Critical Scholarship in Early Education and Care: Writing and Speaking for/with Others

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Abstract

This essay raises questions regarding the primary aims of, and the ethical responsibilities involved in, writing and speaking publicly as individuals, but especially on behalf of a group such as RECE, and to or for unknown and unknowable others and audiences. Drawing from leadership experiences across the over 30 years of RECE, I unpack examples of recent public statements made, and focus on the power of and the ethical responsibilities of critical scholarship and activism.

Key words: Critical scholarship, reconceptualizing early childhood education, ethics and action

Who has the authority to act or speak for whom?

Recently, a small number of people from the newly formed policy caucus in the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) organization wrote a position statement focused on critique of the State of Alabama's governor for her statement that the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) 4th edition of the *Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) Guidelines* (2022) was too "woke," and too focused on LGBTQ issues and anti-racist curriculum (see receinternational website blog "solidarity with US early childhood educators). The Governor fired her State ECE Director for supporting DAP, and removed DAP guidelines from all early childhood programs.

The RECE Policy Caucus statement was put on the RECE website and circulated through other social media. It was a good effort, but given the dangerous tensions and critiques that prevail, what more might we, as RECE, an international group, have done? How to choose when to do things and who should speak or act for whom?

In another more recent example, the RECE Steering Committee decided that a statement from RECE leadership would help to respond to questions about our future 2024 conference that was to be held at Bethlehem University in Palestine. Four members of the Steering Committee volunteered to write a brief statement that was published on the RECE website (see receinternational.org statement on violence in Israel and Gaza, link in references) and on other social media. The statement was focused on the effect of war and violence on families and children in both Israel and Palestine, and on the violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (see United Nations, on child rights convention in references) and called for an immediate ceasefire. The RECE Steering Committee statement received both positive and negative reviews when sent out; several people felt the statement was not strong enough. Because of the ongoing conflict—the conference in Palestine has been postponed until another year.

In this short article, as a senior and founding member of RECE, I wanted to think about the primary aims of, and the ethical responsibilities involved in, writing and speaking publicly as individuals, but especially on behalf of a group such as RECE, and to or for unknown and unknowable others and audiences. My provocation flows from this question: As we often acknowledge and critique the histories of settler colonization in

various countries, and in the USA, including in school curricula and assessments and in our own teaching and research, how can we best act as critical allies, and in alliance with others, without speaking or acting on behalf of others? What knowledge systems do we have that make us the one(s) to have the authority to speak (or write) "truth" about others, and other nations or conflicts (Foucault, 1980)? But what does it mean to be silent--To act, or not act? These are ethical and moral as well as social and political issues; do I/we have a responsibility to write, act or speak—Why? Whether? When, where, and how?

Memories—Some Stories

I am an "Elder" in the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) organization and have been part of the RECE community since its beginning in the late 1980's. I am also a 77-year-old white woman from the USA, mother and grandmother, and a retired Professor. Over time, I have worked on issues of education and cultural diversity, and early education and child care policy and pedagogies, not only in the USA, but in selected countries in Africa, Western and Eastern/Central Europe, Scandinavia, and elsewhere (e.g., Bloch, 1987; Bloch, 1992; Bloch, Holmlund, Moqvist, & Popkewitz, 2003; Nagasawa, Peters, Bloch, & Swadener, 2023). I have worked in regions of extreme poverty in West Africa, and in the USA.

