

Attention, Individualism, and Humility: Using the Theories of Simone Weil to Disrupt Neoliberal Discourses in Early Childhood Education

Andrea Delaune

University of Canterbury - Christchurch, New Zealand

Neoliberal discourses present a particular vision for early childhood education: that of economic rationality. It is the purpose of this paper to both engage with and critique the pervasion of neoliberal discourses within early childhood educational policies, and present an alternative based upon the philosophical vision of Simone Weil (1909-1943). Although much of what is written is applicable in many countries, Aotearoa New Zealand is of specific focus here. Weil's vision is divergent from the neoliberal ideologies of "individualism," "competitiveness," and "measurement," instead promoting the values of humility, "deference," and attentiveness. Attention is the act of seeking in order to meet the other where they are whilst leaving our preconceptions and agendas behind. Recent movements to increase our surveillance and evaluation of children (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017) do not open themselves to the child from his or her own perspective and consequently cannot really see the child. They can only see what the evaluators conceive, which is a partial, inaccurate, and incomplete view. The act of attention resists these externalised limitations by making it clear how much can be lost through these inadequate forms of imposed systems and what can be gained through an alternate path. Attention and humility will be discussed to explore their potential for critiquing the present dominant neoliberal discourses in early childhood education, and offer an opportunity to reconceptualise education. At the outset of this paper, a sketch of the neoliberal individual will be considered in relation to the constructions of individualism, autonomy, competitiveness, and rationality. Following this a discussion of neoliberal ideology within early childhood education will be critiqued in relation to the "neoliberal realities" that shape the early childhood educational landscape. After outlining the contextual setting, the Weilian theoretical framework will be described, defining the concepts of attention, "gravity" and "grace". The considerations from these two sections will be coalesced within the final section, to critique the neoliberal situation in light of Weil's philosophy and to explore the generative potential for reconceiving the dominant neoliberal individualising discourse in light of Weilian concepts.

Neoliberal 'Values': Individualism, Autonomy, Rationality, and Competition

Peters (2011) writes that the "neoliberal view rests on an ideology of *individualism* as the most fundamental and unifying premise" (p. 1) [emphasis added]. The neoliberal individual is conceived as a being whose actions serve as a function of, and catalyst for, the "market" (Saunders, 2010). The actions of the individual must serve the central function of the market – that of competition (Foucault, 2008b, p. 118). Individuals must demonstrate they are embodying "competitiveness," functioning as entrepreneurial actors who are engaged in self-improvement to adapt to market demands. The rationality for the self, and the assessment of others, is through the economic lens. Those who do not adapt to this economic vision must "be ready to be rejected...if they are no longer of any value" (Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, & Somerville, 2005, p. 347). As Smith (2007) succinctly describes, "in this conception there is only limited space for passive 'victims' and no room for those who are seen as choosing to remain outside the ideological framework" (p. 343). Indeed, remaining outside of neoliberal discourses proves increasingly difficult as economic discourses blur and dismantle boundaries between the market and the government – the private and the public – in a language that "destroys social responsibility and critique, that invites a mindless, consumer-oriented individualism to flourish" (Davies, 2005, p. 6). A generation of educators in Aotearoa New Zealand beginning in the education field may have never experienced a society that

is anything other than dominated by neoliberal ideologies, thus the necessity to present an alternative vision remains a critical task.

The supposition of the competitive neoliberal individual brings with it an assumption of autonomy. A part of and indeed contingent to the rationalisation of the “free market” is the construction of the rational, autonomous individual, the *homo economicus* (Foucault, 2008a). This “neoliberal self” is bound through the sometimes-discordant notions of autonomy and “governance.” The autonomy of the neoliberal individual is mirrored by the limitations of governance and the “neoliberal commitment to the constraints of regulation and surveillance” (Devine & Irwin, 2005, p. 323). Foucault (2008b) writes that neoliberal governance is no longer the *laissez-faire* surrender of the market to its own devices, but rather a governance concerned with the limits of “permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 132), governing at just enough to promote maximum growth. This nexus point of governance both occludes and reinforces the techniques which limit autonomy, as governance for freedom is still governance of freedom; particular forms of “free” expression are in effect subjugated through these technologies of governance, negating the possibility of the uninhibited, unrestricted, and liberated individual (Devine & Irwin, 2005). McNay (2009) argues that individual autonomy is “not the opposite of or limit to neoliberal governance, but rather lies at the heart of disciplinary control through responsible self-management” (p. 56), raising questions about how to combat neoliberalism on the grounds of personal freedom. The quest for autonomy and the freedom to “remain competitive” is negotiated through techniques of governance both internally and externally driven.

