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Thinking Through Early Childhood

by Jonathan Silin

Since the beginnings of formal group care of the young in the nineteenth century, the early childhood educator has been cast in a facilitative role. The child, understood as vulnerable to threats posed from the outside by harsh social circumstances and from the inside by the workings of fraught psychodynamic processes, was seen to be in need of a protector and nurturer. The caregiver/teacher was viewed as a disinterested presence in the classroom, defined solely by the needs of the undeveloped and immature child. This was very much a gendered story. Although men like Friedrich Froebel and Johann Pestalozzi were among the early theorists of the field, and psychologists like Erik Erikson and Jerome Bruner later made important contributions, the task of providing care was always construed as woman's work—undervalued, undercompensated, and largely misunderstood.

Working against the grain of this history and contemporary assumptions about the nature of the field, in this essay I make a counterintuitive argument that decenters the child and brings forward the adult in early childhood education (ECE). Over time, ECE has become a complex discipline that offers unique and powerful ways for understanding human experience. My claim: The early childhood perspective can tell us as much about how to be with the old as how to be with the young, as much about the needs of the old to lead socially relevant lives as how the very young want to make their mark on the world and achieve social recognition. This is to untether the field of ECE from its foundational intention of bettering the lives of young children and to ask how the insights learned in that arena might contribute to work with people of all ages. My goal is to reimagine the affordances offered by the ECE point of view so that we become not only better providers of care and education for the young but also better positioned to contribute to larger social and intellectual conversations.

Our Reciprocal Lives

To make this argument, I draw on four and a half decades of working with young children, their families, and teachers. I also draw on the reciprocal relationship between my professional and private lives—the way that work in ECE has informed my responses to my life outside the classroom and, in turn, how these experiences have influenced my understanding of what it means to care for and educate children. I ask the reader, skeptical as she may be, to join me in *thinking* through ECE to the present moment—a moment, to be sure, which is characterized by anxious watchfulness and stunning mindlessness about children, when continuous surveillance of young lives and programs that focus on only the narrowest band of the skills and capacities that children possess are the rule.

To be clear, thinking through is not the same as thinking about early childhood. Thinking about suggests a distancing and objectifying process akin to describing something that is outside of oneself. Thinking through ECE requires a Foucauldian question: How has ECE functioned in my life, or how might it function in the future? This is to ask how knowledge lives within us and within the practices to which it gives rise. It is to privilege the performative nature of our knowing rather than a search for its truth value and to privilege the messiness of lived experience over the rationality of theoretical constructs.

For me such a phenomenological exploration raises personal as well as professional quandaries. I suspect that, in general, teacher educators are comfortable asking themselves and their students how the life experiences they bring to the classroom influence their pedagogy. Often they do this in the interests of helping neophyte teachers articulate potential curricular biases, purge themselves of “personal” opinions when in the classroom, and recognize how they are drawn to invest in particular kinds of students. Indeed, for decades teachers have been exhorted to act only in the best interests of the child, as if they enter the classroom selfless and disembodied, without social biases, political commitments, and psychological self-interests. As if we know only about the vulnerable child in need of care and protection.

In reality, however, I suspect that there is a far more reciprocal relationship between life lived inside and outside the classroom than we are inclined to acknowledge, and that attempts to mask the porous nature of this divide are bound to fail. I ask myself the traditional question: How do the experiences I bring to the field shape my research and teaching? I also ask less obvious questions: How has my life in ECE influenced my work as an AIDS advocate, my role as caregiver of two fragile elderly parents, and my response to the loss of a life partner?

Looking more closely at the permeability of the membrane that separates the personal and the professional offers a nuanced and complicated appreciation of the powerful ideas that frame the best work in ECE. Most often, ECE has been characterized as a subject matter—the study of young children, their care, and their education. In contrast, I would suggest that the field of ECE might best be understood as a discipline in its own right, a constellation of ideas that can enable us to make sense of many situations in which we find ourselves—some related to young children, and others not. If ECE is imagined as a posture that we adopt in the world, supported by a toolkit of linking ideas, then we can better grasp the unique contributions of the field to the larger study of social theory and practice, to life lived in and out of the classroom. A discipline as well as a subject matter, ECE offers us a way of describing the world as well as a particular set of objects to be described.

