



Research

Building new images of (e)quality: what do we need to risk?

Glenda MacNaughton, the University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

The idea that children and adults differ has a long but debated history. What has changed over time is how we understand the specific nature of the differences between children and adults and the educational conclusions we draw from them. Four themes can be found in contemporary writings on childhood that raise questions about what is gained and lost through creating and maintaining images of the child as distinctly developmentally different to the adult. Rather than protecting the child through seeing the developing child as different to the adult we risk separating ourselves from the child by overemphasising these differences. We potentially build fears rather than possibilities for connections with the child, create inaction through knowing too much, separate the child from their world and endanger the child. This article draws on those ideas and research using a retrospective critique to trace the risks for equity and for (e)quality in early childhood settings of relying on images of the learner from science, especially developmental science, as the foundation for action and advocacy in our field. It will also explore the risks in casting science to the margins of our professional knowledge base.

Introduction

High on the bookshelves in my study sits a group of books that rarely attract my interest these days. They are dusty and a little yellowed at the edges, but they have been well used. They are all that remain of my training as a kindergarten teacher in Australia in the late 1960s. I'll introduce you to some of these books in a 'retrospective critique' of my cultural history as an early childhood professional. I want to use my particular retrospective critique to challenge and resist a dominant image of the early childhood professional as someone whose work with children rests on a science of the child.

Michel Foucault calls retrospective critique a 'genealogy of knowledge' that allows us to '(rediscover) the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies that establish a way of thinking and acting that is so 'self-evident' that we regard it as 'universal and necessary' (Foucault, 1977, p. 104). Foucault believed that such a genealogy can help us to emerge renewed from the grip of power. However, as we do it, we can 'come into collision with each other ... (and we can) run into dead ends, problems and impossibilities ... (as well as) ... conflicts and confrontations' (Foucault, 1989, p. 114). I will use the texts of my training to explore elements of our image of the early childhood practitioner that are so 'self-evident' that they are 'universal and necessary' to the profession. I risk running into 'dead ends, problems and impossibilities'; and I risk creating 'conflicts and confrontations'. But I hope to encourage a conversation about how to become early childhood professionals in ways that promote justice and for equity in our lives with children.

Images of the early childhood profession

What does it mean to be an early childhood professional? How do people recognise an early childhood professional? US academics Nita Barbour and Carol Seedfeldt give this answer in their text, *Early Childhood Education: An Introduction*:

As you enter the field of early childhood, you will be joining those dauntless women: those pioneers and giant thinkers who have taken early childhood education from infancy to the threshold of maturity. Like the pioneers of the past, you must be willing to commit yourself fully to the profession. Being an early childhood educator is not an easy task. To be a professional early childhood educator implies you have a certain body of knowledge and the skills to use it effectively (1998, p. 21 –22).

Much of their statement is self-evident - universal and necessary - and resonates in numerous other early childhood texts, including one or two that I have written! However, I'd like to use my retrospective critique to examine the connections between the 'self-evident' science of the child that is our profession's 'certain body of knowledge' and the 'giant thinkers' who created it. I will draw on several writers whose work has inspired me and whose texts reside on the lower, more accessible, shelves of my bookcases; and I will add the words of colleagues, children and parents I have met through my research in recent years. The interview transcripts used in what follows are from a 12-month project on what supports critical reflection in early

childhood education unless otherwise stated (see MacNaughton, 2003). These people contributed their words in a spirit of hope and good will that they might make a difference to our knowledge about the field and so I apologise in advance to them if where I lead takes us to 'dead ends and impossibilities'.

Let me introduce you to the first dusty text on my top shelf: Herbert Ginsburg's and Sylvia Oppen's *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development: An Introduction*. Its back cover is torn and almost every second dog-eared and yellowing page has fading pencil lines on it. It was published in 1969 in the USA and its Foreword says much about why I was required to purchase it as a text in the first year of my training as a kindergarten teacher here in Melbourne:

Today Piaget seems to be *the* child psychologist in the eyes of the American public. His name crops up in countless publications and his ideas are discussed in many different circles – psychological, educational, philosophical, psychiatric (Ginsburg & Oppen, 1969, p. vii).

