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Practice paper

Creating hope in dystopia: *Utopia as Method* as social pedagogy in early childhood studies

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Abstract

Those who choose to engage with the academic world of early childhood are frequently caught between encouraging students to advocate for children and contribute to the construction of a good life and navigating the regulatory frameworks that shape future practice. In short, we must prepare students for the highly skilled work of supporting people who live their lives in day-to-day actions that are underpaid, under-resourced and overlooked. Those who prepare students for this reality are tasked with developing programmes that both instil hope and pragmatism that will sustain them when faced with these everyday realities. This article outlines how the authors addressed this through an adapted use of *Utopia as Method* in a module on an early childhood degree. By following its distinct modes, students are guided to position themselves not as passive observants of a childhood that is socially constructed around them, but as social and political actors engaged with making human beings human. Among other issues the article evaluates the

intersection between social pedagogy, utopia and the future of early childhood. Based on explorations undertaken for this article, we argue that the imaginative reconstruction of childhood through higher education is at ease with the values and purpose of social pedagogy. We reflect that, while the method employed as part of a module was useful in terms of personal development and future-oriented practice, the need to include children's voices is yet to be developed.

Keywords early childhood studies; *Utopia as Method*; Ruth Levitas; social pedagogy; Anthropocene

Introduction

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) book, *The Ecology of Human Development*, is a formative text for child development theory (see also Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). In his preface, Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that ecological development is a 'process and product of making human beings human' (p. xiii). Undergraduate students of early childhood studies might recognise in these words the interplay of children's nature, nurture and culture so familiar from child development theory and practice.

Less familiar to students of early childhood studies, perhaps, is Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on time and its contribution to the ecology of human development. To better understand how time contributes to 'making human beings human', we reproduce the preface's passage in full:

The process and product of making human beings human clearly varied by place and time. [T]his diversity suggests the possibility of ecologies as yet *untried* that hold a potential for human natures yet *unseen*, perhaps possessed of a wiser blend of power and compassion than has thus far been manifested. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. xiii, emphases added)

Child development theory and practice, Bronfenbrenner suggests, should not neglect to consider ecological factors not yet tried in order to discover human natures not yet seen. This takes early childhood studies into uncharted territory: a re-reading of the *Ecology of Human Development* reframes child development theory and practice as the interplay of nature, nurture, culture and *the future*.

This article explores early childhood studies and its re-orientation towards the future. It does so with reference to an undergraduate programme at a UK university and its approach to child development theory and practice in the Anthropocene epoch. In particular, we discuss the part that the future plays in our pedagogical practice; specifically, how we support undergraduate students to manage the uncertainty of what is yet to come. None of us faces the future with a road map or manual in hand. Yet, by reframing our theory and practice in relation to nature, nurture, culture and the future, we can begin the task of proposing ecologies as yet untried and imagining human natures as yet unseen. And our students might do so, all the while supporting the healthy development of babies, toddlers and young children in child care and education.

In this article, we discuss how we draw on *Utopia as Method* (Levitas, 2013) to help our students make such imaginative proposals. This method demands practicable visions for the future that might transform our practical contributions to present child development practice. It also demands we make our hopes for the future explicit in order to situate such aspirations and beliefs in a present context that is rich with diverse cultural values around children, childhood and future generations. Its purpose, as Levitas (2013) writes with reference to her own grandchildren, is 'to make it better, if we can, for those who come after' (p. x).

We adapt *Utopia as Method* so that students have an opportunity to apply utopian thinking to issues such as their future careers in early childhood education and children's futures in the Anthropocene. This article explores the possible relationship between these two futures.

We wonder whether this pedagogical approach to child development theory and practice might be considered social pedagogy. In other words, is 'making human beings human', in fact, a fair description of social pedagogy? Our article theorises how a social pedagogical approach to early childhood studies might encompass the formative part the future plays alongside nature, nurture and culture within an ecology of human development.

We begin by briefly discussing the future of early childhood studies before sifting through the various ways we encounter 'the future' in them. Following our explanation of *Utopia as Method* in this context, we ponder whether social pedagogy is the future of early childhood education and care at this present juncture in history. We conclude by considering the extent to which *Haltung* and *Bildung* are features of human development that enable us to imagine 'human natures yet unseen' and to contribute to 'ecologies as yet untried' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. xiii). Our argument is that it is through our practical concern for children, their development and their experience of childhood that we might construct a future worth facing, and facing adventurously, with children and for future generations.

