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## Re-imagining socialist childhoods: Changing narratives of spatial and temporal (dis)orientations

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The focus of attention of this special issue has both personal and professional significance for the guest editors and most of the contributors, whose childhoods were touched by either the experience of socialism or its collapse and consequences. Influenced by Foucault's (1977) idea that reporting evidence and significant moments from the past contributes to histories that are authentic and accurate, this special issue offers insights into the changing narratives of socialist and post-socialist childhoods. We are mindful of the risks associated with revisionism; that is, revisiting and, through that, re-evaluating the past in light of what we know in the present. Mitigating this risk, to some extent, is that many of the authors whose secondary research papers are published in this issue were privileged to work with original documents written in local languages. In this way, they were able to interrogate the past and reveal the nature of discourses and practices in order to make a contribution to better understand the present (Skehill, 2007).

### Background to this special issue

This special issue drew inspiration and gained momentum from participating in the international collaborative and multi-disciplinary Re-connect/Re-collect Project and from organising its 2021 conference 'Spinning the Sticky Threads of Childhood: From Cold War to Anthropocene' in one of the five physical and virtual hubs globally. Employing a collective biography methodology (Davies & Gannon, 2012), the project connected people and collected memories of childhood experiences from the politically often discredited socialist past. Weaving together memories brought the 'personal' into the 'public' in a non-binary way, and with that, affording opportunities to reconcile tensions between the past and the present in unexpectedly bold ways (Cold War Childhood, 2021, [www.coldwarchildhoods.org](http://www.coldwarchildhoods.org)).

This special issue attempts to expand our knowledge and understanding of how socialism was experienced by children of that era. The subject is delicate, therefore, it required careful handling as childhood experiences, bound in history and in particular geo-political contexts, were revisited and re-imagined. The topic occupies a precarious but unique space in the discipline of early education. Precarious because it has so far received limited attention, although, more recently, there appears to be a renewed interest in childhoods during the Cold War (Aydarova et al., 2016; Millei et al., 2019; Silova et al., 2016, 2017, 2018; Stearns, 2016; Szakács, 2019; Tesar 2018; Winkler, 2021).

It is also made precarious by the challenge of communicating ideas on the subject in a common language. Language is contextual and relational, and our understanding depends on our insights into the cultures, values, political priorities and their manifestations of the time, in this instance, into the workings of socialism. In some of papers of this issue, the nuances that emic interpretations afforded in one language (for example in Hungarian or Russian) proved to be difficult to communicate in another (i.e.: in English for this special issue). As we were working with authors, whose mother tongue was not English, the linguistic

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and conceptual difficulties in crossing language boundaries sensitised us to the risks of losing meaning and/or understanding. Hence, we found ourselves in a precarious position again as we attempted to contribute to re-dressing the imbalance in knowledge production and dissemination hierarchies between the East and the West (Collyer, 2018; Demeter, 2019). Giving many of the authors the opportunity to write with authority and with authentic voices about a subject they hold an insider view of, disrupts the historical and epistemological Western paradigms and questions the long-held belief that those on the periphery of global knowledge production can only create local knowledge or voice local 'truths' (Frank and Meyer, 2007; Mignolo, 2009). This special issue, therefore, remains hopeful that it contributes to an extended community of knowers to be recognised in the global scientific world. Expression in some of the papers may be somewhat awkward or lacking fluency, which calls for linguistic tolerance towards the authors who, by writing in a language other than their first language, are 'enabled to name their own world academically' (Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015, p. 8) as they bring new perspectives on a niche topic to the surface.

The topic of socialist childhoods is also unique because it opens a window into history that is not easily captured retrospectively. With this loud silence of untold public and personal childhood experiences of socialism, our intention was to provide a scholarly space for authors who had a keen interest and a genuine curiosity in education and childhoods during the Cold War. Our call for paper invited contributions to advance conceptual and empirical inquiry by examining understandings of socialist childhood experiences, curricula and pedagogic practice. The eight papers included in this special issue give accounts of the changing narratives of socialism and its (often prevailing) influence today in Hungary, Russia, Romania, Serbia and Mongolia. The papers offer spatial and temporal orientations for today's readers as they disrupt the discourses dominant on the Western side of what Churchill called the 'Iron Curtain' (indicating the boundary between the Soviet satellite countries of Central-Eastern Europe and Western Europe) (Lénárt, 2008). As the authors in this issue suggest, our understandings are uncertain and constantly shifting for socialism as 'an unfinished business' (Jelača and Lugarić, 2018, p. 10) is not entirely obsolete, its traces are ever present, and this persistence calls for scholarly attention.

### **The 'unfinished business' of socialism**

Socialism does not mean the same thing to everyone. As the papers here demonstrate, there are critical differences between how it is understood in the various geo-political, economic and ethno-national contexts of the Eastern Bloc, including countries from Central-Eastern Europe and East/Southeast Asia. We understand socialism to be a utopian society disinterested in materialism where a one-party state, through control over the political, economic and social systems, owns the means of production and manages the bureaucratic (re)distribution of wealth, resources and rights in a top-down fashion. In some of the papers, this is referred to as a socialist dictatorship. Communism, the ideological movement of socialism, championed an equal society with collectivism over individualism (Bihari, 2013) inspired by the Marxist theory of an almost 'messianic' classless society (Jukić, 2013, p. 50) as 'the desired final stage of ... the ensuing socialist state' (Jelača and Lugarić, 2018, p. 2).