ECE: A Fraught History

The field of ECE, like childhood itself, has a fraught history. When I entered the doctoral program at Teachers College in 1978, the early childhood program had just been subsumed under the larger umbrella of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Nationally, in the preceding

two decades—during the War on Poverty and the creation of Head Start and Project Follow Through—the field had been colonized by psychologists and behaviorist of all stripes. ECE was neither a highly valued profession nor an independent scholarly discipline. Practitioner knowledge, generated primarily by women caring for young children—Susan Isaacs, Caroline Pratt, Patty Smith Hill—had little saliency in the academy.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, mainstream leaders in the field focused on the need to professionalize early care and education through better articulated career ladders and licensure for individual teachers and early childhood centers. Central to this effort to improve the status of underpaid and undervalued child care workers was the legitimizing claim that the field of ECE was grounded in a scientific knowledge base. In 1984 Bettye Caldwell, president of NAEYC, confidently summarized, “Our field represents the applied side of the basic science of child development” (p.53). Not practitioner knowledge, not women’s supposedly natural sympathies with the young, but the growing developmental canon was to guide our work. Even more forward-looking thinkers of the time, like Leslie Williams, my Teachers College advisor, described the three roles of early childhood educator as catalyst, synthesizer, and translator (Williams, 1978). In short, although we were supposed to study children, we were primarily positioned as consumers of other people’s knowledge rather than as scholars who generated knowledge, let alone as scholars who produced theory that might have currency for anyone other than those who worked with the very young.

Thirty years later, the same devaluing of ECE continues. In the United States, for example, although the Common Core would directly impact the lives of every young child, not one of the 135 people called upon to create K-12 standards was an ECE teacher or professional. In Ontario, where I live, new full-day kindergartens in the public schools are staffed by a certified classroom teacher and an early childhood specialist who earns about half of what the teacher earns. The salary differential reflects both the more limited licensing requirements of ECE specialists and their realm of expertise—child observation and development—as opposed to direct classroom instruction.

A Critique of Developmentalism in ECE

In the 1980s my response to the low status of ECE was twofold (Silin, 1995). First, I highlighted the distinctions between the two equally important fields of education and psychology and, most especially, emphasized the value-laden work of educators in promoting a democratic society. To me, it was the social and political dimensions of the educational domain that were too easily subsumed under the purportedly scientific gaze of psychology. Second, I constructed a critique of the way that developmental theory had come to dominate ECE, obscure its history, and blind us to its possibilities. I reasoned that the work of the classic stage theorists—Piaget, Erikson, Freud—limited our appreciation of children’s competencies. As encoded in the ECE canon of “developmentally appropriate practice,” stage theories contributed to a singular focus on the how

and the *when*, rather than the *what* and the *why*, of educational endeavors. No matter the intention of their creators, most stage theories led educators to a singular focus on the undeveloped and therefore vulnerable nature of the young child and to a heightened sense of their protective responsibilities as adults. The curriculum was cleansed of conversations deemed unsettling to children no matter how much these troubling topics reflected their lived realities. It is as if adults and children inhabited different worlds.

In retrospect too, it's clear that my critique of the role of psychology in education was an act of personal-professional reciprocity, fueled by my history as a gay man and the particular sensitivities that I brought to normative assessments of human development. Knowing full well that gay people were often stereotyped as child-like—pleasure seeking, playful, even imaginative—I sought to champion these very same characteristics as strengths to be sustained across the life span. Enduring painful judgements of my own sexuality, I could begin to imagine the experiences of woman, people of color, and other minorities whose development might also be judged inadequate against inappropriate norms.

