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Introduction: Resituating Canadian Early Childhood Education

This journal issue began with a conversation between Larry Prochner and myself at the *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education Conference* in June 2008 held in Victoria, British Columbia. We discussed the idea of bringing together a group of Canadian early childhood education scholars who have been inspired by reconceptualist ideas to make their work more visible and simultaneously to further develop this important body of knowledge. Our hope was that this issue, in conjunction with other existing reconceptualist-informed work, could open spaces for rethinking practice in early childhood education in Canada. The response to the call for papers for this special issue reassured us that Canadian scholars have much to contribute to current discussions in early childhood education, especially when early childhood education has emerged as a key priority for various provincial jurisdictions over the past five years. In my view, an expanded early childhood education system cannot be pursued without critically engaged conversations about our common understandings of childhood and learning. The articles in this issue engage in this conversation.

This preamble brings me to the purpose of this collection: the theory-practice divide in early childhood education. Reconceptualist ideas (based on postmodern, poststructural, feminist, and postcolonial, among other postfoundational theories) have revolutionized the field of early childhood education. This body of scholarly work has the potential to disrupt normalizing early childhood education discourses that create and maintain social inequities in society and to respect differences and diversities. At the same time, critiques have been presented that question the relevance of the reconceptualizing movement to everyday early childhood education practices. Given the importance of diversity in the Canadian context, it seems relevant to challenge the notion that postfoundational theories are primarily theoretical enterprises and explore how the theory-practice binary has been situated in traditional early childhood education discourses. The articles in this volume engage with this challenge. The authors do not view theory and practice as separate categories, nor do they refer to the application of theory to practice; rather, their work can be situated in the intra-active nature of theory and practice as described by Lenz Taguchi (2010).

In this introduction, I do not attempt to define the reconceptualist movement in Canada or to provide a history of its genealogy. Plotting its history and creating a definition of reconceptualist ideas in early childhood is not a linear and simple task. At the same moment that definitions are demarcated, exclusions are created. Furthermore, a historical account needs to take into consideration time and place as uneven and dynamic, something that would require much more space than I have here. Rather, I elaborate on four themes that link the articles in this issue to the broader reconceptualist literature. My

positioning of the articles into these themes is convenient. Each of the articles could be discussed from many standpoints.

Unpacking Binaries and Dominant Discourses

Dualistic thinking has dominated the field of early childhood education since the early 20th century (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007), creating hierarchies of appropriate and inappropriate practices. This binary thinking is sustained through the work of dominant discourses that shape and reshape our ways of being and becoming. The effects of this thinking have been devastating, especially for minoritized children and families (MacNaughton, 2005). The reconceptualist movement has created spaces for interrogating how dualist thinking privileges certain experiences and grants others invisibility. As Lenz Taguchi (2010) argues, we need approaches that move away from *either/or* positions.

Katherine Davidson, in her article "The Integration of Cognitive and Sociocultural Theories of Literacy Development: Why? How?" questions the binaries embedded in thinking and enacting practices of literacy in early childhood. Particularly, she demonstrates how we can begin to reconceptualize the *either/or* approach to literacy: cognitive versus sociocultural theories. Taking into consideration the diversity that underpins our societies, Davidson proposes an *and/both* approach for literacy practices in which context takes precedence.

Taking another problematic, Luigi Iannacci and Bente Graham, in their essay "Mind the Gap: Destabilizing Dominant Discourses and Beliefs about Learning Disabilities in a Bachelor of Education Program," demonstrate how they have worked with student teachers to challenge and resist dominant discourses of disability. They make an important contribution to understanding resistance. They do not romanticize the work of resistance as an easily attainable task. In fact the article clearly demonstrates that given the powerful material effects of dominant constructions of disability, resistance needs to be an ongoing process that requires continual reevaluation of its strategies.

Social Justice

Many early childhood education scholars (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Taylor, 2007) have written about diversity and topics such as racialization, gender, and sexuality. One important contribution made by these scholars is their challenge of singular explanations of these topics. They have acknowledged the invisibility of political pasts, presents, and futures in the fight toward social justice. Postcolonial and Indigenous scholars have also provided useful critical lenses for understanding the histories and continuing influences of colonialism, imperialism, and neocapitalist ideologies in early childhood education (Soto & Swadener, 2002; Viruru & Cannella, 2004). They argue against colonial, oppressive, and exclusionary understandings and practices that silence othered knowledges (Ritchie, 2007).

In "From Theory to Practice: Engaging Newcomer Parents in their Children's Education," Judith Bernhard describes a series of ethnographic studies that outline the experiences of newcomer (immigrant) families. The article draws on Freirian and post-Marxist theorists to argue for the importance of viewing practice-theory as a dialectic process when doing research with newcomer families. To demonstrate this process, Bernhard reviews the findings of

three projects that involved families in unpacking social relations of power in institutional contexts and consequently, “providing parents with tools to reach out to educators.” An important feature of the dialectic theory-practice process that Bernhard proposes is its participatory nature: where views from all stakeholders (families, children, researchers, community workers) are welcome and necessary.

