

**Title: Exercising punishment or guiding students: what's the difference?  
A critique of recent theories of classroom discipline in early childhood**

**Author: Dr. Zsuzsa Millei – School of Education, University of Newcastle**

Bio: Zsuzsa's work is located in an interdisciplinary field of the sociology and politics of education and focuses on classroom discipline, sociology of childhood, early years policy and early childhood education. She currently lectures in sociology of education, child development, and children's services, however earlier she taught introductory sociology courses, social policy and critical early childhood courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Her research brings theoretical understandings into policy making, pedagogy and classroom practices in order to serve social justice agendas related to children and youth. Zsuzsa's research expertise and publications can be divided into three intertwined areas: theories of classroom discipline, early years policy, and constitutions of the child in early childhood education and care. She is a member of the Centre for Professional Learning in Education, at the University of Newcastle.

**Peer-reviewed articles and conference papers**

- Z. Millei (in press) *Problematizing the concepts of 'citizenship' and 'participation' in early years discourses: are they so empowering?* International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (IJEIEC)
- Z.Millei (under review) *Guiding or regulating children: The politics of discipline in early childhood* The International Journal of Educational Policy, Research, and Practice: Reconceptualizing Childhood Series
- Z.Millei and R. Imre (under review) *The problem with using the concept of 'citizenship' in early years policy* Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood
- Z. Millei and L. Lee (2007) *'Smarten up the parents': whose agendas are we serving? Governing parents and children through the Smart Population Foundation Initiative in Australia* Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood 8(3)
- Z. Millei (2007) *Controlling or guiding students – what's the difference? A critique of approaches to classroom discipline* NZARE and AARE Conference 2007, [http://www.aare.edu.au/07pap/code07.htm#M - mil07410.pdf](http://www.aare.edu.au/07pap/code07.htm#M-mil07410.pdf)
- Z. Millei (2005) *The Discourse of Control: disruption and Foucault in the early childhood classroom* Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood 6(1)
- Taylor, A., Millei, Z., Partridge, L. and Rodriguez, L (2003) *Restricted Entry: Issues & challenges of negotiating access to the field.* NZARE and AARE Conference 2003, Proceedings - <http://www.aare.edu.au/03pap/alpha.htm#> – TAY03564
- Taylor, A., Millei, Z., Partridge, L. and Rodriguez, L (2004) *The getting of access: the trials and tribulations of the novice researcher* Issues In Educational Research 14(1) p.85-101.

**Other published conference paper, article and book review**

- Z. Millei (2008) Book review: Kervin, L., Vialle, W., Herrington, J. & Okely, T. (2006). *Research for educators*. South Melbourne, Vic: Thomson Social Sciences Press. Issues In Educational Research 18(1)
- Z. Millei (2008) *The discourse of ALP's national agenda on early childhood – unsettling notions of citizenship and nationhood*  
<http://www.socialjusticeinearlychildhood.org/campaigns/>  
SJIEC Sydney, 12<sup>th</sup> of April, 2008
- Z. Millei (2004) *Do we really know 'what the child is'? Why is it so important for an early childhood professional to ask this question?*  
Early Childhood Teachers Association (ECTA) Magazine, November 2004
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**Unpublished conference papers (past five years)**

