

At the Conceptual Crossroads: Exploring Anti-Racist and RECE Identities

Kerry-Ann Escayg
University of Nebraska Omaha
ORCID ID 0000-0001-5003-7192

Flóra Faragó
Stephen F. Austin State University
ORCID ID 0000-0001-8770-0904

Abstract

The reconceptualization of early childhood education, like anti-racist approaches to education in general, is situated within a broader emancipatory model that explicitly centralizes the principles of freedom, justice, and hope as guiding ethical and political commitments. The conceptual intersections between the fields of education and social activism have the potential to transform pedagogies, research methods, and policies at the systemic level by reorienting how knowledge is produced, validated, and enacted. In this essay, by engaging with foundational reconceptualist scholarship and incorporating structured self-reflection questions, we examine how our positionalities—understood as our socially and historically situated identities—inform our approaches to anti-racism and reconceptualist early childhood education (RECE).

Although the individual human experience unfolds according to the circumstances of birth and embodied identities, many individuals encounter transformative turning points throughout their lives (akin to the unveiling of a hidden figure). Such periods are marked by epistemological, emotional, or material shifts, prompting the challenging of longstanding conventions, the initiation of new intellectual or personal journeys, a call for ongoing change, and an urgent need to respond to internal (or external) impulses to begin anew. These moments of dramatic realization or moral reorientation are not limited to those who inhabit flesh and blood, existing in ‘mere mortal’ incarnations; rather, they also take the form of a time-spirit or zeitgeist that pervades entire disciplines, institutions, and bodies of knowledge. Considerable evidence in early childhood education (ECE) demonstrates that both conceptual (theoretical) and empirical (practice-based) turning points have shaped and continue to shape the field’s development. Scholars, practitioners, and researchers have challenged traditional pedagogical standards and instead conceptualized theories and practices that explicitly address the exclusion of culturally diverse knowledges and ways of being and knowing to promote a new regime based on systemic justice for Black, Indigenous, racially minoritized, and linguistically diverse children and their families.

Turning Points in Practice: The Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education Movement

The reconceptualist movement, which originated in the early 1990s, was spearheaded by a group of scholars who challenged the prevailing paradigms in developmental psychology, critiquing the canon’s dominant approaches by arguing that they held undue sway over the production of knowledge and the formation of normative and often deficit understandings of children and childhood (Bloch, 2013). From a reconceptualist perspective, one can reasonably argue that such undue influence functions as an exclusionary apparatus by constraining understandings of children and pedagogical strategies within a predominantly White and universalizing framework. An over-dependence on developmental psychology theories perpetuates power differentials by

privileging certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others, thereby obscuring alternative cultural ways of being and knowing (Kinkead-Clark & Escayg, 2021).

To interrogate these racialized dynamics as embedded within educational theory and practice, Lubeck (1991) advises scholars to “question what we do, why we do it, whose interests are served, and what the consequences are, both intended and unintended” (p. 168). Researchers have addressed these questions by documenting the prevalence of racism in early childhood settings and throughout the broader field of education, demonstrating how inequities are reproduced through everyday practices and institutional structures (Escayg, 2020). Pursuing such lines of inquiry is consistent with anti-racist approaches to early childhood education. In practice, anti-racist early childhood education moves beyond critiquing racism and whiteness as systems of power and privilege to conceptualizing and actively promoting systemic change across all levels of the field, including research, teacher education, and policy (Escayg, 2020; Escayg et al., 2025).

As global racial and economic inequalities intensify, and as young children in the Global South continue to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes—often resulting from policies originating in the Global North and destabilized by a systemic imbalance of power—new questions have emerged that call for renewed critical engagement. As Arndt and Urban (2024) rightfully ponder, “What, at the beginning of the second quarter of the 21st century, does it mean to reconceptualize our individual and collective engagement with young children and the societal institutions tasked with their education?” (p. 230). Upon deeper consideration, we find that such an inquiry exemplifies a similar ethos of provocation, one which not only inspires and affirms, but also demands and necessitates action by compelling scholars and practitioners “to fill in what is missing... and to ‘be angry and dream’” (Lubeck, 1991, p. 168).

In this analysis, we weave the past with the present and the creative with the scholarly, drawing on the key principles of reconceptualist scholarship as a foundation for deep self-reflection and sustained scholarly dialogue, in response to the clarion call “to be angry and to dream.” Moreover, we situate our work within a transgenerational discussion, recognizing and honoring the lived experiences and accumulated wisdom of our experienced RECE peers across the globe, while remaining acutely aware of the challenges posed by our contemporary socio-political climate. Of signal importance, our reflections are grounded in the critical questions and thought-provoking ideas presented in a 2023 special issue of the *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies* journal, featuring critical reflections and insights from esteemed scholars in the field (entitled “Critical reflections and provocations from reconceptualist ‘elders’”).