While my concerns about the distinctions, hierarchies, and exclusions perpetuated by stage theories continue today, I have also seen that those theories can function as important rationales against the grinding march of standards and the standardization of the curriculum. In Newark, NJ, during the 1990s, where I worked as an evaluator for an early childhood school reform initiative, I observed teachers and some reformers trying to resist the spread of narrowly conceived, highly academic programs for even the youngest children by referencing the idea of developmentally appropriate practice (Silin & Lippman, 2003; Silin & Schwartz, 2003). Today, when the demands of national standards and high stakes testing have obliterated any consideration of the lived experience of children, too often teacher education focuses on preparing professionals to map their work onto predetermined templates, and even child development falls by the wayside (Boldt & Ayers, 2011; Taubman, 2009). Few have time to stop and ask: Who are these children in my care and what do they want to know?

Interestingly, my 1980s critique of developmentalism was echoed during the 1990s in the new field of queer theory. Impelled to examine the meaning of time in lives often unscripted by traditional models of family life, queer theorists rejected the logic of “reproductive temporality,” with its assumptions about order, progress, and delayed gratification (Halberstam, 2005). They sought a temporality that more accurately reflected the experiences of lesbian and gay people who inhabited the social margins, who would never achieve “heterosexual maturity,” and whose lives might only be accounted for in unruly narratives.

Most especially, queer theorists rejected the future orientation embedded in ideas of a developmental progression from immaturity to maturity—from dangerous, ungovernable desires to safe, stable, and properly disciplined lives. The child, no longer an emblem of reproductive futurism, grows sideways as well as forward (Edelman, 2004; Stockton, 2009). New skills, ideas, and ways of

being emerge beside those that already exist, and do not require jettisoning the old and familiar in the interests of a “better” future.

Temporality and Tenderness

Questions of temporality are inevitably at the heart of the work of ECE. For the young, of course, it is all about the present—the immediacy of needs, wants, and desires. I listen to Daisy’s infant cries summoning her parents in the middle of the night. I remember three-year-old Christopher’s despairing arrival at my classroom door in the morning, little comfort in the promised reunion with his family later in the day. There is no future. As I write I can hear Jennifer, my four-year-old neighbor, who has recently mastered a two-wheeler, exuberantly calling out to no one in particular as she practices her new skill, “I am a professional biker. Ladies and Gentlemen. Watch me bike.”

Jennifer, Christopher, and Daisy remind me of the intensity, the passions, and the fierce attachments that adhere to children’s lives in the present. They speak unmediated languages of pleasure and pain that are increasingly scorned in classrooms as signs of immaturity and failed socialization. But whose failure is it when we turn away, unable to tolerate and help children tolerate a full complement of human emotions? Whose maturity is really in question?

For adults, work with children points not only to the present and moments of beginning, but also to questions of mortality and temporal continuity. Ushering the young into the world with all our hopes and dreams, it is hard not to reflect on time gone by as well as time remaining, on our accomplishments as well as our future projects: What will be carried forward and what will be left behind of the worlds we have made? As we observe how the young change, questions about which traits will serve them well and how those traits might be transformed with the passage of time are always with us.

To me, these temporal considerations suggest the complex ways that power and vulnerability circulate between adults and children, teachers and students. When we look at the child, we see someone in need of protection, frail, and powerless and, at the same time, we see someone full of potential who is defined by her not *yetness*. Knowing that the passage of time has foreclosed our own moment of open possibilities, we experience ourselves as far less powerful than the child with her future before her. Even as we offer the strength of our protectiveness, we experience our own vulnerability, all that we can no longer become. In turn, the child is strong because of her futurity, her possibilities, even as she is frail in the moment. Real tenderness toward the child is expressed in the understanding that she too will one day suffer the loss of potentialities. The complex temporal dimensions of tenderness open out the present to include both the past and the future, to incorporate the powers and frailties that characterize the young and the old alike and bind us together in one world.

To be sure, it is difficult to stay in the present where children live and not rush toward the future where educational rhetoric draws us with carefully couched arguments about the economic and

social benefits of early education. I make no claims to rational arguments about such benefits, which mostly fall on deaf ears of politicians and budget markers anyway. I prefer instead to find my ground in a more existential perspective that values the moment-to-moment lives of children.