- (invited speaker) 'You say you want a revolution session': *The discourse of ALP's national agenda on early childhood – unsettling notions of citizenship and nationhood*  
Social Justice in Early Childhood (SJIEC) 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference "Throwing the baby out with the bathwater", Sydney, 12<sup>th</sup> of April, 2008
- *Theorizing Citizenship and Participation*  
(CIEC) Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood: Honoring the Child, Honoring Equity 7, 2007 – Transforming Connections – Local and global possibilities – University of Melbourne, 15-17 November 2007
- *The Politics of Participation: Problematizing the Paradigm*  
WAIER (Western Australian Institute of Educational Research) Forum in Perth, 11th of August, 2007.
- *Questioning the notion of participation: Do we always empower children when we create more equal relationships with them?*  
Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood: Honoring the Child, Honoring Equity 6, 2006 - Cultures, Challenges & Change in Troubling Times Conference – University of Melbourne, 16-18 November 2006
- 1. *Educating or regulating parents? What a parent education website 'teaches' us*  
2. *"He's got to learn to keep his shoes on": how inclusive our schools really are*  
WAIER (Western Australian Institute of Educational Research) Forum in Perth, 6<sup>th</sup> of August, 2006.
- *Choice as an act of freedom or a technical means of government: Questioning the role of the researcher*  
Childhood and Youth: Participation and Choice Conference - University of Sheffield, UK July 4-7, 2006
- 1. *Governing pre-school children and teachers: the changing mentalities of government in Western Australia*  
2. *'Smarten up the kids': whose agendas are we serving? Governing*

*parents and children through the Smart Population Initiative in Australia*  
2006 Association for Cultural Studies Crossroads Conference -  
Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey July 20-23, 2006

- *The Getting of Access: trials and tribulations of the novice researcher*  
New Zealand Association for Research in Education and Australian  
Association for Research in Education Conference 29 Nov – 3 Dec  
2003, Auckland, New Zealand
- *“I can do everything!”: Deconstructing discipline in a classroom*  
Second Annual Postgraduate Research Forum 7 November, 2003, The  
University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
- *Restricted Entry: Issues and challenges of negotiating access to the  
field*  
Second Annual Postgraduate Research Forum 7 November, 2003, The  
University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia

### **Abstract**

This paper critiques theories of classroom discipline employed in early childhood learning environments in order to raise some questions about recent practical approaches to discipline advocated by Porter (2003b), Kohn (1996), Gartrell (1998) and others. The author adopts a perspective outside of the field of educational psychology by using Foucault's (1979) and Rose's (1996a; 1999; 2000) ideas on contemporary government. This analytical context problematises the taken-for-granted understandings about the 'unruly child' and his/her regulation. Discourses of guidance theories are re-thought as regimes of truth and practices produced for the government of children's conduct. The paper questions the claim of these theories that they grant more freedom to children than 'traditional' discipline theories and argues that guidance approaches 'unknowingly' control children to a greater extent.

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### **Introduction**

Recent discourses of early childhood, especially child-centred approaches, the Reggio Emilia approach and sociocultural approaches to planning and teaching, promote the image of the 'strong child' who has the capacity to be the co-constructor of knowledge, independent problem solver, and a skilful social negotiator (see for example Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett and Farmer (2008), Fler et al.(2006), and Stonehouse (2001)) and citizen "with entitlements and rights" (Early Childhood Australia, 2006). These discourses urge teachers to engage in power sharing with children to label out their power differentials. Teachers take up the role of facilitators or co-learners rather than teachers; they strive to create a democratic and free learning environment where each child is listened to and each child's needs are addressed individually, where problem solving happens through collaborative partnerships and negotiation. It is argued that learning environments that build on these ideal relationships between children and teachers are more egalitarian. Children are understood as citizens of learning communities, therefore they are thought of as equals and partners to adults in learning (Arthur *et al.*, 2008).

The guidance approach to classroom discipline is increasingly popular in early childhood. This approach holds that teaching children to behave 'considerately' is more important than their punishment (Kohn, 1996; Porter, 2008). Guidance approaches build on children's inherent need for autonomy, competency and goodwill to self-regulate their behaviour (Porter, 2003b). By reconceptualising classroom discipline as collaborative problem solving and using strategies borrowed from counselling, they engage children in active participation in their own discipline with the facilitation of the teacher. These strategies aim to empower children by removing the control and domination of

the teacher (Porter, 2003b). As Porter (2003b) explains it further: “This view trusts children to exercise self-direction, rather than imposing controls on them” (p. 14). This paper addresses these claims and argues that this supposedly more democratic approach to discipline or power sharing builds on a particular understanding of power that masks power relations that more intensely control children.