The future of early childhood studies

Early childhood studies is an established academic subject area (QAA, 2022) benchmarked against the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) (QAA, 2014) to produce a range of undergraduate courses in UK higher education. An example of one such course is a two-year early years foundation degree that might be endorsed by the early years sector and provide students with full and relevant qualifications to work directly with babies, toddlers and young children in regulated child care settings. Another example is a three-year bachelor's honours degree that might require students to acquire some practical experience working with children and their families but also develops students' independent research skills.

The subject of early childhood studies includes an analysis and evaluation of historical, sociological and educational perspectives on child development theory and practice and theories of childhood. How might the subject turn towards the future now that it must face the historical, sociological and educational explanation for the Anthropocene and the part that children and childhood might play in it?

Characteristic of the Anthropocene, according to Latour (2014), is that we are 'learning to navigate in common a landscape of controversial data' (p. 139). For example, models of climate change indicate that intergenerational inequity will be a feature of the future (Thiery et al., 2021). Challenging intergenerational inequity matters in early childhood studies since children have a right to healthy development and not the development of dystopia. But what kind of child development counts as healthy in light of what we now know about the Anthropocene? Answering questions such as these must draw upon diverse visions of what the good life looks like as it must be lived in the future (Children's Society, 2021; Hedegaard, 2009; Úcar, 2021).

In addition, we need to address the consequences of intergenerational actions and decisions. When Latour (2014) warns that 'to state the fact [of the Anthropocene] and to ring the bell is one and the same thing' (p. 139), early childhood studies can hardly suggest that students sit on the fence. We must instead support students to wonder how, through their work and research, very young children may become human beings made more human, and to imagine equity in a more-than-human world. This article is an attempt to show how one module in our early childhood studies programme creates hope in dystopia by affirming early childhood studies as a site of intergenerational collaboration. Or, as Levitas (2013) puts it: 'For those who still think that utopia is about the impossible, what really is impossible is to carry on as we are' (p. xii).

In theory, undergraduate students are well prepared for what is to come and to propose how to continue in the midst of the Anthropocene. For example, the FHEQ (QAA, 2014) expects third-year undergraduates on a bachelor's degree programme to demonstrate an 'appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge' and to exercise 'personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances' (p. 26, paras 4.15 and 4.15.2). Subject benchmarks (QAA, 2022) indicate that early childhood studies students find their way to the limits of knowledge by drawing upon their respective experience and reflection: 'There is a concern to support students in reflecting on their own childhoods, on experience in early childhood settings and in exploring the relationship between these experiences and the theoretical perspectives that enable students to make sense of them' (p. 11, para. 6.4).

In other words, students must learn to face the future responsibly and decisively and never naively. But experience and reflection have limits. A decade ago, Thompson and Pascal (2012) warned us that reflecting *in* action and reflecting *on* action could take a practitioner only so far. They urged us to range beyond reflecting in and on action and to develop reflection-for-action, 'in order to make the best use of the time resources available to us' (Thompson and Pascal, 2012, p. 317). Reflecting for action

acknowledges that the future does not necessarily follow full and adequate preparation for it, in which all problems are foreseen and all challenges addressed in advance. Reflection-for-action enables us to evaluate the present so we might avoid being found wholly wanting by an unforeseen and uncertain future.

A restrictive approach to reflective practice, then, may not prepare undergraduate students for the future as well as we thought. A way must be found to renew reflection so that it can face the crises and destructive potential of the Anthropocene. We need to wonder what kind of experience might reshape what it means to be a reflective practitioner around the development of babies, toddlers and young children in this epoch.

But why bother? The early years sector is 'scandalously poorly paid and (relative to schoolteachers) under qualified' (Moss and Cameron, 2020, p. 220). In fact, the ongoing concern surrounding the retention of newly qualified teachers suggests that even qualified teacher status may provide students with neither the security of employment nor a safety net for their skills, knowledge and attitudes (DfE, 2018; Long and Danechi, 2021). Early childhood studies is hardly an attractive future career when seen in these terms.

