

Effective vagabonds? RECE in the micro- and macro-politics of critical early childhood scholarship

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Abstract

What is the purpose of early childhood education? This question frames critical RECE scholarship. As we approach the second quarter of the 21st century, I suggest it is time for a critical reflection on how we imagine our future *wayfindings*. Drawing on Freire's insistence in the *directivity* of education, and Fernand Deligny's image of the critical educator as vagabond, I argue we should—and can—engage more with the macro-politics of early childhood research.

Keywords: Critical scholarship; macro-politics of education, nonviolent guerrilla

Early childhood education in (times of) crises?

What is the purpose of education? This is the fundamental question that frames the three decades of RECE engagement with critical scholarship. Any attempt at approaching this question inevitably takes us into the historic and ongoing struggle between the *mainstream* and the *margins* of the educational establishment which is, I suggest, a good starting point for a critical reflection on where we are, and how we might imagine our future *wayfindings*. The global picture at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century is one of mutually reinforcing existential crises, all of which are impacting young children, their families and communities: climate catastrophe, loss of biodiversity, pandemic, war and violence, displacement and forced migration, erosion of democracy and human rights—all in the context of dysfunctional global capitalism.

In the face of an increasingly powerful global alliance between mainstream research – *Big Social Science* (Torrance, 2015), neoliberal policy agendas, and corporate interests — critical scholars have been systematically marginalised. Reflecting on the “historical present” of critical qualitative inquiry, Denzin and Giardina (2016) come to the following conclusion: especially those scholars in the humanities and social sciences doing critical, feminist, poststructural, postmodern, and posthuman research face a crossroads, one in which (a) the act of research is inherently political; (b) that act is governed by a particular free-market politics of research in the corporate university; (c) (post-)positivism still dominates this conversation; and (d) anti-foundational approaches to research are often marginalized. (p. 5)

RECE: spaces of resistance and mutual support

Critical early childhood scholars have been trying hard to carve out and protect spaces of resistance from within which they continue to question seemingly unquestionable truths and the rules of the game of the ‘normal science’ (Kuhn, 1962, p. 23) mainstream early childhood research has become. Internationally, we have built a community of scholars and supportive spaces that have allowed opening early childhood research to new areas of theory, philosophy and methodology. Michel Foucault's work has provided us with the necessary tools for understanding the workings of power in all our understandings, conceptualizations and actions (MacNaughton, 2005). Drawing on the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, non-linear, rhizomatic thinking has shaped our analyses and practices (Olsson, 2009). More recently, feminist/queer, new materialist and posthuman work, inspired by writers like Rosi Braidotti (2002, 2011) and Karen Barad (2007) has further

challenged our understandings of what research might mean when mind/meaning/matter/agency/ can no longer be separated or attributed to distinct Cartesian researcher-subjects. They all contribute to a shared history, going back to the late 1970s, of “asking questions about the narrow perspectives of the dominant empirical research in child development/ECE in research in the United States and in Great Britain, Australia, Northern, Western, and East-Central Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa” (Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, 2014, p. 3).

The emerging critical work eventually found its home in the international RECE group, which held its first conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1991. Measured in terms of new and unconventional thinking, sustained critical debate and scholarly *output*, the mission to *reconceptualize* our inquiries, understandings and practices concerning young children has surely been successful—as documented, not least, in two edited volumes (Bloch et al., 2014; Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, 2018). In his contribution to the debate, Michael O’Loughlin (2014) recalls a sense of “nurturance, hope, possibility, and a perpetual wish for more” (p. 63) at the very heart of the RECE movement. He also wonders for what, if anything, RECE and its critical contributors will be remembered “in a world of predatory capitalism, ruthless mechanical notions of accountability, and disinterest in the existential and liberatory potential of care and education” (O’Loughlin, 2014, p. 63). O’Loughlin’s (2014) question is one that the neoliberal, corporate university, in new-managerialist speak, regularly framed as *impact*: Have we had “any lasting influence on policy and practices?” (ibid). The answer, on a global scale, has long been discouraging. As countries emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, only to face a perfect storm of mutually reinforcing existential crises, there are encouraging signs the picture is beginning to change (Urban, 2022). However, while some light is beginning to “fall through the cracks,” like Michael O’Loughlin (2014), we are “still waiting for the revolution” (ibid).