The dominant images of individuality, autonomy, rationality and competition, are defined by their relationship to desire and consumption. Davies and Bansel (2007) describe the neoliberal individual as subject to, “practices of consumption, attached to a discourse of lifestyle, install[ing] desire within subjects...consolidat[ing] their embeddedness in discourses of success as material...involving economic ambitions and desires above all else” (p. 253). Within neoliberalism, individuals – adults and children – are drawn into deeper and broader levels of desire(s) - a twin-fold desire for the material acquisition of things paired with the desire to procure the means to acquire things (Wolff, 2013). By stimulating desire (for acquisition), the individual is motivated to participate within the market; to do so the individual must conform to the demands of the market (be a rational autonomous competitive individual) and the market is enlarged through such participation.

Within the domain of education, desire and consumption are related to the positioning of education as a tool to develop knowledge in order to compete within the knowledge economy. In general, the situation of education within the discourse of a knowledge economy is “taken for granted by governments, mass media, public opinion, and most scholars today” (Livingstone & Guile, 2012, p. xv). Within this world, knowledge is a form of currency, and the knowledge acquired by individuals through education leads to opportunities for upward mobility through one’s “capital-ability” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 225). To develop this capital-ability, children must be encouraged to be competitive and entrepreneurial within education, serving as preparation for their future within the market, reinforcing the rationality for the self and others through the economic lens. As identified earlier, movements to increase the evaluation of children (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017) in order to improve children’s learning as a part of a wider neoliberal push towards the optimisation of early childhood cannot really see the child, instead they see costs and benefits. Neoliberal ideologies promote the positioning of all knowledge as market knowledge, as a necessary element for success within the neoliberal milieu (Roberts, 2004). Attention can offer a way to resist these limitations through a reconstruction of the ways in which evaluation and assessment are enacted and subsequently, a reconsideration of the “forms of central control” (O’Neill, cited in Biesta, 2010, p. 58). Accountability to externalised governance loses potency when the educator’s focus is directed entirely towards the child and seeking where the child is currently engaged.

The narcissistic desire to compete and indeed succeed within the economic market generated through neoliberal images of the self (the individual, rational, autonomous, competitive being) would have us believe that it is only through our concerns with the self and/or self-improvement that society can thrive and flourish. The neoliberal subject is invited to “a mindless consumer-oriented individualism” (Davies, 2005, p. 6). According to neoliberal ideologies, social and cultural reconstruction must occur for nations to survive within the economic market (Peters, 2001). This reconstruction does not just alter approaches and structures of education, it realigns the values of education. In realigning the relationship between the individual and education, the individual and their relationship to community is reconceived, redirecting social responsibilities to the realm of the private, encouraging the displacement of consideration of the needs of the other in order to promote the primacy of the neoliberal self (Fukuda-Parr, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Nilakant, 2008).

Individualism and Community in Early Childhood Education: Neoliberal Ideologies and Realities

As articulated above, McNay (2009) raises the concern that combating neoliberal ideology armed with arguments of personal freedom is problematic due to the centrality of autonomy to neoliberalism. In order to reconceive ways to combat neoliberalism, perhaps something can be gained from looking at how neoliberalism (re)configures community relationships.

Despite its historical roots of community activism (May, 2013), early childhood education within Aotearoa New Zealand is presently regulated to promote the mechanisms of competition, resulting in a significant downturn in the number of community based-providers and a staggering increase in for-profit providers since the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2017). Community relationships are reconfigured through such reforms, with for-profit providers required to undertake no involvement in the community other than that which will ensure their (venture) early childhood centre remains (economically) viable. Providers who profit from their centres enjoy the benefits of governmental funding, without the limitations of zoning regulations (such as those applied to schools) as they are non-existent within early childhood education. Viewed through the neoliberal lens, the absence of zoning restrictions enhances parents' autonomy to choose where to enrol their children, and large low-cost providers can establish settings for up to 150 children in a setting (New Zealand Government, 2008) to draw children in from many communities. The benefits that can be had from an early childhood setting deeply invested in community improvement (Duncan & Te One, 2012) are traded for consumer autonomy and desire.

