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ANT-Inspired Readings from an Informal Early Learning Program
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Author's Bio

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Abstract

This paper employs the Foucauldian notion of governmentality and actor-network theory's notion of translation to propose that and show how a neoliberal imaginary permeates the everyday lives of Ontario families with young children. The paper traces the unfolding of school readiness as a dispersed policy network in Canada since the 1990s. Drawing on observational data collected in one Ontario-based, parent-child program, it then presents and discusses a series of vignettes that show how ostensibly supportive actions between practitioners and parents can also enrol parents in actor-networks oriented toward the realisation of neoliberal goals. The analysis corroborates Iannacci's observation that neoliberal assemblages produce both possibilities and limitations for children, their parents and the educators who work with them.

Introduction

Daily life in the twenty-first century is deeply entangled in neoliberalism. Some scholars refer to a "neoliberal imaginary" (e.g. Urciuoli, 2010) by which they mean that neoliberal economic imperatives such as enterprise, competition, faith in market processes, and a

preoccupation with strategic planning, accountability and monitoring systems, are being mobilized in areas of life formerly considered well beyond the scope of economic policy making.

> [N]eoliberalism has become a free trade faith. As such, its tenets go beyond privatization and profit maximizing into a reimagining of one's very condition. The impact of neoliberalism, most strongly articulated in the corporate sector, has since the 1980s come to saturate all other sectors, including government, non-profit, health, and . . . education. (Urciuoli, 2010, p. 162)

These scholars also argue that as neoliberal economic policies gather momentum in people's working lives, they are shaping subjectivities. Writing of education policies, Stephen Ball (2003, p. 215) asserts that "this epidemic of reform . . . does not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are." In fact, people from all walks of life now align their aspirations and desires with economic principles; we are daily invited to (re)imagine ourselves as bundles of skills and "elements whose primary function is . . . making profit for oneself and/or one's organization" (Urciuoli, 2010, p. 162). This (re)imagining has taken place gradually and without the imposition of legislation, for as Richard Edwards (2008, p. 26) puts it, neoliberal governmentalities rely less on legislation than on people accepting "a regulation which is self-imposed through the internalizing of the regulating gaze."

My paper explores the mobilization of neoliberal subjectivities among parents of young children living in Ontario. It pays particular attention to the mobilization of neoliberal parenting subjectivities in the context of informal programs for parents and young children, but situates those programs within the larger social project of promoting children's readiness for school. A plethora of such programs sprang up in Ontario in the early 2000s as constituents of provincial and territorial initiatives such as Ontario's *Early Years* (see e.g. McCain & Mustard, 1999) and the *Best Start* programs that replaced them. Policies that invest in neighbourhood networks of support for parents rather than access to high-quality, affordable child care spaces have been roundly criticised in Canada (e.g. Friendly & Prentice, 2009), but the program curricula -- what actually happens during programs -- have attracted relatively little critical attention. Pamela McKenzie and I examined social interactions in program settings such as public libraries and community centres. We found that a great deal of education and social support was embedded in numerous, routine social interactions (McKenzie & Stooke, 2007; Stooke & McKenzie, 2009; 2010), but we also presented evidence that practitioner-parent interactions were sometimes sources of unintended exclusions, especially when a parent's purposes for attending a program were not well aligned with program goals (McKenzie & Stooke, 2012). Here I take a different tack. Where the earlier papers critically examined interactions to reveal barriers to participation, this one troubles the notion of participation and critically examines practices in which practitioners, parents and children are invited to participate.

The analysis draws on actor network theory (ANT), in particular the notion of *translation* (Callon, 1986). Informed by Hamilton's (2011) analysis of recent adult literacy education policies in the United Kingdom (UK), I conceptualize children's readiness for school as an evolving and dispersed policy network and like Hamilton have employed Callon's (1986) four *moments* of *translation*, *problematization, interessement, enrolment and mobilization,* to frame a discussion of its unfolding over time. Observational data collected for a small case study of practitioners' work in one informal parent-child program are employed to show how routine and ostensibly supportive interactions between practitioners and parents entangle them in "mundane, quotidian neoliberalisations" (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 85). To contextualize the analysis I present an overview of school readiness as a policy network and propose some ways in which informal programs for parents and young children are positioned within that network. Central to the analysis are ideas about the Foucauldian notion of *governmentality* and ways in which *governmentalities* participate in the formation of subjectivities.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT): An Overview

ANT is a socio-material research approach informed by the theoretical writing of Foucault (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Developed during the 1980s by researchers in science and technology studies, most notably Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, the approach is now employed in other areas of social research, including early childhood education (e.g. Heydon, 2013). There is no orthodox way to conduct an ANT analysis. As Hamilton (2011, p. 56) puts it, "[t]he world as proposed by ANT is a fluid one and a similar flexibility is claimed by the theorists who use it." I am a newcomer to ANT and rely primarily on descriptions found in two educational research texts by Tara Fenwick and her colleagues (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011) and on Mary Hamilton's (2011) article, *Unruly Practices* which elaborates Callon's (1986) four moments of translation.

In ANT, an actor-network is conceptualized as an "assemblage of materials brought together and linked through processes of translation" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 12). An actor-network includes both human and nonhuman actors, all of which are considered to be active in forwarding the goals of the network. A parent-child program for example, can be viewed as an actor-network that assembles people, educational policies, parenting discourses, classrooms, and a host of material resources such as puppets and puzzles, to perform a curriculum.