The future of early childhood studies needs to find a way beyond the contrast between high expectations of students' academic performance, low pay in professional practice and expertise in supporting children's healthy development. How, then, might early childhood studies address students' respective ambiguity of becoming (Dall'Alba, 2009), either as graduates advocating for children's best interests or as poorly paid practitioners? In this article, we suggest that *Utopia as Method* (Levitas, 2013) provides the structure that supports students to answer this question.

The future in early childhood studies

Early childhood studies already views the future through various lenses. Here we discuss some of them.

Sentimentality

The ubiquitous lyric 'I believe the children are our future' (Masser and Creed, 1976) frequently closes debates on the purpose of early childhood theory and practice. That's because, by reaching for this line, we design ourselves out of the future; similarly, we design children out of the present. Children call out such impudent sentimentality in the face of dystopia: 'You all come to us young people for hope. *How dare you!*' (Thunberg, 2019).

Potential

Implicit in early childhood studies' practice-based approach to the future is potential, usually an evaluation of (or at worst, a judgement on) children's potential. For example, it is not uncommon to hear even qualified practitioners complain about children not 'fulfilling' their potential. The future, then, is the space where a child realises their potential (or does not).

It is not common, though, to hear practitioners evaluate whether they themselves are fulfilling their own potential, and analysing reasons why or why not. 'Making human beings human' may offer more positive and productive ways of thinking about professional development and children's healthy development.

Social construction

Sentimentality and unequal approaches to our potential, and indeed children's potential, are poor starting points from which we might theorise 'the future' within early childhood students. Rather, our subject's explanatory coherence frequently draws on theories of social construction (Aries, 1973; Qvortrup, 2000).

That childhood has been socially constructed over time is a fundamental concept. An unintended consequence of this theory is that 'over time' tends to be mistaken for historical review only and one that emphasises the formative role of the past more so than the formative role played by 'the future'. Consequently, we neglect to consider an anticipatory preview of society's construction of children. We fail to consider imaginative reconstructions of childhood in the future, perhaps anticipating children's greater

participation in the society that constructs their experiences of childhood. Early childhood studies would do well to remember to include 'the future', and what it means to develop well in it and for it, in its theoretical underpinning.

In addition, by claiming that childhood is socially constructed, early childhood studies positions students as passive observers of the phenomenon. By including 'the future' as a feature of time and enabling students to anticipate possibilities for children's development, early childhood studies can position them as active participants in it (Ba, 2021; Diversi and Moreira, 2012). Only then might we be able to help students resolve the temporality dilemma in relation to their development and that of children, too, in terms of children's temporality: in other words, to what extent are they both *being* and *becoming* (Uprichard, 2008)?

By seeing 'the future', not sentimentally, nor as potential, nor as explained historically only, but as children's participation in an imaginative dialogue, early childhood studies can approach a social pedagogy capable of facing the intergenerational inequities of the Anthropocene.

Utopia as Method – theory meets practice

The subtitle of Levitas's *Utopia as Method* (2013) is 'The imaginary reconstitution of society'. What this requires of us 'is to imagine alternative ways of life that would be ecologically and socially sustainable and enable deeper and wider human happiness than is now possible' (Levitas, 2013, p. 198). The single module that we teach could not pretend to cope with such a scale. Instead, we adapt the method so that its process is the imaginative reconstruction of childhood. Imagination, even more so than reflection, is the resource drawn upon to make concrete proposals for social construction. There are three modes to Levitas's utopian method, as explained below.

The archaeological mode

Levitas (2013) adopts archaeology as a metaphor in her method since it 'undertakes excavations and reconstructions of both artefacts or cultures, based on a mixture of evidence, deduction and imagination, representing as whole something of which only shards and fragments remain' (p. 154). Given that political positions might 'contain implicit images of the good society and views of how people are and should be' (Levitas, 2013, p. 154), students must approach policy as archaeologists recovering political utopian intention buried within published policy and exposing them to scrutiny. This mode enables students to perceive the present political landscape and the direction it is taking.

The ontological mode

Utopia claims 'a way of being that is posited as better than our current experience' and a 'desire for a better way of being [that] usually implies greater happiness' (Levitas, 2013, pp. 177, 153). This mode invites students to range beyond empirical evidence and encourages them to imagine what human flourishing might mean, especially from the perspective of the social construction of childhood (see, for example, the Flourish Project [<https://www.flourishproject.net>]). To do so, students must imagine 'what kind of people particular societies develop and encourage ... what capabilities are valued, encouraged and genuinely enabled, or blocked and suppressed, by specific existing or potential social arrangements' (Levitas, 2013, p. 153).