### **Discourses of guidance approaches**

Within early childhood education, classroom discipline sits in an integrated framework of what is regarded by many as ‘best practice’. The “prevention of inconsiderate behaviour” (Porter, 2003b, p. 26) fundamentally builds on the creation of a child-centred environment, the fulfilment of children’s physical, psychological, social, intellectual and academic needs, and the provision of individually appropriate programs (Porter, 2003b). It is argued that if children are engaged in meaningful and interesting activities, they are less likely to “find alternatives, less productive things to do, resulting in disruptions to others” (Porter, 2003b, p. 29). If these preventative measures are still ineffective, the teacher has to intervene with classroom discipline.

Recent classroom discipline theories and practices promoted in early childhood contexts combine a mixture of approaches influenced by guidance theory (Gartrell, 1998; Kohn, 1996). Proponents of guidance approaches argue that the concept of ‘discipline’ is attached strongly to the concept of ‘control’, thus its use brings unwanted connotations. Instead of working towards students’ submission to classroom rules and the teacher’s authority, guidance approaches aim to collaborate with students to reach certain behavioural goals that they agree on. Negotiation or dialogue between children and the teacher is utilised to restore equilibrium in the classroom and students are invited to “become active participants in their own social and ethical development” by solving conflicts and disruption issues themselves (Kohn, 1996, p. 77). The teaching style or relationship used by guidance approaches, therefore, is considered more democratic or egalitarian. In other

words, guidance approaches aim to provide children with more freedom or self-determination (Fields & Boesser, 1994; Porter, 1996, 2003b; Wolfgang, 2004).

Guidance approaches draw on a particular image of children that sees them as enriched and vibrant human beings and have a need to “generate identities” and understand the world (Porter, 2003b, p. 8). They are seen to be motivated, able to make constructive choices, behave thoughtfully and are full of skills and competencies (Porter, 2003b). This image connects to the idea that children are worthy of respect for what they are at the present and should be approached with guidance and not authority (Kohn, 1996; Rogers, 1969). Porter (2003b) summarises this presumption: children behave well if they are “treated well and poorly when disrespected” (Porter, 2003a, p. 17).

The stated goals of guidance approaches to discipline differ from ‘controlling’ approaches. While the latter aim to make children comply with adults’ instructions, guidance approaches’ goals aspire to “teach them to act considerately” so that children think about their actions (Porter, 2003b, p. 16). The role of the adult in disciplining is also crucial. Guidance approaches promote the leadership role for adults that enables children freedom through bringing expertise and protection into their relationships (Kohn, 1996; Mintz, 2003; Porter, 2003b). This idea stands in opposition to control approaches, according to which adults regulate children through authority and dominance. The fundamental aims of guidance approaches are to teach children to realise their interpersonal competencies and to teach skills to solve social problems, such as self-control or the practice of perspective taking (Kohn, 1996).

In sum, instead of working towards students’ submission to classroom rules through the dominance and control of the teacher, the advocates of guidance approaches promote an ‘egalitarian discipline’ to reach ‘considerate’ behaviour in classrooms. This approach aims to provide more freedom for children by removing power from the adults and placing it in children’s hands, hence the term ‘egalitarian discipline’ (Porter, 2003b). The following sections problematise this understanding of power and propose an alternative perspective developed by Foucault (1980).

### **The constituting the 'considerate child'**

Guidance approaches, on the one hand, think about children as 'strong', therefore, discourses of guidance approaches are extremely appealing to early childhood practitioners. On the other hand, guidance discourses consider children as subjects of discipline strategies, so their learning is intervened, their competencies are developed through certain forms of training and skills, and self-disciplined children are produced. Guidance approaches deliver a form of discipline that maintains children's freedom and autonomy and at the same time teach children to self-regulate themselves. Since self-regulation is the aim of classroom discipline (Slee, 1995) and children are free from adults' control, these approaches deliver a theory to discipline against which it is hard to argue. This paper, however, critiques guidance approaches from the perspective that they invent ways to think about and discipline children that enable power to work in sometimes invisible and unexpected ways (Gore, 1993).