Jean Piaget began his work in the 1920s, as child psychology began to emerge as a scientific discipline concerned with child and human development. In the USA, trained psychologists observed large numbers of children under laboratory conditions in clinics and nursery schools (Rose, 1989). As Bloch explained:

... there were attempts to use the 'hard' physical sciences, and psychology's definition of science (typically personified in experimental psychology) as the model for truth,

definitions of valuable knowledge, a way to get factual information about 'normal' child development, and guidance for pedagogy... Being 'scientific' in theory, method of research, and pedagogical applications was part of becoming or appearing more professional, especially as many associated with child development or early education were associated with home economics and what was thought to be a female field (Bloch, 1992, p. 9).

During the 1920s, child psychologists like Piaget, Gesell, Skinner, and Erikson sought to build scientific knowledge of the child - a science of the child that developed in several directions (Singer, 1992). Piaget's constructivist theories of cognition represented one direction. His scientific investigations sought to explain how a child's view of the world shifted from being 'obviously incorrect' to correct. His theories of knowledge posed a staged development, in which the child's immature and inaccurate view of the world progresses in distinct stages to the adult's mature, accurate and correct ways of thinking.

Piaget's prominence in my training as a kindergarten teacher in the 1960s was due partly to the fact that in 1957, the USSR had demonstrated its lead over the USA in the 'space race' by successfully launching Sputnik – the first orbiting satellite. Piaget became so fashionable because he believed that his theories were the foundation of an education that produce individuals who could question and reform their society and break with traditions:

The principal goal of education is to

create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done – men who are creative, inventive and discoverers. The second goal of education is to form minds which can be critical, can verify, and not accept everything they are offered. The great danger today is of slogans, collective opinions, ready-made trends of thoughts. We have to be able to resist individually, to criticise, to distinguish between what is proven and what is not. So we need pupils who are active, who learn early to find out by themselves, partly by their own spontaneous activity and partly through material we set up for them; who learn early to tell what is verifiable and not simply the first idea that came to them (Piaget, cited in Ginsburg & Oppen, 1960, p. 232).

I understood Piaget's educational goals, but not his notion of 'schema' – which is why the term is circled and underlined so many times in my textbook. Heavy underlining of other terms shows how hard I struggled to understand them – 'epistemological problems', 'assimilation' and 'accommodation'. I certainly agreed with the Foreword to Ginsburg and Oppen (1969):

In spite of his popularity, however, (Piaget) remains a difficult author, especially for an English-speaking reader (Ginsburg & Oppen, 1969, p. vii).

Ginsburg & Oppen failed in their laudable effort to make Piaget's work accessible to me as an undergraduate student. I never liked reading Piaget and often resented

having to do so. Also, while I could pass essays and exams about it, I never once knowingly used it when I met children. I had met a 'giant thinker' of the early childhood field, but he had given me no 'certain body of knowledge' to inform my interactions with children. One of my practicum tutors called me 'intuitive', by which she meant that despite my inability to explain why I did what I did and to relate it to Piaget's schemas, I interacted with the children in ways that she considered to be appropriate.

I passed my first practicum, but rather than gaining a certain body of knowledge, I had experienced considerable uncertainty about my body of knowledge. I had been terrified of 'getting it wrong' and my terror drove me to what I remember as Hildebrand's 'ten commandments' for working with young children. I must 'always be at the child's level'; 'never say "don't"'; 'always sit so I could see all the children'; and 'positively redirect children when they misbehave'. I was uncertain where these ten commandments came from or whether they expressed Piagetian principles – and I probably didn't care. But I was certain that I ignored them at my peril. I was certain that they helped me pass my first year practicum. Maybe that's why they remain with me today.

