Discourses in School Readiness: A Foucauldian Genealogical Analysis of Head Start Policy, 1964-2020

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Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* opens with a ghastly description of the public torture and execution of "Damiens the regicide," an account that continues in agonizing detail for three pages before the narrative fast-forwards eighty years, to a prison schedule that includes time for exercise, recreation, education, and listening to "passage[s] from some instructive or uplifting work."[1] Foucault uses these disparate examples and the time that separates them to illustrate how "a new theory of law and crime…a new age for penal justice" emerged, with new practices and new policies related to the punishment of criminals. During this emergence (or *Entstehung*), there is "this double process: the disappearance of the spectacle and the elimination of pain" that resulted in "a whole new morality concerning the act of punishment."[2] As Foucault describes it, the punishment of criminals between 1760 and 1840 underwent a "great transition" by "ensuring that the execution should cease to be a spectacle."[3] This "reduction in penal severity" is "certainly a change in objective" in which "the old partners of the spectacle of punishment…gave way."[4]

How might Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* inform the analysis of policy documents pertaining to early childhood education and care (ECEC)? On first glance, the description of the changing nature of punishment in the penal system might seem irrelevant for the analysis of school readiness discourse in ECEC. This paper argues that there is a similarity in both efforts. Each seeks to understand, as Foucault describes it:

> How is it that certain moments and in certain orders of knowledge, there are these sudden take-offs, these hastenings of evolution, these transformations which fail to correspond to the calm, continuist image that is normally accredited?... It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other....it's not so much a matter of

> knowing what external power imposes itself...[but instead] how and why at certain moments that regime undergoes a global modification.[5]

Foucault drew inspiration from the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who proposed genealogies as a way to demonstrate "how power/knowledge relations operate within different historical periods and within different disciplinary regimes."[6] In his adaptation of Nietzschean genealogies, Foucault did not focus on the *why* of power and power relations. Instead, he was "generally concerned with the 'how' of power."[7] Adopting a Foucauldian genealogical approach requires a researcher to embrace a "devil is in the details" mindset. As it is described by Maria Tamboukou, genealogy "provides a functional microanalysis of power relations, operating on the smallest and most insignificant details."[8]

Foucauldian genealogical analysis allows considerations of *how* power is revealed in a specific discourse, *who* benefits from the discourse, and *who* is disadvantaged by the discourse. As a method, it has been used to examine various discourses in ECEC, including discourses of disadvantage, discourses of quality, discourses of children as human capital/economic units, and the tension between discourses of development, religion, and human capital.[9] While Foucauldian genealogy has been used as a method to analyze ECEC policy and practice in countries like Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Indonesia, it has rarely been used to consider ECEC policy in the United States.

This paper considers how *discourses of school readiness* have become increasingly influential in ECEC, reflecting a neoliberal ideology that reifies human capital theory, accountability, and privatization. The rise of school readiness discourse in the United States' federally funded Head Start preschool program during the period from 1964-2020 is offered as an exemplar, and Foucauldian genealogical analysis is used as a method to understand how the discourse arose. Two questions guide the inquiry: How have images of children been constructed and reconstructed in Head Start legislation and policy discourse since its inception in 1964, with the move from discourses of disadvantaged children to discourses of school readiness? How do recent Head Start legislative and policy documents use school readiness discourse to reify and reflect

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neoliberalism in ECEC practice?

Head Start was established in 1964 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Throughout its 60-year history, Head Start has maintained bipartisan legislative support and has expanded to serve more children, from a wider range of age groups, in sites around the United States. The expansion of Head Start coincided with the emergence of neoliberalism's widespread influence on politics, culture, and systems of social support, including education. Discourses associated with neoliberalism represent a Foucauldian "force of domination" that, in turn, has propelled school readiness into a dominant discourse in ECEC, with its emphasis on accountability, meritocracy, audit culture, human capital theory, competition, standardization, and privatization. School readiness discourse has resulted in what Michael Apple calls a *reconstruction of common sense* that deconstructs and reconstructs knowledge about young children and their education.[10]

Drilling down to a concise and agreed-upon definition of school readiness proves challenging, as the term seems to have different meanings for different people. As Pamela Jane Powell describes it,

> School readiness is an ubiquitous term. The definition varies depending on the context in which it's being discussed. Teachers have a different idea of school readiness than parents do, and politicians have a different notion than pediatricians. School readiness, seemingly easy to define, is just the opposite. The beliefs and descriptions of school readiness are untidy.[11]

The term first appeared in Head Start legislation in the 1980s, and the meaning has been debated among policymakers, legislators, educators, and parents since that time.[12] Powell asks,

