



Re-thinking education in conditions of converging crises:

Purposes, Provision and Pedagogy

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Positioning my work

- ❖ Inter-connected interests: (early childhood) education – democratic culture – social pedagogy - care, employment and gender – leave policies – care and education workforce – history and comparative studies
- ❖ ‘Conditions of the times’ →
 - ‘polycrisis’ demanding ‘transformative change’ and ‘real utopias’
 - role of the academy: *‘challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, expanding the menu of the possible’* (Joseph Tobin)...

‘Possibility space: the role of social sciences in understanding, mapping and shaping the future’

‘A well-intentioned focus on impact has encouraged incremental work on policy – how to tweak [adjust] a little, ideally aligned with the interests of the government of the day but discouraged the serious design of how our society or economy might be a generation out ...

*I believe **we need to grow the spaces and places within the social sciences that expand our shared possibility space, the options for our societies.** This is what I call exploratory social science – generating not finalised blueprints but rather generative ideas and prototypes that can be adapted, expanded and experimented with’ (Geoff Mulgan, Annual Lecture to British Academy of Social Science)*

Today's menu

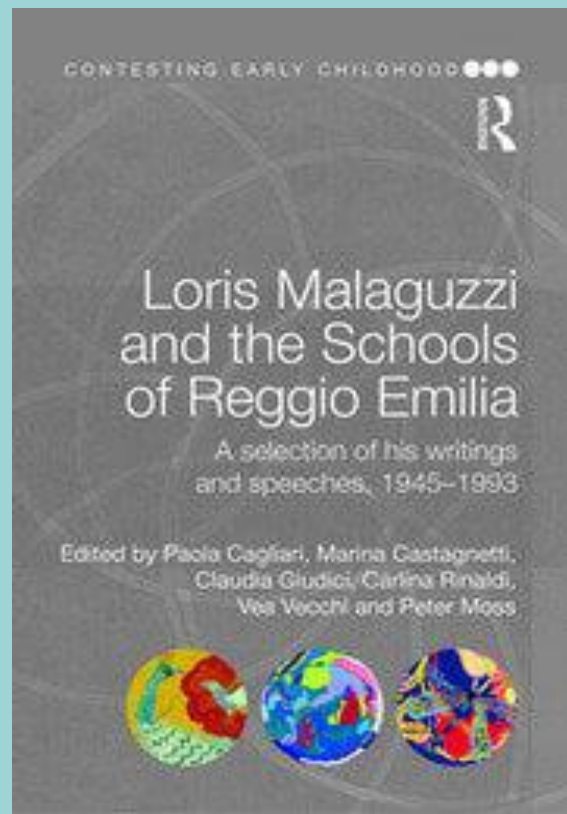
1. Education is a political practice...political questions and political choices
2. What are the conditions of the times?
3. Conditions very dangerous...but also open up for new possibilities → opportunity and responsibility to work on 'real utopias'

1. Education is a political practice...political questions and political choices

Education as a political practice

- ❖ Education today often understood as, first and foremost, a **technical practice** - outcomes, measuring performance, technologies for high performance...about asking **technical questions**, e.g., what works?
- ❖ There is an alternative: education understood as, first and foremost, a **political practice**

*‘[Education is] always a **political discourse** whether we know it or not. It is about working with cultural choices, but it clearly also means working with **political choices**’ (Loris Malaguzzi)*



Loris Malaguzzi (1920-94)

- Trained as teacher and psychologist
- Worked in Reggio-Emilia
- From 1960s, led the creation of network of 50 municipal schools for young children (0-6)
- Schools world famous... groups visit from many countries...exhibitions tour the world

Education as a political practice

- ❖ Means asking **political questions** and **making political choices** between conflicting alternatives

*'[Political questions are] not mere technical issues to be solved by experts...[but questions that] always involve decisions which require us to make **choices between conflicting alternatives**' (Chantal Mouffe)*

What political questions? What political choices?

Some of my political questions

- ❖ What **image** of the child...educator...school?
- ❖ What is the **meaning** of 'education'?
- ❖ What are the **purposes** of education?
- ❖ What do we mean by '**care**'? How does care relate to education?
- ❖ What fundamental **values**? What **ethics**?
- ❖ **What do we want for our children**, now and in the future?