Ginsburg's and Oppen's introduction to Piaget sits next to the second book I'd like to introduce you to: B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, published in 1971. These two books' proximity is no coincidence. It reflects the influence of science – and, especially, of behaviourist science – on our profession. I probably met *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* in my third and final year of training as a kindergarten teacher. It has less

underlining and circling and is less dog-eared and worn than the Ginsburg and Oppen. Perhaps it wasn't referred to so often, or perhaps I struggled less to understand it. However, one marked passage stands out:

We can follow the path taken by physics and biology by turning directly to the relation between behaviour and the environment and neglecting supposed mediating states of mind. Physics did not advance by looking more closely at the jubilation of a falling body, or biology by looking at the nature of vital spirits, and we do not need to try to discover what personalities, states of mind, feelings, traits of character, plans, purposes, intentions, or the other perquisites of autonomous man really are in order to get on *with a scientific analysis of behaviour* (Skinner, 1971, p. 20).

Under that final phrase - 'a scientific analysis of behaviour' - I had written, 'Is that what we need?'. Had I begun to doubt that science was the 'certain body of knowledge' that I needed? Even if I was doubtful, I certainly needed a 'certain body of knowledge' as I juggled three things in my final practicum: wearing the ridiculous and uncomfortable smock that all kindergarten students at the time were required to wear; observing the children objectively and writing my objective observations in a little note book that fitted nicely in my smock pocket; and controlling the group of children. Those objective observations were the bane of my practicum life. I did them, but I could never quite fathom why. Classifying them into developmental categories made my evenings a torture of boredom. Apparently, it still is for some in our field:

I do them really cos I have to. QIAS says we have to I have been doing them now for 13 years. They take forever to file into developmental categories. I have tried lots of different methods. But you know I think I am just bored, really bored with observations (Research interview transcript, 2002).

QIAS is the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System for long day care centres in Australia which judges centre quality against a set of quality areas of practice (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 1993). My objective observations never connected with the child I confronted the next day, whose plans for the day differed radically from the lessons I had planned so carefully the previous evening, using my observations. Similarly, despite spending my evenings writing individual lesson plans for several of the 25 children, the next day I could never forget that the third year practicum required me to take and maintain 'full control' of a group of children. Failing to control them meant failing the practicum. Skinner came to the rescue. His positive and negative reinforcers, when combined with Hildebrand's ten commandments, enabled me to pass. Skinner still rescues those needing to exert control; behaviourism is still part of early childhood's 'certain body of knowledge'. Listen to this extract from a research interview I conducted with a teacher I'll call Jo, who talks about her current professional dilemmas:

There are a few boys in the group and they're quite rough and domineering. They walk up and they hit and walk away. We make eye contact with them. We say 'Look at

me' and we say to them: 'You hurt X; It's not nice; It makes me sad', and then we redirect them and reward the child who was hurt or injured. We hone in on the behaviour rather than the child. Building self-esteem is the key to behaviour problems. If children feel good about themselves, they don't need to get attention in negative ways. We keep constantly saying, 'Well done, you did a good job'; constant praise. Not that children don't go and do something negative after you praise them. It's hard not to feel frustrated. But we try to first ignore it, but if we can't or if it's disruptive or a danger we need to stop it. We try to be consistent. Toddlers are always testing at that age, so they need us to be consistent. What we say, we mean.

Other teachers in this research project had 'a few boys' who challenged their control; and most echoed the slight fault in behaviourism that Jo had hinted at: our certain body of knowledge has uncertain effects. As I reflected on these teachers' dilemmas, I remembered Valerie Walkerdine's (1981, p. 20) discussion of power and resistance in children's play:

To understand power and resistance in the play of children we have to understand those practices that they are recreating in their play. These produce the children both as recreating the often reactionary discourses with which they are familiar, but also serve to constitute them as a multiplicity of contradictory positions of power and resistance.

