

## Relational Futures in Preschool

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses the importance of preschool education in relation to futures teaching and critical discourse. I will discuss preschool as a functioning, unparallel space that can help define futures oriented education. By outlining preschoolers as presently active collaborators in future worlds as opposed to merely inhabitants of future worlds, this discussion merges integral futures thinking with the surrealism found in the dialect of four-year-olds; revealing a process of education which acts towards futures while living them, and opens possibilities for each of us as we emerge from the shadows of modern education.*

**Keywords:** Preschool futures, early childhood education, co-agents, educational futures

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### Introduction: Future Visions from a Four-Year-Old

Neema: "Once upon a time there was a princess and she lived in a magical world. This magical world was in the future. The world is flat and tired, because some war world bad guys shoot some of the Earth down.

The princess moved to a new castle because the old castle was full of bad guys who shot it down and they wanted it that way. Her new castle was made of leaves and sticks and vines and tree stumps. There weren't very many trees because some men cut them down. There weren't so many animals either because there were lots of insects that ate all the big animals. Stick bugs, spiders, bugs, leaf bugs and mosquitoes ate them.

The princess died because she was very old on her way.

The people stayed alive because they had none-dieing-bones. The princess gave them none-dieing-bones from her heart before she died. The people could live forever and forever. The future started going dead because the future didn't have none-dead-bones. But because before the future was dead, the princess's heart gave none-dieing bones to the future so it could stay alive, but it was so close to dieing. So now it is more dead than less dead.

The leaves could come off the plants and back on them whenever they wanted. It helped the future come back alive again because the future needed magic and the leaves gave the magic to the

future. The people needed the magic too, to stay alive."

Heidi: "Neema, what do you want the title of your futures story to be?"

Neema: "The Mouth of the Actual."

Heidi: "The Mouth of the Actual? And how old are you?"

Neema: "Four years old."

(Neema<sup>1</sup>, age four, personal communication, 2008)

So here we are, in a future that is now more dead than less dead. I sit with four-year-old Neema in our ordinary preschool classroom, astounded by her surreal intentions towards futures, and I wonder to myself, do I still have the ability to realize magical futures? How do I respond to Neema's vision of a future? Is she saying that in the future people will survive from their hearts? Or that magical leaves will save people? Is that possible, and on top of that, how do I even begin to address her title: "The Mouth of the Actual"? Are her ideas relevant or simply sweet imagination? I wonder, how does the simple task of engaging myself in a child's ideas toward the future put me into this fully realized living debate within myself, not just a debate on the tasks I have to attend to as her teacher, but the tasks each of us must consider as a reproducing species on a changing Earth?

Questions like these initiate an integral, often dismissed, discourse within education: one that is concerned with children's ideas of their futures. The following discussion and personal narrative comes directly out of a history of collaborating with the lucid, luxurious visions of a child, and positing education as "a matter of rejoicing in the abundance and intricacy of the world, entering into its living questions, living debates, living inheritances" (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006). What I will describe is how we can make room in preschool education and future studies education for these resoundingly human questions, which in turn make paths for refreshed utopias of presence and futures of possibility. The underlying premise is that future studies education and early childhood education include many similarities and unique points of entrance and departure that can refresh both discourses. Rather than focusing on how to teach futures curriculum topics within preschools, I will tell more loosely about the situation and a process, uniquely derived from the early childhood classroom and its constituents, that articulates further developments in futures oriented education and collaborative citizenship. To consider ways for educational futures that will breathe, that will be made of magic and have none-dieing-bones from the heart.

### What Children are Not

*"They were born before they opened their eyes. When they opened up their eyes they saw where they were."*

Grace, age five.

As an early childhood educator and future studies advocate, I work in the particularly sticky spot of being "positioned at the commencement of the education system ... optimally placed to lay significant foundations for young children's lifelong development as they move towards adulthood and come to engage increasingly with a complex and often fragmented social environment" (Page, 2000). Curriculum guides, texts

and theories agree that children are becoming prepared for the world during their early formative years. Synonymous with the idea that early, formative learning occurs in childhood, is also a widely accepted truism: children are not only learning for the future world but *children are the future*. While that phrase is pervasively used, the validity of its assumptions is something I insist we fight against. All the 'what are we going to leave to the next generation?' rhetoric is rooted in believing children are the future. This is a contradiction of serious magnitude, which is frankly, undermining our work as futures advocates, citizens, educators, and humans.