Corridors of power and the purpose of education

Having been involved with critical scholarship in early childhood for most of my professional and academic career I am well aware of the marginalisation of small-scale, mostly qualitative, and usually un- or under-funded research in the corridors of power. But I have also come to believe that proactive exclusion and disregard by policy makers and research councils is only one aspect (albeit a highly effective one) of a more complex picture. Faced with a hostile external environment, critical early childhood inquiry, appears to have circled the wagons and entered a phase of introspection. At conferences and seminars, there has always been a tendency of talking to ourselves rather than the outside world. This is understandable and necessary because mutual support and solidarity are, in my view, the foundations of critical inquiry. But as a result, are we more concerned with analysing policy than actually *making it*?

In his 1925 book, *Sisyphus or the Limits of Education*, Siegfried Bernfeld defines education as “the sum total of the social reaction to the fact of ontogenetic postnatal development” (First published in English as Bernfeld, 1973, pp. 31–32). The premise of reconceptualist scholarship, as far as I am concerned, is that neither of the premises of Bernfeld’s definition—society and development—should be taken for granted or left unchallenged. Yet, it is exactly the connection between the two, the child and society, the private and the public, the individual and the collective, the local and the global, that leads to the fundamental question: what—and who—is education for? Thinking with Paulo Freire I suggest that asking question about the purpose of early childhood education and care in the micro- and macro-political environments we find ourselves in is more important than ever, considering the hegemony of global education *knowledge brokers* (Seitzer, Baek, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2023)—OECD, World Bank, UNESCO and, not to forget, philanthro-capitalist ‘donors’. Freire links the question of purpose to imagined futures: where to from here?

The directivity of education means that education starts from a given level and goes beyond itself. It also means that education has always implicit utopias, dreams, desires and values. I cannot simply say: 'I educate for nothing'. Teachers insist on being teachers, this means they have a kind of dream. (Figueiredo-Cowen & Gastaldo, 1995, p. 18)

Critical inquiry in our field needs a similar understanding of its purpose. We cannot inquire for nothing, and we urgently need to go beyond the self-referential conversation. Our conversations, instead, should be facing outward—and they should be centred around our utopias, dreams, desires and values which we need to move from the implicit to the explicit. This conversation will be controversial, as it would be naïve to pretend that there can be one dream, one set of values, one utopia we all share. But to engage in that conversation, and to proactively initiate it within and, most importantly beyond our community of critical early childhood scholars will be a crucial step in a necessary search for “new and alternative modes of political and ethical agency,” and to confront the “inertia or self-interest of neoconservative thought” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 301). It will require our concerted efforts to (re-) politicise our research. Citing Leslie Bloom and Patricia Sawin, Norman Denzin (2015) suggests five goals for critical inquiry that can serve well for a preliminary orientation of the project of a re-politicised early childhood inquiry:

1. Place the voices of the oppressed at the center of the inquiry.
2. Use inquiry to reveal sites for change and activism.
3. Use inquiry and activism to help people.
4. Affect social policy by getting critiques heard and acted on by policy makers.
5. Affect change in the inquirer's life, thereby serving as a model. (p. 33)

A nonviolent guerrilla movement? for early childhood

Fernand Deligny, the French educator fiercely opposed to and by the educational establishment—described himself as “primordial communist, nonviolent guerrilla, weaver of networks, cartographer of wandering lines” (Hilton, 2015, para. 1). Deligny (1970) suggested that the “liberation of the people” necessarily begins with children, requiring “light-footed educators, provocateurs of joy . . . child-enthusiast effective vagabonds” (p. ?). He also introduced the idea of wander lines—*lignes d'erre*—which would later be taken up by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983) as *lines of flight* in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983).

Vagabonds can be effective (efficaces) in many ways, intended and unintended. Researchers embarking on critical investigations becoming vagabond efficaces is an appealing image to me. Critical inquiry necessarily involves sympathetic non-compliance and subversive challenges to the mighty edifices of certainty that dominate the territory, the land owned and controlled by the comfortably settled. We—RECE—are successfully and effectively engaging in our many local micro-politics of early childhood education. The challenge now is to claim our place as non-violent guerrillas in the global macro-politics as well!

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