Socialism and its successor, post-socialism are referenced in the articles of this special issue highlighting their presence in discourses of education, special education and social pedagogy. These papers speak of the prevailing influence of socialism and its legacy as it continues to seep into children's everyday lived experiences.

### **The education of children during (post)socialism**

In countries of the Eastern Bloc, early childhood had an 'iconic status' (Penn, 2011, p. s16) and children were placed in the centre of the social, political and economic re-making of society as they were viewed as an embodiment of a new social order (Silova, et al., 2017). Typical of the era is that education became a slave to party politics (Pukánszky & Németh, 1996) and extended to the education of children's morals and consciousness (Vu, 2021). Kindergartens and schools, as subjugating instruments of ideological indoctrination (Jelača and Lugarić 2018), were to nurture a new generation of Soviet citizens, who were to be shaped by socialist political ideals, values, beliefs and behaviours (Millei et al., 2019; Millei & Imre, 2016)

in order to secure fidelity to the single socialist party. The state had an expectation of extreme conformism and an active engagement in the building of a 'bright' socialist future.

Scientific research at the time led to theorisation where the Marxist concept of collectivism, for example, translated to collective tasks and taking responsibility for work (labour) that was expected of children within their communities. Similarly, Makarenko's pedagogical ideals of the collective, self-management and productive labour heavily influenced educational practice. Conformity to shared ideals, group goals and group needs were prioritised, which put children under pressure not only to self-manage their contributions to their community's work but also to learn to lead effectively. It is not surprising then that no child could be individualistic, nor fail because of a collective approach to teaching, learning and behaviour management (Millei & Teszenyi, forthcoming). The group was more important than the individuals in it (Bronfenbrenner, 1971; Kirschenbaum, 2001).

Socialist states attributed great significance to educating society's future citizens in a strictly normative and outcome driven fashion that required unconditional compliance with ideological expectations and paid no heed to children's individual needs or indeed to how individual children experienced education and care in state-funded institutions. Individualism was not tolerated and any deviation from what was considered as 'the norm' was judged unfavourably. Under the false pretence of developing group communities and helping children manage institutional daily schedules, this conformity instigated practices (such as strict daily routines, expecting every child to do the same thing at the same time) that both exploited and drew on young children's vulnerabilities and dependence on adult support.

Adult-centred socialist pedagogical approaches forfeited the rights of individual children in the name of equal rights for every child. Although the legacy of adult-centredness still circulates in curriculum documents as an aspect of early childhood pedagogy, as seen in Habinyak's paper, the collapse of socialism brought with it approaches to early education that replaced the collective with the individual. In Hungary, for example, children's rights were declared more widely in policy documents as the country had ratified the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 (Pálfi et al., 2019). As Canning, Teszenyi and Pálfi discuss, how children's rights were viewed improved considerably, even though what remained of socialism continued to cast a shadow on pedagogic practice.

Kóger's paper gives account of the relationship between families and kindergartens in the 1950s and highlights that institutional care, with tightly controlled or no opportunities for true parental involvement, was regarded as superior to children's upbringing and education in the home. Shaped by propaganda work, the dominance and silent power of early educational institutions of the socialist era manifested in a drive to educate parents (not only children) and exerting influence on how children were brought up in their homes to secure the ideologically aligned education of the future generation.

Following immediately after decades of the socialist system, countries started to move towards becoming politically democratic states with market economies. However, this transition took longer in some contexts than in others (if it can be called transition at all for its possible non-linear nature and its contested 'expected destination' (Buyendelgeriyn, 2008, p. 237)). Nevertheless, the ensuing changes were characterised by a decline in state ownership, consequently the growth of the private and service sectors, and an increase in foreign investment accompanied by rising unemployment and poverty. One of the main instruments of these changes was the decentralisation of governmental responsibilities, financing, and decision-making (Brayfield & Korintus, 2011; Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017).

These processes of decentralisation in education and de-institutionalisation of child protection are examined by Habinyák and Rákó respectively. Both papers outline the major transformations the change of regime in the early 1990s brought with it: Habinyák highlights the introduction of education reforms and the emergence of educational pluralism in Romania, and, although decentralisation led to alternative pedagogies in early childhood, she calls for a greater degree of autonomy for early education and care institutions to be able to make a real difference to young children's holistic learning and development. Rákó, on the other hand, examines the 'transition of the child protection system', that has started to pave the way for the processes of deinstitutionalisation and the emergence of alternative forms of care in

Hungary. The research findings she presents point to imperatives for further resources and a more coordinated approach between the services that safeguard children.