We examine the intersections of our professional and personal identities as both anti-racist early childhood scholars and RECE scholars, conceiving of these intersections as mutually reaffirming. We discuss how our interconnected bodies of pedagogical work inform and support our approaches to challenging race and racism in early childhood education by envisioning solutions grounded in systemic transformation rather than isolated reform. To that end, two fundamental questions inform this conceptual paper. Firstly, “What are the epistemological and ontological underpinnings that position me as a RECE scholar committed to anti-racist praxis?” The second question takes a two-part approach, exploring both the connections and the challenges that arise when RECE and anti-racism intersect: “How do the ideas and critical perspectives of RECE inform and shape our understanding of anti-racism, and what does this mean for our own work, including how we conceptualize ECE?” As a community of scholars drawn together by shared commitments to hope, advocacy, and activism, RECE functions as both an intellectual orientation and a practical engagement. Historically, RECE scholars have been committed to activism and social justice work, availing of scholarship as sites of intervention rather than passive observation (Bloch & Swadener, 2023).

We invite scholars who recognize these attributes in themselves and whose work aligns with the threads of resistance to engage in reflexive examinations of their own situated knowledge, positionality, and personal narrative. By sharing our perspectives and experiences, we hope to foster a more nuanced understanding of the issues under scrutiny and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable discourse. The passion of anger can ignite our pursuit of justice by sparking a desire for change.

“To be Angry and to Dream”

For many writers, the narrative process, including reflective storytelling, offers a unique and essential insight into conceptual creativity, enabling us to make meaning and interpret our experiences. As we strip away the superficial veneer to explore more complex layers of ideas surrounding a particular concept, theory, or personal experience, our imagination often serves as a vibrant backdrop, fostering the interplay of cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that ultimately inform both our expression and comprehension of the world around us. Finally, we assemble on the metaphorical stage of human experience, where we construct and negotiate our narrative personas, plot trajectories, and conceptual frameworks, while intersecting with the seemingly lyrical phrases and transitional moments that contour and substantiate the subject matter of our academic and literary inquiry. We draw upon the experiential repository of life.

Kerry-Ann’s Reflection: Scene One, Act One: Anti-Black Racism in Early Childhood Settings

I am consumed by anger, indeed enraged, yet a perceptive emotional awareness enables me to recognize that my psychological state exceeds mere rage. Rather, I am experiencing righteous indignation, a morally unsurprising response to injustice, characterized by an intense generative force and protective instinct. A recent conversation with my niece, in which she recounted another incident of racism at her childcare center perpetrated by an early childhood educator, starkly illustrates how systemic inequities continue to manifest in everyday interactions. At only five years of age, she has already been subjected to the indignities of anti-Blackness, including hyper-surveillance (a well-documented feature of racialized childhoods). It is troubling to consider why she must continually endure such injustice, serving as a poignant exemplar of the anti-Black violence in early childhood settings that scholars consistently problematize (Boutte & Bryan, 2021). As my anger gives way to tears, and ultimately, to action, I undergo a transformative shift from emotional response to political and intellectual engagement. My writing instrument becomes a metaphorical sword, sharpened and at the ready, symbolically empowering my scholarly practice as a form of resistance and intervention.

Intersecting Identities: RECE and Anti-Racist Scholar

By decentering our own positions and recentering the experiences of the children, families, and communities who navigate myriad forms of oppression and injustice daily, we are further empowered to reconfigure the locus of knowledge production and prioritize the perspectives of those most impacted. As a scholar in the field of RECE and anti-racist education, I am driven by my faith in the transformative potential of human agency, which I assert can be actualized through the willingness to challenge dominant norms, question established power structures, and engage in critical inquiry without hesitation or apology. This perspective is also informed by the prophetic question posed by Kessler (2023): “I wonder if the research published today by RECE members is helpful in any way in addressing the problems in education, or does it function exclusively to enhance the careers of individual researchers?” (p. 3), prompting us to re-evaluate the purpose and impact of our scholarly endeavors. In envisioning anti-racist early childhood education, I draw upon a relational ethics of accountability grounded in

my connections to my son, my niece, my nephew, my former Black students, and the broader Black diasporic community, who serve as primary points of reference guiding my work.