The architectural mode

Now comes the sustainable design for life and living – a future landscape that includes features of both political currency and purpose in practice with personal and value-laden intention. Students must propose 'potential alternative scenarios for the future' (Levitas, 2013, p. 153), in which they play a part and take responsibility for the consequences of their conduct. Crucially, this is developed 'as part of a dialogue, neither intending nor constituting a forecast' (Levitas, 2013, p. 153) – a design that will see their own motivations kept alive in a practice landscape that may align, to greater or lesser degrees, with their own values and possibilities.

In addition to the three modes being structured along a chronology of present, past and future, the three modes of *Utopia as Method* are communicated with reference to the model of heart, hands and

head (Sellars and Imig, 2021). Specifically, the ontological mode draws on the feelings and desires of their hearts. In the archaeological mode, students are using their heads to 'wise up' and 'to be savvy' to the utopian intentions of government policy and utopian foundations of political ideology. And, finally, by proposing an architectural design for their personal and professional conduct within the construction of childhood in society, students focus on their hands and what they can imaginatively mould, create and contribute to children and childhood.

We begin teaching by using examples of utopian thinking that are easy to find and readily at hand. These include utopian visions of climate activism, corporate technological promotion, radical proposals for child care, urban architecture and rewilding (see, for example, ARUP, 2017; Climate Coalition, 2016; Impact Hub Birmingham, 2018; Microsoft, 2015; Wildlife Trusts, 2018). We want to show students that utopia, rather than being 'nowhere', is in fact everywhere. It not a niche area of study, but rather a personal, political power hiding in plain sight.

We rely on resources that are already familiar to students in order to support their understanding of the three different modes of *Utopia as Method*. For example, when teaching the archaeological mode, we compare photos of surviving standing features at the excavations in Pompeii with imaginative reconstructions of those same spaces and places that illustrate how the streets, buildings, theatres and town walls might have looked at the time that they were the everyday and familiar features of Pompeian life. Recently, we looked closely at an archaeologist's imaginative reconstruction of 'Ava', a young woman buried thousands of years ago in Scotland (Hoole et al., 2018). Using her fragmentary remains and scientific methods and tools, we can now come face to face with Ava. We hope students see that archaeology is about engaging imaginatively with places, spaces and faces across time. The future is embodied and emplaced in their present.

The intention is to negate any apprehension students may feel about imagination in academic contexts and the invitation to think imaginatively about early childhood studies and concepts such as 'the future'. Their familiarity with conventional academic demands means we are often asked, 'How do we reference what is in our imagination?', as though the absence of a tagged citation in their writing is an indication of academic worthlessness. This illustrates how students have absorbed throughout their academic journey a reliance on measurable outcome and facts as evidence of truth. *Utopia as Method* opens opportunity for 'interpretative spaces' (Cleary, 2019, p. 2), where a better world can be reimagined.

What we are really doing is encouraging our students to push beyond conventional critique, critical thinking and fault finding and to imagine the responsibility they can take to construct childhood for the better. Unlike Wright's (2010) 'real' or 'viable' utopias, in which analysis relies on existing and accepted scientific knowledge, *Utopia as Method* includes imagination and the 'education of desire' as legitimate processes of generating knowledge (see Levitas, 2013, pp. 113, 148). *Utopia as Method* and its incorporation of imagination means students can use its processes to rehearse how to rock the boat but anticipate the steps they need to take to prevent falling out of it. Ultimately, it is about students' conscious participation in society as individuals with specialist knowledge and special understanding of early childhood, and how they might operationalise that knowledge and understanding across their lifetime as we proceed through the Anthropocene.

Future adventures in early childhood studies

The article has so far discussed how we adapt *Utopia as Method* to one module on an early childhood studies course at a UK university. This course was recently endorsed by the Social Pedagogy Professional Association (SPPA), a centre of excellence for social pedagogy theory and practice in the UK. Endorsement is a public acknowledgement by the SPPA that this early childhood studies programme aligns with principles of social pedagogy. A task before us is to evaluate our existing provision, including practice placements, with regard to social pedagogy, so that we might prepare practical and practicable transformations to our teaching, to students' practice and to children's development – and the relation between all three. Below, we examine current explorations.