Children are *not* the future. They are stakeholders in future worlds, yes, but there is not a defined future waiting out there for them, 'somewhere over the rainbow'. Nor will children stand by idle, aimlessly playing and waiting patiently for the future to suddenly, 'become' them. Young children are quite the opposite of the dominant understanding of the future. When we are capable and willing observers, children are revealed as they are - actual living practice of the eternal, vulnerable, chaotic *present*.

*Children have a dogged, delicious disrespect for worktime, punctuality, efficiency and schooled uniform time. Their time is an eternal present. They live (given half the chance) pre-industrially, in tutti-frutti time, roundabout time, playtime; staunch defenders of the ludic revolution, their hours are stretchy, ribboned, enchanted and wild... (Griffiths as cited in Milojevic, 2005).*

They embody a precise living presence which, unlike the 'future' they are supposedly owners of someday, actualizes itself in a child's full throttle actions alive within each and every moment. Each moment with a child is a world of its own, and precisely a future of its own, right now. Each child is already a breathing, active agent in the world we live in, *giving birth and life to futures everywhere*. They are not empty vessels or vessels only half-full. They are humans who too, are creating narratives about and actions towards creating alternative future worlds. Albeit most of these narratives are unfortunately, at best, framed and hung on the wall to reflect on, laugh at and remember only later, when they 'grow up'.

With this in mind, we need start reframing our discussions about educational futures. Children, even at a young age, are already powerful, articulate, fragile and equal participants in our shared worlds. They are participants whether or not we ignore or oppress their possible contributions. Children each act as their own chaotic system which does not have "a single future toward which it inevitably moves, but rather thousands or billions of distinguishably different futures, any one of which may be realized as the system evolves" (Cornish, 2004). They each release into the world a potion, a universe of stars with their every breath, a place to reside, nuclear sized futures, all on their own.

That being said, it is one thing to abstractly assert that a young child is an equal citizen, a mother of futures, an equal combatant and a co-conspirator of future worlds, but it is quite another to live this assumption in a classroom every day. Our histories are determined to exclude children from their own futures and it is not easy to reintroduce them back into the fold. We must overcome a good amount of habitual bias in order to approach very young child co-agents with the equality and attention we all deserve, while activating futures orientation and futures advocacy within our execu-

tion. I believe there is something to celebrate in the preschool classroom, with its gentle antagonism, gentle rigor, forceful slowness and deliberate execution of everyday life. By illuminating the unique futures qualities of the preschool situation, I am hopeful we can continue to cultivate our 'language of criticism and a language of hope' (Milojevic, 2002) and vast understandings of necessary methodologies within future studies and education.

### The Remarkable Preschool Situation

*"Everyone likes the future to be like kids."*

Spencer, age five.

Let's enter the preschool classroom. An image of Buckminster Fuller's Spaceship Earth is on the wall, a painting easel rests idle, and collages hang from the ceiling. Children carry backpacks, well-loved stuffed animals and trinkets or bits of nature picked up off the sidewalk stuffed in their pockets, arrive and put their things in their cubbies. They bring with them tired, curious eyes, an occasional tear, mismatched socks, a smile, restless legs, arms and fingers. Along with the readily visible, there is also the morning and the night before, a dream, a hunger, a fullness, a scrape healing, a conversation, a vision in the car window, a sense of rain on their boots, some curiosity. Their entire realities, worlds even, are carried into the classroom in that tiny body. My being is brought into the room, too: a late night conversation, a dream, a hunger, a fullness, thoughts of my friends, thoughts of this article, breakfast lingering, coffee not strong enough, too strong, a curiosity about how the day will pass. As the parents leave their children behind in my care, the morning scenes are staged. As in many preschool classrooms, it is set to open with certain fundamentals: a good morning, a greeting, the calendar, the weather and an overview of the day ahead. Our 'future generation' wanders over to the area defined by a colorful rug waiting for our morning greeting, and with that, there is a certain sense of the day beginning. Each of us has come with 'several' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) into the room, each of us more-or-less ready for what we are going to do, but precisely at this moment we wonder - *what exactly is it that we are doing here?*