+

What are the **conditions of the times**?

2. What are the conditions of the times?

Education and the conditions of the times

*'[O]ur conception of pedagogy is **dynamic**... Either pedagogy – like all the human sciences – is remade, reconstructed and updated based on the **new conditions of the times**, or it loses its nature, its function, its proper capacity to correspond to the times it lives in, and above all to foresee, anticipate and prepare the **days of tomorrow**' (Loris Malaguzzi)*

The world of the 'polycrisis'

- ❖ *'A problem becomes a crisis when it challenges our ability to cope and thus threatens our identity. In the polycrisis the shocks are disparate, but they **interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts**' (Adam Tooze)*
- ❖ The Doomsday Clock at **89 seconds to midnight**...closest ever to midnight *'reflecting the continued state of unprecedented danger the world faces'*.

Four existential crises in the ‘polycrisis’

1. The crisis of the **environment...** or multiple crises
2. The crisis of **science and technology** (e.g., nuclear weapons, AI)

*‘many if not most of the ecological, economic, social, and psychological ailments that beset contemporary society can be attributed directly or indirectly to **knowledge acquired and applied before we had time to think it through carefully**’ (David Orr)*

Four existential crises in the ‘polycrisis’

3. The crisis of **care**
4. The crisis of **neoliberalism** – its destructive consequences + decline & fall

What is neoliberalism?

- ❖ ‘Thought collective’...’political movement’...’theory of everything’...’successful story’
- ❖ 1947 Mont Pelerin meeting → MP Society → foundations, think tanks, university departments → Chile 1973 →
- ‘the *big time came at last in 1980* when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan teamed up to bring the neoliberal script to the international stage...[and] the neoliberal show has been playing ever since, powerfully framing the economic debate of the past thirty years’ (Kate Raworth)
- ❖ Epicentre in UK and US...but spread globally

What is neoliberalism?

- ❖ **Economisation**: insertion of economic rationality into every part of life... *‘the conversion of non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones’* (Wendy Brown)... **commodification** and **marketisation** of almost everything
- ❖ **Values**: competition; (individual) choice; calculation
- ❖ **Ideal subject**: *homo economicus* – competitive and calculating...independent and self-interested...informed consumer and flexible worker...an *‘entrepreneur of the self’*

Consequences of neoliberalism

'[Neoliberalism] now configures great swathes [areas] of our daily lives and structures our experience of the world – how we understand the way the world works, how we understand ourselves and others, and how we relate to ourselves and others...We are produced by it' (Stephen Ball)

Consequences of neoliberalism

'[Neoliberalism] has caused or contributed to most of the crises that now confront us: rising inequality; rampant child poverty; epidemic diseases of despair; off-shoring and erosion of the tax base; the slow degradation of health-care, education and other public services; the crumbling of infrastructure; democratic backsliding; the 2008 financial crash; the rise of modern-day demagogues...our ecological crises and environmental disasters' (George Monbiot and Peter Hutchison, 'The Invisible Doctrine')