Utopia as Method illuminates students' own decision making around their everyday conduct, bringing into question their ability to extend their early childhood knowledge and understanding into the current dilemmas and debates of social life and the hard choices of their own lives. Based on our current understanding of social pedagogy, we suspect that such an approach to our students' development would not be satisfied with our students undertaking 'child observations' in early years settings. Rather,

it would ask of the student, 'What have you observed of your own development? How might your presence and expertise be put to use so that you as well as children continue to develop healthily in the Anthropocene?'

Similarly, we wonder whether a social pedagogy approach to school classrooms would be satisfied with debating, with other teachers, whether or not a child is fulfilling their academic potential. Rather, it might ask of the student teacher, 'What of your own potential? What is helping you or hindering you from fulfilling it?'

On the face of it, we are talking about early childhood studies as a pathway to a number of social professions. First, we would anticipate our graduates caring for babies, toddlers and young children alongside colleagues in child minding services, early years settings, independent and state-funded schools and family support centres. *Utopia as Method*, as we have adapted it, provides students and tutors with an opportunity to work together to foreground what matters to us, individually and more collectively, about childhood. Its three modes expose those visions and values that might otherwise remain hidden behind academic conventions, such as referenced writing, and professional expectations, such as recognisable reflective practice.

Positioning 'the future' as uncertain, promising the 'as-yet unseen', the 'as-yet untried', means we can approach child development as a common endeavour, a social project even at the scale of the module's class. The uncertainty of the future and of the Anthropocene means that we avoid presenting early childhood studies as an object, a canon of prescribed knowledge to be acquired uniformly. Instead, by considering the diversity of values and visions of the future of childhood, and the utopian thinking around improving the quality of our lives, we ensure that early childhood studies remains a subject.

What remains to be addressed is children's participation in this work. Their views and voices and values are not yet 'designed in' to the social dimension of social pedagogy and the imaginative reconstruction of childhood as a future-oriented activity through *Utopia as Method*. Concerns about the future orientation of early childhood theory and practice have already been raised within a social pedagogy context. For example, Moss and Cameron (2020) caution against orienting 'uncritically and unrealistically' towards the future since this would assume 'a future of more of the same, but [one that] prioritises a certain idea of what children should become at the expense of what is valuable and meaningful to children in the present' (Moss and Cameron, 2020, p. 221).

Children's participation, as it is familiarly understood in early childhood studies, refers to children's rights, including the right to healthy development (Peleg, 2017; United Nations, 1990). It also refers to theories of social construction that see children as active participants in their development (Aries, 1973; Qvortrup, 2000). Following the Covid-19 pandemic and the imposed lockdowns because of it, a newly formed childhood commission invited children to share their views and vision of the future: 'We will ask children ... How they feel about the future and the challenges facing the world' (Children's Commissioner for England, 2021, p. 6).

This is beginning. But how might students make responsible decisions in response to what children might say? Children's participation in early childhood studies should instigate dialogue. According to Lundy (2018), we are often too quick to 'smash and grab' at children's views and voices. Instead, following Mannion (2010), Lundy (2018) advises that by 'practising a "warts and all" participatory approach, with all the possibilities of failure, we provide a face-valid response that may or may not work; but, critically, this is in itself empowering because it is not accepting that things are impossible' (p. 340).

Children's right to development and participation must allow for the not-yet-tried, the as-yet-unseen – and the possibility of failure (Peleg, 2017). Participation in the Anthropocene must be characterised by intergenerational and mutual interdependence (Monteux and Monteux, 2020). By proposing *Utopia as Method*, Levitas (2013) urges us to move fast in order to anticipate and avert deeper dystopia: 'The economic and ecological crises mean that change is both essential and inevitable. It is the nature of that change that is in question' (p. xii).

To be more truly social as social pedagogues, tutors need to consider how to include children in a mutually interdependent making of the future. We can hardly highlight the intergenerational inequality of the Anthropocene yet reproduce it within our own teaching structures.

