, p. 43).

The training Froebel provided was undertaken for six months, 12 hours a day. The routine consisted of an early rise with daily religious services and progression through a rigorous programme for understanding and using the Froebelian gifts (Wiebe, 1896). This training in 'Froebelian methods' was not intended as a means of replacing mothers in the lives of young children. As May (1997, p. 56) points out, in Froebel's kindergartens young women training as teachers 'were not to replace the mother...but to complement the work of the mother of young children'. Although potentially radical for the time, for Froebel the training of women was linked to his discourses of motherhood as crucial to a healthy childhood, rather than as support for the emancipation of women (Steedman, 1990; May, 1997).

During the 1830s and 1840s Froebel was considered a mad old man for his interest in, and study of, the education of young children (Wiebe, 1896). During the first half of the 19th century Froebel had been ridiculed by (mostly male) audiences at his lectures on the need to train women to care for young children (Wiebe, 1896; May, 1997). This derision was seemingly based on a mix of the dominant masculine disdain at the idea of women requiring an education at all and derision of Froebel's personal interest, as a man, in the care and education of young children.

To convince a skeptical community and establish a properly resourced kindergarten required patronage. Froebel found this in the person of Baroness Bertha Von Marenholtz-Bulow. Wiebe (1896, p. 46) claims that without her patronage and support 'it is doubtful if the name of Friedrich Froebel would have come down to this generation as being of any importance'. The patronage and philanthropy of the wealthy as a prerequisite for success is a recurrent theme in the initial establishment of ECEC services. The gendered nature of the relationship is also important here. As mentioned above, Froebel was considered 'the old fool' as he played and sang with his kindergarten children (Wiebe, 1896, p. 47). The Baroness, however, provided Froebel with female legitimacy in the terrain of the care of young children and, importantly, entrée to the world of influential individuals. Through the patronage of the Baroness, Froebel was invited to speak to the Weimar court and to the Women's Union regarding kindergartens and the higher education of women for the purpose of teaching young children.

Within his regime, Froebel managed to embed tightly connected discourses of motherhood and teacherhood, thus enabling and legitimising the place of women in the education of young children. Without the support and work of women, Froebel's kindergartens would not have existed. Froebel's insistence, against the popular opinion of the early to mid-1800s, that women needed to be trained for their vital role in the education and care of young children has been important, inspired in some a devoted loyalty (Taylor Allen, 1982; Brehony, 2000). An education for young women based in maternalistic ideals, in preparation for their future as 'proper' or 'good' mothers was accepted, for as Taylor Allen (1982, p. 323) points out 'in a period when the male professions gained prestige through increased and formalised educational requirements, the professionalisation of the maternal role seemed to offer to the middle class woman the same status as was accorded to the male professional.'

The institutionalisation of Froebel's practices and beliefs in the education of young women contributed to the establishment of maternalism as the basis for being a good ECEC teacher. That is, to be a good teacher of very young children required an education for young women that would bring forth, or make conscious, their natural motherly instincts. Of course, these natural motherly instincts were governed by Froebel's educational practices and belief in the Unity of God, man and the natural world (Taylor Allen, 1982; Steedman, 1985). This also fitted with concurrent discourses of the late 19th century of middle and upper class women becoming 'social mothers'. The idea of 'social mothers' was strong in Germany, where such women attempted to bring together the poor and the rich, erasing class boundaries. They aimed to share the burden of caring for young children under difficult living conditions, through providing care and education for poor children and education and support to working class mothers (Taylor Allen, 1982).

The Prussian government closed Froebel's kindergartens in 1851, declaring them atheist and subversive (Wiebe, 1896; May, 1997). This ban on kindergartens occurred within the context of uprising and war in Europe. One consequence of this upheaval was the spread of Froebelian methods via the immigration of women. His work spread across the west and became a dominant western practice through the efforts of the many women who had been trained in his ideas. The first kindergarten

in London, the English Infant Garden, was opened in 1852 by a German woman, Margarethe Schurz, who had been trained in Froebelian methods (May, 1997). Schurz later travelled to the USA where she also opened kindergartens. These first Froebelian kindergartens were initially taught in German. Following Froebel's death in 1852, both Froebel's wife and the Baroness travelled extensively advocating for kindergarten education. Furthermore, Margaret McMillan, a significant historical figure in ECEC, was elected to the Council of the National Froebel Society in 1904 (Steedman, 1990). McMillan's work in Deptford and her 'school in the garden' were heavily influenced by Froebelian ideas and methods which had appeared in mothering pamphlets across England around that time (Steedman, 1990, p. 83).

