

Introduction to the Special Issue: Critical reflections and provocations from reconceptualist “elders”

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Abstract

The introduction to this special issue focusing on reflective essays written by founders and early contributors to Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) scholarship, provides a brief history of the RECE movement, conferences, and contributors. We then discuss the broad themes of the essays, including provocations raised and visions for the future.

Key words: reconceptualizing early childhood; critical theory; social justice; global childhoods; scholar activism

The Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (known as RECE) organization is a largely academic organization focusing on critical perspectives surrounding early childhood, including early education and child care in and out of group settings, as well as policies and pedagogical practices that affect young children, their families and early childhood educators/caregivers. RECE conferences have been held since 1991; in 2024 we will have the 30th conference.

This special issue was inspired by the start of an Elders Group within the RECE organization over the past several years. At the 29th Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) conference, hosted by Manchester Metropolitan University in England in September, 2023, a small group of six “Elders” engaged in an interactive session in which RECE founders and early organizers were asked to frame their long-term commitments in relation to their work related to the RECE organization, and to describe some of their most important contributions as scholars, and to the early childhood education field. For this special issue, we asked these six and other Elders in the organization to write short articles including one or more broader provocations or to provide some advice for others based on their career or current perspectives on important and persistent issues for others to consider. Twelve colleagues based in five countries were able to write for this special issue. An earlier career colleague who served as the RECE session’s facilitator has provided a commentary.

Although twelve were able to do articles for this issue, we want to acknowledge the many other early RECE scholars who are not part of this issue, but were founding and long-term influential members of RECE; these include Janice Jipson, Joe Tobin, Gary Price, Amos Hatch, Beth Graue, Valerie Polakow, Mary Hauser, Bill Ayers, Lourdes Diaz Soto, Richard Johnson, Gunilla Dahlberg, and Glenda MacNaughton as well as the late Sally Lubeck, Jeanette Rhedding-Jones, and Liane Mozere. Each of these individuals helped in establishing RECE and/or in contributing career-long scholarship that was often first shared at RECE conferences and/or helped to provide the foundation for the ways the conferences were done, and the diversity of ideas as well as critiques that were presented.

Their contributions, which are too numerous to cite here, were provocative, creative, and quite significant (see Bloch, Swadener, and Cannella, 2014/2018 for further details). We also recognize that childhood studies, including sociology of childhood, and more critical studies of children and childhoods began well before our first conference in 1991. We want to acknowledge the different but parallel groups of scholars in other countries whose work has contributed and continues to contribute to our individual and collective work. We begin with a brief history of RECE and follow with a discussion of the essays that were written for this special issue, with emphasis on the provocations they raise.

A brief history of the founding of RECE

While the first RECE conference was organized in October, 1991, the work leading up to that first meeting had been going on in different ways for much longer. It is difficult to find a starting point. Perhaps we should start with the context.

The majority of early RECE scholars had been involved in different political movements in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA as well as in other countries. The political unrest that led to a rebuke of colonial rule in the Global South and in their eventual independence also had foundations in critical theory and scholars’ writing, as well as social and economic movements of a variety of sorts. In the USA, the 1960s and 1970s involved early childhood reforms that led to Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, and Project Head Start as well as, after many peaceful and less peaceful protests, desegregation of schools and voting reforms. The second wave of feminism, along with easier availability of birth control brought long overdue attention to women’s wages and educational and employment opportunities, and a more visible and empowered recognition of the importance of and demand for child care.

A variety of critical scholars, especially but not exclusively, from Latin America, North America, Great Britain and continental Europe drew on socialist and neo-Communist frameworks in initial important interrogations of the role education, including early education and child care, played in the reproduction of class, race, and gender inequalities. Finally, political movements toward more recognition of LGBTQ rights and Queer Theory, and Disability Justice emerged as crucial backdrops for many scholars who came to see RECE as a scholarly home.

By the mid-1970s, a group of critical curriculum theorists in the USA were meeting and some coined themselves The Reconceptualists (Pinar, 1975). By the 1980s, several researchers in the fields of early childhood education and child care were experimenting with critical theories and different methodologies in our work, and some were beginning to use the work of the Reconceptualists, as well as other critical curriculum scholars. In the USA, a few early childhood researchers began to participate in the Bergamo Conference for Curriculum Theory held in Ohio that ended up as a model for the RECE conferences. As many of the essays in this special issue give more detail about these beginnings in this issue, here we also turn to the few of us that also went to the American Anthropological Association meetings where we were presenting cross-cultural research related to early education/schooling and child care.

The first people to imagine doing our own small conference focused on critical curriculum theory as well as interdisciplinary studies in early childhood education and child care but with varied research interests. Some were focused on curriculum and pedagogy, others on critiques of child development, and others on child care policy. Some drew on anthropological research in the USA, Africa, Japan, Western Europe, and Scandinavia, while, as suggested above, others used neo-Marxist frameworks, feminist or queer theories.

RECE as a conference, from the beginning, included those who wanted to experiment with different theories, different ways of doing research (methodologies), and ways of presenting or writing and communicating what we found or thought was important. Most were focused on political, and social action and many had been involved in different activist groups long before the first conference in 1991.