What are we supposed to do here in this intimate, exhausting preschool classroom? Across most arenas of discourse, it is in early childhood education where the educator is predestined to be the one responsible for introducing the fundamentals of education and of life: the structuring of language, time, routine; the structuring of relations, emotions, sociability, politics; the structuring of bodies, Cartesian dichotomies, minds; the structuring of systems, control, and production. Beyond the large abstractions come the details of every day life, also predetermined to be taught: how to wipe yourself after going poop; how to eat properly; how to wash hands; how to talk in-turn; how to dress yourself; how to tell what season it is; how to walk inside; how to share and how to listen to authority. Countless worlds of teaching are outlined as the unique responsibility of a preschool educator.

Here in the countless worlds lies the interface, and here too lies the blood force. Within early childhood classrooms, an educator is expected and forced to be in a dis-

tinctive situation, a messy commingling of normally isolated forces and forms of teaching. In very few other situations do you daily help a person wash their hands while they ask seriously, "Why do we water hands?" Within this delicate balance lies a rare opportunity and location within futures education to "return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense" (Butler cited in Bussey, Inyatullah & Milojevic, 2006).

In order to sense this frailty more closely, we return to the classroom rug. We are starting to get a clearer glimpse at the complex situation of the preschool classroom. Here are the children, co-agents in our worlds giving birth to futures everywhere, sitting on the floor; here is me, a co-agent in our worlds giving birth to futures everywhere, poised to help them wash their hands and poised, too, to theoretically impart the fundamental knowledge of human society to them; here is also the construct of the preschool classroom as determined by society, framing the futures being born as well as framing the materials and things which encapsulate these futures. Yes, there is a lot going on here. At a minimum, we are realizing we cannot just be satisfied teaching basic colors, linguistics, reading readiness or socialization skills.

Preschool is a serious and sensitive situation. What we witness and participate in without regard, is a constant exchange which crosses over from specific subjects into worlds of the vast relational. That is not to say a commingling doesn't occur elsewhere – it happens everywhere. Everything is a commingling, patiently waiting, willing, giving, ready! Future studies and integral educators desire to teach precisely with these vast systems intertwining, but in preschool we are expected to let that reality affect our immediate classrooms, our teaching, our learning. It permeates the whole of the classroom experience – if a child is crying loudly in a corner because a tower they were trying to build crashed to the ground, that emotion is accepted and taught towards, reacted to, considered an integral part of the process. Constant change and chaos are in love with the preschool classroom.

Unlike the framework where an unexpected emotional response to change is considered an isolated behavioral issue, in the futures preschool classroom it maintains itself as the *cohesive learning discourse* it has no choice but to be. A situation where we can "point, in fact, Earthward, to a deeply bodily, deeply experiential, deeply aesthetic fact to which we have been blinded by our culture of fragmentation and isolation... It is a way we carry ourselves in the world, the way we come, through experience to, live in a world full of life, full of relations and obligations and address" (Jardine et al., 2006). Here we have a kind of living model for what inherently integral, complexity-ridden education looks like.

Preschool is a peculiar aberration because of its ability to compel and allow for integrated, emotional, abstract, concrete and historically fundamental learning from all parties involved. In addition, we are managing to be acutely aware when a child "stands up, breathing and co-ordinating all these complex patterns by himself and gets his own balance and starts drinking in the patterns of cosmos and earth he is apparently spontaneously interested in co-ordinating the total information – the total stimulation" (Fuller, 1962). I hope we can learn from this, too, retain what we fiercely observe here. The young child is an incredibly natural integrator in an integrated situation, for what is separated but what we separate for them? Children and their pre-

school classrooms are an excellent example of chaotic worlds, crying, laughing and cracking open the path of futures, that is, if we are willing to negotiate this space together.