Froebel's influence extended to Australia, where his ideas and practices were widely valued and utilized in the emerging kindergarten and day nursery associations in the decades on either side of the turn of the 20th Century. The name and work of Froebel infuses the histories of both the Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College (Harrison, 1985) and the Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria (Gardiner, 1982). When the Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College moved to a new residence in 1925, the building was named 'Froebel House' and 'the College colours, green and white, were chosen as they most readily associated with the Froebelian philosophy, green – because it symbolised youth, growth and development, and white for purity and singleness of purpose' (Harrison, 1985, p. 55).

Froebel's insistence on the central role of women in ECEC contributed to a space in which some women in Germany, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the USA were able to find a legitimate position for themselves beyond marriage and home. These women were also able to take on positions of leadership within education, although such positions were strictly limited in the broader scheme of educational institutions and discourses (Steedman, 1990; Theobald, 1996). For example, in Queensland, Mary Agnew was employed by the Department of Public Instruction to set up and inspect kindergartens in Queensland at various times around the turn of the 20th century. Her appointment as a significant government official was partly based upon her British training in Froebelian methods; however, her inspection duties were restricted to kindergarten practices and, at times, lessons in needlework – a distinctly female occupation within the system (Queensland Parliamentary Papers, 1910).

Moving into the 20th century: the rise of psychology and nation building

Discourses reflective of Froebel's religious emphasis and 'mother made conscious' began to shift towards the end of the 19th century. It is evident, however, that the tight linkage between motherhood, women's labour and ECEC did not disappear. Rather, the natural mother unconscious within every woman was becoming subjected to the rational and scientific gaze of psychology. Bloch (1987) suggests that the explicit linkage of early childhood practice with scientific rational discourses began between the two world wars, during the 1920s and 1930s. Further, she suggests that this alignment with developmental psychology was an attempt on the part of women working in ECEC to be viewed (and to view themselves) as professionals.

Development psychology, therefore, was considered by some as a legitimating discourse. This seems a justifiable suggestion, given the rising dominance at that time of psychology in the fields that surrounded the management of humans, including health and welfare (Rose, 1999). In order to argue the case for early childhood education the many women who worked and advocated in this field would certainly have had to make use of the dominant, masculine discourses of psychology.

G. Stanley Hall, the 'father' of child study suggested in 1905, in the context of debates over women in higher education, that women should be 'educated primarily and chiefly for motherhood' (in Bell & Offen, 1983, p. 162). He also bemoaned 'bachelor women', who 'are often in every way magnificent, only they are not mothers' (in Bell & Offen, 1983, p.159). G. Stanley Hall made a significant contribution to the pioneering and establishment of developmental psychology, and he remains a noteworthy historical figure in psychology. His ideas, and idealism, about motherhood were rationalised through his position as scientific man; he made scientific arguments that childless women were superfluous. He also made rather unscientific, religious-esque arguments of the holiness of motherhood (Bell & Offen, 1983). It could be suggested, therefore, that from a position of power and authority G. Stanley Hall contributed to the reinforcement of maternalism as the basis for the development and value of early childhood educational pedagogies.

It was, in part, the equation of scientific rationality with masculinity that ensured women were marginalised or excluded from laying the foundations for psychological studies of childhood around the turn of the 20th century (Burman, 1994). Indeed, as Burman (1994, p. 12) states, 'the equation between science and masculinity was so strong, and research practice so 'virile', as to be able to counter the supposedly feminising tendencies that proximity to children produces'. Burman (1994) suggests that women's perceived emotional, subjective and therefore quite irrational relationship with infants was seen to prevent them from making the rational, objective and scientific observations and assessments required (although Dr Maria Montessori is an exception here).

Furthermore, in nations such as the UK, the USA and Australia, discourses of good women were founded on being a particular sort of wife and mother (Yeo, 2005; Lake, 1994). For example, in the USA, the then President Theodore Roosevelt suggested in an address to the National Congress of Mothers in 1905 that

...the most important, the most honorable and desirable task which can be set any woman is to be a good and wise mother...I am speaking of the primary duties, I am speaking of the average citizens, the average men and women who make up the Nation (in Bell & Offen, 1983, p. 138).

Roosevelt's comments are aligned with the comments made by G. Stanley Hall (as referred earlier). This maternal discourse, dominant at the time, with its links into nation building, the economy and citizenship in the western nation states has been widely discussed (e.g. Steedman, 1990; Koven & Michel, 1990, 1993; Theobald, 1996; Mackinnon, 1997).