Actor-networks do not exist in isolation (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011). Neither are they fixed. Each actor-network temporarily assembles "multiple, overlapping worlds that may be lashed together as temporary stabilizations in the process" (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011, p. 95) such that any assemblage can simultaneously be an effect of one actor-

network and an actor in others. Individual parent-child programs can be viewed as actor-networks in their own right, but I also view them as actors in a large, dispersed actor-network oriented toward the mobilization of parent subjectivities for children's school readiness, a project that has been gathering momentum since the 1980s and which is, itself, entangled in a larger actor-network powered by the neoliberal economic policies introduced at the end of the 1970s. As the above example suggests, actor-networks can seduce and resist one another; they overlap, intersect, and sometimes even gobble one another up. The early childhood education community's concerns about the potential *schoolification* of school-based early learning programs recognizes this assimilative power of large and relatively stable actor-networks. It is not schooling per se that disturbs early childhood educators, but the extent to which K-12 schooling in Canada is enmeshed in a reform agenda aligned with the neoliberal economic imperatives listed in the introduction.

Governmentality and the Formation of Neoliberal Subjectivities

The term *governmentality* refers to self-conduct, especially the ways in which individuals such as parents and young children engage in "the practices of government" (Nicoll & Fejes, 2008, p. 13). Government is, of course, a widely used term whose meanings vary according to the context of use. For the purposes of this paper, I have adopted a definition proposed by Dean (1999) that well accommodates a discussion of neoliberal government.

> Government is any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes. (Dean, 1999, p. 11)

As does classical liberalism, neoliberalism celebrates individual freedoms. The challenge for authorities is to govern with minimal recourse to force or regulations. Neoliberalism responds to this challenge by creating an "enabling state" (Nicoll & Fejes, 2008, p. 13) in which government is exercised through "social norms and institutions and distinctive forms of knowledge rather than sovereign authority"(Jessop, 2007 cited in Nicoll & Fejes, 2008, p. 10). In an ideal enabling state people freely choose to govern themselves and align their desires and aspirations with those of the state. A growing number of critical social researchers (e.g. Ball, 2012; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Kaščák & Pupala, 2011; Olssen, 2008; Rose, 1999) argue that people's willingness to align desires and aspirations with neoliberal goals is less indicative of agency than a sign of neoliberal governmentalities at work. Governmentalities are social technologies that work "on the choices and self-steering properties of individuals, families, communities, [and] organizations" (Rose, 1999, p. xxiii). To use Foucault's words, they are "an

ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power" (Foucault, 1991, p. 20 cited in Edwards, 2008, p. 25).

A key understanding shared by liberalism and neoliberalism is that market processes are "efficient ways to organize human life" (DeVault, 2008, p 10). However, where classical liberalism eschews state intervention in economic life, neoliberalism intervenes in market processes indirectly "by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation" (Kaščák & Pupala, 2011, p.148). Neoliberal economic policies were first implemented in the United States and Britain more than thirty years ago.

> Exchange rates were floated and capital controls were abolished, giving money and capital the freedom to move across national boundaries. Far from being a necessary process . . . neoliberalism must still be understood as the deliberate policy of those in power. . . . It was public policy, not market pressures that led to the deregulation of capital markets and the removal of exchange controls in the late 1970s and early 1980s. (Olssen, 2008, p. 38)

Given neoliberalism's celebration of individual freedom and small government, its power to govern is breathtaking. Neoliberal economic policies severely limit the powers of even the wealthiest nations to set unique and locally-responsive social policy agendas (DeVault, 2008). In education, for example, standardized measures of achievement are routinely employed to compare education systems at international, national, and local levels and scores are often used by lobbyists and pundits to predict a region's economic prospects. These highly visible comparisons serve as powerful policy levers. Witness the ways in which Canada's poor showing on a report released by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2008 has been cited by politicians, child care advocates and numerous other members of ECEC's professional and research communities. Ten years ago the British sociologist of education, Stephen Ball, drew educators' attention to an "unstable, uneven but apparently unstoppable flood of closely inter-related reform ideas" (2003, p. 215) which were "permeating and reorienting education systems in diverse social and political locations which have very different histories" (2003, p. 215). In schooling, assessment and accountability requirements are now major sources of anxiety for teachers, children, and parents (Ball, 2003; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Griffith & André-Bechely, 2008; Parkinson & Stooke, 2012). Ball and Olmedo (2013) argue that a preoccupation with assessment and accountability is reorienting the goals of education, "producing new kinds of teaching subjects" (p. 85) and changing what it means to be an educated person.

Ideas about lifelong learning have also kept pace with neoliberal reforms. Formerly understood as a means of self- actualization, lifelong learning is now thought to be a necessity and the lifelong learner, envisioned by liberal humanists as an autonomous, self-actualized

individual, has been replaced by neoliberalism's "enterprising and competitive entrepreneur" (Kaščák & Pupala, 2011, p.148). Lifelong learners must commit to a lifetime of self-improvement, yet be cognizant of the fact that no credential, however prestigious and however expensive, can guarantee "sustainable employment" (DeVault, 2008, p. 12). In short, the mobilization of subjectivities for neoliberal ends is well underway in diverse educational spaces and it is slowly but surely shaping practices in spaces formerly thought to be of little interest to educational policy makers, including the informal spaces in which families with young children gather to play and socialize.