Balázs-Földi addresses the sensitive issue of how disabled children and their families were supported during the socialist regime and in the subsequent period. She highlights the paucity of empirical research and draws on the findings of three significant national surveys conducted on the living conditions of families raising a child with disabilities during the ten year period between the collapse of the socialist system and 2008 to (i) reiterate the need for empirical enquiry and (ii) to put out an urgent call for a conceptually-conceived disability strategy that could meaningfully inform the development of social policy to enable people's independent living during their life course.

Garey's paper underscores the widely experienced educational reforms also taking place in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She introduces her paper with the Russian saying "The teacher is the second parent", echoing the powerful role of the state in the upbringing of a generation of ideologically indoctrinated socialist citizens that Kóger also discusses in her paper. Educational reforms were informed by continued theorisation that introduced new concepts of childhood and practices, some of which reached other parts of the world, such as Vygotsky's cultural historical theory of human development. Garey's paper compares the content of Russian and American teacher training manuals and draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1970, p. 26) work as she identifies *vospitanie* "upbringing" or "character education" infused with communist morality as the most important difference between American and Soviet schools. The paper suggests that just as socialism as a socio-cultural phenomenon did not disappear overnight, the examined Russian training materials continue to reproduce Soviet understandings about childhood, education and the role of the state, in turn, shapes teachers' perception of the child, their understanding of childhood, and their views on education.

This has synergies with the findings from Mikuska, Raffai and Vukov-Raffai of their secondary research, which also identifies strong connections between the 'socialist past' and current early childhood education and care practices. This study took place at the critical juncture of transitioning from the old to the new Curriculum Framework in Vojvodina, a northern region of Serbia, and attempted to capture the significance of this change as well as the trepidation of educators. This trepidation may reflect 'a sense of perpetual liminality (as a deeply felt, lived paradox)' as the underlying condition of everyday life in transition (Jelača & Lugarić, 2018, p. 5), which brought with it the romanticising or the silencing of socialist ideologies or indeed both. Children of that era remain bound to their particular national landscape and treat narratives of change, such as the meaning of Christmas celebrations, with ambiguity (Silova, 2018). The authors caution that such a significant transition should be a slower and more considered process and call for greater opportunities to access professional training that addresses localised culture, identity, language, and other ethnic characteristics with fully trained mentors.

Just as the definition of socialism is contextual, so are the ways in which the legacies of socialism manifest in the various geo-political, economic, socio-cultural and ethno-national contexts. Dyer, Luke and Sanjaa's paper takes us to Mongolia and offers insights into the integral part rural boarding schools, established in the socialist era to serve children in herding communities, play in national policy for ensuring universal access to formal education. As the authors suggest, shaping education policy for mobile herding children is not without its problems. Emerging fractures are highlighted as maintaining the rural culture as a central aspect of national identity begins to recede and post-socialist modernity starts to see both a rural and urban future for Mongolia's children. Hence, the "relevance" of boarding schools in formal schooling and the inevitability of complicated and layered change in place and time create complex realities. The authors call for refuting ahistorical and socio-spatially dislocated, over-simplified conceptualisation of 'relevance' as an ontological imperative.

## Conclusion

The notion of socialism was undoubtedly integral in understanding constructions of childhood, children's position in society, family politics or social policy in 20th century Europe and Eurasia (Bailyn et al., 2018; Millei et al., 2019). Education in the countries of the former Socialist Bloc was often presented in

'Western' literature as being conformist, overly ideologically driven and uniform across regions (Penn, 2011). However, there were also some connections across the divided ideologies of East and West for example the commonly shared view, which disregarded children as social actors in their own right (Millei, 2011). Strong state directives could be regarded as forms of authoritarianism. Yet, the extent and coherence of the Soviet early childhood education and care system was unmatched by any other non-socialist system. Kindergartens adopted a holistic approach, extending to physical health and wellbeing, which was interpreted and implemented in a vastly different way from systems in English-speaking countries (Penn, 2014). Government funded kindergartens provided a comprehensive and co-ordinated system of early education and care, which reflected a significant societal investment in children (Penn, 2011; Vágó, 2005). The diversity of childhoods and children's experiences across and within state socialist countries is undeniable and do not neatly fit the dichotomies between the East and the West (Silova et al., 2017; Tesar, 2018). In some instances, children ignored or skilfully navigated the prescribed norms, in others, they interpreted everyday realities on their own terms alongside the official authoritarian scripts (Millei & Teszenyi, forthcoming).

In the world of peer refereed scientific papers, the hegemony of English language appears to be matched by a way of thinking about early childhood that is averse to the diversity and complexity of socio-cultural and geo-political contexts (Moss, 2010). This special issue has afforded us an opportunity to increase the visibility of this unique window in history by bringing the reader research that gets up close to the experiences and memories of those who lived through socialism, and capturing the somewhat marginalised but authentic voices of those who are in the position to write with authority as they revisit and re-imagine socialist childhoods. This special issue does not aim to preserve these marginalised voices like artifacts kept in a museum. Rather, we aim to draw attention to new perspectives, to offer new knowledge to the scientific community and to galvanise us into action as we ask further questions and seek out new and unexpected ways of understanding.

### Declarations

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