

# Childhood and Critical Qualitative Inquiry: A Short Personal Story?

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a short historical description of my cross-disciplinary entangled scholarship that can generally be described as embedded within critical multiculturalism, concern for childhood and diversity, and critical qualitative inquiry. Additionally, I discuss the importance of humility, understanding the higher education environment, always tying inquiry to direct action toward justice, and functioning through positive collaboration.

**Keywords:** childhood, critical, inquiry

Global conditions at the time of this writing make a focus on my own work seem probably too individualist, definitely self-centered, and certainly all too human. We are living within disaster conditions that, I believe, have been entirely the creation of human hegemony and unexamined power orientations in one form or the other. These extreme conditions include continued social injustices and inequities – dangerous and often unquestioned use of violence to solve problems – unjust and disastrous actions broadly that disqualify forms of life that are not labeled human – elimination of ecosystems – and, disrespect and destruction of the earth as a location of biodiversity, material possibilities, and dependability.

Yet, even from within these difficult times, I must believe that we can maintain more just values and construct research, actions, and transformations toward justice for all forms of life as well as for the earth itself. For us as critical researchers concerned with complexities of power and multiple forms and definitions of justice, this work means challenging dominant perspectives as we function as critical public intellectuals, rethinking how to conduct and disseminate our inquiry always/already grounded in just intentions, and constructing lines of flight and actions that could lead to equitable transformations.

## Work that I Hope Can Have Some Positive Impact

My work has been cross-disciplinary, entangled and multiple. However, for clarity, here I discuss it as critical multiculturalism, childhood and diversity, and critical qualitative inquiry. Further, I hope the somewhat linear focus makes clear changes in perspectives that have become increasingly more oriented toward forms of justice as the major purposes.

## Critical Multiculturalism

I began as a teacher working in a public school that predominately served the housing project two blocks away (at the time, “housing project” being the name for public housing built for those who had to deal with extreme poverty). The children were mainly white. Although, my parents had always made a living wage and spent time making sure I could participate in music and organizations like Girl Scouts, each of them had grown up in extreme poverty just before, during, and immediately following the Great Depression in the United States. As my father would often say, “People are

told to pick themselves up by the bootstraps, but many people don't even have boots or shoes." I was taught to recognize the life difficulties experienced by many throughout life, especially in capitalist conditions that disqualify and exclude those who have been denied resources.

During my years of teaching, I came to realize that the system did not seem to support children of poverty or expect life to improve for them. Further, even using individualistic language, both society and the system function as if educating a universal learner. Additionally, today there are still those who would place limits on all those same students, and even blame them for their economic conditions. I came to believe that teacher education had not prepared me to understand or work with these children. I became very concerned about their diversities, believing that I must increase my knowledge and that teacher education programs required major changes. For these, and even more complex reasons, I believed that I should return to graduate school to learn more about children themselves and to attempt to influence teacher education.

In the late 1970s, when I entered a doctoral program, the major discourses were child development based on Piagetian theory and multicultural education generally. My focus regarding children became learning all about developmental psychology, even to the point of conducting an extensive dissertation working individually with a large number of young children in a public school; I was profoundly influenced by Piagetian learning perspectives. Further, as multicultural discourses were emerging, I became aware that there are all types of knowledges and forms of learning; over the years, these possibilities for cultural diversity began to change my beliefs regarding development psychology. But, change is often gradual and does take time.

Along with concern for ways to support the individual diversities of children, I realized that the content and experiences offered in teacher education do not often address possibilities for accepting and respecting all children. However, as a doctoral student and then an adjunct faculty member at the University of Georgia at the time, I was lucky to be exposed to a program that involved undergraduates in extensive work with children in public schools. Even though much of the academic content continued to be that of dominant teacher education, field work exposed those preservice teachers to the cultural and individual diversities of children in real life settings. As I communicated regarding these field experiences daily with people in the schools, but especially with the children and the preservice teachers, I was given opportunities to consider and deal with more diverse experiences in teacher education. Becoming with this diversity of people, one could not deny the need for what some have called critical multiculturalism.

Regarding my example related to work in the early part of my career, I would refer to attempts to reconstruct teacher education using the scholarship of researchers like Ken Zeichner that explored a range of types of field experience, as well as Piagetian constructivist learning (Cannella & Reiff, 1994a). I also explored the pressures faced by new teachers in schools who were often not supported in their beliefs regarding diversity (Cannella & Reiff, 1994b). Throughout the various years of the 1980s and early 1990s, although many in teacher education believed that diversity in learning should be included throughout, others were not supportive. Often it was necessary to put forward one course so that diversity would be addressed; for this reason one multicultural course was included in many teacher education programs. As time passed, I taught this course in my various faculty positions. At Texas A&M University in College Station, we were also able to include more diverse cultural perspectives within curriculum methods courses as well as adding a family and community course with community-based field experiences. We attempted to add a second language requirement as a method for expanding minds and understanding diverse perspectives

(even including sign language as meeting that requirement), but university committees rejected that addition to teacher education.