Mobilizing Parenting for School Readiness

It is well recognized that parent involvement in school-initiated activities contributes to children's achievements at school. It is not well recognized that parents' work is increasingly caught up in neoliberal educational reforms although a study by Griffith and André-Bechely (2008) found that parents were investing substantial amounts of time and resources helping their children to prepare for standardized tests. Griffith and André-Bechely argued that standardized tests are among the many institutional technologies that "are changing the relationship between professionals and nonprofessionals and directly affecting the lives of those people who fall within their institutional mandate" (p. 44). Griffith and André-Bechely's comment raises a thorny question for the current discussion. If parents of school-age children fall within an education mandate, to which institutional mandate does the parenting of young children belong? Canadian governments tend to equivocate on this issue, but they do agree that the parenting of young children is an issue that requires government attention. If schools are to prepare children to compete in the global economy, early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies, programs and services must ensure that children arrive at school well prepared to meet the school's expectations.

Conversations about school readiness predate neoliberal reforms. *Readiness* was first discussed by Pestalozzi in 1898 and it entered ECE professional discourse during the 1920s (Kagan & Rigby, 2003, p. 1). Those early meanings of readiness were strongly associated with maturational theories, most notably the theory of *reading readiness* (Morphett & Washburn, 1931) which held that readiness cannot be taught. For this reason, throughout much of the twentieth century parents of young children were discouraged from pursuing any form of academic teaching at home.

The maturationist perspective has lost ground to an understanding of readiness in which "development is stimulated by learning and is not a prerequisite for it" (Kagan & Rigby, 2003, p. 2). In Canada, readiness usually means readiness to succeed academically and socially in grade one. Children who are ready for school "come to school healthy, well-rested, and well-fed;

curious, eager to learn from new experiences, able to follow their teacher's instructions, and to work co-operatively with other children" (The Learning Partnership, 2008, p. 1). Full-day early learning kindergarten programs are widely available now, which means that kindergarten teachers and other early childhood educators are deeply entangled in the promotion of school readiness. Yet there remains an assumption that getting ready for school takes place largely at home, and this idea is reinforced by studies linking success at school to an "enriched home environment . . . where parents talk with their children, engage them in conversation, read to them, and engage in forms of discipline such as time-out that encourage self-discipline" (Rafoth, Buchenauer, Crissman, & Halko, n.d., p. 2). Parents who access texts such as The Learning Partnership's (2008) report are advised to use a plethora of online resources to inform themselves about the important roles they play in promoting early child development. They are encouraged to be involved in their children's schooling, and to advocate for early learning programs in their local schools. Less "involved" parents may be targeted more directly by parenting programs such as one Australian initiative that openly stated its intention to "smarten up the parents" (Millei & Lee, 2007, p. 208). The challenge, however, is to convince *all* parents of young children that it is in their interest and their children's interest to adopt parenting practices that promote future success at school. In an enabling state, parents must freely choose to take that responsibility, but a universally available and well-coordinated network of programs and services for families with young children affords opportunities to enrol parents in the school readiness project.

Parent-Child Programs and Parenting for School: A Case Study

I use the term *parent-child programs* to refer to a diverse array of neighbourhood-based programs that aim to create learning opportunities for young children along with social support and parenting education for their parents and caregivers. The programs are positioned at intersections and overlaps among institutions such as education, healthcare and social welfare. Program leaders design physical environments and select resources to foster curiosity, support learning and facilitate socializing among children and adult participants. They rarely engage in explicit instruction although they may encourage participating families to interact with program resources in school-like ways. Some programs schedule group activities such as story circles for children and discussion groups for adults, but most programs embed most information, education and support within intentionally informal and supportive interactions.

Parent-child programs existed prior to the 1990s, but there were fewer of them then and they were only loosely connected to one another. For example, a program for new parents might be sponsored by a health authority and located in a public library. In the late 1990s, however, powerful advocacy efforts successfully linked the establishment of neighbourhood-based resources for families[i] to children's well-being and to a society's future economic prosperity. In Ontario, McCain and Mustard's (1999) *Early Years S*tudy identified "child development and

parenting centres in communities" (p. 20) as a top policy priority. Subsequently, child development and parenting centres were centrepieces of the Conservative government's *Early Years* initiatives and those centres were later integrated into the Liberal government's *Best Start* initiatives. Recently, the Ontario government's most visible initiative for young children has been school-based, full-day, early learning kindergarten programs, but in keeping with an agenda laid out by Charles Pascal (2009) in his report to the premier, the government is implementing strategies to coordinate and integrate neighbourhood-based programs and services for families with young children.

Since parent-child programs do not provide preschool education programs or child care services, it is worth asking what benefits they offer to families. Some advocates cite large-scale program evaluations to argue that the benefits of living in a resource-rich neighbourhood extend to all children, not only the children who participate directly in programs (Evangelou, Brooks, & Smith, 2010, p. 606). Others cite evidence from large-scale population-based studies to argue that some detrimental effects of living in a resource-poor neighbourhood during early childhood can persist into adolescence, even if the family has moved to a richer one (Lloyd, Li, & Hertzman, 2010). Individual program leaders are less confident about the benefits of their programs and they sometimes struggle to answer the question: What difference does your program make? As one reviewer of the first draft of this paper pointed out, there is a dearth of evidence that links specific benefits to individual programs. Yet practitioners employed in programs seem to be aware that the task of supporting young children's education and development is distributed among a diverse array of programs and services. The practitioners who participated in my study described their program as an entry point to a broader network of supports and noted that they worked hard to link parents to that support network. The study data corroborate their comments; however, they also show how connecting parents to a network of supports creates opportunities to perform parenting subjectivities associated with neoliberal educational reforms long before children take their first tentative steps onto the school yard.

