CHAPTER ONE

Contextualizing the Reconceptualist Movement in Canadian Early Childhood Education

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This edition of *Research Connections Canada* emerged from a discussion between the editors regarding the low profile of the reconceptualist movement[1] in Canadian early childhood education and care (ECEC[2]). In other parts of the world, particularly Australia, New Zealand and parts of Europe, reconceptualist critiques[3] have become a significant discourse that has fundamentally shifted ECEC practice, theory and research. The reconceptualist discourse questions assumptions of universality and the use, for example, of terms such as 'best' and 'appropriate' that suggest singularity of response in a diverse and complex world. In Canada, modernist perspectives and assumptions continue to dominate ECEC, and reconceptualist alternatives are seldom explored or debated.

While reconceptualist perspectives are rare in ECEC discourses in Canada, we knew of some examples and undertook a search for others. We approached colleagues whom we knew, or suspected, harboured reconceptualist sympathies. What emerged was the identification of a particular 'niche' where reconceptualist work is being done. That niche is cross-cultural work – a very *Canadian* area of interest. It is noteworthy that within the relatively narrow field of cross-cultural ECEC, reconceptualist perspectives appear to be

dominant. In the chapters that follow, we present the results of our search. In sharing these findings, we hope to introduce the wider Canadian ECEC community to the paradigms and propositions of the reconceptualist movement.

Before introducing the chapters, we will first provide a brief overview of the history of the ECEC reconceptualist movement in other countries. In doing so, we will highlight features of that work that provide useful alternatives to the established ways of understanding children, their care and their social contexts. These perspectives provide a valuable lens and aid to reflection on our practice for all of us who educate and care for young children, educate Canadian ECEC workers, engage in ECEC research, allocate funding for research, and develop and administer policies that impact children and families.

We invite readers to join us in looking deeply at ourselves and the contexts in which we work, contexts that include the ideas and discourses that philosophers call 'postmodernism.' The postmodern world has two main features: "an almost universal trend away from things like centralization, mass production, and mass consumption . . . and . . . towards the development of flexible technologies that are developed and used in smaller and more diverse units" (Corson, 1998, p. 2). The chapters that follow show how ECEC has been impacted by the uncertainty, complexity, diversity, subjectivity and non-linearity, as well as the spatial and temporal specificities and multiple perspectives that characterize the postmodern era (Lather, 1991).

Themes of the Reconceptualist Movement

Key elements of postmodernism include the loss of certainty, control and predictability, openness to the presence of many voices and views, and the need to engage with those other views and explore a world of profound diversity. In the postmodern era, process, engagement, dialogue and co-construction take precedence over routines, prescribed best practices, exclusivity and the safe haven of predetermined outcomes. The reconceptualist movement in the field of ECEC is just one facet of postmodern thinking.

Postmodern era thinkers have disrupted the arguments and structures that characterize modernity. Modernity emerged during the 18th century through a set of deep social and intellectual transformations (Bauman, 1991; Kumar, 1995). Its goal was to develop an objective science and universal morality that would foster human emancipation and improve the human condition. Modernity was concerned with classification and description. It brought order to the apparently unordered environment in which people lived. Modernity

also provided the basis for structuralism, which was primarily concerned with discovering the rules, principles and laws that guide, form and shape people's actions. Modernist thinkers assume objectivity is possible and that individuals can detach themselves from their biases. Bauman (1991) asserts that many of the inequities and social injustices that prevail today are rooted in the modernist worldview, such as the valuing and pursuit of order, certainty, truth and pure science. With their overarching goal of bringing order to human existence, modernist paradigms are unsuited to recognizing or accommodating the diversity and complexity present in today's world.

Modernity's reliance on science and human rationality still has a strong hold in the field of ECEC, particularly in the U.S. and Canada. Evidence of this hold can be seen in the enduring influence of the concept of developmentally appropriate practice, definitions of quality, and theories of child development that assume universal laws and norms. These ideas, resting on the concept of normality among all children and families, are part of the intellectual tradition of modernity.

