

# A personal history of resistance, re-imagining and re-search in a quest for more equitable and just early childhoods

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## Abstract

This essay describes motivations and evolving foci of my work over decades of teaching, international travel, and cross-cultural research; and situates changes in my sense of self as an educator, scholar and reconceptualist within socio-cultural and political contexts. Lessons from children inspire reflections on the challenges of critique *and* negotiating perspectives on early care and education. The essay concludes with provocations for more community-based collaborative inquiry on behalf of childhoods in pluralistic and threatened democratic societies.

**Keywords:** psychological anthropology, cross-cultural research, Reggio Emilia, Italy, sociocultural studies

## Prelude

The burdens and privileges of “elder” status vary across cultures and communities. Fables depict images of wizened sages whose life lessons are sought or, as is increasingly the case, dismissed based on perceived (ir)relevance to contemporary concerns. Age-wise (with requisite wrinkles and grey hair), I’m eligible for this label. As for relevance, it depends.

My curriculum vita lists teaching appointments in elementary schools and universities, publications and invitations to speak in national and international settings, and funded research on the cultural natures of parenting, early learning and child development. What my c.v. doesn’t describe are experiences informing my values, beliefs and goals, in essence my identity as critic and advocate for more equitable and engaging early childhoods—the gist of what follows.

## Childhood in the Jim Crow south

The eldest of five children, I grew up in central Florida and attended segregated schools. Mother taught kindergarten, and sometimes I helped. I was an early and voracious reader whose love of books continues. School was easy, recess and spelling bees my favorite; one special friend missed weeks of school as her family of migrant farm workers moved seasonally. My siblings and I planned annual circuses in our backyard, sold puppies at the shopping center, and spent summers on multi-family camping trips. It was a happy time in my life, although those memories are now tainted with what was kept from me.

The list of what I did NOT know is long and painful to acknowledge. I was in high school before learning there were other schools in town for “colored children.” The Civil Rights movement was not part of the school curriculum. I didn’t hear about the March on Washington where Martin Luther King gave his ‘I have a dream’ speech. My family’s silence about these events is troubling, especially after the deaths of four girls—the same ages as my siblings – in the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham,

where my grandparents lived. On the other hand, I overheard complaints about President Kennedy's intervention when Alabama Governor George Wallace attempted to block two Black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama, my parents' alma mater. I was a high school senior when, thanks to a friend's subscription to *The New York Times*, I began learning about the ongoing civil rights movement, the surge of legal mandates and the resistance throughout much of the south.

### Coming of Age

I was optimistic that, as a teacher, I could contribute to a more equitable and socially just society. Yet those concepts (and strategies to achieve them) were glaringly absent from my teacher education. After satisfying program requirements, I spent my junior year in Florence, Italy, along with FSU faculty and 100 students. That year changed my life.

I relished the opportunity to explore art galleries, practicing my beginner level Italian while ordering gelato and pizza. Children were ubiquitous in public arenas, as were emotionally-laden *discussione*, whether at the market or in the park. My meanderings sometimes led me to protests associated with Italy's *autunno caldo*, where I heard Italian student, labor and women's groups' demands for social change. I left Italy with questions, hopeful I'd be back.

In the absence of email and social media, I could not have anticipated the turmoil in the U.S. upon my return in 1968, including the assassination of Martin Luther King, the seemingly endless war in Vietnam, the U.S. women's movement— each with its own particular backlash, amid early warnings about climate change. When I began student-teaching, the turmoil was less visible, reminiscent of my own 'protected' childhood. It was only when I learned my mother had voted for George Wallace for president that I understood she supported his racist segregationist agenda. I graduated on December 13, 1968. The next day I married and moved from my childhood home. By January 1969, I was an eager and anxious new teacher.

### Teaching as resistance

When the principal escorted me to the third-grade classroom, she handed me a folder of children's assignments in school-wide ability level groups. Minutes later the bell rang and thirty children entered the classroom. What happened next was unplanned and, in hindsight another transformative experience that changed my image of children and myself as their teacher.