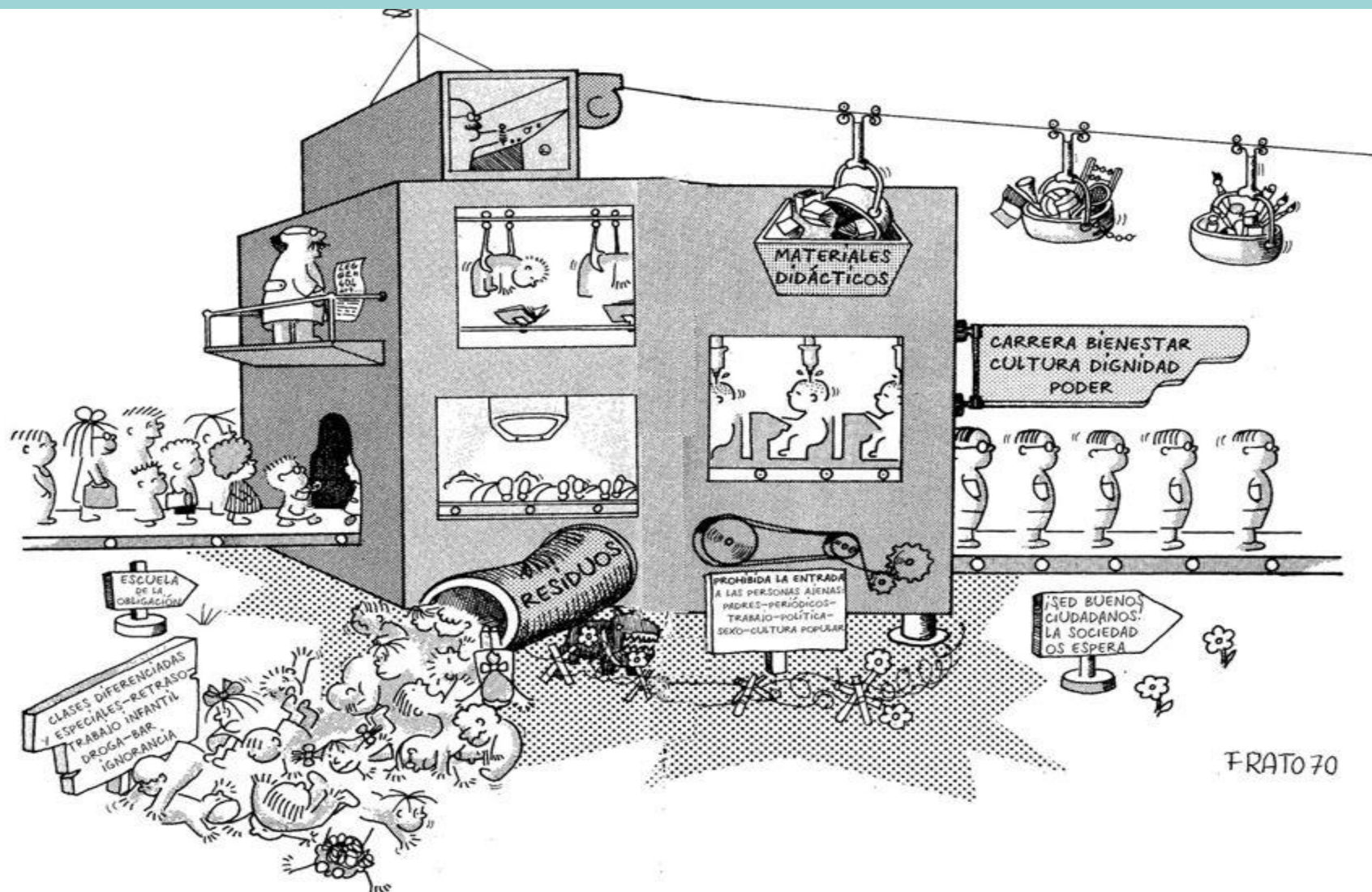
...and consequences for education in many countries

Consequences for Education: spread of GERM

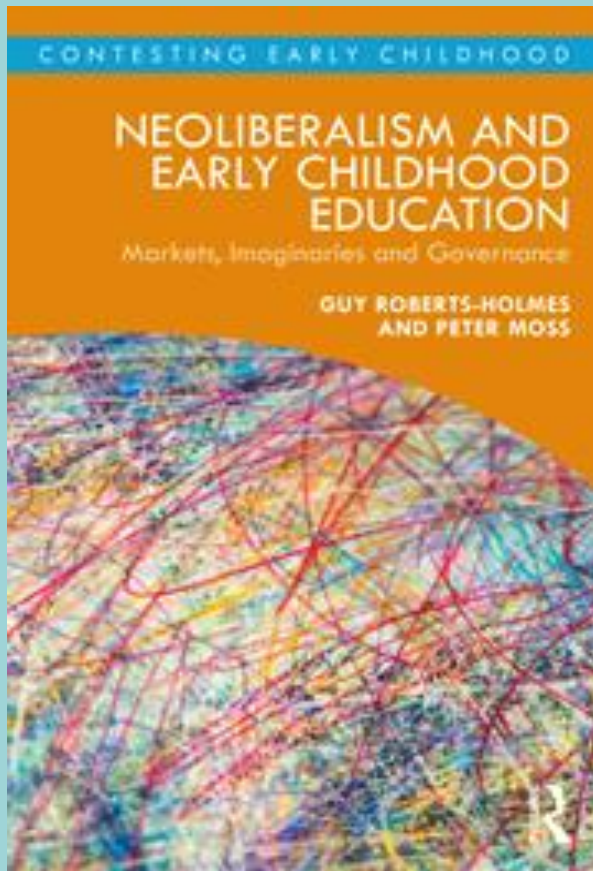
- ❖ ‘**G**lobal **E**ducation **R**eform **M**ovement’: emerged in 1980s and ‘*adopted as an educational reform orthodoxy within many education systems throughout the world*’ (Pasi Sahlberg)...5 main symptoms
 1. **Market** logic – centrality of competition
 2. Corporate and **business** management models
 3. **Standardisation** – performance standards for pupils, schools, countries
 4. **Core** subjects – narrowing of education
 5. **Test-based** accountability – ‘high stakes’ testing