### **Critical Childhood Studies**

In the early 1990s, I began attending the *Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice*, founded by William F. Pinar (See *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, 1975 & 2000) and Janet Miller that had for many years represented the reconceptualist movement. During that time, Marianne Bloch and former graduate students and colleagues founded the *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE)* conference and movement in which I have participated. Along with my own in-depth exploration of feminist and poststructural work, especially the scholarship of Michelle Foucault, I began to take what some call a critical stance or a feminist poststructural perspective that would always be concerned with the complexities and injustices of power. I came to believe that this critical perspective should be used to reveal how our universalist views of those who are younger label and place limits on them, as well as resulting in power for particular adults and specific groups of children.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, dominated by these concerns as social justice issues, I worked to examine and critique adult (and researcher) constructions of childhood. My most important beginning volume is the book *Deconstructing Early Childhood Education*, published in 1997 because the work problematizes our allegiance to child development, demonstrates how early experience is used to judge (objectify and control) both mother and the family, and critiques play-based instruction as representing a single culture perspective. Second, in 2004, Radhika Viruru and I published the book *Childhood and (Post)Colonization* that illustrates the ways that the notion of child constructs those who are younger as objects and citizens of empire. Yet, we also discuss how both education and research can be reconceptualized toward decolonial practice. My bias is that the field of early childhood education is of major importance because practitioners and researchers pull from all other fields like psychology, sociology and literary childhood studies as well as education. More importantly, however, early childhood workers are physically with those who are younger every day. While all early childhood professionals are not aware of the work presented in the two volumes, the critiques and content provide perspectives that can increase, and have increased, justice for those who are younger as we work with them.

Some scholars and teachers have become reconceptualist, critical partners with those who are younger. An example is my edited volume with Lourdes Diaz Soto in 2010, *Childhood: A Handbook* along with a range of other volumes, work presented at many conferences, and direct changes to classroom practice. See for example, the direct classroom practices of one of my PhD students, kindergarten teacher, April Larremore, in 2016, *Disrupting Gendered Pedagogies in the Early Childhood Classroom*. Additionally, with the emergence of critical, justice-oriented concerns by a range of scholars, a more public and easily accessible location for childhood policy research and dissemination became increasingly important. For that reason, I created this journal, the *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal* through the Public Knowledge Project, Open Journal Systems in 2008, using the software provided by the Simon Fraser University partnership.

### **Critical Qualitative Inquiry**

Over the years, as I hoped to expand justice for those who are younger through my work as a critical early childhood scholar, I began to realize that justice and equity are never achieved in one location but are rather entangled across cultures and fields, and are always/already political. The *International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry* has

become for me a major location for critical scholarship and within which to form alliances with researchers across fields. As part of the congress, we created the *Coalition for Critical Qualitative Inquiry* from within which a range of research projects have emerged including basic descriptions of critical qualitative inquiry within contemporary conditions (Cannella, 2015; Cannella & Lincoln, 2004; Cannella, et al., 2023) as well as research that addresses continued forms of injustice and disqualification like racism (Collins & Cannella, 2021) and the devastating conditions in which many immigrants must often live (Cannella & Huerto, 2019). All of these issues impact those who are younger as well as everyone.

Most recently, my work has been influenced by posthumanism concerns that include the recognition that some people have never been considered human (e.g. those labeled children, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals), the disqualification and even elimination of forms of life that are not “people” but are viewed as owned and to be used by people, and the disrespect and destruction of the earth that is harmful to all forms of life. I believe that critical posthuman work may help us generate increased forms of entangled justice(s), equity(ies) and opportunity(ies) for those who are younger, for life that is never labeled human but is rather more-than-human, and for all of us (Koro & Cannella, 2024).

Finally, as a critical qualitative scholar, I hope that we can increase the activist focus of our inquiry – always addressing justice, power, and equity – taking our actions with/to the public – and even becoming positive agents through actions that counter those that would continue to exhibit and privilege their power over others.

#### **Advice to Critical Researchers (and hopefully, continually to myself)**

**I would suggest that as researchers we always need to foster the construction of the humble, relational, and collective self.** Following Foucault’s 1969 lecture and the chapter that followed in *Language, Counter Memory, Practice* in 1980, I agree that the author is a function of discourse, “there is no author,” no genius, no profound individual self. Further, in *Staying with the Trouble* in 2016, Donna Haraway reminded us of the possibilities that we can, and most likely are, continually becoming-with our entangled relations that may include ideas, other human beings, and various more-than-human life and materialities. I know that I would not have conducted an entangled genealogy of the constructions of child, child development, and early childhood education if I had not been exposed to (and become-with) the works of Aries, Foucault, Banks, Burman, and others – if I had not interacted with other early childhood scholars, especially reconceptualist scholars - if I had not taught (and become-with) young children in our classroom – if I had not become-with my children. I must humbly remember that whatever I have done has been the result of previously unthought becoming relations and often collectivities.

**In attempting to survive in higher education, remember that even without increased capitalist transformations, the emphasis has historically been on judging and grading the work of individual scholars – do what you need to do to survive or leave, but believe that this can be challenged.** With tenure decisions, some have been labelled good enough, even outstanding, and others are disqualified. I would advise critical scholars to construct both new possibilities (like journals, events, actions) and alternative perspectives. Examples within the dominant have included: organizations that support previously unthought critical work, collectives of scholars who stand for each other, critical participatory action research.

**Always conceptualize inquiry as requiring some form of direct action toward justice.** Remember that functioning differently, whether through research, pedagogy, or otherwise, does not always mean one is moving toward justice, diversity, fairness, or

respecting others. Even as critical scholars, we must always critique ourselves, not as a move toward perfection, but as an examination of our becoming with the justice and equity.

**Even during difficult times, be positive and collaborative, appreciating your own life and becoming with the life/lives of others.**

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