Re-situating Canadian Early Childhood Education

Edited By: Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Larry Prochner
Reviewed by: Sandra Chang-Kredl

Sandra Chang-Kredl is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University, Montreal. Her research interests are in curriculum studies, teacher identity, childhood studies and children's popular culture, all of which are framed by qualitative and cultural studies approaches. She also has experience teaching and administering in early childhood settings.

Re-situating Canadian Early Childhood Education (2013), edited by Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw (professor in the School of Child and Youth Care and coordinator of the Early Years Specialization at the University of Victoria) and Larry Prochner (professor of early childhood education and chair of the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta) is part of a series called *Rethinking Childhood* (Gaile S. Cannella, general editor). The series challenges modernist approaches to childhood, through reconceptualist and critical scholarship, with the purpose of developing new understandings of the early childhood education field within a framework of postfoundational theories. *Re-situating Canadian Early Childhood Education* presents scholarship from a uniquely Canadian context, providing examples of reconceptualist work by Canadian early childhood researchers.

The two opening chapters set the tone and purpose for this volume by presenting a forceful overview of the reconceptualist movement in early childhood education. In the book's foreword, Curry and Cannella describe the scholars of the movement, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, as advocates who challenge dominant, positivist, universalizing, and Euro-Western ideologies that disregard (to the point of erasure) the contributions and experiences of marginalized groups. This trend is perhaps best exemplified by the privileging of developmental psychology in the field of early childhood education. The construction of the child from a developmental standpoint is an idea that has been institutionally legitimized, and its powerful discourse affects the lives of children, families, and teachers around the globe. Reconceptualists argue against discourses of childhood

that legitimate a belief in control and predictability, for example, the process of adults observing and measuring children's development/progress against a standard of normality. Significantly, book editors Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner frame reconceptualist work in early childhood education as a political project. The critical activism implicit in reconceptualist scholarship aims to decolonize the field and open it to more diverse and socially just approaches. Its purpose, then, is to give voice to those whose voices have traditionally been oppressed, in particular, children, their teachers and families, women, and racial and ethnic minorities. The collection of work in this volume demonstrates how Canadian scholars in early childhood education contribute to the reconceptualist project of challenging discourses entrenched in modernist, neoliberal agendas through "deconstructive action" (Curry & Cannella, p. xv) while reconstructing new ways of thinking. These new ways draw on postfoundational theories that encourage dialogue, process, and openness to diversity, multiplicity, and complexity.

The book succeeds in representing a diversity of approaches and topics from a reconceptualist standpoint in Canadian early childhood education scholarship. In their introduction, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner describe how the original focus of reconceptualist studies in early childhood education was to critique assumptions framed by developmental psychology, and this appears to still be a prominent theme, as reflected in many of the chapters in this edited volume. Postfoundational theories are used to challenge dominant views forwarded by developmental psychology and exemplified in NAEYC's guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice.

For example, sociocultural theories are applied to challenge the view of literacy development as a solely cognitive activity (Davidson); sociohistorical perspectives of play are used to interrogate the dominant, Eurocentric perspective of play as stage- and age-based (Kirova); and critical disability studies are used to challenge dominant discourses of disability as deficit oriented and literacy as print focused and psychometrically defined (Iannacci & Graham). Many of these chapters are thought provoking. Langford, in writing about the early childhood educator's professional authority, applies feminist studies and critical theories to help the early childhood educator reclaim her identity and work. The dominant view of early childhood educators as professional technicians who merely carry out standardized procedures dictated by experts (e.g., child psychologists, professors in education), Langford claims, must be challenged. She advocates for an educator who can understand her position in a highly gendered profession, actively pursue a professional authority that is complex, and reconceive of herself as a critical subject and agent. Such new understandings of the project of early childhood education, sorely lacking in current Canadian society and teacher education programs (with their hegemonic devotion to child-centred and developmental discourses), bolster the early childhood professional with the will to contribute to social justice as a caring, intelligent citizen who is historically, socially, and culturally aware.

To be clear, the book is not a collective hunt to overthrow developmental approaches. Kummen, Pacini-Ketchabaw, and Thompson, in what they title "making developmental knowledge stutter and

stumble," challenge traditional dualisms, such as human versus nonhuman and discourse versus matter, to literally reconceptualize developmental knowledge (i.e., rather than offering alternative theories to developmental psychology, they encourage us to think *differently* about developmental knowledge). The authors apply postfoundational theories of new materialisms and posthumanism to resituate developmental knowledge from within the educator, as successful or unsuccessful developmental worker, to an event that emerges from interactions between educators, children, and materials. The reconceptualist movement has also expanded beyond the interrogation of developmental psychology to encompass a broader aim of equality, diversity, social justice, and emancipation (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Prochner). Davidson presses for an integrated approach that combines cognitive and sociocultural understandings of literacy development. Queer theory is used to challenge heteronormative approaches to teacher education in early childhood (Janmohamed). And work from Indigenous scholars is used to oppose colonization practices in an Inukjuak centre (Rowan).