The dominance of scientific and rational discourses is not a simple matter of the 'masculine' dominating the 'feminine'. As Foucault (1977) has suggested, power relations are far more complex than such top-down conceptualisations. In the context of early childhood education it is important to take note of the various power relations amongst different groups of women, as well as amongst women and men. For an analysis of motherhood and ECEC a simple and essentialised category of woman cannot hold. For instance, in Australia at the turn of the 20th century, rural women, Aboriginal women and urban poor and working-class women certainly led very

different lives, not only from each other, but also from the educated middle-class women who constituted the majority of early childhood teachers.

Further, the view of the central role of the mother/teacher was not just espoused by men. Most women working within early childhood education through the turn of the 20th century not only reiterated the natural place of mothers in the lives of young children, they were making these statements from positions of relative middle class, educated privilege and authority (Taylor Allen, 1982; MacKinnon, 1997; Yeo, 2005). The discourses of maternalism and good motherhood thus provided an effective means of government of all women, and middle and upper class women were to govern themselves, each other and women of the working classes and their children.

A key historical example of these complex relations between women, maternalism and ECEC is provided through some discussion of Maria Montessori. Dr Maria Montessori was a significant figure in early childhood education, she was also a single mother, a fact which was well hidden during her life both for religious (she was a Roman Catholic) and professional reasons (Cunningham, 2000; May, 1997). Montessori was the first Italian woman to graduate with a medical degree and her ideas regarding childhood and education were based in her scientific research, a point that was important to her public success (Brehony, 1994). Nonetheless, she relied on an image of a beautiful and loving mother figure as an essential foundation for her educational theories. Here I quote Montessori (1946, p. 87) at length,

The teacher, as part of the environment, must herself be attractive, preferably young and beautiful, charmingly dressed, scented with cleanliness, happy and graciously dignified. This is the ideal, and cannot always be perfectly reached, but the teacher who presents herself to the children should remember that they are great people, to whom she owes understanding and respect. She should study her movements, making them as gentle and graceful as possible, that the child may unconsciously pay her the compliment of thinking her as beautiful as his mother, who is naturally his ideal of beauty.

This quote from Montessori presents a complex picture of ECEC teachers and the children in their care. It is a vision based on an ideal mother figure that is quite gentle and romantic, belying the widely suggested point that Montessori managed the work ECEC teachers in highly regulated ways, and that she was well known for refusing to

negotiate on the use of her methods, apparatus and training for teachers (Brehony, 1994; May, 1997; Cunningham, 2000).

Alison MacKinnon (1997), in her history of women and education during the 20th century, argues that some women took up the dominant masculine discourses of maternalism and motherhood around the turn and into the first half of the 20th century in different ways from those suggested by men. MacKinnon (1997, p. 39) suggests that 'feminists underlined the importance of motherhood, linking it with women's superior moral judgement'. This kind of position was widely advocated by different groups of women for different purposes. For instance, some feminists used a morality discourse, in the context of the population 'crisis' of the 1890s and 1910s, as a resistance to masculine debates against contraception. They argued that the limiting of families to a small number of well cared for and morally fit children was preferable to a large number of unwanted, uncared for and immoral children who might then be an imposition on the nation (MacKinnon, 1997; Yeo, 2005).

Early childhood educators as good teacher/mothers

There is evidence to argue that current understandings of ECEC in Australia have been built on discourses of maternalism. Acker (1995, p. 23) has suggested that 'maternal imagery is very strong in discussions of teachers and teaching and has deep historical roots'. Further, Steedman (1985) develops links between conceptions of 'good' middle class motherhood and the 'good' teaching of young children as espoused by 'the fathers' such as Froebel. Her point, that redefinitions of the family, motherhood and childhood were linked into wider social changes in the 19th century, is supported by the work of Thorne (1987). Thorne argues that during the 19th century and the early 20th century the increasing domesticity of motherhood, the increasing divide between public and private life, and the tight linking of children with women meant that childhood was also redefined. Part of this redefinition involved raising the emotional value of children, particularly for mothers. It also involved mostly male experts expounding upon childhood's natural and universal state of development and the absolute and natural necessity for 'good' mothers in this process (Thorne, 1987).

ECEC teachers continue to regularly and enduringly have their skills and knowledges attributed to a natural mothering instinct. These links between nature, maternalism and the work of the ECEC teachers are difficult and contradictory. It needs to be acknowledged that many women in ECEC take pride and pleasure in their work and identity as teacher/mother. However, others have attempted to refuse this discourse, pointing out their years of university education and the need for early childhood teachers to be recognised as professionals. For these women, the naturalisation of their work undermines their struggle for professional status.