The Program

The program I observed was located in a retail space, one of several vacant spaces in a suburban shopping mall. In addition to general goals such as provision of social support for families and creation of learning opportunities for young children, the program aimed to promote awareness of literacy learning opportunities in the everyday routines of family life. In keeping with the funder's approach to community development, the program leaders were also expected to partner with other local organizations and to promote integration of services.

Furniture and materials for the program were owned by the sponsor organization. These included puzzles, games and other materials purchased during the previous year for a literacy

program and they tended to reflect the alphabet focus of the earlier program. The program was staffed by two leaders and coordinated by a senior member of the sponsor organization. Although neither of the program leaders was able to attend every session, one of them was usually on site.[ii] An alternate leader and two settlement workers attended regularly and also participated in the study.

The intended audience for the program was residents of the neighbourhood whose children would attend junior or senior kindergarten that fall. The actual audience was made up of local families and small groups of children accompanied by home child care providers who drove to the program from other neighbourhoods. Several caregivers regularly brought up to seven children to the program and caregivers and parents occasionally brought children whose ages ranged from infancy to eight years. No registration was required for the program. Parents and caregivers signed a register and indicated how many children they were accompanying, but they were expected to be responsible for the children they accompanied. Parents were invited to give consent to participate in the study and to allow program leaders to use photographs of their children in documentation panels, but no other paperwork was completed by families or leaders and the leaders did not conduct any formal assessments of children's development or behaviours.

The program was in-session at least two full days per week throughout June, July and August. I attended 12 half-day sessions. As a participant observer I composed observational field notes, conducted informal interviews with practitioners and parents at the program, took photographs, and collected samples of print-based texts created in and for the program. These included two texts that I discuss later in the paper: a menu planner and a brochure that listed locally available programs. Following Hamilton (2011) I created a series of narrative vignettes derived from field notes which feature literacy events embedded in interactions between practitioners and parents. The vignettes and surrounding commentaries are intended to provoke a "conversation between theory and data" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 56). During the following six months I facilitated a follow-up focus group and conducted individual interviews with parents, leaders, the program coordinator, and one settlement worker.

My field notes contain numerous descriptions of literacy events. As noted earlier, the program goals included the promotion of authentic family literacy practices, that is, practices arising out of genuine purposes such as seeking to learn the show time for a movie, using a map to plan a journey, sharing a storybook, and posting an advertisement online. All literacy practices are embedded in *events* (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), a term first used by Heath (1983) to denote "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (p. 93). The notion of a literacy event is now much broader and my notes contain references to drawing, speaking and listening, but in keeping with the program's goals and in light of the near absence of digital resources being used during sessions, I

stayed close to Heath's early, print-based definition of a literacy event. [iii]

It came as no surprise that the observational data contained numerous descriptions of literacy events. A majority of the games and material resources available to the children encouraged them to play with letters and sounds and they appeared to welcome the opportunities. Neither was it surprising that leaders' attempts to introduce everyday life literacy activities into the program were not received with similar enthusiasm by the adults. The form and tempo of parent-child programs varies little across programs and the activities may have felt out-of-place and inauthentic. Indeed, the leaders themselves voiced doubts about how this new component of the program could be coordinated with existing routines. However, the adults' lack of engagement in the activities is less relevant to the current discussion than the social practices that everyday life literacy events, both planned and spontaneous, appeared to be promoting. These included planning healthy meals using *Canada's Food Guide*, budgeting for groceries, strategically planning family activities to include participation in a variety of educational programs, and accessing parent support groups and specialized services such as speech-language assessments. Such events can be examined as moments in which parents are invited to perform parenting subjectivities aligned with a neoliberal imaginary and in the next section I discuss several of them as moments of translation in which parenting subjectivities are being mobilized to promote children's school readiness. The events selected do not constitute a representative sample of literacy events observed during site visits, but they bring into view how easily an intentionally supportive interaction can become entangled in neoliberal governmentalities. They are "no more than the steady drone of the mundane and the normal" (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 85) but it was their very ordinariness that compelled me to pay attention. By refusing to ignore them, I hope to demonstrate that what passes for normal may be worthy of close examination.

School Readiness: Four Moments of Translation

Following Hamilton (2011), I have organized the discussion using Callon's (1986) four moments of translation: problematization, interessment, enrolment, and mobilization. Hamilton illustrates Callon's four moments in reference to the UK government's *Skills for Life* policies in adult literacy education. Adult literacy education policies in the UK might seem far removed from early childhood education and care policies, but I believe they have much in common. Each aims to shape a "diffuse and informal area of educational practice" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 57) whose employees are "positioned within complex and competing political agendas including those addressing inequalities, stigma and racism, social inclusion and economic development" (p. 58). Adult literacy programs and early childhood education both facilitate learners' access to formal educational experiences yet live in tension with formal education systems. Finally and most importantly, both adult literacy and early childhood education are entangled in discourses surrounding lifelong learning and twenty-first century skills. Consequently, they are more

vulnerable to neoliberal reform technologies than their positioning relative to public schooling would suggest.