By the late 1980s, while many were doing different types of research (Bill Ayers, Joe Tobin, Jonathan Silin, Sally Lubeck, Amos Hatch, Mimi Bloch, Beth Swadener, Shirley Kessler, Rebecca New, among others), the *field* of early childhood education was still oriented toward quantitative and positivist research, and developmental theory was still absolutely dominant in the USA, and, we believe, elsewhere (Bloch, 1992). There were few early childhood academic positions in early childhood that encouraged critical theory-oriented analyses of curriculum or policy; there were virtually no journals in early childhood education that even published qualitative research. There were few professional conferences that seemed to appreciate the work in early childhood education *we* (the early RECE group) were doing, the questions we were asking, or the more radical critiques of curriculum, teaching, or policy that we were posing.

Several key publications came out in the 1980s and early 1990s. These included Valerie (Polakow) Suransky’s *The erosion of childhood* (1982), Valerie Walkerdine and others’ critiques of developmental psychology (e.g. Walkerdine, 1984), Sally Lubeck’s *Sandbox Society* (1985), Bill Ayers *The Good Preschool Teacher* (1989), and Joe Tobin’s *Preschool in Three Cultures* (1989). In 1989, Amos Hatch hosted a conference focused on qualitative research in early childhood education which resulted in an important article, as well as a book on qualitative research in early childhood settings (see Hatch, 1990). At nearly the same time, Shirley Kessler wrote a key article on Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education with a major critique of the NAEYC 1987 guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices (Bredekamp, 1987; Kessler, 1991). The first edited journal (Swadener & Kessler, 1991) that focused on reconceptualizing early childhood education was published in 1991; it was followed by an edited book *Reconceptualizing the Early Childhood Curriculum: Beginning the Dialogue* (Kessler & Swadener, 1992).

A small group, including Shirley Kessler, Beth Swadener, Janice Jipson, Daniel Walsh, and Marianne (Mimi) Bloch decided to plan a specific conference titled *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education* to bring people together as a network for graduate students and faculty to present and discuss new ideas. The first conference was held in October, 1991 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. RECE conferences were modeled after Bergamo’s small, affordable, nonhierarchical and intimate format and its emphasis on critical theory and praxis.

At the 1991 RECE conference, many came despite distances. At the time, our hopes were to help to open up the theoretical, transdisciplinary, and multi-methodological foundations of knowledge about early childhood education and child development. By looking beyond quantitative research and by drawing on different disciplinary and theoretical lenses, including critical, queer and feminist theories, we hoped to raise new questions, to interrogate policies and practices in early education and child care, and, through our collective and individual work, to foster more equitable experiences for educators/caregivers, young children, and families.

Finally, with our initial group’s expertise in cross-cultural and transnational studies, we hoped to reconceptualize what “normal” and “abnormal” childhoods and development might be. We hoped to bring a more inclusive and global perspective to bear on the diverse richness of childhoods around the world, while also using scholarship and policy analysis to examine global inequities affecting young children’s development, education, health care, and basic needs.

The first eight conferences were in the US including Hawai'i, with international attendance (notably from Norway, Aotearoa Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, Denmark). In 2000 the conference was held in Brisbane, Australia, and in 2004 in Oslo, Norway, and later in Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, UK, Hong Kong, Palestine, and Kenya. The array of issues and theories shared at the RECE conference also became far more diverse. For a deeper dive into past programs see the archives at <https://receinternational.org/conference-archives/>

More than thirty years after the first conference, what do some of these “Elders” remember as significant in their articles for this special issue? How did some of these scholars choose the topics they focused on in their research careers? How did they shift in their academic careers theoretically, in policy, in teacher education, and as scholar activists? Below we focus on the themes we saw in the provocations, issues, or advice contributors included in their essays.

The RECE elders represent diverse strands of critical scholarship, and career-long experience and leadership. The essays also represent only some of the theories and methodologies used by these and other *non-elder* (younger) RECE scholars. A wide array of “new” theories, post-methodologies, and commitments are in current use, including feminist new materialism, more than human, critical race theory, and a focus on indigenous, as well as black and Latinx feminist frameworks.

Marcela Montserrat Fonsesca Bustos (from Norway and Chile) graciously agreed to represent the mid-career group by adding some comments reflecting her concerns and those of many others in the broader global community and younger generations.

Themes and Provocations

While we did not arrange the essays in chronological order, as many were doing concurrent work in the beginnings of RECE, we did group them somewhat thematically so that those writing about similar issues or framings of the field might be put into conversation with each other and the reader.

We begin with a focus on critical curriculum theory, and the germinal work of **Shirley Kessler**, as she applied curriculum studies to early childhood contexts and to her critique of the NAEYC *DAP Guidelines*. In this essay, Shirley reflects on her work and makes a case for more collaborative work with early educators including greater attention to those doing collaborative action research with educators. As one of the first to name our work as reconceptualist, Shirley's essay provides critical history of our beginnings.