We must also engage with the political status of our students' qualification to work with children and to advocate for their voices. What might a social pedagogy approach to the quality and qualification of the early years workforce look like (DfE, 2012)? Currently, the ideal and legitimated member of this workforce is the 'graduate practitioner' (QAA, 2022), replacing previous ideals such as early years professional (see DfE, 2012). Our teaching must necessarily reflect the opportunities afforded our

students by the political landscape. But our students must also see themselves as producers of their own opportunities. The archaeological mode of *Utopia as Method* enables them to identify gaps or gateways between respective utopian visions. The architectural mode then empowers students to make practical and practicable plans for their own conduct as early childhood experts. This conduct is not restricted to the professional field of early years practice. Rather, it implies students' conduct within their social lives, which, by extension, includes their respective politics.

In this regard, *Utopia as Method* provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their political position, with respect to their professional status in early childhood education and care, their personal attachments to early childhood as a social construct and their private experiences of child care. Although politics may be threaded through the separate domains of the professional, the personal and the private, this does not mean that social pedagogy might just as easily be presented as political pedagogy, or that our students' social actions can be categorised as political only. But we must not pretend that the future of early childhood studies is detached from the political value placed upon the status of its workforce.

Sadly, we continue to struggle uphill to give life to our sector within the welfare state, let alone beyond it. For all the talk of the importance of children's first 1,000 days (House of Commons, 2019) and the hefty claims of neuroscience (Conkbayir, 2021), the early years remains a 'Cinderella service' (Howard, 2015). In light of this (rather than in spite of it), and in light of the holism at the heart of social construction theory, we see real value in encouraging students to see early childhood studies as providing them with routes beyond early education and care sectors.

As advocates for young children's participation in society (in other words, children's agentic construction of the society around them), opportunities to embed early childhood values and vision within other sectors – architecture, urban planning, retail management, faith groups, sport and leisure organisations, even politics – excite us. At times, we need to go so far as to provide our students with explicit permission to imagine such routes, let alone to explore them practically, in order to fight the over-familiarity of early childhood studies as being exclusively in service to the early years sector.

Finally, we need to remember that students' attempts to imagine childhood otherwise and to reconstruct it as better than present might bring them into conflict with the habitual routines, efficiencies and accepted conveniences of workplaces. We have not yet articulated a strategy to support students of early childhood studies manage potential conflict between social pedagogy and workplace politics beyond drawing on Standard 6 of the SPPA (2016), which is to 'understand and work with the tensions inherent in valuing individual autonomy and social interdependence'.

Utopia as Method (Levitas, 2013) offers a space where imagination is an essential resource to increase children's participation in child development theory and practice. Students' imagination may also enable us to broker a friendly dialogue with children in terms of what matters to them currently. Early childhood studies need to support students to embark upon the adventure of facing the future with very young children. 'The future' is not dystopian but an intergenerational adventure: 'The workforce must be supported to be researchers, adventurers and explorers so that young children can also be understood as researchers, adventurers and explorers from whom we have a great deal to learn' (Osgood et al., 2016, p. 6).

How might we disturb social interdependence so that we open up possibilities to challenge the political status of the early years workforce and the workplace resistance to new voices and views round practice? By imagining the future as collaboratively constructed – with children, with carers (paid and unpaid), with the public and the private sector, with policy makers and politicians – we can certainly begin to sketch out a more participatory social world. And by including a greater diversity of voices and vision, we might construct a more anticipatory social world, capable of facing facts about the future and producing checks and balances on human conduct in a more-than-human environment.

To what extent might social pedagogy enable early childhood studies accommodate the future alongside nature, nurture and culture as formative factors in child development theory and practice?

Is social pedagogy the future of early childhood studies?

Bronfenbrenner (1979) was quick to qualify what was meant by 'making human beings human'. It should not be mistaken for 'airy idealism' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. xiii). Reframing child development in relation to what the future might yet hold should be a serious business, practical, practicable and situated in opportunities available in the present moment.

The same year that Bronfenbrenner prefaced his book with its purpose of 'making human being', Rorty (1979) wrote of the process that helps us in 'becoming new beings': 'The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist ... in the 'poetic' activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines ... to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in *becoming new beings*' (p. 360, emphasis added).

In this article, we have described our pedagogic use of *Utopia as Method* to get a grip on the formative factors of nature, nurture, culture and, now, the future, in child development theory and practice. As pedagogues, we are stepping into the unknown, somewhat, alongside our students. We are facing the unknown in order to play our respective parts alongside children and future generations to aid human development in the Anthropocene.