Reconceptualist ECEC scholars question the existence of a singular *truth* and, consequently, of universality (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Cannella, 1997). They have problematized the fact that the field of ECEC has constructed a *true* child which allows us to make sense of what children are, what they should be and what they need in order to fit into a specific ideal (Burman, 1994). Leaders of the reconceptualist movement argue that reality does not exist independent of the knower and the process of knowing. It is essential to acknowledge the importance of context and values when making decisions. The reconceptualist movement postulates the validity of many truths relative to their contexts. An intersectional race, class, gender, sexuality, nationalism and age-sensitive analysis is promoted (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001).

The reconceptualist movement views language as a discursive system of socially construed signs, a meaning-filled practice, rather than what might be referred to as modernity's instrument for delivering *reality* (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). Recognizing the discursive nature of language, the terms 'young children' and 'early childhood' are viewed as social constructs into which we infer or build meanings (Cannella, 1997; Moss & Petrie, 2002).

Reconceptualist thinkers also question binary/dualistic thinking (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Oppositions have been framed between the rational and irrational, ordered and unordered, objective and subjective. Reconceptualists talk about 'both/and' rather than 'either/or.' In ECEC, we discuss the distinctions between included and excluded, appropriate and

inappropriate, as being natural. However, these distinctions are contingent upon dualistic conceptions of power and, as such, they are problematic.

The role of ECEC institutions and professional disciplines is also questioned by scholars within the reconceptualist movement (Moss, 2001; Moss & Petrie, 2002). Moss and Petrie (2002) argue that ECEC institutions can be considered sites of disciplinary power and modes of regulation. A key element in the existence of institutions is their legitimization of discourses.

In short, postmodern perspectives have framed the reconceptualist movement in ECEC and influenced, in a variety of ways, the work of the authors of the following chapters.

The Making of the ECEC Reconceptualist Movement

The reconceptualist movement in ECEC emerged in the early 1990s through a series of conferences and publications. Scholars who spearheaded this movement saw the need for opportunities to participate in discussions which were unlikely to occur in "regular" early childhood conferences, books or articles (Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education [RECE], n.d.). These discussions were guided by questions of postmodernity and diversity. In 1990, the Qualitative Research in Early Childhood Education Conference was organized in Knoxville by Amos Hatch and Richard Wisniewski of the University of Tennessee (RECE, n.d.). A small number of researchers presented papers and participated. However, those participating identified a great need to continue the stimulating discussions that took place. The scholars who participated in the Knoxville conference were among the pioneers of the reconceptualist movement in ECEC. In 1991, the first Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education Conference took place in Madison, Wisconsin, organized by Mimi Bloch (Tobin, 1991). The topics discussed included the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Bredekamp, 1987); concepts such as children at risk and readiness; ECEC and culturally diverse populations; international ECEC initiatives in Reggio Emilia, Japan and East Germany; research in early childhood; control, surveillance, and children's rights (Tobin, 1991). In the years since 1991, many more researchers have attended the RECE conferences, which have taken place primarily in the U.S. but also in Brisbane, Australia (2000) and Oslo, Norway (2004). In addition to the conferences, many books and journal articles have been published (for a list of the growing literature base, see the RECE website at http://www.reconece.org).

The topics addressed at RECE conferences and in reconceptualist publications include critiques of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), critiques of mainstream definitions

of 'quality' early childhood services, feminist and queer perspectives, poverty and advocacy, the workings of colonialism, gender and the body, politics of culture, representations of children and childhood, and resistance and representation (RECE, n.d.). Despite the wide range of topics, the characteristic that unifies the RECE conferences and reconceptualist publications is the critical perspective on mainstream ECEC theory, practice and research.

Another important development in the history of the international reconceptualist movement involved the creation, in 1998, of the Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) entitled Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood Education (Kessler, 1999). This group included many of the same people who organized the RECE conferences. They identified the need to meet in a forum separate from the mainstream discussions of ECEC during the AERA meetings. The SIG members felt the need to discuss issues related to rethinking theory, research and practice in ECEC.