An ECE Point of View

I do not make these claims in a vacuum. Recently, for example, I came across two books that exemplify different strategies used to advocate for the time of childhood and for time in childhood (Hall & Rudkin, 2011; Young-Bruehl, 2012). What I found most striking is how the differences between the two works highlight what I consider to be the unique strengths of the ECE point of view.

In *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children* (2012) Young-Bruehl takes a modernist approach to the defense of childhood and to the importance of ECE as a protective discipline. Identifying *childism* as a prejudice against children akin to racism, sexism, and homophobia, she marshals overwhelming data on the mistreatment of children across the world. She calls for more enlightened policies and practices and the fulfillment of the promise of the UN Convention on Rights of the Child and the 1960s vision of the Great Society.

When looking at how childism works within individuals—the fears, anxieties, projections prompted by children in adults—Young-Bruehl (2012) relies on a traditional Freudian framework. When justifying the needs and rights of young children themselves, the rationale is almost exclusively the science of child development. This scientific rationale appears to preclude more probing ethical or sociophilosophical consideration of what it means to care for the next generation. Nor does Young-Bruehl turn to children themselves in an effort to unpack their understandings of rights and responsibilities. While she offers narrative case studies from her psychotherapy practice, only her adult reflections on the past bear witness to the experiences of the young. I don't find Daisy, Christopher, Jennifer, and other children I know in the text.

By contrast, Hall and Rudkin's *Seen and Heard: Children's Rights in Early Childhood Education* (2011) is grounded in their daily work with children at the Boulder Journey School in Colorado. Like Young-Bruehl, they recognize and decry the socially marginalized position of the young in society. However, rather than address all three core themes of the UN Convention—protection, provision, and participation—Hall and Rudkin focus on supporting participation. The emphasis is on the here and now—the rich realization of social relationships and communal responsibilities possible in groups of young children.

For me, three qualities in Hall and Rudkin's (2011) work exemplify what makes the ECE perspective unique. First, they provide many examples of close, careful observation of children, long a core practice in the field. Hall and Rudkin are part of a community in which teachers continually exercise the pedagogical watchfulness and thoughtfulness described decades ago by phenomenologically oriented educators like Aoki (in Pinar & Irwin, 2004). They observe

and listen with intense curiosity, without judgement, without rushing to intervene. They allow themselves to be instructed as easily by nonverbal as by verbal behavior. And when they do respond to children's questions and concerns, it is often by modifying the physical and social environment rather than by engaging in long wordy conversations.

Second, Hall and Rudkin (2011) assume childhood competencies rather than vulnerabilities, social attunement rather than egocentric self-absorption. They emphasize the ways that children are able to manage the dialectic between their own and adult perspectives, between their need for protection and desire for participation, between claims for individual liberties and group responsibilities. No matter how much our national policymakers would like to believe that children passively absorb the standardized curriculum, early childhood specialists understand the young as agents who selectively attend to, resist, and transform their local worlds as they interpret them (Dyson & Genishi, 2013).

Respecting childhood competencies, the teachers at the Boulder Journey School talk *with* rather than *for* children, engage the young directly in problem solving, and identify the larger political and social issues raised in children's words and deeds. Consequently, Hall and Rudkin's (2011) text is alive with children's voices.

Finally, at Boulder, the right to participation is linked to the emergent curriculum, which is negotiated between children and adults, realizing the present interests of the former and the insights of the latter into the potential for future learning. The resulting curriculum, always dynamic, never scripted, reflects the rich lives that the children bring to the classroom. It is created as much, if not more, from the children's questions as from the adults', from the children's ways of being in the world as from the adults'. The French philosopher Barthes (2013) puts it this way, "For a teaching relationship to be effective the speaker should know only slightly more about the topic than the listener (sometimes, on certain points, less: this is the process of exchange)" (p. 21).