Translation refers to processes "whereby the messy complexities of everyday life are ordered and simplified for the purposes of the project at hand" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 59) and it is central to ANT analyses. Translation often occurs through processes of classification which filter out some experiences, highlight others, and smooth out differences. In a medical consultation a patient may describe experiences in a narrative form, while the doctor assembles certain experiences as symptoms and others as risk factors. At a bank, people's interactions are translated into credit ratings, risk tolerances, and so on. While much translation of experience in contemporary life is mediated by online and printed forms, translation also happens in subtle and routine labeling practices. A young child's expressions of anger can be labelled as tantrums. A mother's decision to sit on a chair during circle time rather than take a spot on the floor with her child may label her as an uninvolved mother. However, translation is not inherently good or bad. As the following vignette demonstrates, it all depends on the orientation of the actor-network.

Welcome to Canada: A Translation Story

The playroom was almost empty when Ms. Da and Bo[iv] cycled up to the door. It was not a great first meeting. We had no idea what language Ms. Da spoke and much of the afternoon was spent trying to figure that out. Finally we borrowed an atlas from the local library and opened it at a world map. I pointed to Ontario and said, "We are here." Then I pointed to China and ventured a guess. I said, "Are you from here?" Ms. Da smiled. She seemed to know what we were asking. She pointed to her home city in China and spoke its name. She pointed again and said, "Daughter – twenty-one." We smiled and shook hands. We were both exhausted.

I was surprised that Ms. Da came back – but that's another story. The second time I saw her she was deep in conversation with a vivacious, Spanish-speaking woman. It was embarrassing to see how relaxed the two of them seemed to be when I thought about my own stressful first encounter, but Ms. Da caught my eye and smiled and then she reached out and shook my hand warmly. How had these two women made friends so easily when the rest of us had struggled to learn just two facts? The short answer is that they had by-passed the need to use words. Instead they were using gestures and taking turns drawing on a scrap of paper -- the back of the program brochure (see Figure 1).
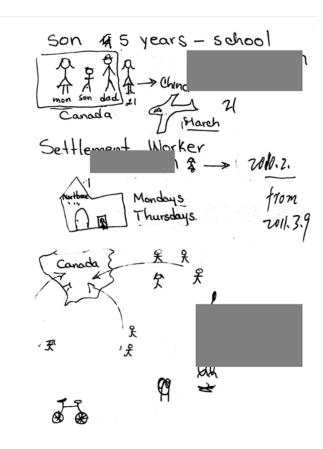
Figure 1 (Names are masked to protect privacy.)

Welcome to Canada: An Co-Constructed, Authentic Literacy Event

Later I spoke to the other woman and learned that she was a settlement worker whose role was to help newcomers to Canada access services. In a follow-up interview, the settlement worker described how she and Ms. Da had co-constructed the story of Ms. Da's coming to Canada using the scrap of paper mentioned above. This rich, multimodal conversation had served several purposes for the settlement worker. First, it provided a way to welcome Ms. Da. Second, it allowed the settlement worker to administer an informal but standardized triage protocol. In order to figure out Ms. Da's eligibility for English language classes and other services, she needed to know her marital status, her immigration status, and her legal relationship to Bo. Was she his mother? Or was she his grandmother? She might be eligible for free English classes, but not if her husband was travelling on a student visa. Third, the conversation allowed the settlement worker to share information about services for families with young children. By a process of elimination, she discovered the name of Bo's school and was able to tell Ms. Da the days that she would personally be on-site at the school.

Callon's four moments of translation provide a framework for tracing the mobilization of parenting subjectivities for the school readiness project. Moments of translation are not synonymous with developmental stages. Rather Hamilton explains that "moment implies both a freezing of chronological time sequence to hold up an event to close scrutiny and also 'moment' in the sense of a fulcrum of forces around which events turn" (2011, p. 60). An important aspect of the framework is that translation is not considered complete until mobilization has been achieved.

Problematization

Problematization refers to processes through which a vision, problem, goal or agenda is identified as a problem-to-be-solved. For example, although ideas about school readiness have been part of educational discourse in Canada and the United States since the 1920s, school readiness was not represented as a problem to be solved through policy making until the end of the 1980s when it became part of America's National Education Goals.

> [S]chool readiness moved more visibly onto the national agenda in 1989 when
> President Bush and the nation's governors announced six national education goals,
> the first being: *By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to*
> *learn.. . .* Giving rise to much activity, the goals also served as the foundation for
> President Clinton's and Secretary of Education Riley's Goals 2000 legislation.
> (Kagan & Rigby, 2003, p. 2)

Problematization is an act of imagination, but it may require work to sustain interest in the problem. To this end, advocates for parenting programs such as McCain and Mustard (1999) linked "what good mothering has done for centuries" (p. 6) to Canada's future economic prosperity at a time when the main topic in ECEC literature was the need for a national child care system (Pence & Benner, 2000). In the face of such a compelling problem, advocates for parenting programs needed a good story and McCain and Mustard provided that story. Armed with numerous findings from neuroscience and public health studies – most of them originating outside of Canada –McCain and Mustard worked with a team of researchers – many of them in fields other than education -- to assemble a set of recommendations that lashed together modern public health success stories, communitarian philosophy, neoliberal public sector reforms, the private sector and a "patchwork of disjunctive programs" (Friendly & Prentice, 2009, p. 9). But the central problem remained. How might governments make the "magic elixir of *good parenting* available to all?" (Stooke, 2003, p. 93).

