

Pathways to Justice and my RECE Journey

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Abstract

In this essay I reflect on themes of social justice that have pervaded my work and life, including decarcerating disability, anti-oppressive education, work in African contexts, and my ongoing critique of the damaging power of deficit discourses regarding children. Drawing from examples of theory and research meeting policy and practice, I raise questions about the future of these endeavors and the roles of RECE.

Key words: social justice, children's voices, disability studies, social policy

Early memories

As long as I can remember I have cared deeply about social justice. I grew up in a white working-class community in northern Indiana, had friends and a next-door neighbor with disabilities, and developed an enduring interest in Africa by fourth grade. I organized friends in our neighborhood to find ways to support older neighbors, do performances in our yard or basement, and engaged in hours of imaginary play. I had an early interest in maps, travel planning, and health – in part because of losing my mother to cancer at age ten and my first stepmother three years later.

As I grew up, I loved working with younger children, including an early volunteer experience in a public preschool and serving as a respite care provider for families with disabled children in high school. I majored in psychology and philosophy and took many women's studies classes – an emerging field. My concentrations in psychology were child development and developmental disabilities, and within philosophy, later social theories, including critical and feminist theory. I studied with a former doctoral student of Herbert Marcuse, Michael Washburn. The seeds for a combination of critical theory and childhood studies were being sewn. To this day, I tend to frame issues in a dialectic and yearn for social transformation.

My first fulltime job in the early 1970s was in a state institution for children and youth with developmental disabilities including autism. While I didn't yet use the discourse of decarcerating disability (Ben-Moshe, 2020), I was deeply troubled at the children's relative abandonment, isolation, and treatment plans. I became part of the deinstitutionalization movement and worked in group home and independent living settings for several years. I was also active in intersectional movements including civil rights, women's rights, and the anti-war movement. I had friends who moved to Canada during the Vietnam war and one of my favorite books was Howard Zinn's (1980) *A People's History of the United States*.

With a move to Madison, Wisconsin for my Master's degree, I deepened my learning with and about young children, teaching in a preschool lab and volunteering with advocacy programs focused on children and youth with disabilities. After completing my master's, I coordinated a statewide professional development program focused on group home staff and became an active supporter of the self-advocacy movement. I was active in an array of community-based groups focused on hunger, poverty, and disability rights. My work in the latter area became the focus of a co-edited book (Rogers & Swadener,

2001), *Semiotics of dis/ability: Interrogating categories of difference*. My work with Kenyan colleague, Kagendo Mutua also reflected these themes.

The roots of RECE in Madison

My next position (in 1981) was Lecturer in Child and Family Studies in which I mentored preschool student teachers and taught a course on cultural diversity in early childhood education. This reinforced my long-time interest in what was later called “antibias curriculum” and ways to counter early learning of racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. This interest in antibias curriculum and equity issues in education brought me to work with Carl Grant, Mimi Bloch, and Michael Apple (as well as George and Louise Spindler) in the PhD program in Curriculum and Instruction at UW-Madison. My coursework brought together themes that had long been part of my community activism and deeply held values. My dissertation, a year-long ethnography of two inclusive, multicultural, multilingual child care settings, provided rich opportunities to share classroom and playground spaces with children, listen to them, and learn about formal and informal curriculum related to human diversity. I also cultivated my interest in cross-national policies affecting children and interest in early childhood policy and practice in sub-Saharan Africa.

Within weeks of graduating in 1986, I co-led a youth against hunger trip to Senegal and The Gambia. I have been doing research and volunteer work in Africa ever since – most of it in Kenya, where I have worked since 1992. I have focused largely on cross-national child and family policies, children’s rights, and children living in difficult circumstances and their resilience. After having a Fulbright and doing collaborative research with Kenyan early childhood leaders Margaret Kabiru and Anne Njenga (Swadener, Kabiru, & Njenga, 2000), I have continued to return to Kenya and co-founded two non-profits with colleagues there.

While completing my dissertation (1985-86) and during the following years, I was part of a group of early childhood researchers using non-dominant critical and feminist theories and qualitative methodologies in our work, often with an emphasis on equity and social justice. I was part of organizing sessions at the American Anthropological Association and the Bergamo Curriculum Theorizing conferences with titles such as “through children’s eyes and in children’s voices.” Other recent graduates of UW-Madison (e.g., Shirley Kessler, Janice Jipson, and Daniel Walsh), colleagues at other universities including Amos Hatch and Joseph Tobin, and I were struggling to find outlets for our scholarship in mainstream journals or at AERA and searching for alternative intellectual spaces.

Many of us had been influenced by the earlier critical curriculum “reconceptualist” movement (Pinar, 1975) and started discussing the need to reconceptualize early childhood curriculum and the emerging field of childhood studies. Shirley Kessler and I edited a special issue focused on reconceptualizing early childhood curriculum and soon after a book (Swadener & Kessler, 1991; Kessler & Swadener, 1992). Shirley was writing critically about NAEYC’s “developmentally appropriate practice” and I was critiquing deficit discourse in the field and advocating cultural inclusion and antibias practices.