Yeo (2005, p. 17) suggested that historically women who undertook a social mothering role such as ECEC work 'refused the taint of filthy lucre, so that women's professions came into existence either as voluntary work or paying little remuneration'. Traces of this attitude continue to be evident in very material ways. For example in the 1990s in New Zealand, discourses of the natural place and work of women in ECEC were used by some organisations to argue against the ECEC teachers' claims for equal pay (Duncan, 1996). While this argument has more recently been revoked by the government, the tactics used had historical links to the early 20th century and were certainly not unique to New Zealand. A further example is provided by Sweden, a country now considered a leader in effective, supportive and family friendly early childhood policy and services, had in the first half of the 20th century used the 'natural' place of women in ECEC to justify low pay and low status for ECEC teachers (Holmlund, 2000).

Conclusion: making some links to maternalism and ECEC in current Australian discourses, practices and policies

Dever (2005, p. 57) suggests that

...Australian campaigns around family policy require careful interrogation of historically sedimented and hierarchically organised concepts such as 'motherhood' as these concepts are central to the production and naturalising of particular constructions of citizens, nations and borders.

Dever was making her analysis in relation to links between policies regarding families and those regarding refugees. However, her point regarding the need for careful investigation of a concept such as motherhood is also important for analysing ECEC

policy, as current debates in Australia regarding child care and women's place in the paid labour market are embedded in these 'historically sedimented and hierarchally organised' (Dever, 2005, p. 57) debates over motherhood. Dever (2005) provides three recent examples of men in Australian politics linking motherhood with good citizenship, all of which were widely reported in Australian print media. In 1999, the then Premier of Victoria Jeff Kennett, apparently suggested that the Melbourne schoolgirls he was addressing 'make a career out of motherhood'. His comment was followed by the Australian Treasurer, Peter Costello's now infamous exhortation that Australian women have at least three children – 'one for the mother, one for the father and one for the country'. The Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, also entered the debate, suggesting 'come on, come on, your nation needs you' (Dever, 2005).

The exhortation to become a mother as a woman's national duty, the reintroduction of a 'baby bonus' payment (albeit one that is available to all new mothers, not just white ones as it was in the 1910s), debates surrounding women's paid labour, child care, and indeed immigration and refugee debates, are all historically reminiscent of earlier debates in Australia at the turn of the 20th century. In the contemporary Australian equation of motherhood, woman's work and ECEC, the deeply contradictory and complex realities of motherhood and women in the paid labour market often remain elided at a policy level. For example, Australia and the USA, are the only two western nation states to not have a statutory paid period of maternity leave for mothers (OECD, 2006), a position based in an historical assumption by government that women have a 'breadwinning' husband and therefore do not need to work outside of the home. Although the maternity leave debate has been raised within Australia's governments by women (e.g. Pru Goward as Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Liberal MP Jackie Kelly) there has been no alteration of this policy. Women in Australia, therefore, are dependent for paid maternity leave upon the conditions provided in individual businesses and workplaces.

Alongside these motherhood problematics are the serious difficulties faced by the women who work in child care. As a historically philanthropic sector, embedded in maternalistic discourses of a woman's natural mothering instincts, the work of ECEC teachers is deeply undervalued in Australia (OECD, 2006). This undervaluing is

regularly manifest in poor remuneration and working conditions for many working in formal ECEC settings. There is also evidence that mothers who use institutional child care for children before school age are still judged in terms of their perceived worthiness as mothers based on the reasons the children are in care, and that early childhood educators continue to identify themselves as undertaking a mothering role (Ailwood & Boyd, 2006).

Koven and Michel (1990, p. 1108) suggested that,

When viewed from the perspective of maternalist politics, women's charitable institutions and organizations take on new significance as components of networks of benevolence as well as sites of state welfare program and policy formulation, experimentation, and implementation...The interactions between women's movements, states, and national political cultures...[have] affected the subsequent course of both women's history and the history of welfare states.

In Australia, policies and practices for early childhood education and care require a careful and detailed analysis in terms of their maternalistic bases. Such an analysis needs to take into account the interwoven historical threads of motherhood, women's paid labour and institutionalised child care. It also needs look to the vast body of work beyond early childhood, for example from women's studies and politics, which has investigated women's histories. This process has the potential to illuminate historical connections that help us understand and resist current maternalist discourses impacting upon early childhood education and care.

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