> …what does it really mean for a child to be ready for school? The current focus on school readiness provides a welcome opportunity to examine that question from pedagogical, research, and policy perspectives, with the hope that we can come to consensus on what has become a controversial issue. For some,

> school readiness means entering school with a knowledge of the ABCs and 1,2,3s. Although children's academic development is without question very important, it is only one piece of a set of interconnected factors that determine school readiness.[13]

Heather Biggar and Peter Pizzolongo suggest five factors that are indicative of children's school readiness: "physical well-being and muscle control and coordination; healthy social and emotional development; positive approaches to learning, such as curiosity and motivation; adequate language development; and a foundation in cognition and general knowledge."[14] A challenge in ECEC has been in how one might assess these factors in children, and what meaning might be made of such an assessment.

Biggar and Pizzolongo offer another important consideration about school readiness: the role of schools themselves in determining how the concept is defined and actualized.

> . . .school readiness is more than what a child brings to the table. . . school readiness is not only the capacity of the child to absorb new information and build new skills in a school setting, but also the capacity of the school to support each child's success.[15]

Despite an effort to lay some responsibility for school readiness on schools themselves, my analysis demonstrates how school readiness discourse places responsibility for readiness at the feet of children themselves, who are expected to enter the K-12 system at age 5, already prepared to adapt to school culture and to meet behavioral, academic, social, physical, and emotional expectations with a minimum degree of adjustment or challenges. School readiness discourse asks ECEC programs to inculcate within all children an expectation for what is meant by school. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) pushes back on this assumption about the meaning of school readiness in its *Position Statement on School Readiness*:

> It is the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of children as they enter school and to provide whatever services are needed

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> in the least restrictive environment to help each child reach his or her fullest potential. Every child, except in the most severe instances of abuse, neglect, or disability, enters school ready to learn school content.[16]

As these various positions on school readiness demonstrate, there is no definition of school readiness that is satisfactory to everyone; for the purposes of this paper, I rely on Eugene Lewit and Linda Schuurmann Baker's concise, clear, and useful articulation. "The concept of school readiness tethers the notion of readiness for learning to a standard of physical, intellectual, and social development that enables children to fulfill school requirements and to assimilate a school's curriculum."[17]

As was discussed previously, Foucauldian genealogies do not focus on the "why" of power and power relations but are instead "generally concerned with the 'how' of power."[18] Foucault rejected attempts to pinpoint a clearly outlined progression that logically and neatly led through history to a current moment. A task of the historian, according to Foucault, is the search for that which "emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning."[19] Foucault suggests genealogy as an alternative to an historian's traditional task, precisely because it "opposes itself to the search for 'origins."[20] This distinction matters; as Foucault argues, "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things."[21]

Foucault compared genealogies to maps, a metaphor that underscores the circuitous nature of history; accordingly, Foucault saw the role of the genealogist as analogous to that of a cartographer. In the genealogist-as-cartographer metaphor, "the art of drawing a map or a cartography [is used] to show how discursive and non-discursive formations coexist in various forms or correlation, opposition or juxtaposition, pointed out by the cartographer."[22] There is no straight path running through history, traceable from beginning to end via singular events that emerge like towns along a highway; instead, the map is complicated by hills and valleys, oceans and volcanoes, and other forces that shape and change the metaphorical landscape from which knowledge grows.

When the researcher "listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things; not a timeless essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion."[23] According to Foucault:

> Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of the species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent…is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and why we are, but the exteriority of accidents.[24]

In short, the Foucauldian genealogist "must be able to recognize the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats – the basis of all beginnings."[25] The researcher looks for the *Entstehung* (emergence, or "moment of arising") of what Foucault calls "forces of domination." For Foucault, "It's not so much a matter of knowing what external power imposes itself. . . [but instead] how and why at certain moments that regime undergoes a global modification."[26] The emergence of forces of domination are an "eruption, the leap from the wings to the center stage," and their power is exercised in the field of knowledge. [27] Changes in discourse result in the reconstitution of knowledge, and it is through this epistemological act that power is wielded. Whoever controls the production of discourse also controls how people know the world around them. Foucault's theory of knowledge-construction as an exercise in power was explored in his writings about punishment, mental illness, prisons, sexuality, and other topics of societal importance. Policy and practice in ECEC are another cultural realm that benefits from genealogical examination.