Our intuition is that social pedagogy provides us with an ecology where theory meets practice so that we can face uncertainty creatively and can include children's participation equitably. It has a 'power of strangeness' (Rorty, 1979, p. 360) to take us out of our familiar subject and to reshape it and to renew it. To fulfil this power, we must all become new beings so that we can make human beings human. In the following paragraphs, we frame *Bildung* and *Haltung* as among the poetics of social pedagogy (Rorty, 1979). We discuss how these terms might enable imagination to sit alongside academic critique and reflective practice as formative factors in an ecology of human development and children's participation to be included in the ecology of early childhood studies.

Rowson (2019) argues that 'the notion that we become "more" human through various forms of maturation or development lies at the heart of *Bildung*' (p. 10). It is the desire for a 'transformative' education, rather than merely an expansion of a failing consumerist, neoliberal model, that provides an opportunity for development, as opposed to mere change (Rowson, 2019).

Our use of *Utopia as Method* (Levitas, 2013) as a framework for fusing academic regulatory requirements with disciplined imagination is consistent with Rowson's (2019) description of *Bildung*, since it is 'based on a commitment to a substantive account of human flourishing and the good life, including a sense of shared responsibility to ensure the conditions for the good life are widespread' (p. 6). Its three modes enable the articulation of this vision by providing students with a guided structure for plotting a growing realisation of one's place and purpose in bringing 'the good life' a little closer for children. *Utopia as Method*, adapted in this way, may help our students become new beings (Rorty, 1979).

Holding such hope is consistent with our sense that, rather than make a complaint about a child's apparently unfulfilled potential, a social pedagogue would sooner consider what potential actually lies in day-to-day circumstances. They might ask, 'What is within the power of this person to do about this situation?' As such, even future generations can be treated respectfully as equals when their everyday conditions are considered with regard to transformative encounters.

Adapting *Utopia as Method* to be the imaginative reconstruction of childhood means that we encourage students to consider insights into the lifeworld of another (Hatton, 2013), by writing in the first person, in the present tense, articulating what it is like to be in that space and place, and to be the face that others see as 'failing' or 'vulnerable' or 'homeless', and yet to imagine what flourishing might look like instead. By putting personal and professional values into reflexive action, students might tentatively theorise about their own practice and professionalism. *Haltung*, in this sense, is considered holistically, drawing on the definition of professionalism by Parsons (2016), as being ready to take social action.

But our module takes one significant risk. It assumes that our students care about the dissonance between child development theory and the dystopian direction of the Anthropocene. In that regard, we assume the presence of *Haltung* on their behalf. And, consequently, we hope that *Utopia as Method* offers *Bildung*, an opportunity for edification as much as education. Both assumptions require much more rigorous analysis in order for us to make any claims for the module's characteristic social pedagogy qualities.

Conclusion

This article's evaluation of our module, from the perspective of social pedagogy and early childhood studies, has highlighted our next steps. We need to increase and improve children's participation in our adventures with *Utopia as Method*. We need to tackle petty workplace politics as much as engage with the politics of childhood on a more macro scale. And we need to make contact with informal child care

providers and make inroads into the private sector so that students might find means of advocating for children's healthy development in these spaces and places too, and not only in formal education settings.

Is this news? Not really. What is different now, though, is that to foster social pedagogy within our course, we can no longer ignore inconvenient truths. Facing the future involves facing facts. And, rather than imagining next steps as momentous, they are really rather mundane. Our path into social pedagogy appears to be a demand on our ordinary abilities – to care for our subject and to share our voices, values and vision, to acknowledge our interconnectedness and interdependence, and to do what is already within our power to effect change. What matters is that, by choosing this path, we might avoid the inertia of academic critique and political powerlessness.

Social pedagogy within early childhood studies encourages us to realise fundamental respect for children as active participants in our subject – under-represented, talked-over, unheard – and for practitioners and professionals as political actors in the day-to-day doing of difficult work – underpaid, under-resourced, overlooked.

And what of ourselves and our students? *Utopia as Method* allows us to respect our own vision of utopian childhoods and for our own ability to make the policy landscape intelligible. The evaluation revealed blind spots and shortfalls of our own: the assumption that our module was an opportunity for *Bildung* and the assumption that students' engagement and learning reflected their *Haltung*; the need for further research to provide evidence to support such claims.

Our work continues, committing and recommitting again and again to the ongoing struggle to realise a society constructed around the development of very young and vulnerable children.

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Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

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