When I read that in the 1990s, I felt

elated! Someone else had found boys a problem and had found that following Hildebrand's Ten commandments made little difference to how the boys behaved. Edna is another teacher and I've shared her stories of working with boys elsewhere (Mac Naughton, 2000). She sums up the reasons for joining the Gender Equity Research Group this way:

... I don't think until I actually got into the group that I knew why I was there. I can't really say that I had to be there for any particular reason. It wasn't a major issue at that time. Boys were revolting in blocks; you knew that was the way it was, so it wasn't an issue.

Walkerdine's book wasn't one of my training textbooks about children. Indeed, none of my texts mentioned power and control, although they did discuss differences, particularly sex role differences between boys and girls. The third of my dusty training texts is Catherine Landreth's 1969 *Early Childhood: Behaviour and Learning*, which tells us that:

Girls are more likely to be jealous than boys...(p. 341)
....More girls than boys were afraid of insects and spiders (p.330) ... it seems likely that being a little man in our society as opposed to being a little lady calls for more of a stiff upper lip and more of an investigatory approach to the new or the strange (p. 330).

Perhaps I found the boys such a challenge because I was jealous of their lack of fear of spiders and of their stiff upper lip; and because I lacked their investigatory approach to me. For them, I

was the new and strange in their kindergarten life - a working class country girl meeting their middle class outer urban ways of being boys. Or perhaps, the boys were a challenge because I failed to see the advantages of the prerogatives granted to each sex that Landreth (1969) told us about:

...the protective affection given a girl, the lusty freedom accorded a boy. As little boys and girls differ in their vulnerability to environmental circumstances and as they face different expectations from the moment they can sit up, it is only fair that they should be helped to enjoy as well as endure *la difference* (p.348).

Nobody explained to me how according a boy 'lusty freedom' dealt with his equally lusty resistance to Hildebrand's ten commandments. I'm not sure I even knew how to ask the question. But I am sure that my training texts maintained patriarchal relationships and ways of being in kindergartens. Teachers like Edna still struggle with the effects of according boys 'lusty freedoms', and teachers like Jo require endurance. But is it fair to expect them to endure these 'environmental circumstances'? Will Jo and Edna find any help in the science of the child that pervades our current texts? More specifically, where in current and past texts will she and Edna find inspiration to seek equity and justice for children and for themselves?

A science of the child - built by primarily the western, white, middle-class 'giants of the field' - has led us to accept as 'self evident' that we should accord lusty freedoms to boys and endure the effects. Does the science of the child that

underpinned my training mean that we must avoid damaging the developing child by simultaneously accepting sexist ways of being and maintaining an image of a professional in 'full control'? Do current texts offer teachers such as Edna and Jo other ways of being with boys and with girls? Or do they merely reinforce a patriarchal status quo?

The texts of my training were also virtually silent on questions of equality between 'races'. For example, at the end of Catherine Landreth's book is a five - paragraph section on *Socialization in Different Nations and Societies* and a paragraph on how children knew if their ethnic group was valued that concludes as follows:

In Blake's poignant lines written at the end of the eighteenth century, a little black boy, born in the 'southern wild' cries, ' I am black, but O my soul is white'. No one who works with and cares for young children can escape commitment to promoting a society of man (p. 348).

That passage is open to many interpretations but it is hard to interpret it as actively anti-racist. Meanwhile, my training had ended. I had learnt to do my observations and to use them to write plans for individual children. The plans' irrelevance for what I did the next day (I was still writing them at night!) didn't seem to bother anyone and so in my first years of teaching I just did it because you do, much like Barb who spoke to me of why she joined the research project on critical reflection in early childhood:

The reason I joined this project was, well frankly, I was bored with planning. I have been doing it for

years. I know how to do it. You take observations, you do a plan for the child, you implement it and you evaluate it. I had really lost interest in it all. I was just going through the motions.