Although it is tempting to simplify this relationship for the purposes of a stronger argument, it is important to assert that the relationship between individualism and early childhood education is a complex problem, and the reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual and community (in relation to early childhood education) is not a simplistic equation. However, there are general trends which do suggest the benefits of community-based providers are stronger than for-profit providers (Moss, 2009). Through the construction of the neoliberal being, individualism is promoted over – and to the detriment of – collectivism (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2005), causing grounds for concern when the landscape of early childhood education has shifted so dramatically in such a short time frame; there is little time to assess the situation, and no opportunity for the children who experience these changes to relive them.

Equally, the relationship between autonomy and early childhood education is not simplistic. As stated earlier, neoliberalism encourages participants to view the world through an economic lens; the marketisation of early childhood education has forced management of education and care centres to make decisions based upon market knowledge and parents to measure education through an economic rationality. However, despite situating early childhood education within the free market, the relationships between the quality of the early childhood setting and price are not as simplistic as other products of the market (Shugan, 1984). Although parents can be enticed to enrol

in lower-cost early childhood settings when they perceive the quality is of similar value to those of a higher cost (Yoon, Oh, Song, Kim, & Kim, 2014), parents and families of children who are given their choice of early childhood educational providers are not necessarily equipped with the knowledge to discern quality, or are driven by necessity (Moss, 2009). These conditions negate the argument that parents hold the capacity to act as rational and autonomous actors when considering early childhood education, and brings into question the assumption that educational decisions can be reduced to a cost-benefit analysis.

Neoliberal ideologies have also reconfigured the relationship between the educational setting and the family. In the educational sphere, the relationship of accountability has been augmented from between teachers and parents, to teachers, parents, and the state (Biesta, 2010). Accountability is not solely focussed towards parents or children, but rather to “regulators, to departments of government, to funders, to legal standards” (O’Neill, cited in Biesta, 2010, p. 58). The neoliberal subjects - both the teacher and the child - are viewed as “manipulatable man” (Olssen, 1996, p. 338), wherein continuous assessment and surveillance are enacted in order to ensure responsiveness and demonstrable (measurable) entrepreneurial activity. Additionally, neoliberalist discourses of human capital position children in light of their future potential (Buchanan, 2016; Kj rholt, 2013); the future of children are no longer solely the concern of the family, but the concern of a state jostling for position in the future market. Not only are children viewed in such a way by the state, but teachers are encouraged to view children in this way. Self-management moves to the fore in determining well-being, lessening the interdependent vision of this dimension of humanity (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017). Neoliberal tools of governance are honed towards dissection, not only within individuals but between individuals. We are urged to see ourselves and each other in light of our current levels of productivity, and children in light of future productivity, compelled to split-screen our vision in relation to this dual bind of present and future.

The free market of early childhood education has not promoted the increase of quality in educational provision lauded by economic theory. Within educational settings, particularly in early childhood, the market-driven approach “does not work as markets are meant to do; it does not guarantee quality or efficiency, and in fact dispenses services in a highly inequitable fashion” (Ball and Vincents, 2005, cited in Moss, 2009, p. 21). The ethics of applying market sensibilities to the lived experiences of the child within the early childhood setting are questionable, as “[u]nlike material commodities in a market, parents cannot easily obtain a refund or a new model if they are dissatisfied with their child’s outcomes” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006, p. 116), and more importantly there is no ability to replicate lived-experiences for the child. The rationality of education through the economic lens does not capture the full ramifications of what is lost when community-based settings are pushed out of the market. Community-based settings fit within the not-for-profit category, with no financial gains from the conduct of the service (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2018). Moss (2009) contends that the status of the educational service (profit/not-for-profit) directly relates to the quality of the service, with not-for-profit providers more likely to produce higher levels of quality. The promotion of the free market has significantly lessened the presence of the not-for-profit settings within the Aotearoa New Zealand milieu, raising the contention that the conditions for quality early childhood education is concurrently lessened.