Consequences for Education

- ❖ **Purpose:** economic purpose dominates...‘**human capital**’ development and economic competitiveness
- ❖ **Pedagogy:** transmission of predetermined information for predetermined and standardised outcomes...‘**prophetic pedagogy**’ that ‘*knows everything that will happen...[and] has no uncertainty*’ (Loris Malaguzzi)
- ❖ **Provision:** school as **business** selling commodity to parent-consumers & **factory** producing predefined outcomes



*‘...a factory of learning, a modernist institution of government, set within the ontology of environmental exploitation...a block, an obstacle, an inhibition to freedom, to ‘learning’, to the move to a different sort of sustainable society. We take **the school to be...irreparable**’ (Jordi Collet-Sabé and Stephen Ball)*



‘Contesting Early Childhood’
series

‘...questions the current
dominant discourses
surrounding early childhood,
and offers *alternative*
narratives’

The decline and fall of the neoliberal order?

- ❖ No hegemonic project lasts forever and many argue the neoliberal era is in decline

'[N]eoliberalism's promises did not survive the test of the real world. Today, they are largely exhausted' (Jens Beckert)

**BUT PERIOD OF DECLINE IS VERY DANGEROUS...
ADDS TO CRISES**

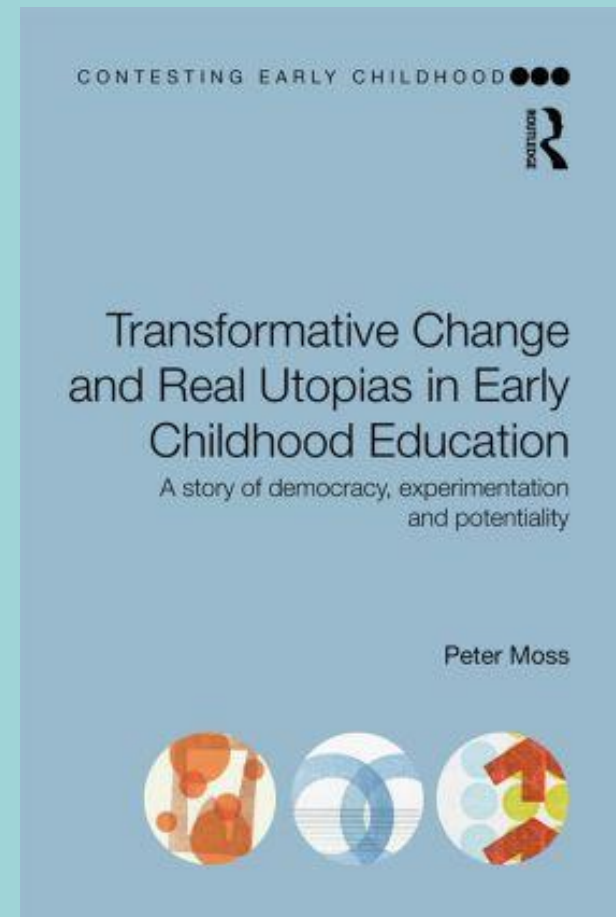
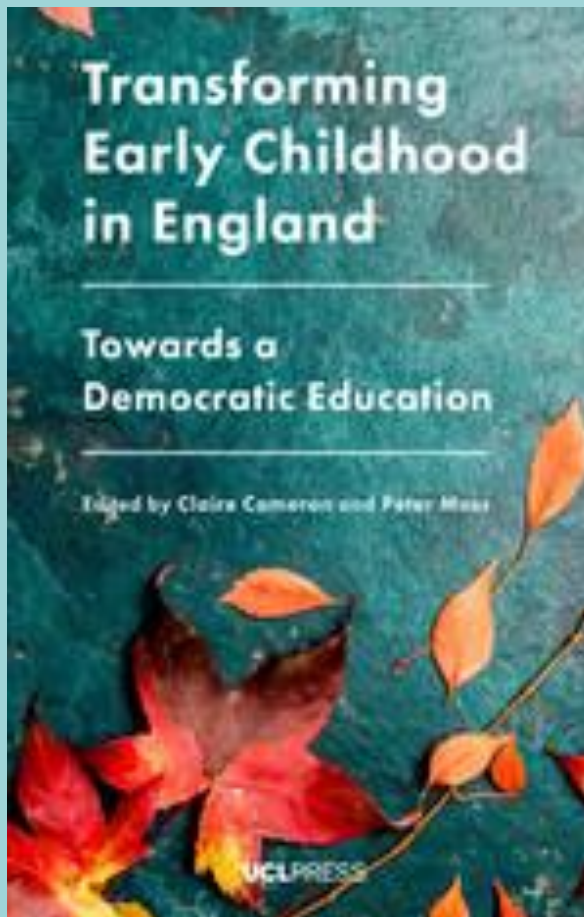
The decline and fall of the neoliberal order

- ❖ Vestiges of the neoliberal order with us for years