In my teaching, as in my training, Piaget's individualism and Skinner's behaviourism co-existed uneasily with my intuition about children and with Hildebrand's ten commandments. As I sought to individualise my program, I lived in fear of losing control and of forgetting Hildebrand's commandments. That it was the boys who so often challenged my 'control' and undermined Hildebrand's ten commandments surprises me little now.

The fears and uncertainties of a certain body of knowledge

My fears of getting it wrong and my uncertain knowledge base were not mine alone. That's a lesson I have learnt from the teachers with whom I have researched since 1990 in the GERG (Gender Equity Research Group) project and from the work of postmodern scholars, such as Jonathan Silin, (Silin, 1995) whose books sit on my more accessible lower shelves. I have learnt that my fears and uncertainties are such common characteristics of early childhood educators that perhaps they are inbuilt to my training. My training introduced me to a science of the child that was meant to give me a certain body of knowledge, but gave me instead a considerable body of doubt. Piaget taught me that the child requires very special and specific 'handling' to grow normally, but did Piaget also teach me to fear the child and to doubt my capacities to be with them? After all, I certainly wasn't a developmental expert with a certain body of knowledge. Remember: I couldn't

understand what a 'schema' was and I was bored by *the* developmental expert of the time.

Nearly 30 years later, the same uncertainties appear in this research interview with Shona during the critical reflection research project, whose certain body of knowledge seems irrelevant to her, for some of the same reasons it did me. Shona was asked what would help an early childhood educator in long day care to try new ways to work with children:

More information - maybe we're doing something wrong: why don't you try this? I don't think unlimited money helps - get more resources but children play with them once and then move on. We're looking for hints, clues to what to do to stimulate children.

Anna, who works as a kindergarten teacher responds to the question from the critical reflection research project, 'What gets in the way of critical reflection?':

Lack of knowledge - sometimes feel that I operate in a vacuum - not knowing how to take the next step not having the tools to open up more ideas. Knowledge might be in form of reading but I need to see how it might work. If people not around or problem no one else is engaged with - working on my own is the hardest. I need other people or other forms of support.

Texts should reassure Shona and tell her what to do, but they rarely do:

Books - I find sometimes they're very - they go into detail and jargon.

They're overwhelming - I want them to be specific - like I was trying to look up something on a developmental area - biting or pushing or something I can't remember - the books didn't tell me - I know it was a book on language. I wanted a couple of lines I could write in a handout to parents about language. I guess I could have written it myself, but I couldn't find a couple of lines in a book.

Perhaps Shona and I are just not very bright. However, it's just as likely that our field's emphasis on developmental differences between adults and children has created, in Jonathan Silin's (1995, p. 104) words, '... a minefield continually being reseeded with new points of danger.' Silin (1995) identifies several developmental theories of the child - born of the science of the child - that place the adult in danger of 'getting it wrong'. These include attachment theory, cognitive theory and theories of co-construction. More recent research about early brain development has created new risks for adults who make the child 'vulnerable to harm' (Thompson, 2001, p. 23):

Recognizing that the early years are a period of unique opportunity and vulnerability means that the environments of early childhood should be designed so they facilitate, rather than blunt, the remarkable intrinsic push toward growth that is characteristic of every child (Thompson, 1999, p.12).

Neuroscience is *the* theory of the moment. Like Piagetian theory, it requires anyone who wants to be seen as an expert about the child to learn a new language that includes terms like

'synapses', 'neural pathways', 'critical periods' and 'cortisels'. Like behaviourism, it promises us increasingly certain scientific knowledge about the child. Commentaries on it, such as this by Nash, are not uncommon:

Deprived of a stimulating environment, a child's brain suffers. Researchers at Baylor College of Medicine, for example, have found that children who don't play much or are rarely touched develop brains 20% to 30% smaller than normal for their age. Laboratory animals provide another provocative parallel. Not only do young rats reared in toy-strewn cages exhibit more complex behavior than rats confined to sterile, uninteresting boxes, researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign have found, but the brains of these rats contain as many as 25% more synapses per neuron. Rich experiences, in other words, really do produce rich brains (Nash, 1997, p. 1).