This is followed by **Rebecca New's** essay. Like Shirley, Becky became an early critic of DAP (Mallory & New, 1994), arguing that developmental and cultural diversity were critical and working with NAEYC to address ongoing concerns. Her essay discusses her work in Italy, as one of the early US educators to work with Reggio Emilia, and her emphasis on equity and inclusion in early childhood contexts. Becky describes evolving themes of her work over decades of teaching and cross-cultural research and reflects on lessons from children and challenges of critique and negotiating perspectives on early care and education.

Beth Blue Swadener's essay follows, adding an emphasis on disability justice and anti-oppressive practices in early childhood that helped frame her critique of deficit discourse, notably “at risk” constructions of childhoods and families. A life-long scholar/activist, Beth's essay also speaks to her personal and professional histories as they have joined together in the ways she writes and has done research that complements local and global policy advocacy and scholar activism over her career.

Mimi Bloch further unpacks advocacy in her essay, focused on issues of who speaks for whom in research and policy circles. She asks what does it mean to advocate for change as an organization—and as RECE? She highlights her belief that the wide array and diversity of reconceptualist and critical scholarship in ECE has impacted the field of early childhood education, but questions whether that is sufficient given global inequities and conditions. How might RECE form more powerful alliances, or engage in actions with greater effect?

Mathias Urban shares a vision for local and global advocacy and argues that RECE scholars have been successfully and effectively engaging in local micro-politics of early childhood education. Mathias writes that it is time for a critical reflection on how we imagine our future *wayfindings*. Drawing on Freire’s insistence on the *directivity* of education, and Fernand Deligny’s image of the critical educator as vagabond, he argues that RECE scholars should—and can engage more as non-violent guerillas with the macro-politics of early childhood research.

Nicola Yelland also reflects on global childhoods, diverse methodologies and ways we define and do research with children and families. Her provocations include ways in which prevailing, often deficit views of childhood shape children’s experience in schools, and how we might be more persuasive in advocacy including for multi-modalities of learning in a high-stakes testing context that has narrowed curriculum.

Sue Grieshaber reflects on social justice and how she came to connect with RECE. She argues for the potential of participant design research (PDR) and partnering as method, due to its focus on educational justice. Socially just research treats all participants equitably and aims at transformative social change by addressing injustice. Sue suggests this approach to research might allow small-scale and qualitative/post qualitative research to have greater impact.

Gaile Cannella continues the call for social justice, critical qualitative inquiry, and an activist focus of our inquiry – addressing justice, power, and equity. Rather than provocations, Gaile offers advice to other critical researchers including the importance of fostering the construction of the humble, relational, and collective self; the importance of challenging persistent hegemonies in higher education that promote judgment and neoliberal values; and to link direct actions to inquiry.

Michael O’Loughlin, the first of two RECE scholars who are also psychoanalytic therapists, follows with a reflection on his long-time work with migrant and refugee children urging readers to “imagine pedagogical systems or a therapeutic milieu that will enable children to begin to give an account of themselves (cf., Butler, 2001)...to deconstruct the systems of recognizability embedded in the familial, cultural, and political matrices within which they are nested.” He further reflects on the urgency of moving children from “mere existence to ethical relationality and agentic possibility.”

Gail Boldt, the second scholar with psychoanalytic training, reflects on three decades of research and teaching “taken up by questions of curriculum and pedagogy as perpetrators of children’s suffering, but in practice ...my efforts have been to support children’s experiences of pleasure and possibility and of themselves as mattering in vital ways.” She continues to argue that more expansive and vitally engaging classrooms are central to our commitments to just and equitable education. The current political, social, and economic pressures on all of us challenge us to continue to insist on creating spaces in which who and what we are matters. She ends by reflecting on ways that RECE has been a living enactment of the power of such mattering.

Jenny Ritchie draws on her long-term relationships with Maori scholars and communities, as well as her commitment to the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in early education more generally as she reflects on the value of learning how to *unknow*. She further reflects on young peoples’ concerns about climate devastation, biodiversity loss, and the ongoing pillaging of the environments and underscores their focus on “Deeds not Words”, collaboratively enacting pathways for restoration of the wellbeing of our biosphere. Her provocation is, “what have you unknown, what else can you unknow, and what are your wayfinding pathways towards Deeds not Words?”

Finally, **Jonathan Silin’s** essay on the value of allowing an educated hope to be our guide in moving toward the future provides reflective intergenerational guidance and a vision of the future for earlier career RECE scholars and colleagues. In the midst of pervasive social injustice and threats to well-being, Jonathan expresses hope that, “younger colleagues can realize that a sense of wholeness, ... is buttressed when we modulate our personal ambitions working for a better world ... in the face of the ineluctable challenges of a society run amok.”

We end with this message of “hope in the face of the ineluctable challenges of a society run amok” - and world, we must add. As this special issue is being published at a time of persistent global inequity, and a period of two highly visible wars taking an enormous toll on children, we acknowledge the continuing contributions of critical scholars, the challenges of the work, the varying approaches to activism, and the importance of remaining hopeful within rhizomatic, unpredictable, and oftentimes terrifying times.

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