Power can be conceptualised differently than is understood by guidance approaches. Power, in a Foucauldian sense, is diffuse and assembled in power relations that are always shifting rather than concentrated on behalf of individuals or groups of people (Foucault, 1980). In this view, power is productive in shaping the social world, "power produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, [and] produces discourse" (Foucault, 1984a, p. 61). Power shapes how problems and behaviours are understood, how people are classified, and ascribes appropriate ways to steer or govern conduct. By producing discourses, power also "shape[s] identities and regulate[s] bodies, desires, selves and populations (Seidman, 1998, p. 235). Discourses produce particular understandings of the world, in that 'the child' is a subject of discipline, and 'discipline' itself. These constitutions position children in shifting power relations that sometimes work on their behalf and other times disadvantage them. Discourses of guidance approaches position children in power relationships that enable the use of subtle techniques of power seemingly working on children's behalf. The following sections examine

the ways the competencies, learning and development of 'the child' are constituted through guidance approaches that enable power to work through in unanticipated ways enabling the heightened control of children.

'The child' is understood as standing in a dynamic relationship with her/his environment and others and actively constructing her/his knowledge and skills through interactions. This Vygotskian discourse inscribed on development plays an important role in the exercise of power through discipline approaches. It serves as an instrument of authorisation and validation for intervention into the process of knowledge construction by the child and legitimates adult intervention. The child develops understandings of the social world and of her/his social competence with interventions of adults in prescribed discursive contexts. In these contexts, she/he actively constructs change to reach *socially desired* understandings, social skills and emotions that result in 'considerate' behaviours. So, her/his constructions are limited by the available discourses and deliberate interventions.

Guidance approaches ascribe children with a particular form of social competence that stretches over certain qualities, dispositions and abilities. Social skills or competency, and in relation to that potency are focal points of guidance approaches and are constituted the following way. Guidance approaches use a strong instrumentalist discourse that promotes the attainment and training of particular social skills to students in order to preempt or to deal with inconsiderate behaviour. The acquisition of these skills is placed into a developmental framework and become intertwined with wider discourses of child development<sup>i</sup>. It is assumed that the more developed children are in these areas, the more efficient they are in building relationships, reflecting, negotiating and solving social problems, and therefore, they cause less disruption. Constituting 'the child' as having these social skills or the lack of those yields power in at least two ways.

First, it constitutes the emotions of 'the child' as amenable for training and regulation so 'the child' can develop "mastery" in these through training (Porter, 2003b, p. 69). 'The child' is regulated here through her/his own constructive capacities that create feelings and attention towards others

(Hultqvist, 1997). Moreover, the child's subjective experience as to how she/he has to perceive the world and feel about it, is normalised, evaluated and improved if necessary (Fendler, 2001). The expression of feelings and teaching self-expression are mechanisms for this normalisation (Tobin, 1995). So, while behaviour conditioning targets children's behaviour, guidance approaches makes the children's relations, emotions, her/his inner understandings of the world and her/his own constructive capacities the objects of regulation and normalisation.

The second way constituting 'the child' as lacking or having little social competence wields power is that children with 'social skill deficits' or 'developmental delays' are potentially identified as belonging to certain social groups who exhibit 'inappropriate' behaviour or have alternative morals (Porter, 2003b). While the intention is to counteract the assumedly negative influences the children of these parents have encountered, labelling their social skills as 'inappropriate' engraves "historically specific power relations" (Fendler, 2001, p. 131). Thus, power works through inscribing social problems onto individual incompetence in social skills. Constituting 'the child' as an active constructor and in terms of social competence, mobilise particular techniques and mechanisms that utilise children's self-government.