Challenging persistent core ideas in the early childhood education field is not an easy goal. Unchallenged assumptions that have been recycled for decades, such as the undisputed belief that human intellect should be measured through predetermined and universal psychological constructs, make it difficult for different ideas to be considered. As Janmohamed notes, challenging dominant discourses requires a "constant need to swim against the tide" (p. 99). A project of reconceptualization is by necessity complex and messy, not straightforward. This book's chapters—and their somewhat "piecemeal" presentation, which echoes Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner's description of the movement—serve to disrupt and resituate the conversations away from some of the core ideas too long unchallenged. Many do so in a preliminary and exploratory manner, leaving space and an implicit invitation for further research to be conducted in important areas.

A recurrent experience in reading the various chapters was a sense of surprise, almost a sort of awakening - "I never thought of this issue in this way"- and an appreciation for the vision and mettle required to challenge dominant discourses in everyday early childhood events. For example, Rose and Whitty move the reader to reconsider how neoliberal constructions of time dictate so much of our lives, specifically, the routines that are ritualized in child care settings, the goal of efficiency that is prioritized through time-fixated beliefs, and the quantification and objectification of students' and teachers' experiences. In this way, they reveal some of the unquestioned ways of thinking that are so embedded in our lives as educators, parents, and children.

Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner describe the reconceptualist movement in early childhood education as a political project, in that the work is meant to move beyond theorizing and make a real-world difference by addressing social injustices. The collected work in this book certainly supports this vision by interrogating the marginalization of different populations in a variety of actual Canadian early childhood contexts. Kirova studies the experiences of refugee families and their young children in an intercultural early learning program in western Canada. To challenge the dominant stage-based view of play, she brings to light the importance of cultural "brokering" that educators carry into children's play, showing that play is not a culture-free activity to be parsed into measures of norms and deficiencies. Rowan addresses remnants of recapitulation and evolutionary theories that continue to perpetuate the marginalization of Indigenous students and families. She urges for accessibility to Inuit culture and identities for children in a child care centre in Inukjuak, Nunavik. Swadener, Peters, and Gaches focus on a children's rights perspective across three nations: Australia, Northern Ireland, and Canada. In challenging the traditional and neoliberal tokenizing of the child as passive, dependent, and inferior, they go farther than many scholars who advocate

theoretically for children's greater participation. By fusing their theoretical interrogation of adults' assumptions about childhood with actual cross-national examples of children being supported in forming and expressing their views, they present possibilities for including children, especially children under 8, as participants in serious forms of decision making about issues that affect their lives. Bernhard's focus is on Latin American immigrant mothers' relationships with their children's schools. Drawing on critical pedagogy, cultural capital, and identity studies, Bernhard makes a case for the need to help immigrant parents develop their agency through a process of "conscientization" (Freire, 1994), to acquire their own *habitus*. Through focus group discussions, the mothers developed knowledge and awareness of social positioning, power, social strata, and cultural capital in Western school systems and, through this awareness, began to engage with and maximize their own identity. Bernhard also challenges the lack of awareness that Canadian teachers have about immigrant families as they unknowingly subscribe to assumptions of Western norms as superior.

In addition to Langford's chapter on authority and the early childhood teacher, other chapters address the need to reconceptualize early childhood teacher education. In examining curriculum documents in Ontario, Janmohamed notes that the focus of diversity in teacher education is on different abilities and different cultures, but has yet to attend adequately to the queer population. Janmohamed challenges heteronormative approaches to teacher education and contends that queer theory can offer important, rupturing ways of understanding children, families, and early childhood education. Iannacci and Graham apply critical disability studies to question dominant discourses of disability in teacher education. The teacher candidates in their study learned to understand children's assets as opposed to deficits, to move beyond print texts, and to focus on the quality and nature of instruction

rather than the quantity; however, they were not drawn to consider disability to be a social construction. Iannacci and Graham conclude that the monolithic discourse of disability is difficult to penetrate, but they urge teacher educators to encourage more complex and reconceptualized discussions about disability.

A reader who is unfamiliar with postfoundational theories may have benefited from a more explicit explanation of the theoretical positions being referred to early in the book, but it is perhaps only through reading the various chapters that a keen understanding of these theories, through the different authors' practical and critical applications to real-world problems, can be appreciated. In terms of the book's representation of reconceptualist scholarship in Canada, the contributing authors write from a number of provinces, as well as from the United States. Of course, any book is limited in its ability to fully represent its constituents; however, as a Québécoise, I would have liked to have seen Québec - in terms of its linguistic politics or its prominent (and controversial) subsidized child care program - represented in the book. Let this be a call to scholars in different provinces to step forward, as reconceptualist work in early childhood education is needed if the aims of social justice, diversity, and emancipation are to be had for all Canadian children, families, and educators in early childhood settings.

To conclude, this is an important book that I would highly recommend to researchers and graduate students looking for important directions in which to focus their developing research in early childhood education. It would also be valuable for prospective teachers studying in teacher education programs, to help them understand the impact of foundational ideas on their beliefs about childhood and teaching, and to enable them to consider alternative postfoundational approaches reflected in this collection.

References

Curry, Daphne L., & Cannella, G. S. (2013). Reconceptualist her/histories in early childhood studies: Challenges, power relations, and critical activism. In V. Pacini-Ketchabaw & L. Prochner (Eds.), *Re-situating Canadian early childhood education* (pp. ix–xxvi). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York, NY: Continuum.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Prochner, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Re-situating Canadian early childhood education.* New York, NY: Peter Lang.