Rethinking Child Development

Since the early 20th century, child development and early childhood education have formed a happy pair: developmental psychology develops theories about young children, and early childhood education applies them (Burman, 2008a; Turmel, 2008). The questioning of this powerful coupling was perhaps the first challenging idea that the reconceptualist movement contributed to the field of early childhood education (Cannella, 1997; Lubeck, 1996). The administration of children’s behaviors, the regulation of children’s bodies, the surveillance of families, the normalization of children’s lives, and the standardization of measures that clearly define the notion of the child were challenged as hegemonic practices. The focus changed from understanding the child to understanding developmental constructions of the child (Burman; Turmel). New questions were asked: What is understood by the term development? Who defines development? Who is included in the definition? Who is silenced? How have developmental norms been constructed throughout time and space? (Burman, 2008b).

Zeenat Janmohamed, in her essay “Queering Early Childhood Studies: Challenging the Discourse of Developmentally Appropriate Practice,” engages with feminist poststructural and queer theory to problematize the assumed heteronormativity in developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) discourses. She argues that certain identities are produced, exchanged, and consumed through developmental discourses. In particular, Janmohamed notes that the universality embedded in early childhood developmental texts renders “non-normative expressions of gender and the ultimate silence around children’s queer identifications, explorations and performances” invisible. She concludes that further exploration is needed of how queer-identified children and families experience the effects of universal discourses of childhood.

In “Becoming Intimate with Developmental Knowledge: Pedagogical Explorations with Collective Biography,” my colleagues Kathleen Kummer and Deborah Thompson and I build on the critique of child development theories and demonstrate both the possibilities and challenges that emerge when teaching developmental psychology differently in postsecondary institutions. We draw on poststructural and posthumanist feminism to present an embodied interrogation of developmental psychology. Our new insights into the embodiment of developmental practice provide spaces for continuing a critically engaged way of teaching developmental psychology. We do not propose moving away from child development in early childhood education, but moving in/with child development and unfolding its historical, political, and social underpinnings.

Politicization of Identities

The concept of identity has been taken for granted and rarely theorized in traditional approaches to early childhood education. However, primarily using feminist approaches, scholars have changed our awareness of the importance of moving beyond essentializing conceptions of identity and have proposed to engage in a quest for understanding processes of subject formation (how identities are created and continually reworked, MacNaughton, 2000). Identity is no longer understood in its singular form, as fixed and stable, or as a property of rational and objective subjects. Rather, identities are viewed as unstable and dynamic, even as contradictory. Our attention has moved toward processes where subjects are always in the process of becoming something else.

In "Theorizing an Early Childhood Educator's Authority for the Advancement of Social Goods," Rachel Langford opens the early childhood educator's dominant identity for interrogation. She questions theories and practices that position educators as lacking authority. Historical notions of authority from which educators have been excluded are viewed as part of projects of citizen subject formation. Drawing on feminist scholarship, Langford proposes to reclaim authority as a viable subject position for educators, although as she claims, authority needs to be reconceptualized and reimagined. Reimagined concepts of authority would not necessarily exclude, but include uncertainty, complexity, and contradictions. These are in fact the requirements of a reclaimed notion of authority to enable educators to work toward social justice.

In a powerful examination of time as mediator of teacher/children/researcher subject formation, Sherry Rose and Pam Whitty, in their article "Where do we find the time to do this? Struggling Against the Tyranny of Time," destabilize dominant classroom practices through a process of experimentation. They eloquently demonstrate the fluidity by which identities are constructed and reconstructed—slipping in and out of dominant and pervasive discourses that shape subject positions in early childhood education. They engage in their experimentation through the practice of ethics. Ethical practice is not understood from a moral perspective, but as an ongoing process of making judgments: a process that is full of uncertainty and undecidability. Rose and Whitty take responsibility for their decisions without relying on universal rules or codes.

Conclusion: Resituating Early Childhood Education

Going beyond the theory-practice divide in educational practices can be a complicated process, but for some reason it seems that the rewards are so great that there is no turning back to pedagogy as usual once one has started to engage in displacing one's understandings and thinking differently. (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 20)

This collection of articles by Canadian reconceptualist scholars working in the field of early childhood education is only a small sample of an ongoing critical project to reveal the need to engage practice in theory and theory in practice in order to explore the complexities of the field. In a neoliberal, postmodern, fragmented, and decentered world where power has become diffused and without fixed boundaries (Hardt & Negri, 2000), we need to hold

onto communities of practice that implicitly and explicitly work against inequities and for social justice by always opening creatively toward something new.

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