It is the ECE point of view—close observation, assumption of developmental competencies, openness to instruction from children—that I find deeply compelling in Hall and Rudkin's work and notably absent in Young-Bruehl's. It is this point of view that in the past has been so eloquently articulated in the work of Harriet Cuffaro. Drawing on her close reading of John Dewey, Cuffaro (1995) looks to schools as democratic communities in which the voices of both teachers and children are honored. More than laboratories, classrooms are dynamic communities that should function with full participation of all concerned. Like Hall and Rudkin's text, Cuffaro's are always filled with closely observed narratives of children at play. At the same time, Cuffaro is careful to explicate the critical role of the teacher in listening to children's immediate interests and using them as starting points for learning about ever-expanding communities beyond home and classroom. The teacher provides invitations—through the questions she asks, the materials she introduces, the clarifications of intentions she seeks, and the vocabulary she provides—for the children to experiment with the world.

ECE: At Other Times, In Unanticipated Places

I should not be surprised that the work of early childhood educators—especially those who, like Cuffaro and Hall and Rudkin, value the potential of building strong democratic communities through education—is largely ignored in the world of politicians and public policy. Democracy, enabling young people to become activist-citizens, is threatening to those who benefit from the status quo. But I am continually disappointed by the absence of dialogue between early childhood educators and scholars from other disciplines. While a growing minority of the former have productively engaged in interdisciplinary projects, seldom is work done in ECE referenced elsewhere (Block, Swadener, & Cannella, 2014). I was recently intrigued therefore when perusing Judith Butler in *Conversation* (Davies, 2008) to find myself immersed in the world of early pedagogy. I associate Butler's work with challenging, if at times impenetrable, theorizing about gender and sexual identity, which takes place far from the haunts of young children. And of course there is that, but there is also this: a description of accountability as an ethical responsibility that happens in dialogue with others and strikingly resonates with an early childhood perspective.

In contrast with popular approaches to accountability weighted down by the supposed certainty of quantifiable measures, or even a Nietzschean call to account that elicits a rationalizing defensive posture, Butler (in Davies, 2008) poses accountability as an open, relational process. She knows, the way that good early childhood educators know, that taking place within the context of caring human relationships, accountability—like the curriculum itself—is always partial, always incomplete.

Butler (in Davies, 2008) surprises yet again when commenting on an ethnographic study of children's dramatic play. She immediately recognizes that early childhood is an untapped site for thinking through cutting-edge social theory. In their playful ability to reimagine the social order, children are themselves burgeoning theorists of gender norms and transgressions, family politics, and queer belonging. This is the kind of theorizing, and the probing questions that it generates, that first drew me into the classroom in 1968. As a young adult I was struck by how the children's concerns about independence/dependence, autonomy/enmeshment, safety/risk were the very ones with which I was struggling.

Today I worry that if novice teachers are not taught to listen carefully to children—as carefully as they are now taught to assess academic accomplishments—they will miss the critical provocations that make life in the classroom so engaging. This kind of listening and watching means giving children opportunities to reveal what they already know about the world, the funds of knowledge with which they enter school (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Helping young students acquire a narrow band of cognitive competencies can be satisfying for some adults, but I doubt it is intellectually challenging enough to keep the best and the brightest young teachers in our schools for very long.

From the start, then, I experienced the early childhood classroom as a place to explore fundamental ontological and epistemological questions with children. Fifteen years later, when I became a teacher educator, I began to see that the knowledge I had acquired through the practice and study of ECE also informed my view of the world beyond the nursery school classroom. Here I return to a theme with which I began: the ways that our personal and professional lives intersect, enrich each other, and provide steadying ballast against difficult times.

As a newly minted college professor teaching young adults, my pedagogy reflected habits of mind acquired while working with young children—finding a balance of thinking, doing, and reflecting in the classroom; constructing a curriculum that allows individuals to pursue their own interests within a set of common themes; promoting a caring community of learners. Closely observing individual students as well the collective student body, their use of space, and my own, I found myself haunted by a familiar question: Who am I in the lives of these students? How do I negotiate the appropriate distance in these new relationships, positioning myself as both the one who cares and the one who knows, the one who identifies with the life and struggles of the student and the one whose authority is grounded in mastery of the subject matter?