- ❖ ‘*The old is dying and the **new cannot be born***’ (Antonio Gramsci)... ‘*there are currently no politically strong narratives that would point to alternatives to the neoliberal logic of competition, markets, and coercion in ways that are firmly guided by the principles of social justice and a democratic polity*’ (Jens Beckert)
- ❖ ‘*In this **interregnum** a great variety of **morbid symptoms** appear*’ ...and the possibility of a worse narrative succeeding, e.g. authoritarian, nativist regimes

3. Conditions very dangerous...but also open up for new possibilities → opportunity and responsibility to work on 'real utopias'

*‘Only a **crisis** – actual or perceived – **produces real change**. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on **the ideas that are lying around**. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until **the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable**’ (Milton Friedman, 1962)*

- ❖ Faced by the polycrisis, we need
 - **to develop alternatives** that offer **transformative change**...new ways of thinking, talking and doing
 - to work on **‘real utopias’**



Real utopias

- ❖ **Utopian thinking**: *'the exploration by imagination of new modes of human possibility'* (Boaventura de Sousa Santos)
- ❖ **'Real Utopias'** (Erik Olin Wright):
 - **Desirability**: values, principles, goals...a dream
 - +
 - **Viability**: systematic theoretical models or case studies of examples...a possibility
 - **Achievability**: what conditions needed for implementation...to build a system

Purposes of education

- ❖ **‘Education-in-its-broadest-sense’**: emancipatory project of holistic growth and self-formation of the **individual**, e.g., *bildung*