The original research into early brain development appeared in developmental psychology and, thence, in early childhood education, through the work of Margaret McCain and J. Fraser Mustard (McCain & Mustard, 1999). In the late 1990s, they drew on neuroscience to argue in a report for the Ontario government that investment in the early years was more important than investment in the later years of schooling. Their report attracted considerable international interest and neuroscience has attracted considerable attention at a policy level internationally. For instance, in 1997, Bill and Hillary Clinton co-hosted the *White House Conference on Early*

Childhood Development and Learning: What New Research on the Brain Tells Us About Our Youngest Children. It received considerable media coverage and as Chabris explained, its message was clear:

This event, widely reported in the media, was designed in part to send an important message to America's parents: a child's experiences and environment during his first three years play a crucial role in determining the course of his later life, directly affecting how his brain will develop and thus his intelligence, his ability to learn, and his lifelong mental health (Chabris, 1999, p.1).

The ideas from the brain research as it has become known - have moved rapidly into websites and magazines geared to parents of young babies. This extract from an article in the on-line parent magazine *Baby Talk* by its executive director Claudia Quigg is typical:

In essence, an infant born with a 100 IQ can either become an 80 IQ or a 120 IQ by his fourth birthday, based on the poverty or enrichment of his experience base!

Many in early childhood have breathed a collective sigh of relief that someone now thinks our work is important. The field has yet another a new (more certain) body of scientific knowledge of the child that will help us to work more effectively with the child; and the neuroscientists are the new giants striding into the hall of fame that early childhood students study. But can neuroscience offer such certainty when neuroscientists already disagree about what the brain looks like, how it works

and how we might best maximise its potential in the early years? Can neuroscience help Jo and Edna to be 'professionals' as they work with boys who challenge them, or is it just reseeding the minefield with another point of danger for them? As Thompson (2001) invites us to consider the 'harm' that those who are the 'essence' of the infants world might do, Silin (1995) invites us to ask, 'If we are fearful about "getting it wrong" then how do we meaningfully connect with children?'.

We can 'get it wrong' in so many ways, as we can imply from this extract from a late 1990s USA text on curriculum development in early childhood, which tell us what educators need to know in order to act in children's best interests:

Teachers also need to understand the theories of John Bowlby (attachment), Abraham Maslow (hierarchy of needs), Howard Gardner (multiple intelligences), Arnold Gesell (gradients of growth), Maria Montessori (maturationist theory), Lev Vygotsky (sociocultural theory), Erik Erikson (psychosocial theory), and Jean Piaget (stages of intellectual development). An understanding of the developmental characteristics of children from infancy through eight years of age allows teachers to successfully prepare materials and activities for young children (Henniger, 1999, p.107).

Many early childhood educators continue to seek a science of the child to guide them in their struggle for control, as I did in my early years as a teacher:

▪ *Can you tell me about a recent dilemma or problem you faced in supporting learning with under threes?*

- Challenging behaviour. We have a child who refuses to eat. It's a real power struggle. The mum took him to the paediatrician who told her it's a power struggle. He advised her but mum won't follow through. He's quite small. He uses food as a control issue. We've tried to tempt him to eat, we ignore it now. When we present him with food he just turns his head away. We even tried sandwiches which we know he likes, but now he just turns away. We know he will eat if he's hungry. We insist he eats good food first and don't offer a sweet substitute later unless he's eaten good food. We're quite frustrated. We got onto some information - some research that suggests children like this can't focus on a lot of foods. They need to focus on one food first and if there are too many on a plate - like peas and beans and carrots, the child can't focus on one food. The research shows you should present one food at a time. We're going to try that because his eating is a chronic problem. We'll implement this system from England and see if that works. He needs good food. He's a sickly child. Mind you, if he was offered lollies, he'd eat them. He only eats what he wants.