In 1984 I left academia to become a professional AIDS educator and advocate, a project in which I had been informally engaged since the very first diagnoses of the “gay cancer” in 1981. This was a carefully considered move—a move to help the community that I loved, in which I loved—but one that I was sure would take me still further from the worlds of young children.

I was wrong. The early childhood lens, the lens that looks at the “whole child,” the child in context, the child who is constantly constructing meaning, was the same lens that allowed me to understand adults living through the health crisis. Unlike many of my colleagues, for example, I did not believe safer sex was a group of behaviors that could be legislated, technologies that once explained rationally would be applied consistently, a set of practices that might be sold by resorting to fear and intimidation (Silin, 1987a). In the 1980s I often found myself isolated at conferences by other activist-educators who were impatient for quick fixes that came in the guise of behaviorally oriented projects that narrowly focused on condom use. From my early childhood point of view, I argued that adults too live in meaningful worlds, that sexuality is both integral to, and expressive of, our continuously unfolding identities. I was no less worried than anyone else, but my sense of urgency was tempered always by a need to respect these complexities and even redefine the meaning of success.

During the crisis years, I was frequently called to schools to calm anxious parents about children and teachers diagnosed with HIV, to help create just policies, and finally to construct curriculum. I hoped to move AIDS conversations, mostly viewed as a topic for high school biology or health classes, into literacy and social studies classes as well as into the early childhood curriculum. Again, my ECE perspective dictated an integrated and multidisciplinary approach that allowed

students to enter and explore the issue from a range of vantage points and to understand it as a socially constructed phenomenon (Silin, 1987b).

During this period I was often a caregiver, employing early childhood knowledge in yet other unexpected contexts. As we do with the young, I realized that often we simply need to position ourselves *alongside* someone who is vulnerable—no press to fix the unfixable, no rush to proffer interventions. I recognized too that in the hospital room, as in the early childhood classroom, I had to monitor the emotions prompted in me by the situations we were living through. I needed to use my perceptions to gain insight into, but not displace, the emotions of the person for whom I was responsible, the one in need of care.

What I couldn't know was that living through the worst of the AIDS crisis would also prepare me to take responsibility for my aging parents in the succeeding decade (Silin, 2006). Initially, their precipitous decline from being elderly and independent to being frail and completely dependent sent me into a tailspin. It helped to recognize that I simply could not meet all their practical and psychological needs. Like the good early childhood teacher, I was familiar with simplifying complex tasks, breaking them into their component parts, and prioritizing what needed to be done.

More fundamentally, I had practice at containing the fears and anxieties of people who were vulnerable and who felt their survival in question. When bouts of dementia overtook my father, I knew about setting firm boundaries as a way to restore calm and about allowing myself to imaginatively enter another's life. Children had also taught me the power of play, of playfulness, and of joining with, rather than resisting, other logics and alternative worlds.

I was not a caregiver for my life partner. He died suddenly and unexpectedly while on a photographic assignment in a far-off city. I was left without the opportunity for shared moments of reflection, without the chance to say good-bye. Perhaps that was why it became such a difficult struggle to move forward with my own life (Silin, 2014). The struggle was lived in and through my understanding that re-presenting experience is an essential way to find solace for the inevitable losses that mark our lives, a process I first saw at work in children's play. Cuffaro (2005) explains:

As they imaginatively experiment with materials—with the fluidity of paint and water, the unyieldingness and durability of wood, the soft malleability of clay—they bring their thoughts and feelings, and questions, to their activities. And in the process of experimenting and discovering, of giving form to and transforming their experiences in play, they author their own texts, create meanings, and make sense of their often mysterious and complex world of which they are a part.

As an adult I don't use blocks, work with art materials, or have access to a home corner in which to rehearse my experiences and to reimagine them otherwise. Instead, I play with words. More abstract than the material props used by children, nonetheless they enable me to re-present the past and project a future when the possibilities seem most bleak. I choose a genre too, the essay—from the French essayer (to try, to attempt)—that maximizes the possibilities for the experimental

and provisional and for shifts in tone and perspective. The essay invites the digressions, moments of incoherence, and self-reflection required to find my subject matter when I am feeling lost. Ultimately, writing enables me to organize pain and find a perverse pleasure in the process.