Interessement

McCain and Mustard successfully problematized the idea that parents needed more support and guidance if they were going to participate in the school readiness project, but that alone could not guarantee mobilization. Interessement and enrolment must also take place. Interessement is the term given to socio-material processes that stabilize an actor-network. As already stated, actor-networks cannot be fixed, but successful networks achieve a measure of stability as long as the identities of the actors in a network can be stabilized. Interessement requires persistence and Hamilton (201, p. 61) notes that "history is littered with failed policy initiatives that for a variety of reasons were not able to create or stabilize a strong enough network."

While the Ontario *Early Years* cannot be described as a failed policy initiative, it was never stabilized. Ten years after McCain and Mustard (1999) released their *Early Years Study*, Charles Pascal (2009) reiterated their main complaint that programs and services for families with young children were no more than an uncoordinated patchwork. In his report, *With Our Best Future in Mind*, Pascal introduced Ontarians to full-day early learning kindergarten programs for four- and five-year-olds, but he also foreshadowed the current reorganization of informal parent-child programs. Through a series of moves sometimes called "system reengineering" the Ontario government is assembling actors from the existing "patchwork" with new actors, most notably schools themselves. The goal is integration of education and care services for children from birth to four years "under a single municipal system manager" (Pascal, 2009, p. 5).

The centres would provide:

- part-time and full-day/full-year early learning/ care options for children up to 4 years of age;
    prenatal and postnatal information and supports;
- parenting and family support programming, including home visiting, family literacy, and playgroups;
- nutrition and nutrition counselling;
- early identification and intervention resources;
- links to special needs treatment and community resources, including libraries, recreation and community centres, health care, family counselling, housing, language services, and employment/training services. (Pascal, 2009, p. 5)

In retrospect, it seems that the *Early Years* initiatives formed an unstable network from the very beginning. The actor-network was the best that could be assembled by one provincial government given the federal government's ideological objections to a national child care

system. School readiness, on the other hand, has proven to be more resilient. Information posted to the website of McMaster University's Offord Centre for Child Studies ominously declares that "[a]ll children are born ready to learn, BUT not all children arrive at school ready to learn" (n.p.). Similarly, a program blurb featured in Figure 4 asks readers: Are we doing enough to improve learning outcomes? As the authors of an article published by The Learning Partnership (2008) put it: School readiness is "a marker that matters" (p. 1) and ECEC programs constitute "an issue with stubborn sticking power" (p. 14).

Enrolment

Enrolment "involves assembling elements and devices, forms of social interactions which will enable the actors to perform the identities required of them within the network" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 61). By locating the new Child and Family Centres in school buildings, the government is assembling elements of the school readiness actor-network to facilitate their enrolment, that is, assembling them in a way that invites informal parent-child programs to perform identities required of school programs. At a more concrete level, it is easy to conclude that coordinating early learning program curricula with full-day early learning kindergarten curricula will be easier once the majority of the actors are located onsite.

The translation story in which a settlement worker welcomed Ms. Da to the program is also a story of enrolment since it shows that Ms. Da was invited to perform identities that would enrol her in a network oriented toward the integration of newcomers into Canadian society. More important for the current discussion, however, are the ways in which interactions between Ms. Da and the settlement worker strengthened the link between Ms. Da and her son's school by informing Ms. Da that she would be at Bo's school on certain days and explicitly inviting Ms. Da to seek her out.

The program I observed facilitated the enrolment of parenting subjectivities for school readiness in obvious and subtle ways. It assembled print literacy games and other learning resources, scheduled a story circle, and involved parents in bookmaking projects. It facilitated parents' access to a host of other programs and services, thereby inviting parents to perform certain parenting identities on a regular basis. It is worth noting, however, that almost all the parents I observed at the program already appeared to be parenting *for* school. Ms. Da, in particular, needed no encouragement. Her regular attendance under stressful circumstances and school-like use of materials suggested that she had been parenting *for* school prior to her arrival in Canada. Ms. Da had worked as a primary teacher in China and used program toys and games to further Bo's academic learning.

Ms. Da Performs First Teacher

As residents of the neighbourhood and newcomers to Canada, Ms. Da and Bo fit the program's target audience. Yet Bo seemed to be in no danger of school failure and Ms. Da's parenting practices were well aligned with the expectations of school. Ms. Da and Bo were ideal program participants and star performers.

Ms. Da and Bo obviously enjoyed being in the program space. Bo would run to the snack table on the first signal. He appeared to like sitting with the other children even though he rarely spoke to anyone except his mother. I have photographs taken during almost every observation session that show Ms. Da and Bo working and playing with the alphabet materials, usually in school-like ways.

Bo was not always interested in playing with the literacy materials. He enjoyed the toy cars and the parking garage and he loved to pull a little dog on a string around the playroom. But Ms. Da was persistent in her efforts to engage Bo in learning to read English words and in playing with the many alphabet puzzles and games available. She used these resources to support her own English language learning too.