While the reconceptualist movement has influenced ECEC thought in North America, Australia, New Zealand and Europe, that influence has been felt differently in each region or country. Those different impacts and interactions are briefly described below.

United States

In the U.S., the reconceptualist movement in ECEC was stimulated by the work of scholars from curriculum studies who began to interpret the field from perspectives such as critical theory, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, phenomenology, sociology of education and interpretative studies (Swadener & Kessler, 1991). One of the early reconceptualist publications in the U.S.A. was the special issue of *Early Education and Development* (volume editors Swadener & Kessler, 1991). It included historical analyses of the influence of child development and feminist poststructural critiques of DAP. In another influential publication, *Reconceptualizing the Early Childhood Curriculum: Beginning the Dialogue*, Kessler and Swadener (1992) presented critiques of DAP, arguing that the discourse of DAP is laden with its own value system. Criticisms emphasized the ways in which relations of power, social and cultural reproduction, social constructions and assumptions of universality are embedded within discourses of DAP (Kessler & Swadener, 1992). These initial contributions to the literature were followed by *Diversity and Developmentally Appropriate Practices: Challenges for Early Childhood Education* (Mallory & New, 1994) which examined the appropriateness of DAP guidelines for children, particularly children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children with special needs and children considered at risk. In 1996, a special issue of *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*

(volume editor Hyson, 1996) focused on a critique of the historical domination of psychological and child development knowledge in the field of ECEC.

Building on this strong groundwork, the reconceptualist movement produced many more publications that have continued, enhanced and expanded the discussions (e.g., Cannella, 1997; Diaz Soto, 2000). Despite the initial conferences held in the U.S., the formation of the Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood SIG led by U.S. scholars, and the many important publications, the reconceptualist discourse in the U.S. has by and large remained a sidebar discussion, especially among ECEC professionals who hold strong ties to discourses of DAP. Although critique of the DAP discourse has been a central theme among U.S. reconceptualist thinkers, DAP has retained its dominant status among most U.S. ECEC practitioners, theorists and researchers.

Australia

The reconceptualist ECEC movement in Australia has diverse but interconnected beginnings that can be traced through work on gender in the late 1980s and early 1990s by feminist poststructuralists such as Walkerdine (1989, 1990) and Davies (1989, 1993). The work of Davies and Walkerdine was drawn on heavily in the early- to mid-1990s by a small number of Australian ECEC academics to further feminist critiques of developmental psychology (e.g., MacNaughton, 1993, 1995) and place gender analysis at the heart of reconceptualist work in Australia at that time.

Alongside this work, some developmental psychologists working in the field of ECEC, influenced by the U.S. reconceptualist movement's publications (e.g., Mallory & New, 1994) and by Vygotskian and Theory of Mind perspectives on the child, began to critique the heavy reliance on Piagetian psychology within Australian ECEC. This small group came together in the mid-1990s to publish *DAP Centrism* (Fleer, 1995). In this edited collection of papers, the influences of feminist poststructuralism and non-Piagetian perspectives on the child are apparent. At that time, some Australian early childhood academics also attended the early reconceptualist conferences in the U.S. The attendance numbers grew steadily during the 1990s. The majority of those attending drew heavily on feminist poststructuralist perspectives in their work.

The *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* published two special themed editions on reconceptualist perspectives (edited by Sue Dockett and Glenda MacNaughton, 1999, 2000) highlighting a growing and diverse range of theoretical perspectives driving Australian

reconceptualist work. In 2000, Australia hosted the RECE conference in Brisbane. The Brisbane conference made evident the diversification of reconceptualist perspectives in the Australian context, including critical and postcolonial perspectives. The conference marked the beginnings of the reconceptualist movement spreading beyond the Australian academy to policy makers and practitioners who not only attended the conference but made presentations (Glenda MacNaughton, personal communication, October 5, 2004).