However, while scientific research increases our knowledge of the child's neural pathways and critical periods, it still can't tell us how to produce the best developmental outcomes for young children, as Frede notes:

Comparing the curricula on the same outcome measures may disguise differences in their full effects on children. Another source of difficulty is that children's development is quite complicated: it is influenced by many environmental factors, and children shape their environments through their own actions. ... The complexity of children's development and the multiple factors that influence it make simple cause and effect relationships difficult to establish. Indeed, children certain characteristics and family background may benefit more from one type of program while others may benefit more from another (Frede, 1995, p. 116).

Frede (1995, p. 128) calls for 'more finely tuned studies' to ensure that curriculum meets individual children's needs; and to 'replicate' and 'extend' previous findings on the long term outcomes of early education to convince policy makers to fund programs. Clearly, a science of the child is still *the* hope for 'getting it right' through creating the right early childhood education. However, although we know more about the child than ever before, many parents and teachers are uncertain how to act with the child and Denick's (1989: 174) thirteen-year-old comment retains its force:

Modern parents know a lot about children and child development as compared with previous generation. Still, many of them simply feel at a loss at what to do. They listen eagerly to the advice of experts, but soon discover they often change their minds and prove themselves to

be unreliable. ... Nobody can give hard and fast advice, the know-how changes just as quickly as the development itself. Uncertainty is chronic.

My training had introduced me to the giant thinkers of my profession but had failed to offer a certain body of knowledge that gave me control of a group of children. Most of the early childhood staff whom I have met in my research projects also met the giant thinkers in their training and still feel that they lack a certain body of knowledge. The science of the child promises much but what did it give me? What is it giving those in the field? What has it contributed to our understanding of relationships between genders and between races?

I wonder if the science of the child is one of those 'dead ends' that Foucault mentioned? It has generated unrealistic expectations of knowledge and unfulfilled promises of control; and unsustainable fears of failure, and for some boredom. However, if we condemn it as a dead end, we condemn a 'universal and necessary' ingredient of our status as a profession and we risk undermining our very sense of who we are. But what if we replaced a sense of who we are that is based on a science of certainty with one based on a politics of possibility? What would that mean for our relationships with children and with each other? Would it inspire action for equity and justice?

At this point, I would like to introduce a third book from my top bookshelf. It is an edited volume titled, *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From Women's Liberation*, published in 1970 and edited by Robyn Morgan. It was a text in my final year of kindergarten

teaching but was required reading only for students taking the Women's Studies elective. Unlike the Ginsburg and Oppen and the Skinner, this book fell apart from constant use. It travelled with me on weekends and it was my bedtime reading. Its covers enclosed a world of thinking and experience that fascinated, excited and inspired me. Chapters explored a myriad of women's issues, from why lesbianism should be a political choice for all women to the politics of violence against women. Not one chapter dealt specifically with being an early childhood professional, yet in my first year of teaching I was drawn to it and others like it. Feminist books displaced child development books on my bookshelves as I started my journey as a feminist in early childhood education.

Sisterhood is Powerful offered no recipes for being a feminist in early childhood; no feminist commandments about how to act with children, no radical rules of observing or communicating with them. Instead, it offered ideas about what's fair and unfair in relationships between women and men and between women and women. I puzzled over what it meant to my work with children. I struggled to think about what it means to be a white woman and what racism feels to black women. The book made me angry and it made me sad. It made me laugh and it made me question. It led me to arguments with close friends and not so close friends at parties. It gave me no recipes for how to be with children, but it challenged me to think about how we can treat each other with humanity and dignity through telling stories of women's lives and making sense of them through feminist politics.