Standing at the front of the room, I began with a cheerful *Happy New Year* before introducing myself. *I'm your new teacher and – guess what – my name is Ms. New!* The children sat quietly, staring at me. According to the schedule, announcements from the principal's office were 10 minutes hence. I went on, surprising myself and surely the children. *Let's do something new today! If you'd like, you may move your desk to a new place in the classroom.* No one moved, until someone asked *Do you mean it?* Hoping to convince myself, I replied enthusiastically: *YES! I mean it.*

I remember the happy chaos as children dragged desks to face the windows, in pairs, others clustered around my desk. The rest of the day went as scheduled and I left with a sense of relief amid lingering uncertainty. Uncertainty changed to dismay the next morning when I opened the door and saw desks in rows. As children entered, they looked quizzically at each other, one muttering: *I knew she didn't mean it.* I walked to the front of the room, with no misgivings about what to say. *I did mean it. But we have a problem.* I read the principal's note: *The chairs must remain in rows so the janitor can sweep.* I asked if they knew the janitor. Some did, most did not. I acknowledged it

wouldn't be fair to make his work more difficult. And I asked – *What can we do?* I was surprised and elated to hear Melissa's soft whisper *We could move them back*. And so they did, often closing the door to avoid complaints. That day marked the beginning of our efforts together to 'make our classroom a nice place to be' – a partnership I sustained with children throughout my teaching career.

One morning in early spring, 'my' children swarmed into the classroom spewing racist indignation about the Florida State Supreme Court mandate to integrate schools *without further delay*. I struggled with how to ethically explain why ending school segregation was 'the right thing to do' without directly criticizing their families. Thankfully, the children were eager to talk about the pending change, including how to make friends with new 'different' classmates.

I left for another position at the end of the year, having gained a new **respect for children's ethical sensibilities as well as their vulnerability to prevailing prejudices**. Neil & Postman's *Teaching as a subversive activity* (1969) validated my behind-closed-doors approach to teaching for a more peaceful and equitable world.

### **Learning and sharing what we know about young children**

My most formative lessons in learning how to teach were at a university laboratory school, where faculty explored 'project learning' within mixed age classrooms, in my case, 5- to 7-year-old children who stayed with me for three years. As I learned about the children I was hired to teach, I developed supportive relationships with families. It was a heady experience, with challenges pushing me to be a better listener *and* a better communicator. How to respond to an African American mother's concern that I was sending her Black child home "uppity?" -- to the social worker about why children were rinsing out beer cans in our water table? -- to the physical therapist when a child with cerebral palsy requested and was granted a "committee" of friends to assist her in performing a cartwheel on the playground? Closing the door was no longer an option.

I brought these classroom experiences with me as a doctoral student at Harvard. Although academic discourses were unfamiliar and most professors were uninterested in my classroom experiences, I was motivated to acquire a more scholarly vocabulary and put it to good use.

Under the tutelage of Robert A. LeVine, my goals expanded in alliance with more nuanced motivations: (1) gain a deeper understanding of socio-cultural influences on parental ideologies and early development; and (2) acquire methodological skills of psychological anthropology to conduct my own research. I was also eager to contribute to the corpus of research literature I was so intent on consuming. My dissertation committee supported my choice of Italy as research site, given my previous experience in that culture and because it would add another contemporary western culture to the cross-cultural literature. Accompanied by our infant son and his father, I launched an ethnographic study of parenting in a small town in central Italy. Observations and interviews confirmed the care of children as a shared responsibility in and outside the home. Living in the community allowed insights into the role of personal histories in infant care practices, and the prejudices imbedded in the term *immigranti* to describe families whose families had migrated decades prior from Southern Italy. As soon as I joined the faculty at Syracuse University, I began exploring ways to return to Italy.

### **Timing is everything.**

It was 1986 when I first met Loris Malaguzzi as he was helping select examples of children's project work in preparation for a traveling exhibition of Reggio Emilia's *servizi del infanzia* (early childhood services). I was dumbstruck at the complexity and

quality of children's drawings. I asked about the origins of the city's early childhood services and he explained (paraphrasing) '*We didn't know what we wanted to do. We only knew what we did NOT want to do!*' He dismissed traditional Italian child care as 'making children stupid' and encouraged me to return the following year with my students. I had just met an Italian reconceptualist!

