

Commentary: Thinking with RECE elders – Where We’ve Been, Where We Are, Where We Want to Go

Marcela Montserrat Fonseca Bustosⁱ

Oslo Metropolitan University

ORCID: 0000-0001-9067-4671

Abstract

This paper takes its starting point in an event with RECE elders at the RECE conference in Manchester 2023. By remembering and writing up personal autobiographic notes and traces from RECE and thinking with the essays from RECE elders in this issue, this commentary reflects, from a personal positioning, on where RECE has been, where we are and where we want to go.

Key words: Social justice. Unknow. Reconceptualizing. Venceremos.

This article has been written in honor of the late Jeanette Rhedding-Jones, my mentor and academic mother, who opened the academic world for me and introduced me to the RECE community. Her words in this text are from my readings of her writings and my memories from working with her and are my responsibility alone.

Who can speak?

The Reconceptualizing Early Childhood conference 2023 was being held in Manchester. I had started to think about what I wanted to present at the conference, when Mimi Bloch and Beth Blue Swadener contacted me and asked if I would chair an interactive panel of RECE elders. Humble and proud I accepted the invitation.

Manchester September 2023: We are gathered in the room assigned to the panel. The RECE elders share their reflections in a powerful session. As the chair, I write short comments from each presentation on a whiteboard. Michael O’Loughlin reflects on his long-time work with migrants and refugee children. His words hit me in the stomach, crawls into my heart. In September 2023 it was 50 years since the coup in Chile, leading to the brutal dictatorship of Pinochet. Born in Chile and fled the country as a young child of politically active parents, this brought back memories of how my family had to flee by airplane to Norway. Today a lot of children are forced to flee in boats. I paint waves on the whiteboard. Those waves disturb me through the whole panel.

I grew up in Norway after escaping from Chile as a young child, and went to kindergarten, school and university here. I noticed from an early age that what I experienced at home: language, music, food, smells, ways of doing and being, did not count in educational settings, my Chilena voice was not interesting nor relevant. Before the coup my mom, together with other students inspired by Pablo Freire, travelled to rural places teaching campesinos and trabajadores en las granjas how to read and write. My mom’s experience was an inspiration for me, studying to be a teacher in early childhood education. But this part of my identity and life trajectories had no place in my education.

I don’t remember exactly when, but at some point I chose the strategy of being a clever girl, working hard to reveal the teacher’s expectations, and perform in exemplary ways according to these. When I started my bachelors’ degree at the university, I had become an expert in hiding the complexities of lived experience from a minority position. Before I go on, I want to underline that this is not a sad story about oppression, but about who has access to which identity positions, and about unconsciously using strategies that work, to answer and adapt to the grand

narratives of how to do early childhood education in Norway. A strategy to be included in the dominating discourses is to succumb to the unmarked majority practice by hiding the minority identity and performing the taken-for-granted majority identity in educational settings. I met Jeanette for the first time when I started to do my masters degree in early childhood. By then I knew I was in no position to speak. Voice was available through repeating the majority discourse cleverly and correctly. But Jeanette, encouraging me to be brave, told me "... without the experience of being other you simply will not know where to begin" (Rhedding-Jones 2002, p. 107), urging me to read and write, and to place "the voices of the oppressed at the center of inquiry" to paraphrase Denzin (2017) in Mathias Urbans text in this issue.

And in this context Jeanette started to introduce me to reconceptualist ideas, asking me with Spivak's text (1994): who can speak?

Speak fast, clever English!

Challenging me to rethink who had access to positions to speak from, Jeanette and I shared experiences of being far away from close family, not speaking our home language, and challenges with access to dominating discourses and taken-for-granted practices. Jeanette told me about the RECE community, and how RECE gave her the possibility to do collaborative work with not only colleagues, but also friends. One of the ways I remember she described this to me, was how getting together at RECE conferences gave her the opportunity to speak fast, clever English.