### Young Children as Future Studies Curriculum

*"Our ignorance only has this incontestable effect: It causes us to undergo what we could bring about in our own way, if we understood."*

Georges Bataille (1991).

If you work with young children daily, you may feel overwhelmed by the field of relations and co-ordination coming into play. Once you are willing to take into account that a child is a co-agent in the world and integrating the total already, you begin to see your situation very acutely and with fresh eyes. For instance, you begin to ask yourself, what can happen when you maintain eternal presence like a child? What can happen when you are as open to the language of emotions as a child? What can happen when you are as vulnerable as a child? What can happen when you relate to time as a child does? What happens when you learn from their cohesive, messy, malleable world? I ask these questions of myself, after living in early childhood for a number of years, but I've found it is not enough to leave it at that. Clearly, one must learn to how to embody the questions to approach any radical nuance. Through a process of embodying these brave acts of living inquiry, there is a chance to open ourselves to the most important ideology behind futures and the hopeful relations between disparate entities. The ideology that when we firstly, allow for the extreme integration of things to persist and when we secondly, allow for the deconstruction of that integration in the process, we then can reveal the struggling, commingling, empathetic human version of what we hide behind to be available while in the midst of relating or teaching. Considering each of our contexts, it is the most difficult thing to be actively and constantly reshaping yourself, and others, for each of us to witness and relate to, and in essence, learn from. For example, can we too cry when we teach? Can we too have the sense of tutti-frutti time? Can we too reveal our intimate, deeply paralyzed thoughts because we too must be able to admit that "people aren't happy when they are in costume" (Joe, age four, personal communication, Spring 2006)?

There may be more to learn about our futures from living with and observing young children in the social setting of preschool than from "teaching" futures. It is not a matter of only imparting something to them, it is imparting everything from and with them. We can, with deep attention, observe the material, approach, methods and more so that relational, integrated beings are outlined discreetly within the inherent, luxurious life of children in context, "where the mundane dross of daily activity merges into the background of fertile shadowy possibilities. It is on these occasions when I am at my most vulnerable and human and when the deeper processes of the social and cosmic intersect and shape consciousness" (Bussey, 2007). Once you validate a child and their methods as qualities of education, as teaching instruments in themselves or as their very own embodied futures 'curriculums', vast plateaus appear which give way to discursive alternatives. Remember however, engagement with

child-coordinated plateaus requires something of us – we must not be afraid to relinquish control to a child's being, to allow them to change us, to share with us their futures and to give us the ability to remain hopeful and surprised by each of us in relation. We must be able to participate with the universes residing in the question "why do we water hands," with the seriousness it demands from the co-agent who is asking. This is futures teaching and a specific calling, a way each of us can discuss "*what exactly are we doing here?*"

### **Collaboration in Futures Oriented Preschool Classrooms**

*"The road was made out of logs and paper. The paper was people."*  
Fiona, age four.

The above brief process outline, of removing the more hegemonic, preconceived notions of what children are and what they should know, while replacing it with a form of continuous reassessment in the face of constantly 'colonized imaginations' (Gidley in Bussey et al., 2006), is a basic initiation into the possibilities found in preschool aged children. When you are on the floor of a preschool with these overwhelming worlds in front of you things change from how do I ask and introduce the "right" questions to, how do we explore all of these questions together? Assuming we are capable of breaking down barriers keeping us from equalizing children's opinions, we now can move into reassessing our assumed fundamental objectives through our process with them. Keeping in mind though what Ivana Milojevic reminds us, "educators need to renew their commitment to the struggle against exploitation on all fronts and bring a vision of critical pedagogy that is anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic, and centers around meeting the basic needs of human beings for survival and wellbeing in the struggle for a socialist democracy" (2002, p.4). It is both inexhaustibly difficult and so simple to restore lucid questioning with a critical discourse, a heavy dismantling - making permissible fissures that let you cry with happiness, make you feel alive and *present* in our porous, messy existence.