In this same period, NAEYC released draft guidelines to *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, validating my experiences as a teacher and a parent. I invited local teachers to join me in providing encouraging feedback; our contributions were acknowledged in the subsequent publication. I spent the next several years traveling between Italy and the U.S., teaching classes and presenting at NAEYC conferences, most often about what I was learning in Italy and in collaboration with Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, George Forman. Following encouragement from the late Carol Seefeldt, I published my first article on Reggio Emilia in *Young Children* (New, 1990). Soon after accepting a position at the University of New Hampshire, I organized a week-long study tour to Reggio Emilia for 69 early childhood educators. I also attended the first RECE conference.

Inspired by Reggio Emilia as well as new RECE colleagues, I was having second thoughts about my earlier endorsement of DAP. In an opening session at NAEYC, I critiqued the very concept of what was by then "the green Bible," drawing on images from Reggio Emilia to illustrate more advanced theories of learning and bolster my accusations of ethnocentrism. I was in good company, as Mimi Bloch, Sally Lubeck, and Shirley Kessler published their own critiques.

I encouraged then-NAEYC President Lilian Katz and Sue Bredekamp to visit Reggio Emilia. In turn, I was invited to join a small group of ECE leaders to revise DAP, with greater attention to theoretical advances of early learning and development and explicit recognition of culturally diverse ways of caring for and teaching young children. One revision meeting overlapped with a RECE conference in Ann Arbor, necessitating an early departure. As I was leaving, a RECE colleague asked, *So you're going back to the other side?* Confused as to this depiction of my position, I explained, with a 1970's mantra: *Well, if I'm not part of the solution, then I'm part of the problem.* Revised DAP guidelines were published in 1997, with numerous references to Reggio Emilia. In spite of this positive response to public and published critiques (Mallory & New, 1994), I was uncertain about my reconceptualist credentials.

In ensuing decades, I moved to two other universities, and conducted three major research projects, the first to understand Reggio Emilia's early childhood services as distinct from other Italian cities with 'quality early care and education.' The second study focused on parent and teacher interpretations of *partecipazione* (understood in Italy as civic engagement). As I toggled between research, teaching responsibilities and new speaking engagements, NAEYC continued to revise DAP guidelines in light of new research and political pressures on U.S. early care and education.

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, my focus had shifted from theoretical and practical advances in how children learn in the classroom to the cultural psychologies (LeVine, 2016) of diverse national policies on early childhood. Travel to international conferences, teaching with international graduate students, and hosting visiting scholars dramatically expanded my knowledge of culturally diverse interpretations of 'quality' early care and education and 'competent' teachers. My network of international scholars inspired an international ECE encyclopedia (New and Cochran, 2007). Editing a volume on *Anthropology and child development* (LeVine and New, 2008) was especially satisfying as we integrated our disciplinary perspectives. Subsequent exchanges with Bob reminded me of discussions in Reggio Emilia, focused on the critical need for

collaborative and multi-method studies -- as long as they included ethnographic documentation of children's actual lives (LeVine, 2016).

Consultancies, including an OECD review of Italian early childhood policies, offered new insights into local, regional and state interpretations of early childhood, provoking long conversations with Sally Lubeck about national vs cultural distinctions. Other consultancies revised old questions about effective advocacy on behalf of children, including a U.S. AID project in Egypt and a subsequent humanitarian team visit to Dnepetrovsk, Ukraine, each focused on early childhood special education. As I write this essay, wars are waging in or adjacent to these two countries and I'm reminded of how much of what I knew then (and know now) seems irrelevant to children, teachers and families in those settings. Questions of timing and relevance also hinder data analyses of a third study, completed just prior to the pandemic, on Chinese and Mexican immigrant parents' perspectives on children's readiness for U.S. schools.

### Provocations

My thesaurus doesn't know the meaning of the word 'reconceptualist.' My own understanding includes, at a minimum, working at the intersection of critique and advocacy, in this case for more equitable and socially just early childhoods. The state of the world makes clear there is more work to do. So how might we do better? I wonder...

*Who else might we invite to join us as we move beyond critique to re-imagine better worlds for young children? What organizations might be open to our ideas and concerns?*

*How might we better integrate our expertise with what is understood at the local level, especially when threats are eminent?*

*How could we more effectively share what we're learning about young children with their families? with skeptics?*

*How can we talk so that others will not only listen, but engage with us for mutual understandings?*

### n.b.

With thanks to the editors for including me in this thought-provoking process, I'm going to take my small dog Ruby Bridges for a walk. I hope someone asks me about her name.

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