Peter Moss examines popular discourses (which he calls *narratives*) in ECEC and uses Foucault's theories of power to identify the ways in which neoliberalism is expressed in these discourses. In *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood*, Moss describes neoliberalism and its influence on education:

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> The story of neoliberalism, therefore, is about how life in all its many facets – including personal relationships – can and should be reduced to economic relationships, based on the constant exercise of competition, choice and calculation by individuals, each one understood to be a unit of human capital and to act in life as 'homo economicus' or economic man or woman.[28]

Neoliberalism is a complementary theoretical framework for a Foucauldian genealogical analysis of school readiness discourse. Neoliberalism creates policy discourse that is used to advance market-based solutions to what are often manufactured problems. In neoliberal ideology, "responsibility is often exclusively judged through an individualistic perspective emphasizing a person's decisions and choices made irrespective of examining the exploitative practices and inequitable institutional practices and policies that create the social conditions that present limited choice(s) to individuals."[29] The widening influence of this ideology on ECEC policy discourse is evident.[30] A focus on human capital drives education policy in the direction of the free market, where meritocracy is accepted as truth, and where policies are engineered to perpetuate the systemic and institutional creation of knowledge by "forces of domination," which use discourse to enact power.

Neoliberal school readiness discourse has *reconstructed common sense* about children, childhood, and the purposes of ECEC, and this reconstruction of common sense frames my analysis.[31] David Gillborn describes common sense as "a powerful technique…[that] assumes that there are no genuine arguments against the chosen position; any opposing views are thereby positioned as false, insincere, or self-serving…the moral high ground is assumed and opponents are further denigrated."[32] According to Michael Apple, through neoliberal rhetoric, traditional "common sense" about education is co-opted in favor of a reconstructed common sense that "tacitly [implies] that there is something of a conspiracy among one's opponents to deny the truth or to say only that which is 'fashionable.'"[33] When the reconstruction of common sense is successful, people willingly acquiesce to a "new truth" and accept the techniques that re-

inforce it, as they are persuaded to reconceptualize that which was previously "known." Apple describes this reality in education as part of a larger ideological shift throughout society. "A large-scale 'educational project' [is underway] to radically change common sense… In this social and pedagogic project, we are to be convinced that there are no realistic alternatives to the neoliberal and neoconservative projects and outlooks."[34] Apple's assertion is applicable to the realities of policy and practice in ECEC, in which school readiness discourse has emerged alongside a reconstructed common sense that makes the early academicization of young children not only permissible but preferred, in anticipation of their future as "college and career ready" citizens, despite decades of research that demonstrate how children learn best – through play, multisensory experiences, hands-on exploration, and opportunities for authentic interactions that reinforce positive social/emotional behaviors.[35] This research is frequently ignored by policymakers, in favor of a viewpoint that emphasizes the economic and consumeristic potential of the child as human capital.

School readiness discourse demonstrates a specific image of children at the earliest moments of their education – the child beginning their first forays into school as *homo economicus*, a precursor to college and career readiness, which is a precursor to consumer readiness. Taking a genealogist's approach means focusing on *how* the discourse arose to dominate ECEC policy conversations, *who* proposed the discourse, and *what* strategies were used to propel it forward. This is the effort in my examination of decades of Head Start policy documents.

Head Start is inarguably the United State government's most successful and well-regarded ECEC initiative, which is why I chose to focus my genealogical analysis of school readiness discourse on select documents from decades of Head Start legislation and policy.[36] Through my analysis, visibility is given to the emergence of school readiness discourse in these documents over the last 25 years of the 20th century, producing by what Foucault called *eventalization*,

> [which] means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait or an obviousness that imposes itself uniformly on all...analyzing an event according to the multiple

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> processes that constitute it. As a way of lightening the weight of causality.[37]

The *Entstehung*, or the "moment of arising," of the school readiness discourse in Head Start policy reflects an emerging neoliberal outlook on the purpose of the federal government's role in the lives of poor citizens.

The discourse around which the Head Start arose in 1964 was that of the *disadvantaged child*, which reflects what is now thought of as a deficit approach in education. Disadvantaged child discourse is evident in a report published in 1970 about the Early Training Project, which served as inspiration and a model for Head Start.

> [Researchers were] attempting to design a research "package" consisting of variables which—on the basis of research upon social class, cognitive development, and motivation—might be assumed to be relevant to the school retardation which is observed in deprived groups and which at the same time might be subject to the effects of manipulation. Because this was a problem with major social implications, we also tried to design a general treatment approach which would be feasible to repeat on a large scale in the event that the procedure proved successful.[38]

While a deficit model echoes through the disadvantaged child discourse that was used to justify the creation of Head Start, childhood was simultaneously imagined to be a worthy period of human development, in and of itself; this imaginary influenced the earliest policies and practices in Head Start. In 1975, the Head Start Performance Standards described the program's intention to "maximize the strengths and unique experiences of each child."[39] This early guidance also urged that "the child's entire family, as well as the community must be involved."