In November 2001, the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood was established by the University of Melbourne with the aim of developing a critical mass of reconceptualist scholarship in the field of ECEC. The Centre's focus on collaborative research with practitioners and policy makers illustrates the impact of Australian reconceptualist scholarship both within and beyond academic circles (Glenda MacNaughton, personal communication, October 5, 2004).

New Zealand

In New Zealand, the reconceptualist movement also began in the early 1990s with roots that go back to the Reggio Emilia programs in Italy, which are still actively promoted through conferences and exchanges with Reggio Emilia leaders. As in the U.S. and Australia, feminist and poststructural theories had a great impact on New Zealand's reconceptualist ECEC thinkers (Diti Hill, personal communication, October 3, 2004). Informal and formal exchanges were developed between New Zealand scholars and U.S. reconceptualists. Reconceptualists in New Zealand have been instrumental in exposing the broader ECEC community to views embedded within the reconceptualist movement, allowing this movement to have a larger and more positive impact than in other regions such as North America.

Part of the reason for this broader impact may be the greater receptivity to diversity that has been found in New Zealand ECEC since the establishment of the Te Kohanga Reo (Early Childhood Language Nest programs) in the 1970s. The emergence of Maori social, political and educational strength over the past twenty-plus years has profoundly influenced the shape and language of ECEC in New Zealand. The strong legal underpinning of the Maori Renaissance, *Mana Maori* (King, 1997), grounded in the Treaty of Waitangi, influenced governmental approaches to policy development and regulatory procedures that were unique internationally in their recognition of the importance of local conditions, participation and knowledge (e.g., the [Anne] Meade Report, 1988, as discussed by Smith & Farquhar, 1994).

Since the initiation of the Te Kohanga Reo, the development of the Meade Report and more recent curriculum and program documents, New Zealand ECEC has been an exemplar of cultural pluralism with the most significant policy and training documents not only reflecting Maori influence in their titles *(Te Whariki – Curriculum Guide; Nga Huarahi Arataki: Future Directions*; and others) but, more importantly, encompassing Maori, Pacific Islands and European-descended diverse understandings of children's care and development.

Europe

It is inaccurate to use the term 'reconceptualist movement' to describe postmodern ECEC discourses in Europe. Indeed, many parts of Europe did not have the need to 'reconceptualize' as they were never dominated by the English-language developmental discourse. Europe has a long history of scholarly work on the subject of ECEC (Moss & Petrie, 2002). There is a strong tradition of pedagogy in Europe, originating in 19th-century Germany, which has been influential throughout the continent and has produced a distinctive understanding of children and services for children (Moss & Petrie, 2002).

The Reggio Emilia programs of the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia, which have been at the root of certain aspects of the reconceptualist movement in New Zealand, have achieved international recognition, primarily for their creativity. *The Hundred Languages of Children* art exhibition produced by Reggio Emilia children has attracted a global audience. Noteworthy features of ECEC in Reggio Emilia include dialogues within and between programs, discussions of pedagogy and childhood, and the vibrant physical presence of children and programs for children within the community (New, 1997). The work of Loris Malaguzzi, the programs' originator, has inspired many reconceptualist thinkers in other parts of the world. Gunilla Dahlberg (Dahlberg, 2003; Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlberg et al., 1999) and Peter Moss (Moss & Pence, 1994; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Brannen & Moss, 2003), as well as many others, have built on Malaguzzi's work. Moreover, connections have been established between some Europeans and some English-language reconceptualists based on their common interest in poststructural theory and its application to the field of ECEC (Peter Moss, personal communication, October 10, 2004).