Yet, successive governments of Aotearoa New Zealand have promulgated the competitive market within education, normalising economic discursive practices within early childhood education and enabling owners to profit from children’s education. Additionally, legislation has been enacted to stimulate the market of early childhood further despite participation in early childhood education working under the auspices of a voluntary undertaking, participation within early childhood education has been made mandatory for parents receiving social benefits (New Zealand Government, 2013). Beneficiaries not enrolling their children within early childhood settings face a “50% cut in their benefit payment if they do not use (and pay for out of their benefit)

the type and amount of early childcare and education they are directed to sign up to” (ChildForum, 2013, paragraph 2). This strategy supports the plans of the government to raise participation levels to near-mandatory levels of involvement of 98% (National Party of New Zealand, 2017). For those not in a position to be pressured by this legislation, enticements to participate are articulated through the neoliberal discourse of individual competitiveness. Adverts describing early childhood involvement as “giving [children] the best opportunity to succeed in life and in future formal education” (Kindercare, 2014), target participation for those not pressured by governmental legislation. Tensions arise when fear advertising is utilised in order to increase market share, and education is presented as a commodity, “something to be sold, traded and consumed” (Roberts, 2007, p. 351).

Gravity, Grace, and the Concept of Attention

To contemplate the ways in which the philosophy of Simone Weil can enable us to reconsider the neoliberal ideology, it is pertinent to take a moment to discuss the path of her life. Weil lived a very short life, afflicted by great personal physical pain and self-inflicted deprivation generated from her high sense of empathy for those less fortunate than herself. Her experiences of pain developed her concept of attention, which she conceived as a means to experience the pain-saving grace of God. Weil’s negotiation with the concept of God, and her devotion to seeking for faith and the place of salvation in human experience can be difficult to navigate. If you do not share her view of religion, the tone of her writing can be off-putting. However, this paper concurs with Roberts’ (2011) assessment that the use of such terminology is of importance beyond the theological sphere, particularly within the domain of education. Weil’s theological perspectives do not detract from the potential her philosophy can have for secular pedagogy. Weil’s drive to pursue something more, her drive to strive for improvement for others in the world, and her search for the validity in educational experience have much to offer to educators.

Gravity and grace are integral to the concept of attention. Where gravity is the spiritual equivalent of physical gravity, drawing us downwards and exhausting us, grace is the opportunity to experience fulfilment and peace. Weil asserts “Everything we call base is a phenomenon due to gravity. Moreover the word “baseness” is an indication of this fact” (Weil, 2002, p. 2). Our selfish and individualistic acts of human nature is the gravity that lowers us. In order to move beyond acts which are affected by gravity, we must take actions towards grace. To do this, Weil stipulates we must have an “attitude of supplication” (Weil, 2002, p. 3), which is also an act of lowering ourselves, but one she describes as “the descending movement of the second degree of grace” (Weil, 2002, p. 4). In the act of humility, what we need is re-evaluated. We may still feel the press of desire to resist our moments of privation and we may even be convinced to succumb to these desires. But in these moments Weil reminds us, that while gravity lowers us towards baseness, grace allows us to access the spiritual and moral energy which we need to thrive. In humility, in the second degree of grace, we experience a moral gravity, which “makes us fall towards the heights” (Weil, 2002, p. 4). At this point, it is important to make clear, that to desire grace is a selfish endeavour, an act of gravity. Weil asserts in order to access grace, “we must give up everything which is not grace and not even desire grace” (Weil, 2002, p. 13). In order to access grace, it must not be an object of desire, but a welcome opportunity; not expected but gladly received.

The means through which one can access grace and move beyond the gravity that plagues our existence, is the concentrated act of attention. The concept of attention was composed from experiences Weil underwent during long periods of concentration while listening to Gregorian chants and religious services. It was during these experiences that Weil felt she was able to focus her concentration entirely and pay attention to God, and subsequently open herself to the grace of God. Weil describes that “attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready” (Weil, 1973, p. 111). However, achieving a state of total detachment, emptiness, and readiness is no simple task; it is an act which requires effort and focus. In order to learn how to be

attentive to others, effort is required of the person who wishes to pay attention, effort which is directed beyond oneself and consists of an opening towards the other. The surrender of the self towards the one being attended to is critical to the act of attention. Within moments of pure attention, there is what Weil called “decreation” in which one can be unmade into near nothingness when attentive. In this moment, it as if the attentive person is transformed from opaque to translucent to be able to see the wholeness of the other being in front of them, and for the love of God to shine through the attentive person to the one being attended to. In this way, attention requires the suspension of the self in deference to the focus of attention. Weil writes,

all that I call ‘I’ has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call ‘I’ of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived (Weil, 2002, p. 118).