Although I aspire to the realization of anti-racist early childhood systems, spaces, and practices in Canada and the US, I recognize that this is an ongoing process that requires continued collaboration, critical reflection, and collective action. Thus, I seek to engage in reciprocal and dialogical relationships with Black parents, teachers, and community members, learning from and with them by iteratively co-constructing a deeper understanding of their interests, priorities, and desires for early childhood education that is both racially affirming and responsive to their needs. Through this collaborative process, the intersecting domains of RECE and anti-racism are illuminated, reflecting both the historical roots of resistance and the ongoing outcomes of collective struggle. In the final analysis, my work remains guided by a prevailing commitment to unity and solidarity.

Flóra's Reflection

I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, Jewish, first-generation immigrant woman from Hungary. I grew up listening to my grandmother's stories about the Holocaust, stories about pain, loss, survival, antisemitism, resistance, and resilience. I am also the mother of two young white children and am married to a white man. All these aspects of my identity shape how I view the world and conduct my research with children, families, and educators on race and gender.

For me, engaging with RECE and anti-racist scholarship has meant bravely leaning into contradictions and tensions and building bridges through collaborations with students, colleagues, and organizations in the US and Kenya. Regarding tensions, I am a white scholar whose career is advanced by researching racism, albeit anti-racism at that. I am a white, Western, U.S.-based scholar engaging in service and research in sub-Saharan East Africa, Kenya, a dynamic that is shaped by colonization. I participate in conferences that are not financially accessible to the general public, which exacerbates the "town and gown" divide. I work within a neoliberal setting, with hierarchies and oppressive structures (Richter et al., 2020) that I perpetuate and benefit from, including working at a university where some of the lowest-paid employees who cook, clean, and maintain the grounds are Black and brown, in contrast to most of the highest-paid administrators who are majority white.

My white children attend the only NAEYC-accredited child care center in our rural region, which is a majority-white childcare center, unaffordable to working-class folks and to many BIPOC families in the region. I work in a state where anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) legislation is chipping away at our ability to teach and research social justice issues, where Offices of Diversity on public university campuses and related diversity programming have been outlawed, and where conducting research on anti-racism can lead to (unfounded) ethics complaints to the university and even job loss.

Yet, RECE and reconceptualist scholars inspire me to lean in boldly and to speak and write about issues close to my heart, such as anti-racist and gender expansive research in early childhood. Kerry-Ann, myself, and our colleague Dr. Terry-Husband recently published an edited volume entitled *Anti-Racism in Early Childhood Education: Challenging Whiteness to Implement Just Practices*, featuring the work of 38 scholars committed to promoting anti-racism in early childhood.

Being an anti-racist reconceptualist researcher means that I acknowledge tensions, yet I also perpetually work toward a more just future for all children and families. My heart is filled with anger and indignation at the state of things, and yet with love and hope for a

more just future. It is my ethical obligation to speak up about racism and anti-racism, especially in all white spaces, and to support the next generation of scholars to center anti-racism in their work with young children and communities. RECE gives me hope that despite contradictions and challenges, as Dr. Martin Luther King (1968) so wisely said, “the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice.” However, as reconceptualist scholar-activists we have to do our part to keep that bend toward justice on the long-run for the well-being and dignity of all children, especially those racialized and others marginalized for simply being who they are.

Conclusion

The inception of the reconceptualist movement was precipitated by a group of scholars who, driven by a deep sense of injustice, critically examined their own identities, subjectivities, and lived experiences as foundations for inquiry. By using these as forms of creative and analytical data, they systematically deconstructed, critiqued, and reconceptualized the field of early childhood education, ultimately challenging dominant approaches. As more complex and insidious forms of inequity emerged, additional scholars with similar academic rigor and dedication to social justice joined the effort, expanding its scope and impact. These scholars embodied the core of Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE), which involves maintaining hope, challenging academic norms, and developing new theories and methodologies that reflect diverse ways of knowing and being. We continue this tradition, aware of the tension between anger and hope, and how it can serve as both a guiding principle and a motivator, driving the advancement of RECE and anti-racism collaborations, our vision for a more just future, and our personal, ethical, and professional responsibilities. To dream is to be free; to be angry marks the first step on that journey of liberation and transformation.

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Kerry-Ann Escayg is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Her research focuses on anti-racism in early childhood education, with particular attention to how young children understand, experience, and resist racism in their daily lives. Her work centers anti-racist pedagogies, children's racial identity development, racial socialization, and anti-racist and Afrocentric qualitative research approaches that foreground Black children's voices and perspectives. kescayg@unomaha.edu

Flóra Faragó is Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University. Her interests center around anti-racist and gender expansive care of young children, and more generally, racial and gender socialization in early childhood. florafarago300@gmail.com