One day Ms. Da and I gave one another a reading lesson while Bo played independently. I had brought a number of dual-language picture books to show Ms. Da and she used her finger as a pointer to match the Mandarin characters with their English equivalents. Later I learned that she had visited the public library to borrow more dual language books, but of the books I had brought, it was the one that contained a story about starting school that she selected to take home.

Figure 2: Ms. Da Learns and Teaches the Alphabet

While no participating parent appeared to be as intensely involved with the literacy materials as Ms. Da, most adult participants spent some time engaged in playful and directive interactions with their children. That kind of involvement elicited many positive comments in post session conversations. Ms. Da was praised for her courage and commitment to participation; another mother was praised for the way in which she emulated a leader's interactional style. One father was especially well liked because he appeared to be so relaxed with his children. He always talked quietly and respectfully to them and allowed them to initiate their own games. The leaders agreed that this father would be an asset to any parent support group because of his accepting and gentle disposition.

As I grew familiar with the program routines, I speculated that enrolling parents in an actor-network oriented toward school readiness was a goal that leaders took seriously, but they generally addressed the goal by facilitating access to other (sometimes formal) programs and services, including but not only clinical services. In spite of the wealth of learning resources they assembled, it seemed that the practitioners felt their program existed to connect families to a network of supports rather than to explicitly teach academic skills. This tacit agreement to refrain from direct teaching was noticed by at least one practitioner who told me the goal of school readiness might be better addressed by more leader-led activities and that the presence of parents made it more difficult for leaders to initiate such activities.

Leaders did initiate literacy activities with the children and their efforts met with enthusiasm. Literacy activities aimed to involve adults were less successful, but rather than dwell on reasons for the lack of enthusiasm, the following vignettes examine events and the conversations surrounding them as invitations to perform parenting subjectivities aligned with the goals of neoliberalism.

Everyday Literacy Practices: Two Enrolment Stories
Story #1: The Menu Planner

It's lunchtime. The practitioners are engaged in a discussion about the general lack of enthusiasm parents expressed toward an activity presented that morning. They had distributed a laminated menu planner based on Canada's Food Guide (Figure 3) and encouraged adults to take a planner home to prepare menus, grocery lists and budgets. Several parents had said they would be unlikely to use the planner for those purposes and when I commented on the lack of interest, the topic of conversation turned to the characteristics of an appropriately involved parent. There was a consensus around the idea that an appropriately involved parent is one who plans and structures family time to allow for regular participation in programs, someone who looks ahead to the expectations of school, and someone who

appreciates the value of program resources and actively engages in program activities with their child(ren) rather than sitting on the sidelines.

Later I reflect on my feelings about the conversation. I thought of myself as an involved parent back in the early 1990s, but I wouldn't have used the planner and still feel alienated by its direct "do this" tone and images of supermarket-style loaves of white bread. But even if the food images had been reflective of the cultural diversity of Ontario families, I wouldn't have wanted to use a planner for meal planning. I concluded that it would take more self-regulation than I mobilized as a parent.

Figure 3: Menu Planning and Budgeting as Literacy Practices

Budgeting as Literacy Practices
Story #2 Scheduling Participation

A practitioner and parent are seated at one of the child-size tables. They are perusing a brochure that lists and describes an array of local programs for families. As the two women look it over, the practitioner takes a sheet of paper and draws up a weekly schedule of programs, explaining to the mother that at least one program can be found locally on any weekday morning or afternoon. Later I look at the brochure. The first thing I notice is how similar the program blurbs are to one another. Several have the same wording, suggesting that those blurbs may have been composed by one person. Clearly the programs are not in competition with one another. They share

a purpose. But one blurb stands out from the rest. It relates school failure statistics and asks parents to consider if they are "doing enough to help children succeed." It shocks me to note that parents of preschoolers are being invited to consider the consequences of their parenting for Ontario's Grade 10 literacy test which is at least ten years in the future.

Where the planned everyday life literacy activities enjoyed only limited take up, informal and authentic literacy practices appeared to be more effective in achieving their purposes. I was struck by the number of events that featured the use of planners, calendars and schedules. The settlement worker, for example, always appeared to have a program brochure in her hand. She told me that newcomers can feel very isolated. She wanted people to know that they could be out and about in the neighbourhood every day of the week. She said that the days of the week are among the first English words that newcomers learn and she was using the brochure to reassure people that they did not need to feel isolated because any day of the week they could find a program that would welcome them. Yet there was little variety in the programs and they undoubtedly privileged monolingual approaches to literacy. An invitation to participate was therefore also an invitation to be assimilated in an English speaking community. Here was a quintessential illustration of Iannacci's observation that neoliberal assemblages create both possibilities and limitations.

Figure 4: A Resource-Rich Neighbourhood Provides Access to Programs

Neoliberal reform technologies, most notably marketization, performativity, and accountability regimes, are designed to enrol subjectivities in the neoliberal practices described in the introduction. Informal parent-child programs have escaped the most draconian aspects of the education reform package, but being accountable for parent participation when participation is voluntary creates stress and anxiety for practitioners and can shape practices in ways that maximize participation. The practitioners who participated in my study tried to attract "hard-to-reach" families to programs. They felt obliged to "reach out" to them even when the program was oversubscribed, yet strategized to limit the "over-participation" of other families. Moreover, reporting attendance statistics, referrals and partnership activities entered their work into a "monitoring system" (Ball, 2003, p. 220), an institutional technology that works on employees' subjectivities by motivating them to "recognize and take responsibility for the relationship between the security of their employment and their contribution to the competitiveness of the goods and services they produce" (Willmott 1993, p. 522 cited in Ball, 2003, p. 220). It is not surprising, then, that program leaders seemed preoccupied with enrolling parents.