### **'Playing with the spilled milk is not an option'**

Guidance approaches aim to lift outside control of children and discipline them through their own self-regulation, termed as 'considerate' behaviour. Self-regulation, however, is not without power. Through guidance approaches, power is invested in certain techniques and mechanisms for the individuals to discipline themselves (Millei, 2007). Power is exercised through discipline approaches in two forms: dominance and self-government. Dominance is an absolute form centralised in the will of the teacher and that is the form of regulation guidance approaches aim to release outwardly in order to free children. Even if dominance is removed, guidance approaches exert power through children's self-government. They invent strategies for children to self-

regulate their own conduct appropriately to their situation. This is a pattern of power through which the self disciplines the self and is an element in the government of people (Foucault, 1984b). In guidance approaches, individuals are made the objects of psychological investigation and knowledges are produced about their emotions, morals, thinking, social competencies and the development of those. These knowledges then, in a reciprocal fashion, shape the ways individuals understand themselves and also assign principles for their conduct. In this way, particular knowledges produced about individuals play a part in their regulation, their government of others and self-government.

According to guidance approaches, children have a need to belong that appears in a developmental sequence (therefore 'pro-social' in the meaning of not social yet). The first step of belonging, that appears before the age of one, is the exchange of emotions that requires specific social skills, such as being empathic, altruistic and cooperative (Porter, 2008). That children have these particular capacities and desires is highly contested in the literature (see for example Fendler, 2001 and Hultqvist, 1997). These capacities, however, make children active to pursue the fulfilment of their needs and at the same time, their conduct becomes amenable to self-government. Being an active agent emancipates 'the child' ideologically. It produces children as individuals who are agents of change, "who can make a difference for themselves and their world, can control their own actions and feelings, and can act on their values" without submitting themselves to adult dominance (Porter, 2003b, p. 14). This is an alluring idea that disguises another avenue power works through this discourse.

By constituting 'the child' as 'agentic' or able to act 'freely', guidance approaches constitute a subject that is possible to be governed without domination. Children are made active, they are freed up from external control and it is exactly this free conduct that creates the possibility of government. Children live with their freedom and fulfil their needs through engaging actively with their environment. Their possible conduct, however, is prescribed by available 'truth-games' according to which they self-govern.

For instance, guidance approaches work with 'natural consequences'. By

utilising here the much used example, when a child spills milk from her/his cup, she/he learns that the 'natural consequence' is that she/he has no more to drink and she/he is asked to clean up the spill. The accidental spilling of milk might be interpreted as due to lack of skills or attention, or as a result of inconsiderate behaviour. In the latter understanding, the child is offered a choice between 'cleaning up and getting more milk' or 'not getting milk in replacement'. The child is assumedly free to decide, but her/his possible actions and choices are carefully scripted. Choosing to play with the spilled milk is not an option. The child also understands her/himself through her/his actions, thus by cleaning up and bringing another cup of milk, she/he self-governs her/his conduct in order to maximise her/his chances in the group. She/he is an enterprising individual and makes regulated choices in order to make the best of her/his life. Freedom thus became technical and infused with relations of power that entail a specific mode of self-government while it shows itself as liberation, empowerment and equality (Rose, 1999).

### **Techniques and strategies of guidance approaches**

The paper returns to the assertion that guidance approaches deliver a more egalitarian form of discipline (Porter, 2008). The teacher is a leader or guide, which provides her/him with an authoritative (expert) rather than an autocratic position. Children are urged to express their feelings and views, and their understandings of problems are respected. Negotiation and reflection are used as techniques to reach outcomes to which all parties agree and are responsible for. The process of negotiation, thus, reflects an egalitarian ideal.

Techniques of self-reflection and the verbalisation of emotions enable the individual to acquire knowledge about her/himself and to express her/his thoughts and feelings. Gathering knowledge about the self and self-expression form part of what Foucault (1988) calls 'technologies of the self'. Through these technologies, the inner worlds of the child become open for regulation. Moreover, they enable the child to self-govern her/his feelings and

act on her/his dispositions according to the norms and morals set up by guidance approaches.