Within the act of attention, thoughts of oneself or of ones’ desires are put aside. In the act of total attention, the deferment of the self is so complete that the concept of the ‘I’ dissipates, and one is entirely in the present, open to receive the inconceivable other. In this context, the definition of ‘inconceivable’ is not the common usage which would be more analogous to unbelievable. It is rather a way in which to express the inability to understand the other and to situate this as a necessary and integral element of openness to the other. Openness precludes selfishness. As such an act cannot involve thinking of oneself.

It would be easy to assume that attention is an act which is undertaken through a force of will; through a concentrated act of energy and might. However Weil cautions us to resist such conceptions, for this confuses the act with physical exertion. Weil writes that in her teaching, if she asked the students to pay attention, this undertaking became confused with a muscular effort, the will being too ingrained in the connection to our bodies. Instead, her notion is that attention is desired but only through passivity, not will. Attention through an act of wilful desire is concerned with pursuing the other, but Weil asserts that, in order for us to attain attention, we must draw back from what we are focussing upon. Weil writes “only an indirect method is effective. We do nothing if we have not first drawn back” (Weil, 2002, p. 117). We must withdraw and remain passive.

As with grace, the desire for attention must be passive. Although desire is necessary to attain a state of attentiveness, the desire to achieve it cannot consume the person. Attention is not connected to consumptive power, rather to passive consent. The desire must be passive, must be patient, and consent to attend towards others. It must be content with waiting in order to attain the attentive state. Weil writes that attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready. This is where attention connects with grace, as “grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void” (Weil, 2002, p. 10). The act of attention is a humble and receptive act. In order to attain grace, one must first demonstrate humility, patiently deferring towards others.

Weil writes “attention, taken to its highest degree is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love” (Weil, 2002, p. 117). In Weil’s view, attention is a necessary prerequisite for love, and when engaged in complete attention towards other, one cannot help but love the focus of one’s attention. This is a love that falls beyond conceptions of reason, an irrational love generated from openness and humility. Rationality is considered to be an aspect of humanity which should be reconceived in order to be reapplied towards the act of attention, as to access the redemptive power of grace, one must destroy that part of the soul that “reasons discursively and measures” (Weil, 1970, p. 292). Reason and rationality will not aid the attainment of grace; passivity, humility and love will aid our descent towards the heights.

Telling a Different Story: A Weilian Response to Neoliberalism

Moss (2014) conceives neoliberalism as a story, one of many, but one which has pervaded contemporary society to unprecedented levels. The story of neoliberalism outlined earlier in this paper illustrates the neoliberal individual as a rational, autonomous, competitive individual. This is an individual who is driven by desire and consumption and is governed to incite individuals to feed their wants through participation within the market; an individual whose rationality is economic and whose 'best self' is an entrepreneurial self which seeks out self-interests through the mechanisms of competition. Despite its pervasiveness within society, this individual is a construction. As articulated earlier, the relationship between individualism and community within early childhood education is not clearly defined and neither is the relationship between autonomy and early childhood education. These ruptures in the dominant image are places where alternate conceptions can break through. This section will explore these fissures in relation to the philosophical vision of the individual outlined by Weil.

Firstly, as outlined by Weil, our selfish and individualistic acts become the gravity that lowers us. The neoliberal being is conceived as an individual whose entrepreneurial ability determines individual success within the market. There is a connection between the entrepreneurial individual and the gravity of individualism which needs to be explored here. Profit within an early childhood setting is not determined solely through numbers of children in attendance, but by relationships with quality indicators (ratios, group sizes, teachers qualifications). Trends demonstrate that between for-profit and not-for-profit providers, quality tends towards those not concerned with making a profit (Moss, 2009). Owners of early childhood educational settings are successful if they are entrepreneurial enough to ensure that their early childhood product flourishes, yet profits are mostly gained from reducing the quality of the early childhood setting. In this respect, the entrepreneurial owner of the early childhood setting is gaining their profit at the expense of the quality education of the child. Entrepreneurism is concerned with the advancement of the self, and not the concern of the other. This is the baseness which lowers the conditions of early childhood education which could be reconfigured with appropriate attention towards the needs of the child and not the profits of the setting. The profit-making early childhood centre owner accumulates profit at the expense of the education of the child in order to advance their own personal gains.