This idea of the possibility to speak fast, clever English is something that has always stayed with me. Metaphorically, RECE also offers me the opportunity to speak fast, clever English. Not literally, of course, English being my third language. But by critically examining and challenging dominating structures and power systems in a safe space that questions and at the same time supports the work I am doing. This work is always done in a context. Collaborative work and participatory research is, as I see it, at the core of RECE. The RECE community supports, inspires, and pushes us to challenge the status quo, the idea of a fixed reality, to strive towards revealing how privilege is distributed, always already aiming for social justice for all.

Fighting for social justice has always been an important part of my life but had never been thematized during my education at the university. The first time I heard about this in an academic context was when Jeanette introduced us students to Gaile S. Cannella's book on social justice in early childhood education from 1997 (Cannella, 1997). With my peers we struggled to understand the concept, not because we did not understand the English word, but because we struggled with what the concept could mean in an academic context. This unpacking of concepts is not something to be done with after doing it once. It goes on and on, as Cannella advised in 1997, and advises critical researchers in her text in this issue.

Unpacking and reconceptualizing also involves deliberate, conscious unknowing. Jenny Richie says in her text in this issue, that she "consider(s) that one of the keys to wayfinding in search of pathways for social, cultural and ecological justice, is a deliberate, conscious unknowing" (Richie, article, this issue). When I started to read and re-read reconceptualist texts, it changed what I was able to imagine as possible intellectually. But meeting, listening to, and becoming with Jenny and Cheryl Rau's presentations and the RECE conference, really rocked my world! I had always worked hard to be a "good" and "clever" student, and then meeting Jenny and Cheryl, acknowledging their ancestors, the land and language, and singing in their academic presentations, voicing colonial critique, made a deep impression on me. Practices that, for me, were always already positioned outside the order of things, to paraphrase Foucault, were theorized, acknowledged and lived on the academic scene. Not only presented intellectually, but also sung, done, and lived, challenging colonial practices

both locally and globally. In her text in this issue, Jenny urges us to move towards deeds, not (only) words.

I started this text by asking who can speak. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994) provoked this question and introduced me to post-colonial perspectives. I grew up not having the language to raise colonial critique, at the same time as the Mapuche people in my country Chile, and the Sami people in my current country Norway, were continuously colonized and oppressed, and, in Chile, even incarcerated and killed by the military dictatorship. Protesting was the tool I new of, the tool I grew up with. At the same time as Jenny urges us to unknow, and move towards deeds, not (only) words, Mapuche and Sami, side by side, are fighting against hydro power development at the holy river Pilmaiken in Chile, and wind power development in a traditional reindeer grazing district in Fosen in Norway. Deeds, not (only) words!

Spivak also (literally, by writing the introduction to *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1974)) introduced me to Jacques Derrida, and I fell in love with his writings. Jeanette and I laughed at this; voicing postcolonial feminist perspectives and *at the same time*, always already intertwined in the colonial, patriarchal world. Metaphorically speaking fast, clever English, the least I could do, was to write full names in the reference list. This “At the same time” followed me since the first time I read Derrida, and this “at the same time” is the crux of the matter for Derrida. Every experience is a unique event, and *at the same time*, every experience has traces of repetition (Derrida, 1973). Or as Jeanette would say, “No matter how many readings are made, the matter of meaning can never be resolved” (Rhedding-Jones 1996, p. 7). Words, and at the same time, deeds.

We can speak!

Jeanette always shared literature with me to sharpen my critical gaze, encouraging me and at the same time challenging me to ask questions that were not asked, and disclose perspectives that were silenced (first read, then talk!). Even when she had her 30th treatment and two strange men were in the room, she asked them to leave, stating “You can’t have twenty-five years of reading and publishing about Foucault without taking your critique of power with you wherever you go” (Rhedding-Jones 2013, p. 30). I was always very thankful to Jeanette for how she had received me when I entered the university, not really knowing what I was doing there other than performing the role of a model minority doing what my family expected of me. She mentored me, challenged me and at the same time she cared for me in this new environment. I remember I wanted to show her how grateful I was, and I worked hard to do so. My family too wanted to show her our appreciation, and I remember we discussed what we would give her as a present. I ended up asking her what we could give her. And she answered what has shaped my career as a teacher, supervisor, mentor and researcher. She said she had more things than she needed (and she told me a few stories of gifts she had received and how she interpreted those; I’ll tell you those stories on another occasion), and she asked me do for the students coming after me what she had done for me, and to be for the students coming after me what she had been for me.