Mobilization

Callon's final moment of translation is mobilization. Mobilization is never complete, but an actor-network achieves a measure of stability when the actors are to some extent regarded as self-evident (Hamilton, 2011). School readiness has been mobilized successfully among some groups of parents, but the fact that program leaders were so concerned to enrol parents they considered to be hard-to-reach suggests that not all parents participate in school readiness discourse. In any case, the transitory nature of parenting young children ensures that work will be necessary to sustain the network and in countries such as Canada that actively support immigration, the ongoing immigration of families from across the world ensures a diversity of attitudes toward parent involvement in education. From a government's standpoint, one way to ameliorate these destabilizing effects is to increase government involvement in the school readiness project. Efforts to integrate services for families, decisions to locate services for young children and their families in schools, and to create administrative structures under an education auspice are enacting a new actor-network in which parenting subjectivities can be more easily shaped and one in which diverse parenting practices are less threatening to the stability of the network.

Conclusion

For more than thirty years, neoliberal reforms have being gathering momentum in public sector workplaces. One result has been a corporatization of institutions such as education. Where some social researchers argue that neoliberal reform technologies are producing new types of

worker subjectivities (Ball, 2003), I have claimed that a neoliberal imaginary increasingly permeates the everyday lives of families with young children. The preparation of children for school has been a policy goal in Canada since the 1990s, but the ongoing intensification of accountability practices in primary education is changing the nature and quantity of school readiness work required of families. Nowadays, even parents of very young children are invited in myriad ways to engage in parenting practices positively associated with children's future school success.

Informal programs for young children and their parents are also entangled in the school readiness project. Formerly construed as places for families to *be*, they too are being asked to think about who children will *become*. For example, a participant in an earlier study of programs for very young children (McKechnie, McKenzie & Stooke, 2005) observed with pride that the public library functioned as a living room for local families. By contrast, the practitioners who participated in my recent study often commented that the program was "not just another playgroup."

I employed Callon's (1986) four moments of translation to trace the unfolding of the school readiness project in Ontario as an actor-network and to show how several planned and spontaneous literacy events acted as nodes on that network. Taken together, the vignettes presented in the paper constitute an unanticipated theme in the study data. By documenting literacy events, I had set out to bring visibility to educational work, with a view to refuting the idea that the informal parent-child programs are not educationally relevant. I did not anticipate that some of that educational work would be oriented toward the promotion of neoliberal governmentalities, but in bringing visibility to everyday life literacy practices, I glimpsed some "backroom workings of social technologies in the making" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 56) and that troubled me. My intention is not to dismiss the obvious pleasure and enjoyment afforded by parent-child programs, or to cast doubt on the professionalism of program leaders. Indeed, my interest in parent-child programs has deep roots in personal experiences as a parent and as a program leader. But as Iannacci makes clear, "[N]eoliberal arrangements, linkages and assemblages can simultaneously create limitations and possibilities" (2012, n.p.). In doing our professional best, any of us can be enrolled into social projects not of our own making.

It goes without saying that the enrolment of parents in an actor-network oriented toward school readiness has profound implications for family life, for children's lives, and for the ways in which childhood is understood and practised. My greatest concern is that the idea that parents need to devote a child's first four years to the school readiness project is in danger of being "black-boxed" – an ANT term that means "taken-for-granted". The problem posed by this analysis is how practitioners should respond, both as individuals and as a community. Writing to teachers, Ball and Olmedo (2013) advise practitioners not to equate professionalism with the well-being of one's organization or profession. They urge teachers to "think in terms of what

they do not want to be, and do not want to become" (p. 86) and they contend that "[b]y acting 'irresponsibly', [educators] take 'responsibility' for the care of their selves and in doing so make clear that social reality is not as inevitable as it may seem" (p. 85). Yet educators employed in informal ECEC programs may feel that their participation in actor-networks such as those described in this paper is inevitable. A trend away from providing funding to organizations in favour of short-term funding for projects means that any organization that does not enrol in the school readiness project could find it difficult to secure funding. My closing words, then, are to the ECEC community as a whole. Courageous individuals will always speak out, but it would be unwise and unfair to depend on individuals. The ECEC community has worked long and hard to direct government attention and resources to the education and care of young children, but it must keep in mind that an enabling state is always "[a]ctively seeking subjects" (Edwards, 2008, p. 21). In seeking increased access to and coordination of programs and services for families, the ECEC community must continue to advocate for programs and services that honour children's right to live in the present.

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Endnotes

[i] See e.g. *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000)
[ii] The leaders' absences were the result of a medical emergency and a family bereavement.
[iii] I employed Heath's definition of a literacy event, but included drawing as well as writing. I did not intentionally exclude digital texts, but there were no computers or wireless internet available in the program space and leaders did not use mobile devices in their interactions with participants.
[iv] All names are pseudonyms.

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