A useful critique that has provoked the field internationally (Myers, 2004), and one in which Canadian scholar Alan Pence has been actively involved with his European and

international development colleagues, relates to the concept of quality. This critique has been influenced by the reconceptualist discourses of Reggio Emilia programs. "The language of quality is the language of the early childhood institutions as producer of prespecified outcomes and the child as empty vessel, to be prepared to learn and for school, and to be helped on his or her journey of development" (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 87). Further, Moss (1994) states: "That defining quality is a political process may not be acknowledged as such at all; instead, defining quality may be treated purely as the application of scientific, managerial or professional expertise or 'consumer' preference" (p. 5). The question that has been considered is: How do we move beyond the discourse of quality which views early childhood institutions in isolation from their contexts (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Moss & Pence, 1994)? Dahlberg et al. (1999) consider the discourse of meaning making:

> *Meaning making requires very precise, demanding and public conditions that create an interactive and dialogic process in which prejudices, self-interest and unacknowledged assumptions, with the distortions and limited vision that they produce, will be confronted and challenged. . . . Contextualization – locating the work of the early childhood institution within a particular place and time – is therefore critical to the discourse of meaning making. (pp. 108-109)*

Canadian ECEC Discourses

Given that Canadian ECEC is strongly influenced by U.S. scholarship, reconceptualist discourses are taking place among only a small proportion of the ECEC community. Few Canadian scholars have contributed to this literature (e.g., Ball & Pence, 2000; Bernhard, 1995; Bernhard, Gonzalez-Mena, Chang, O'Loughlin, Eggers-Piérola, & Fiati, et al., 1998; Dahlberg, et al., 1999; Pacini-Ketchabaw, in press; Pence & Moss, 1994) and, moreover, these discussions remain outside the Canadian ECEC mainstream.

While Reggio Emilia programs stimulated reconceptualist discourses, particularly in New Zealand, they have had a different influence on Canadian ECEC. The prevailing metaphor in Canadian ECEC history is an evolutionary spiral. Early childhood educators are seen as having developed, since the days of the infant schools in the 1820s, ever more sophisticated understandings of children and their development and appropriate care. The evolutionary spiral is consistent with the modernist view of "progress." Reggio Emilia has been interpreted by some in the Canadian context as an addition to the growing body of ECEC knowledge, as an incremental step forward.

Reconceptualist thinkers understand the history of ECEC and the significance of Reggio Emilia quite differently (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Reggio Emilia can stimulate the rethinking of our practices and the examination of the assumptions underlying our practices. Indeed, it has been used in these ways by others. Reggio Emilia is the first ECEC approach broadly accessible in North America that could stimulate a discussion of ECEC in the postmodern era. Unfortunately, it has not yet been used in this way in Canada. Rather than seeing the programs of Reggio Emilia and the words of their principal architect as revolutionary, the Canadian ECEC field has seen them as evolutionary. Reggio Emilia has the potential, as yet unrealized, to enable the deconstruction of Canadian ECEC.

As is the case with Reggio Emilia, Canadian ECEC is still far from embracing the discourse of meaning making. Discussions of quality centres from a managerial perspective dominate the field. Furthermore, these discussions are still closely tied to DAP discourses. This relationship between DAP and quality is important to note as developmentally appropriate practices and classrooms have become synonymous with quality.

Despite these gaps, Canadian scholars are making significant contributions to the ECEC reconceptualist literature in the area of cross-cultural research. The research topics include immigrants (Bernhard, 1996; Bernhard & Freire, 1994, 1997; Bernhard, Lefebvre, Chud, & Lange, 1997; Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998), Canadian First Nations (Ball, 2004; Ball, Pence, & Benner, 2002; Greenwood, Gottfriedsen, & Marchand, 1995; Pence & McCallum, 1994), as well as Indigenous populations around the world (Pence, 1998). The contributions that follow are evidence of the focus of the Canadian reconceptualist movement. Although the perspectives of these researchers have not yet become mainstream in Canadian ECEC, they serve as important contributions to global postmodern thinking about ECEC. The fact that Canadian ECEC reconceptualists are primarily working in the area of cross-cultural research will not surprise readers familiar with the cultural diversity that characterizes the Canadian population in 2005. The mix of cultures, particularly in our cities, is a defining feature of Canada.

Canadian ECEC practitioners, researchers and policymakers must begin to question our long-cherished constructions of "best practice." Such self-examination can be both intimidating and liberating. This volume is presented with the hope that it will begin the process of deconstructing Canadian ECEC and enable us to better understand the limitations of its modernist history. In so doing, we wish to open ourselves up to an appreciation of the diversity of children, families and communities that constitutes the essence of ECEC's postmodern world.