My early training allowed me to appreciate and use both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in my research, and to know, appreciate, and use different theoretical approaches over time. After I completed undergraduate degrees in Math and Psychology in 1968, my first job was as a mathematical statistician at the US Census Bureau where I worked on the census undercount that occurred in low income rural and urban areas. I also did volunteer tutoring with young children in Washington, D.C. In 1969, I decided to start doctoral work in early childhood education and child development after reading about Project Head Start and its emphasis on early education and "catching children early" (early intervention).[ii]

In the early 1970s, I was also immersed in second wave feminism and became very interested in child care provision and policy; like so many others, I was also engaged in protests against the Viet Nam War. When my husband completed his PhD in international economics, he took a job at the University of Dakar in Senegal, in part, because I was interested in cross-cultural research there. In Senegal, I my first study *on* women's work and child care in a rural village, and later, in 1979 during a post-doctoral fellowship focused on cross-cultural studies in human development and anthropology, I returned to Senegal and did qualitative field work on young children's activities and the organization of women's work including child care. In each of these studies, I researched and wrote about "others," though as I had my first and second child with me during the second study, I would say the Senegalese mothers did a fair amount of observation and comment about me as mother, too. Later, I moved toward more collaborative studies with teachers in the USA, and in cross-national research, but still with many questions.

My first full-time academic job was at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as an Assistant Professor in 1980. By then, I had a great appreciation for interdisciplinary work in psychology and anthropology, and quantitative and qualitative research methods. Colleagues Gary Price, Carl Grant, Michael Apple, and Tom Popkewitz pushed me to expand my thinking and reading, as did my first graduate students—Shirley Kessler, Daniel Walsh, Janice Jipson, and Beth Blue Swadener. Another colleague, Herbert Kliebard, an expert in the history of curriculum, helped me to realize developmental theory was only one of multiple influences on curriculum. Michael Apple pushed me to go beyond a simplistic race, class, and gender analysis in my otherwise well received article on the history of aims and effects in early education and child care (Bloch, 1987), while Tom Popkewitz pushed me to learn more critical curriculum theory, suggesting that my work in anthropology and child development/developmental psychology were

atheoretical. Fortunately, I took these comments and critiques as an intellectual challenge.

With graduate students, we read work by other US early childhood researchers including Jonathan Silin, Amos Hatch, Bill Ayers, Joe Tobin, Sally Lubeck, and Valerie Suransky. We also read books and articles by Valerie Suransky (later Valerie Polakow,) Valerie Walkerdine, Bronwyn Davies, and Erica Burman focused on critiques of developmental psychology, as well as more general critical theorists Basil Bernstein, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Nikolas Rose, Chandra Mohanty, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and others. My faculty colleagues supported my work in West Africa, including me in rich and long-term exchanges that allowed me to do meet and work with Miriam David, Gunilla Dahlberg, Kirsten Holmlund and Ingeborg Moqvist, Jeanette Rhedding-Jones, Glenda MacNaughton and Julie McLeod (Australia), and Vera Brofman (Russia). These opportunities were important in forming scholarly networks before the RECE conferences began and later.

The RECE conferences began through a series of discussions and meetings at conferences and amongst ourselves in part because so few were doing early childhood research using critical perspectives or even qualitative research. We started to plan the first RECE conference as an experiment and the first conference, which was hosted in 1991 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, turned into thirty years of conferences. Many wonderful new ideas emerged, and, as we'd hoped, ideas and policies were critiqued; but the long-term impact of our ideas and critiques still seems questionable.

RECE 30 years later: Moving toward action and questioning voice and power

Today, RECE has become an international organization. Some issues are the same as at the beginning; the critiques of DAP have continued for over thirty years (see Kessler, this special issue)—while others are quite different, as one would expect with more diverse and transnational voices as part of the conferences and organization. Even more than in earlier years, we draw from a variety of critical theoretical and methodological frameworks. My current interest tends toward exploring post-human feminist and materialist theories (e.g., Braidotti, 2022), and post-qualitative research methodologies. Over the years, multiple journals, books and book series have emerged that highlight more critical theoretical and multimethodological research. In this way, some aims of RECE thirty years ago have been achieved.