For a glimpse of specificity here, I'll share more from the example of the morning greeting we touched on earlier. When we are in our classroom, the morning scene staged, ordinarily the first thing we do is look at the clock on the wall to see if it is time to begin our day. The question sits: is it nine o'clock (time to meet and greet)? Instead of taking the road of the tired, unquestioning authority, can we take the road of (and made by) young children? When I do, suddenly *nine o'clock becomes everything*. In combination with a sense of vulnerability and vast layers opening outward, I begin to form and ask questions of this everything-which-is nine o'clock. Questions like: What is time? "Who owns time?" (Zeilinkski, 2006) Who invented it and what necessitates it? Why do we start at nine o'clock? What is the point of that demand? Does anyone really want to start? What exactly is the passage of time? But, do we need this limit, here, now? Or, from the children: Does nine o'clock sing? Can I eat the clock? Why doesn't it open its mouth when it talks? How many days does it see at once? Can time poop? (Various students, personal communications, 2009). When I make the choice to engage the children in my questions and myself in theirs, fundamentals

begin to shift immediately. Futures thank us, as we are well aware that fundamental alternatives and possibilities are the heart and soul for their survival.

In this example, with the questions of the time being the focal node, we decided to "open onto the clock" and let the questions lead us to alternatives. The children and I took the clocks down from the classroom wall and opened them up to reveal the raw materials inside. What *does* the clock see? Together we found parts we knew, and if we didn't know them, we made them up—in essence, looking for its eyes, for its voice, for its poop. I certainly didn't know what to make of everything, but their fingers said it all as they smashed the clocks with laughter or when they delicately unscrewed the tiniest screw: "Time looks awesome broken," (Sylvie, age five, personal communication, 2009). In the aftermath we all realized, well, we have no working clocks now, how are we to know how to run our day without this timekeeper? Instead of putting a fixed clock back up and calling it an experiential lesson well done, we let it slow us. We asked more of ourselves. We welcomed alternative futures. One child suggested, "We could look to the sun." Another suggested, "We'll just look inside of us." And, one that stood out to me, "Let's dive down and just ask the fish how they know." That child's idea led to further discussions on biological clocks and ocean ecologies as well as a discussion on why humans invent or need time. What is apparent in this brief example from an hour in a preschool classroom, is that we, as co-agents, can begin to agitate fundamental standards through integral learning with our children. Our collaboration is compelling.

Asking ourselves to have the strength to deviate from habitual assumptions of educational settings and see things anew through critical questioning inspired *from, with and around young children* is not only exhilarating, but can certainly help delineate what a futures oriented classroom and existence feels through daily. Futures are born and return through these shared "questjamakinmarks" (a term combining the exclamation and question mark coined by Jack, age four). Futures are in turn born when we continually "insist that the future must be constructed, not in some fantastic utopian mold, but through tangible transformations of the raw materials given to us in our present state. ... inspired by a distinctive set of conflicting visions" (Harvey, 2000). Hand in hand are the process of illuminating futures and the transformation of futures by that same process. A subtle, dynamic approach formed from asking ourselves to participate with children as real collaborators on a daily basis and in every situation, giving us the strength to accept their wildly surreal, emotional and imaginative futures. In part because they are desirably unprincipled, but also in part because children are aware of the seriousness of what is at stake if we don't bring them into the fold: "I want my stories to be for mommies and daddies. I want them to read my book so they will know about the future because I am worried. I am worried the trees and plants and animals will die if people don't believe in the future," (Lia, age five, personal communication, Spring 2007). Our futures remain deeply delicate and compassionate because of young children and their sensibilities of coordinated universes; untamed and yet *serious*. In the deepest sense we can participate in a process which transforms the silly, so-called inconsequential, ideas of children into seriously intended activities that need massive attention and most urgently, collaborative materialization into worlds where they have not been allowed to infiltrate.



## Points of Entrance and Departure

*"It [the future] revolved into love and into different worlds so the future would stay alive."*

Sophia, age five.

*"Let's stop talking about the future. Can we go build our playground now? "*

Spencer, age five.