Although I didn't begin to construct personal narratives until I tried to make sense of my experiences with AIDS, the seeds for such a disposition were surely sown during my years working with young children. It was in those classrooms that I learned the truth of Isak Dinesen's observation: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (as quoted in Arendt, 1958, p. 175).

I don't want to be a Pollyanna or to speak for others. However, I do want educators to attend to recuperative processes and consider the ways that children accommodate their own losses. I long ago rejected the idea that learning involves the replacement of "primitive" ways of knowing with increasingly more sophisticated ones. I subscribe to an account of growth that is additive; earlier ways of knowing continue forward even as we acquire the new.

In classrooms, I want teachers to help children sustain older modes of responding to the world—most especially embodied forms of knowing—just as they celebrate freshly acquired skills and ideas. Children need to build a fuller repertoire of behaviors—engaging in music, dance, drama, and graphic arts—for representing their worlds than the increasingly narrow literacy and numeracy curriculum found in most schools offers. They deserve a curriculum that sustains fluidity between their verbal and nonverbal selves, between their minds and their bodies, between times of social coherence and moments when they are in closer touch with the seething cauldron of emotions that boils beneath the surface of all our lives.

Three Themes for Life

Thinking through ECE prompts me to attend to the way the field has shaped my responses to a range of personal situations. In turn, these situations have undoubtedly had a reciprocal impact on my professional commitments, something I could never have predicted when I first entered classrooms filled with young children. Describing the interaction between what I have learned as an early childhood educator and my life outside of schools, I find three themes that are applicable whether the object of our gaze is the young child, the vulnerable adult, or the frail elderly. It is this broad impact of the field, with its foundational ideas and questions, that contributes to my understanding of ECE as a discipline, not as just a set of practices for minding the young.

First, thoughtful early childhood educators are continually concerned with the ethics of care. They take up the question of surveillance, the balance between the need for safety and protection and the need for independence and privacy when working in the helping professions. Knowing the value of all that can be learned from close observation, from an openness to others that withholds judgement, early childhood educators teach us to weigh both the impulse to intervene and the rights of others to enjoy and learn from the full scope of human experience. They model

a certain disposition to encounter otherness, in oneself and in others, and to read these encounters as invitations for connection and meaning-making rather than as moments for distancing or alienation.

Second, effective early childhood educators focus on socially relevant curriculum. Spending their days with the young, they bear witness to the passions that fuel our attachments and make our losses, imagined and real, feel life threatening. They know that for the curriculum to be meaningful, it must be emergent and reflective of our lived realities.

The ECE point of view affirms that we learn from and with others not by talk alone, but by mutual participation in shared projects, as we discuss how to construct an entrance for people with disabilities to a block building, investigate how deliveries are received in the cramped urban supermarket up the block, and research the supplies that will be necessary to build a terrarium in the classroom. At other times, when a child describes a painting, dictates a story, or requests a prop for a dramatic play scenario, we must suspend our rational and relational defenses and make imaginative leaps of faith in order to stay alongside her as she explores the world.

Third, reflective early childhood educators draw our attention to questions of human temporality. In my critique of the developmental canon, I wanted to reassert the messy, nonlinear ways that humans grow and change over time. I questioned the heuristic value and politics behind a commitment to a carefully sequenced hierarchy of developmental stages. Life in classrooms and too many hospital rooms confirms for me the singular importance of the present, awash as it is with past history and future possibilities.

When reimagining temporality, the boundaries between adults and children, the mature and immature, the healthy and ill, become porous. One existential reality emerges: We all live in a common world, face similar questions, and deserve equal opportunities and privileges. Respecting children's rights to active participation in the decisions that affect their lives requires that we give special attention to observing, listening, and staying in the moment. Above all, it requires that we resist the efforts of those who would push children into the future before they and we have fully realized the richness of the present.

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