Negotiation, as another technique used by guidance approaches, first gained a strong foothold in the family (Beck, 1997; Cunningham, 1995; Vanderbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006), and acquired a normative aspect in schools with the strong advocacy for interactive teaching (Fendler, 2001). Negotiation became a universal, so its relevance and practice is rarely questioned in early years practices.

Negotiation and reflection are posited by proponents of guidance approaches as superior to other techniques, such as praise and rewards, and as the most worthy technique for solving social problems (Gartrell, 1998; Kohn, 1996; Porter, 2003b). Negotiation works as a technique offering possible avenues for children to be more active or participate freely in problem solving. In combination with self-reflection and verbalisation, negotiation opens up the feelings and morals of children for regulation and self-government. On the one hand, these strategies offer avenues for children to access their own needs and desires and to act upon them. On the other hand, only those needs and desires are limited by available by discourses. In this way, opening up children's innermost feelings and thoughts and making children active in participating in negotiations around those enable children's government or regulation at the same time, not even mentioning the ethical question of intruding into their privacy.

## **Discussion**

This paper addresses two assertions of guidance approaches. First, it examines their claim that they deliver 'egalitarian discipline' through a trading or equalising of power between children and adults (Porter, 2008). Second, it deconstructs the notion of children's freedom advocated by these approaches. The concept of power that underpins guidance approaches is one associated with power as negative and repressive. This conceptualisation identifies power in the relationship between the powerful adult and the

powerless/subject child who is under control. These approaches, therefore, strive to free children from adult control and rather to guide their behaviour in order to create a more democratic environment in classrooms that as a result, also makes children more empowered and agentic. Guidance approaches deliver self-regulated children in socially and pedagogically desirable ways.

Guidance discourses and techniques also position children into shifting power relations by investing certain capacities in children in relation to temperament, relationship, belonging and ethics. Through these capacities, children become skilful and active, they identify, understand, express and self-regulate their feelings, dispositions, attitudes and relations. These discourses produce outcomes desired by the teaching profession and parents. It could also be argued that children might feel empowered by these discourses, since they are actively participating as strong and agentic individuals in their own lives. They are also free to make choices.

Through their active participation and freedom and the techniques of guidance approaches, however, their conduct, affect and morals become amenable to government by utilising children's self-government. In this way, children's control shifts towards the inner world of 'the child': to her/his feelings and disposition, thoughts and desires, and are made the target of government. This paper argues that discourses and technologies of guidance approaches have enabled a more intense regulation of children by utilising active participation and freedom that they intend to promote and therefore, are potentially dangerous.

This paper proposes to conceptualise children's obedience to control in another way to illuminate possibilities of children's empowerment. Obedience might be understood in ways that children are "consciously 'working the system' by using/negotiating pre-established dominant labels in ways that work for the self, either individually or collectively" (Raby, 2005, p. 154). They are obedient because they use obedience as an intended strategy. They might know that praise or some joyful activity follows if they are 'good'. They might also use the idea or practice of obedience to justify their actions or to trigger certain replies in adults. This understanding reflects a more powerful or

strong image of children and demonstrates their skilfulness in working with dominating discourses and practices.

Moreover, the administration of rewards, punishments and consequences wield more visible forms of power relations that might be easier to resist and therefore, could be considered as more desirable if we strive to create environments for children where they are agentic and free. These techniques aim to control the behaviour of children, and at the same time, they leave children's thinking and feelings free of scrutiny and regulation. Self-reflection, and the verbalisation of feelings and most inner thoughts of children, however, violate their privacy. These techniques make children even more open to intensified regulation, and thus they become less powerful. Entering into children's lives disables their attempts to be agentic and cancels their opportunities to shift and turn power relations. Leaving children's inner lives their secrets provides them with more freedom and makes them more powerful.

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<sup>i</sup> These discourses are, for example, based on constructivist ideas on the development of thinking and morals (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; DeVries & Zan, 1994; Kamii, 1991; Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1965), emotional development (Erickson, 1963) and social development, in particular relationships (Corsaro, 1985; Selman, 1980).