Furthermore, the neoliberal form of governance is not only concerned with advancing this situation. It is actively involved in stimulating the market to ensure that this model is prevalent throughout education. The current situation, in which the stimulation of the market has reduced rather than improved quality gains clarity through this lens. In this respect, it is plausible (yet lamentable) why not-for-profit early childhood settings have declined, while for profit centres have multiplied. Essentially, it is not solely the owners of the for-profit settings which are involved in the individualistic acts of gravity which lower us. It is also neoliberal technologies' governance from successive governments which promote this situation as ideal and situate multiple generations of children within these reduced forms of lived experiences. Through the neoliberal form of governance, early childhood education is moved towards a baseness of educational provision which is affected by the selfish and individualistic acts which lower us. In order to move beyond these acts, we must take actions towards grace.

To take action, the role of autonomy within neoliberalism must be considered. Neoliberal autonomy is a relationship between the individual and technologies of governance which are devised to promote the neoliberal subject to thrive. Autonomy is not complete unfettered freedom. Neither is it to completely bound the individual. It is a nexus point between the levels of too little and not enough to produce the competitive neoliberal subject. As McNay (2009) pointed out, to argue against neoliberalism on the grounds of autonomy is to place oneself upon shaky ground; neoliberal autonomy does not refuse autonomy, but neither does it grant it unconditionally. Subsequently, what if we approached neoliberalism from a Weilian assumption of autonomy? Autonomy in Weil's view is a relationship: between oneself and others. The self is not concerned with remaining unconstrained; rather the self is concerned with the ability to submit towards others. In the act of attention we are open to the other, acquiescing personal desires in deference to the

person we give our attention to. Our freedom is only freedom inasmuch as we are capable of attending towards the other. This is the notion of freedom, and the quality of it.

Neoliberal freedom needs the individual to produce something of themselves, and Weil would agree that through the act of attention we are engaged in a form of personal growth, but the direction of the will in relation to these two areas of self-growth aid us to understand how they diverge. Within neoliberalism, the technologies of governance are designed to stimulate the will to maintain the momentum to engage in continual self-improvement (self-management). Again, the entrepreneurial individual is invoked here. The will is the strength behind the entrepreneurial individual: those who are lacking within the market are those who are not making enough of themselves and are deemed lazy and indolent – a strain upon those who are active. Here I would propose that neoliberal promotion of the strength of will (as a force of entrepreneurial ability) promotes an individualistic vision of the world, reducing the ability to conceive oneself as connected to others. When increasing our focus upon ourselves, our vision of others remains ill-defined. To adopt a Weilian vision of the other is to attempt to see the other clearly and to occlude our vision of ourselves – to foreground the other, and remove ourselves to the background. In this relationship, self-improvement is no longer concerned with the self, but is rather generated through the strength of our relationships with others.

Finally, Weil's concept of attention is concerned with the notion of (irrational) love for the other through the focus of our attention. Rationality is a central concern of the neoliberal individual, and arguably education is concerned with the development of rational thought, and the vision of the child through a rational lens. In the reconsideration of the notion of rationality, it is pertinent to revisit the following quote

all that I call 'I' has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived (Weil, 2002, p. 118)

It is here that the notion of rationality needs to be reconsidered in order to contemplate the notion of “that which cannot be conceived.” The humility integral to Weil's philosophy disrupts the common sense of our thoughts around rational assumptions towards education and the conception of the child. This is not to infer that children are irrational nor to detract from the necessity to develop a critical and discerning attitude within education. Rather it is to challenge the notion that the central purpose of education is to channel the child into notions of human potential with the concomitant assumptions of how such potential can be attained. Weilian visions of the child through the concept of attention are openings to see the child in their completeness, but not to assume we know who they are. According to Weil, our engagement in attention should be tempered by a humility that in truth we may indeed know very little, and this is not something to be fought through the strength of our will, but rather to be embraced for the potential it has to open us to other ways of knowing that may develop alternate possibilities for being.

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Author: Andrea Delaune has been a passionate early childhood teacher, centre manager and educational researcher in Early Childhood Education since graduating from Christchurch College of Education in 2001. Andrea has recently completed a Masters Degree in Education entitled *Gifted education for infants and toddlers in Aotearoa New Zealand: An insight into exemplary practice*, and is currently working towards a PhD in early childhood and gifted education. Andrea is a

proud wife, and mother of two young children who inspire her to be a better educator and person every day.