Organization of this volume

Jessica Ball begins the dialogue in Chapter 2 by describing an innovative training program, the First Nations Partnership Program. She addresses these questions: Why do we need to break the mold from prescriptive training in ECEC? How do First Nations Partnership Programs differ from other training programs? What is unique about First Nations Partnership Programs? What can we learn from these programs? Why are capacity-building initiatives important?

In Chapter 3, Margo Greenwood and Tina Ngaroimata Fraser invite us to reconsider frameworks for understanding the care and education of young Indigenous children. They bring together writings on Indigenous knowledges and current practices in ECEC and conclude by presenting a framework for reconceptualizing early childhood practices for young Indigenous children.

In Chapter 4, Larry Prochner and Ailie Cleghorn suggest that there may be a contradiction between the value of diversity in early childhood education thought and practice and researchers' ideas as to what constitutes quality in early childhood education. Prochner and Cleghorn question the application of ideas such as play-based and child-centred curriculum and assert that DAP in some settings may result in a dislodging of locally valued, indigenous conceptions of what children need in the early years. Thus, they ask what kind of theoretical and cultural knowledge the early childhood educator needs to have in order to adapt and what is required in practitioner preparation courses for local conditions.

In Chapter 5, Alan Pence builds on Ball's discussion of ECEC training programs and Prochner and Cleghorn's questioning of dominant discourses in the field of early childhood education. Pence describes the Early Childhood Development Virtual University in Africa which emphasizes local and Indigenous knowledges and inclusive processes. He also presents stories of capacity building and development by describing the various activities and successes of participants.

In Chapter 6, Patricia Corson critiques grouping practices in childcare centres and invites readers to consider multi-age grouping practices as framed within a cultural-contextual approach and as alternative constructions that challenge the legitimacy of the mainstream same-age grouping approach. She provides an overview of a study of multi-age groupings in early childhood education which found that the move toward multi-age groupings

represents a response to diverse family and community needs. In addition, Corson describes the development of a training course that presented multi-age discourses as another way of thinking about early childhood programs.

In Chapter 7, Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw describes a study focusing on the negotiations between immigrant families with young children and early childhood educators as they grapple with issues of first language maintenance. Pacini-Ketchabaw examines the politics of language and culture in ECEC institutions by asking questions such as: How does the field of ECEC understand and support bilingualism? In what ways do immigrant families and ECEC practitioners share goals for raising bilingual children?

In Chapter 8, Mehrunnisa Ali questions the assumption, held by some, that immigrant parents have deficits in parental commitment. She describes a study that found very high levels of commitment to their young children's success among immigrant parents. However, she also illuminates the fact that the capacity of immigrant parents to demonstrate that commitment and to parent their children effectively is compromised by circumstances that affect immigrant families in Canadian cities. These circumstances negatively impact the parents' availability to their children, their use of public services, and their mental health.

It is our hope that the examples of these researchers will help early childhood readers look at the world in new and creative ways. In the postmodern era, process, engagement, dialogue and co-construction will take precedence over routines, prescriptions of what constitutes best practice, exclusivity, and predetermined outcomes. We hope the following chapters will stimulate discussion of the paradigms and propositions that underlie this research.

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Endnotes

1   The term reconceptualist was first used in a critique of the mainstream ECE discourse dominant in the United States. That critique led to the establishment of a Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Educational Research and Practice (RECE) Conference series.

2   Various acronyms are used to refer to the holistic intent embraced by early childhood care and education. Other valid terms include: Early Childhood Education/ECE, Early Childhood Education and Care/ECCE (OECD), Early Childhood Care for Development/ECCD (Consultative Group), and Early Childhood Development/ECD (UNESCO, World Bank, ADEA). The chapters in this volume use many of these acronyms.

3   Or related critiques, as the term 'reconceptualist' is not typically found in the European context but related approaches are.