Our task as living questions, pointed into ever-slippery futures, is a huge undertaking and a practice not considered lightly. Trouble is, when children can be the eternally present curriculum and co-agents, as are we, as are the topics we both impart, as are the actions en-route and resulting - we tend to sorely lack a pragmatic ground to stand on. The formation of living in a futures oriented space of commingled experiences, co-conspiring children-as-curriculum and questjamakinmarks is an entrance that creates a ground. I work with children every day, and I'll admit, it is still a difficult balance to attend to the magic present there and the futures dying every time I act with unquestionable authority out of habit. Acknowledging the struggle of the process, contextualization of the content and institutional criticality help keep these abstractions and concerns directed towards reality.

At a minimum, we can experiment with layers, topics, extensions and ideas to unfold and make futures more possible. In our spaces of futures oriented education, we do our best to make "nine o'clock everything" but we also ask specific questions to create, direct and change misconceptions of our futures. We can ask for possible, probable and preferred futures projects, drawings and activities. We can plan and make playgrounds, cities, classroom furniture arrangements, lectures and trips together. We can ask "what ifs" and learn how to make real the possibilities in the responses like "what if houses could walk and have hair," (Sofia, age four, personal drawing, Spring 2009). We can fail madly and struggle through, laughing when a child makes a paper tiger body and says, "Look at me, I'm only a paper tiger" (Isabelle, age four, personal communication, Fall 2009).

Early childhood classrooms are futures think tanks, full of developers, architects, engineers and construction workers who can "build the future in my backyard" (Spencer, age five, personal drawing, Spring 2007). That is not to say there isn't simultaneously a risk in activating such decisive idealism; materialization of said forms or questions when acting in isolation from the process and context in which they are placed render such questjamakinmarks as stutters, endlessly skipping in place. We need to be careful not to build discursive futures in a classroom that immediately sucks them dry by engulfing and calcifying them as mere curriculum topics, isolated as an end-in-themselves, forgotten in a frenetic tomorrow. The same goes for college classrooms as for a preschool ones.

By this same token, we know we must begin where we are and with the materials we are given. My preschool, though in many ways is an autonomous, creative and willing space, still maintains a regressive sense of "learning" through linear understanding of the world-as-singular. However, we can work within this framework, chiseling away at each extensive moment, much like the electron whose energy can exist

on both sides of the wall. Each habit has its own pace and intensity which takes patience to address. We are alive in durational relation, above all else.

What a futures conscious preschool does allow us to see, is that instead of traversing futures in a cold room around a table or rug, minds abound and clothed in costumes, we can imagine the none-dieing alternatives present when the unfettered visions of young children are included (and at every juncture). People are capable of dramatically altering the development and materialization of the fundamental structuring throughout our systems when preschool is included as a model for futures processes.

It starts within our honest collaboration with children, radiates outward into the immediate institutions of schooling, and continues beyond through the trajectories and peripheries of socialized life as each of us make our infinite futures known. Children are undeniably brilliant, as are we, when we are humble enough to take on their visions. In working with them as equal stakeholders in activating alternative futures, you have little choice but to question your understanding of fundamental structures and actions, including our entrenched, habitual, daily lives and futures. By this one alternative process, we open onto many others.

Future studies educators can gain bravery and potentialities from digesting reflections on our preschool children and situations. In tandem, early childhood educators must always learn from the chaotic, embracing systems future studies validates and participates in. So long as children (and ourselves for that matter) aren't continually disregarded or excused from agency because we are waiting on them to become someone at some other time in a future "so far away that no people will ever get there" (Lia, age five, personal communication, Spring 2007). I've learned that facing the inevitability of young children as agents, tools, materials and process models for each of us, helps to sincerely ensure "that educational futures explores, are as much as possible, the full terrain of possibilities, and in doing so, even challenges the metaphor of "terrain"" (Bussey, Inyatullah & Milojevic, 2008).

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## Notes

1. To protect the privacy of the child and their family, children's names in references are shortened to their first names only. All of the quotations were retrieved during discussions at Bolton Hill Nursery School in Baltimore, Maryland.

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