In 1991 we held the first RECE conference in Madison and I have been involved ever since, along with many graduate students. We functioned for many years as we began – with anarchist approaches to organizing – flattening hierarchies (e.g., no keynotes), using consensus to make decisions with those doing the labor making key decisions, and trying to keep the conferences affordable. In 1998, several of us, including Shirley Kessler, Jan Jipson, Mimi Bloch, and Gaile Cannella, founded the Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood SIG in the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Critiquing deficit discourse: From theory to policy

My work in the late 1980s and early 1990s emphasized two interrelated themes – the importance of listening to children using in-depth ethnographies that foregrounded their voices (and participation rights) and decrying the pervasive deficit discourse or pathologizing of childhood, as reflected in the report *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and so much education scholarship and policy. The label children and families “at risk” was gaining traction and other colleagues (particularly Sally Lubeck) and I began to analyze its origins and the damage of its implicitly racist, classist, ableist, and often sexist common-sense assumption in its widespread use (Swadener, 1990). Valerie Polakow’s (1993) powerful ethnographic work focused on children in the “Other America” had a strong influence on this work, particularly her framing of existential versus instrumental discourses and how they related to children’s rights. My most-cited work is a book that Sally and I edited in 1995, *Children and Families “At Promise”: Deconstructing the Discourse of Risk*.

This work influenced a number of dissertations and books over the years and several local initiatives, many of which missed a central point of our work – finding the promise in *all* children and not just relabeling those labeled “at risk.” A center in California promoting “at promise” practices in education led a coalition that advocated related legislation and in October, 2019 a bill (AB 413) passed the California state assembly that required all programs (and language in legislation) using “at risk” be changed to “at promise.” The day it passed, another bill countering the school to prison pipeline also passed and I was pleased that some of the legislators made that connection clear. It was interesting to note all the statutes that were changed to reflect the at promise language in 14 sections of the Education Code and 8 sections of the Penal Code.

Assembly member Jones-Sawyer stated that, “Our education system has adopted the harmful term ‘at-risk youth’ to label our most vulnerable students. That term connotes negativity and it must be changed. The label ‘at-risk youth’ comes from a mindset of deficit, and focuses on what children lack. As a state, we need to move away from this mentality that tells our children they are likely to fail. We must start referring to our youth as ‘at-promise’ which focuses on a child’s immense potential to succeed in all aspects of life.”

Scholar activism and reciprocal mentoring

In this brief essay, I will fast forward to my work as a scholar activist and some of the reciprocal mentoring opportunities this has afforded and extended. One example is the work of Local to Global Justice (LTGJ), an organization bringing together community activists, students and faculty (at ASU) to connect local issues to global struggles. The other is a dissertation/writing support group I started when our College of Education was disestablished in 2010 over great faculty and graduate student resistance.

With a move to Arizona State University in 2001, a group of graduate students and I co-founded LTGJ and organized the first “teach-in,” focused on learning across community and campus social justice activists. As a space for multi-issue activism, LTGJ combines a festival and social forum environment that acts to occupy and re-direct resources of the neoliberal university toward grassroots and globally oriented activism. Our themes have addressed a wide range of issues, from immigration rights, gender, food and water justice, BIPOC themes, and have recently focused on energy (and energizing) justice, and art and activism. Many student leaders from this group have gone on to do organizing work in several countries and some of us have written together (Farago, et al., 2018; Richter et al., 2020), using collaborative autoethnography.

I also worked with students to organize a dissertation and writing support group that continues now, over a decade later, with over 75 PhD students in several majors having completed degrees. In recent years, the group has been comprised of students who have found it challenging to find support elsewhere, including Black, Indigenous and Latine women, as well as white women, international students, and students with visible and invisible disabilities. Many identify as scholar-activists, which allow for deep engagement across different positionalities and activist concerns.

My ethos regarding reciprocal mentoring extends to LTGJ, which became a space in which students, staff, and faculty served as mentors to each other, allowing all to create ways to both challenge systemic and structural inequities, and to subvert the system from within and outside the university. LTGJ allows for the merging of scholarship and activism, a space where scholar-activism is recognized as a form of intersectional pedagogy outside of the traditional classroom (Richter et al., 2020).

RECE has been a source of support to students and to me. Knowing we have the “home place” (hooks, 1990) of a conference and virtual spaces to share ideas, question dominant assumptions and theories, and work for social justice, while centering children’s experiences of the human and more-than-human, continues to feed my soul. I take new delight, with each year, at the powerful scholarship and creativity of RECE colleagues at all stages of their careers. The journey continues and the relationships deepen.

Provocations

How can we transform the persistence of deficit assumptions to ones that see the promise in ALL children? Is changing “at risk” to “at promise” meaningful?

How to best name, trouble and learn with those who are interrupting deficit thinking and its explicit and implicit forms of harm?

What are ways that child rights-based approaches can be culturally relevant and communitarian; can they include the more than human? How might we better collaborate with children?

How can RECE continue to be relevant to early career scholars who do critical work on the margins of dominant early childhood scholarship and practice?

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