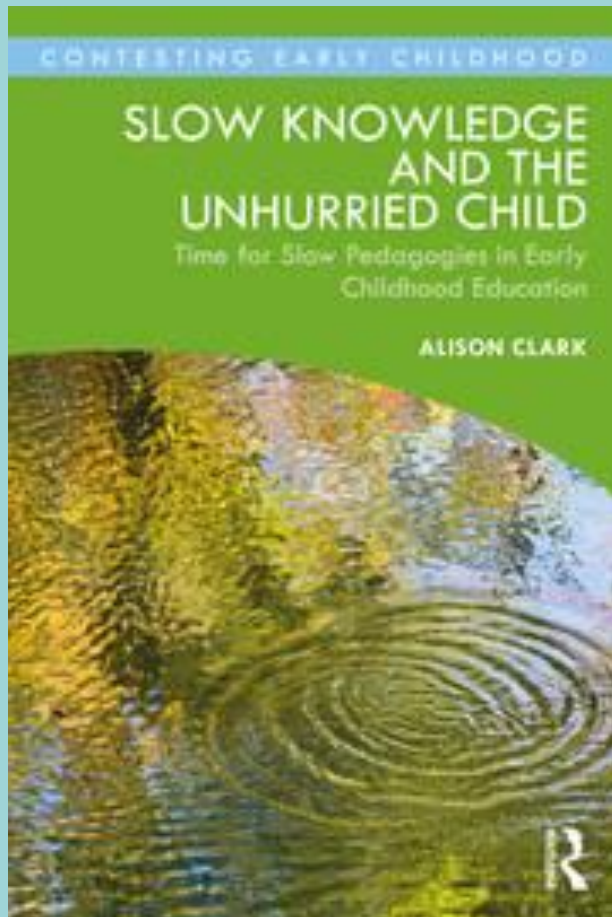
‘[the individual, with others] constructs her/ himself into something not decided beforehand...an active undertaking, which implies an increase in the individual’s possibilities for freedom’ (Gunilla Dahlberg)

Purposes of education

- ❖ Individual...but also about **society** and the **environment**, e.g., for building and maintaining
 - **democratic culture**...democracy as value and practice in education...as a 'lived experience'
 - **more caring society**...synergy between 'education' and 'care'...education inscribed with 'ethics of care'
 - **sustainable environment**...recognise responsibility for and inter-dependence with non-human world

Pedagogy

- ❖ Turn to pedagogy that values wonder and surprise, curiosity and uncertainty, experimentation and the unexpected, creativity and co-construction of meaning, e.g.,
 - ‘**pedagogy of relationships and listening**’, based on the idea of knowledge as ‘*a process of construction by the individual in relation with others, a true act of co-construction*’ (Carlina Rinaldi)
 - ‘**slow pedagogy**’: ‘*complexity and interconnectedness are valued, where there is time for the unexpected and local knowledge is respected*’ (Alison Clark)



- attentive to the rhythm of the children, and adults and materials
- rapid, intense moments as well as a slowing down of pace
- makes time for listening and collaboration
- celebrates the group as well as the individual
- values play and the present moment
- values the difficult to measure
- seeks to enable deep discovery and relationships

Provision

- ❖ School as **public space** or forum open to all **citizens** where they may participate in many **projects** - social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, e.g.,
 - **education** (meaning??)
 - fostering **solidarity...inclusion...welfare...respect for diversity...environmental sustainability...democratic practice**: *‘living centres of open and democratic practice’*
 - **‘creating culture’** in and beyond the school, e.g., image and rights of children
 - *‘participating in **building an educating society**’*

Provision

*‘[The school] may be one of the most important institutions we have to help us build a **democratic conversation** about the future. A physical, local school where community members are encouraged to **encounter each other** and learn from each other is one of the last **public spaces** in which we can begin to build the **intergenerational solidarity, respect for diversity and democratic capability** needed to ensure fairness in the context of sociotechnical change (Keri Facer)*

Education and Real Utopias

- ❖ Offered some **desirable** features of a utopian education
- ❖ Demonstrated **viability** in schools for young children in RE (but there are other examples)
- ❖ **Achievability**: dismantling NL ideology, well educated workforce, human scale schools, competent support systems and ????

To conclude

- At a time of polycrisis and transition, we have a responsibility to analyse the conditions of the times and to ‘work both within disciplines and across them.... to populate our fuzzy pictures of the future with complex, rich, plausible ideas’ (Geoff Mulgan)
- ‘Real utopias’ provide one approach to doing this by linking desirability, viability and achievability
- I have offered one example, in education, focusing on desirability – but backed by viability (examples) and achievability (conditions)

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Sousa, D. and Moss, P. (2024) 'From anger to dreaming to real utopias: Re-thinking, reconceptualising and re-forming (early childhood) education in the conditions of the times', *Global Studies in Education*