> The overall goal of the Head Start program is to bring about a greater degree of social competence in children of low income families. By social competence is meant the child's everyday

> effectiveness in dealing with both present environment and later responsibilities in school and life.[40]

While the term *school readiness* had not yet entered the ECEC policy discourse in 1975, the term seems poised to arise – if only to serve as a shortcut for the more cumbersomely phrased "everyday effectiveness in dealing with…later responsibilities in school."[41] At the time, neoliberalism did not yet have the hold on Western political thought that it would within the decade. The purpose of ECEC, and even the reason for children developing "everyday effectiveness," still seemed to be grounded in an old-fashioned, paternalistic vision of government-as-charity.

Given the historical reality of the period from Head Start's inception in 1964 to the publication of the 1975 Head Start program standards, there were surely those in the federal government (certainly during the Johnson era, when Project Head Start was launched) who saw an ethical and political responsibility to address the racial and class inequities that were laid bare during the civil rights era. In this period an attitude of social progressivism was characteristic of American social policy, and it reflected a certain imagination image of children in the United States, especially poor children of color. By 1981, however, political will had turned from a socially progressive albeit paternalistic position, towards a neoliberal orientation, in which pulling oneself up by the proverbial bootstraps was celebrated and rewarded. The Reagan administration proposed cutting Head Start funding, which was met with public outrage. "Head Start is an investment that pays off for children, for families, for communities, and for the nation" became a battle cry against the proposed funding cuts. In this battle cry, one can hear a new view for ECEC, one couched in neoliberalism; namely, ECEC as "investment."[42] With the introduction of this idea – return on investment as the impetus for ECEC funding – the focus of Head Start began to shift from the individual, unique child who might be elevated out of poverty through ECEC. With a new administration in charge of the federal government, the purpose of Head Start was recast as a societal investment. When funding cuts to Head Start proved more unpopular than Reagan had imagined, the discourse around Head Start began to change and the justification for its

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continued funding begin to focus on children's futures as working citizens. By 2007, when the Head Start Act of 1981 was amended, school readiness discourse had taken center stage, as is evidenced most profoundly in the title of Head Start's reauthorization legislation: the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007.

In a 26-year span, from 1981 to 2007, the forces of domination – that is, neoliberal political actors in the United States – transformed "common sense" about the purpose of and practice in ECEC. As evidence, consider the frequency with which the concept of school readiness has been mentioned in Head Start legislative and policy documents. In the 1975 Head Start Program Performance Standards, the phrase "school readiness" was not found. In the 2016 Head Start Program Performance Standards, "school readiness" was used 28 times. By 2020, "school readiness" was mentioned in 52 of the Head Start policy documents that were found on the Head Start/Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (HS/ECLKC).[43]

Daphne Meadmore, Caroline Hatcher, and Erica McWilliam describe the ways in which Foucauldian "genealogy seeks to inquire into processes, procedures, and techniques through which truth, knowledge, and belief are produced."[44] This paper considers such processes, procedures, and techniques in ECEC, revealing how the discourse of school readiness arose within and influenced Head Start. By framing ECEC policy within a neoliberal "return on investment" ideology, the federal government's enactment of Head Start policy in 2020 produced a certain truth, knowledge, and belief about children and childhood. Head Start policy is no longer deployed as a weapon in the War on Poverty, nor out of a bleeding-heart sentimentality that centers a paternalistic attitude towards poverty that results in a deficit model orientation towards ECEC and perpetuates a disadvantaged child discourse. The disadvantaged child discourse in federal ECEC policy has given way to school readiness discourse, predicated on a belief that ECEC is an investment that embraces meritocracy and the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps imagery that neoliberalism consistently directs towards the poor.