On the RECE website, we speak of RECE as an organization that describes its scholarship and activism within a social justice framework. Our individual and collective work—including modes of resistance and collective action have been successful on some fronts, but, with some exceptions, have impacted broader policies only a little (Bloch, 2018). The work to open up small rhizomatic spaces of dialogue, to engage in critique where there had been none, and to generate new beliefs, and different ways of engaging with each other through writing and action have, nonetheless, been influential. To younger academics, the space of RECE seems to support and encourage new ideas and work, as well as opportunities to act together, as we had hoped.

But what should we, as the RECE community or organization, do now to be a more effective international voice to speak out together when necessary or to work toward change? As stated earlier, how do we choose when to do things and who should decide and act? Might we define strategic alliances within our group or with groups that we have not allied with in the past to promote or resist policies of common interest? When is it all right to speak on behalf of others, including children? When is it better to remember our own participation in colonizing thought and actions through the existence of unequal power relationships, privileged positions, and histories of colonialism and imperialism?

At a conference in New Zealand, Maori and Indigenous Australian colleagues raised important points and critiques about multiple RECE presentations, suggesting that the white western researchers studying Indigenous children were reproducing colonial unequal relationships as well as inaccurate knowledge about children. The indigenous researchers who were long-term members of RECE asked for a RECE statement and greater power within the conference. In response, a specific and intentional indigenous caucus was formed, and one Steering Committee member to represent Indigenous researcher concerns was designated.

Another example--Several years ago, there was a response to the OECD Early Learning Assessment of four-year-olds, known as the "Baby PISA." Quite a number of RECE members took it upon themselves to try to fight or resist this. Later a group in New York, led by Lacy Peters and others, came together in a panel discussion to formally protest and interrogate the goals and format of the assessment. The early efforts led to a statement of protest signed by over 200 individual scholars published in this journal, as well as on the RECE website (Urban & Swadener, 2016). Several other journal articles were published in prominent journals; these efforts together did have some impact.

RECE members, through their affiliations or work with other organizations, have banded together in effective ways to resist governmental policies, with varying success. Some have participated actively in formulating new government or NGO statements about curriculum and more culturally inclusive ways to do assessments. I am thinking particularly of work done by Mathias Urban with UNESCO and other international organizations, as well as other effective lobbying done by the Social Justice in Early Childhood (SJIEC) group in Australia. Another recent example are protests resulting changes in government policy and curriculum frameworks promoted by the Ontario (Canada) Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC).

In 2019, when the policies were to intern thousands of young migrant children who had crossed the Mexican border into the USA at the Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico borders, we held a RECE conference in New Mexico that focused on migration and children in the borderlands. RECE also held our conference in Bethlehem in 2009 and planned to return in 2024, as stated earlier, as a way to show solidarity with Palestinian educators, families and children.

At a conference in 2022, Gaile Cannella and I were challenged by friend and well-known feminist post-qualitative researcher Patti Lather who asked us what *we* were doing now that we have the power to affect change or to push for more collective action?" Here, I think it is important to say—after some thought--that the role of critical theory-oriented early childhood/child care scholars' writing and presentations has been very important by itself. It has been vital to provide a space for intellectual critique and new visions of what might be questioned or perhaps what ought to be in this field. Yet, I continue to wonder whether our individual and collective actions are sufficient? What is the specific responsibility to affect more transformative change? Are there ways to make alliances with others to enhance our collective voice and our knowledge in relation to our power? In which moments are we too silent; in which moments are we in need of being silent, needing to listen to and support others? Levinas (1969) in *Totality and Infinity* suggested that listening to the other—to begin to know the other—is paramount. When does our "expertise" give us the authority to speak truth to/for others? But when is this not the case? I am not suggesting that any of us should be, or could be, silent in the face of injustice--for to not speak or act is also a form of violence. But could we use our research, writing, speaking, and actions to listen more, and then to form more strategic, powerful alliances and actions.

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[ii] I later critiqued early intervention and its deficit assumptions, as well as the assumptions embedded in the phrase "catching children early" in Bloch (1987) and elsewhere.