For me, this is always already the crux of the matter for RECE. By creating spaces where students at the beginning of their academic career and established critical scholars can come together and present, listen, discuss and become together is one way to move towards deeds, not words, to paraphrase Jenny in this issue. Every time I meet students for the first time, when I have students coming to my office, or when I invite students to come to RECE to get to know our research community, I remember Jeanette. Jeanette showed me pathways to my academic and activist voice. And she keeps on doing this through her writings and through my memories. And she does it to new upcoming academics through the Jeanette Rhedding-Jones outstanding dissertation award. And through ways I can’t even imagine. I do not know exactly where this takes us in the future, but I know, that for me, this is a direction I want us want to go.

Where we want to go

RECE has shaped and shapes my academic career. And RECE creates opportunities for raising our voices, both individually and collectively, together we can speak!

Manchester September 2023. After the panel all the participants leave the room. Some continue the conversations, while others go on to find the room for the next presentation they are going to. I stay until everyone has left. Those waves I painted on the white board still disturb me; they won't let me go. I go to the white board and paint a floating device next to the waves. After that conversation I need to do something.

My heart is in Chile and my thoughts are in Gaza, while I am physically in Norway writing up this paper. The professional and the personal are always already intertwined, I have the candles we lit in the memorial for Jeanette when RECE went to Kenyatta university in Nairobi, Kenya. I light them for a short time regularly. The professional academic and lecturer is somewhere in between and everywhere, on this bridge we call home (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002). Challenging dominating practices in academia, and in teacher education and ECEC, can be dangerous. But it is not only dangerous; it is also emancipating. And it is not only necessary; it is urgent and always already in need to be done. I am proud and grateful to be a part of the RECE community.

Borrowing from Jenny Ritchie's words again, let's keep on asking what we have unknown until now, and what needs to be unknown in the future? Or to paraphrase the conference theme for RECE 2023 in Manchester: where have we been, and where are we at. And where do we want to go - together we can speak!

Venceremos!

References

- Anzaldúa, Gloria & Keating, Analouise (Eds.) (2002). *This bridge we call home. Radical visions for transformation*. Routledge.
- Cannella, Gaile Sloan (1997). *Deconstructing early childhood education: Social justice and revolution*. Peter Lang.
- Derrida, J. (1973). *Speech and phenomena*, (David B. Allison, Translator). Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1974). *Of grammatology*. (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Denzin, Norman K. (2017). Critical Qualitative Inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry* 23(1), p. 8-16.
- Rhedding-Jones, Jeanette (1996). Positionings poststructural: some Australian research in Education. *Nordisk pedagogik*, 16(1), 2-14.
- Rhedding-Jones, Jeanette (2002). An undoing of documents and other texts: towards a critical multiculturalism in early childhood education. *Contemporary issues in early childhood* 3(1), p. 90-116.
- Rhedding-Jones, Jeanette (2013). *Under the hair. A memoir*. Published by family and friends.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1994). Can the Subaltern Speak? In Williams, Patrick & Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial Theory. A reader*, (66-111). Columbia UP.

ⁱ Marcela Montserrat Fonseca Bustos is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Oslo Metropolitan University in Oslo, Norway. She was mentored by the late Professor Jeanette Rhedding Jones from 2004 to 2012, and attended her first RECE conference in Madison, Wisconsin in 2005. Her research interests include critical perspectives on inclusion, privileges and power

hierarchies, and her current work evolves around critical diversity management, parental cooperation in ECEC institutions, and critical multiculturalism and racialization. She also works with kindergarten teachers doing action research, challenging taken for granted practices to unknow and reconceptualize ECEC practice. Correspondence with Marcela can be done at the following email address: marcmon@oslomet.no