As Foucault might argue, there is no essential truth about children that

has steered ECEC policy and practice in specific directions, nor is there a pure essence of ECEC policy that casts its shadow from the proverbial Platonic cave. *Why* ECEC has become what it is proves far less illuminating than *how* ECEC has become what it is. How did neoliberal ideology serve as a "jolt," which pushed ECEC policy and practices in new directions, towards different imaginings of young children and their education? The "jolt" of neoliberalism was the *Entstehung* of school readiness discourse. It is helpful to turn to Foucault again, who gave insight into the way in which neoliberalism envisions human capital. Human capital theory and *homo economicus* represent "two sides of the same neoliberal image of the individual as an essentially economic being striving to survive in an essentially economic world."[45]

As previously described, Apple's theory of "reconstructed common sense" gives a framework for understanding how forces of domination have done epistemological work through the school readiness discourse, thereby changing collective knowledge about children and childhood. The reconstruction of common sense can be seen in the "notions of normality, which dominate ECE policies" and are built on a school readiness discourse.[46] In 1975, Head Start policy referred to the strengths and "unique experiences" of children, as if this was common sense that could provide direction for the development of ECEC policy; by 2007, the school readiness discourse had emerged and "legitimated as truth…the notion that, in order to function in neo-liberal society –that is, to be governable– a child must be normalized."[47] Standardization and normalization are cornerstones of neoliberalism that necessitate ongoing program assessment and student evaluation, which has contributed to neoliberalism's emergence as an especially troubling influence on ECEC policies and practices.

Ironically, the neoliberal school readiness discourse echoes the deficit model of the disadvantaged child around which Head Start legislation was originally constructed. Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence describe how the deficit model continues to frame in neoliberalism:

> The concept of early childhood as a *foundation* for lifelong learning or the view that the early childhood institution contributes to children being *ready to learn* by the time they start school,

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> produces a "poor" child in need of preparation before they can be expected to learn, rather than a "rich" child capable of learning from birth.[48]

I return to Apple's theory of reconstructed common sense to make meaning of the way that neoliberalism has shaped ECEC through school readiness discourse. Few would contest the "born learning" narrative as the youngest children master the skill of walking, become more sophisticated in their use of language, and engage with other humans in ways that are increasingly refined and complex. Once this image of children and childhood guided beliefs about the purpose of ECEC, schools adopted the "born learning" discourse in their policies and practices. Play-based schools were the "common sense" approach in ECEC as long as the "born learning" discourse predominated. With the turn towards school readiness discourse, play-based learning was no longer seen as "common sense." Reconstructed common sense couched play as a waste of children's time, only serving to delay their development into human capital. If children were not ready to jump on the assembly line of schooling at age 5, how could their future as a worker, a producer, a consumer, and a buyer be ensured?

Reconstructed common sense has made measurable, standardized educational experiences the *de facto* expectation for ECEC, thereby constructing a new reality that now seems unquestionable in its truth. As Sadaf Shallwani described it in his discussion of Foucault's thoughts on discourse, "Discourses have always been constructed within social, historical, political, cultural, and economic contexts, yet current dominant discourses are often viewed as correct, true, self-evident, non-political, and universal across time and space."[49] Under the influence of neoliberalism, society has become increasingly convinced of children's potential as human capital, and their necessary role as *homo economicus* rests in an earlier-is-better attitude about academic preparation. The school readiness discourse insists that the child is responsible for accepting the investment from the government, with the understanding that they will one day be living and breathing "returns on investment" of the government's resources. When this ideology of human capital is so pervasive as to seem like the only truth regarding the purpose of schooling for young children, citizens have

every reason to envision neoliberal market-based education policy as common sense that does not need interrogation. Foucauldian genealogy reveals the *Entstehung* of school readiness discourse, and this revelation offers an opportunity to recognize, reconsider, and challenge the reconstructed common sense that school readiness discourse envisions for children and their earliest educational experiences.

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38 Gray and Klaus, "The Early Training Project," 909.

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40 Office of Child Development, *Head Start Program Performance Standards*, 4.

41 Office of Child Development, *Head Start Program Performance Standards*, 4.

42 Anne Bridgman, "Head Start at 20," Education Week, October 28, 2021, https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/head-start-at-20/1985/05#:~:text=Looking%20to%20the%20Future,for%20a%20family%20of%20four, 1.

43 It is worth noting the use of "knowledge" in the name of the federal organization that provides oversight of Head Start: the Head Start/Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. Given Foucault's thoughts on how discourses like "school readiness" are used to construct knowledge, it seems appropriate to elucidate this claim to knowledge by the very group that is responsible for constructing knowledge.

44 Daphne Meadmore, Caroline Hatcher, and Erica Mcwilliam, "Getting Tense about Genealogy," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 13, no. 5 (2000): 464. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390050156413

45 Moss, *Alternative Narratives*, 17.

46 Lee, "Governing 'Disadvantage,'" 7.

47 *Head Start Program Performance Standards*, 4; Lee, "Governing 'Disadvantage,'" 7.

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49 Sadaf Shallwani, "The Social Construction of School Readiness," Charleston, SC: Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society, March 2009, 2. This was a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society.

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