It prompted me to reflect critically on the politics of my practice which none of the

texts of my training had. More specifically, my feminist texts had prompted to reflect critically on the children's social and material circumstances and how class, race and gender contribute to the unequal power relations between in my lives with them. It also prompted me to join a feminist conscious-raising group where my learning about my life as a teacher with young children began in earnest. It was a group like many others of the time in which issues from our daily lives were brought to the group and theorised using feminist texts. As my daily life included work with young children it began to be theorised through feminist texts. During my years in the group I became fascinated by how the lives of the children in dramatic play and in their relations with me, their parents and each other could be read and made sense of through texts that at first glance had nothing to do with children. I think for the first time I was actually observing children. My smock had gone, replaced with jeans and t-shirt (neatly pressed, of course) and my little notebook sat regularly unused in its pocket. But, I was looking so closely at how the children were building relationships, and how gender was involved in their making. I didn't know what to do about that but I did experiment, supported by the deep interest of my sisters in the conscious-raising group (one of whom was a parent of preschool children) and by the feminist texts that had now become so much of my life. Children through these discussions and the reading became collaborators with me in my efforts to create a world free from sexism. They became central to my journey to make the world a better place.

All of this was possible not because of the early childhood texts of my training but

despite them. All of this was also possible because I didn't work under the gaze of quality standards, learning outcome accountabilities and curriculum frameworks. I am not sure what learning outcomes resulted for the children in my groups but they did have a teacher deeply committed to trying to ensure gender fairness for each of them, trying to open up possibilities for who they were and constantly reflecting on the stories I read, the songs I sang, the interactions I had, the materials I used and the relationships I built with them.

I did work under the gaze of their parents and of the preschool advisor. The parents were working class women whose lives I recognised so much in from my own and whom I built friendships rather than relationships with. I broke the rules about keeping a professional distance by talking with them about their lives as woman and my own. Their relationships with men and mine were a source of conversation long past going home time and their relationships with their children and my relationships with their children a point of connection. The crossover between my time in the conscious-raising group and my teaching as a kindergarten teacher were brief but they fundamentally changed how I thought about my possibilities as a teacher and the values and insights I built into it.

The preschool advisor who specialised in bringing me handy things for the homecorner seemed happy as long as I kept control. As most of the time I did and could, I seemed to pass muster. That I was intensely exploring my life with children and their mothers through feminist ideas and texts never did and never seemed to enter our conversations. I knew at some level that to begin such a conversation would be to risk much. With

hindsight, I have a greater sense of the professional boundaries I transgressed with parents and yet, the insights about being a parent and a woman I gained through them have been carried with me into the present day.

Sisterhood is Powerful and other feminist texts started me working for gender equity and justice ... and for equity and justice for all. Piaget, Skinner and now the neuroscientists each offer a certain science of the child that has left many early childhood educators vacillating between boredom, fear and control in their work with children (MacNaughton, 2002). A science of certainty has created uncertainties and fears that real people can never reduce. My work is driven not by a science of the child but by a politics of possibilities for us all. I have often faltered in that work, but texts beyond early childhood have touched me in ways that demand that I continue it. And, it is these that have always taken me to new ways of thinking in early childhood. It is the feminist theorists today such as bell hooks (1989; 1995), Patti Lather (1991), Valerie Walkerdine (1989; 1990; 1992) and Judith Butler (1990) that still inspire and demand that I critically reflect on what I do in the name of children. It is their texts that take me to new possibilities and places. They never tell me what to do but offer insights that make me puzzle about what I can and could do. They raise my consciousness and as Paulo Freire believed:

Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves. Their reflectiveness results not just in a vague and uncommitted awareness, but in the exercise of a profoundly transforming action upon the

determining reality. Consciousness of and action upon reality are, therefore, inseparable constituents of the transforming act... (1970, p. 53).

Paulo Freire became added to my bookshelf in those early years of teaching as I learnt somewhat accidentally of his writings. Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* still offers me the same inspiration and affirmation of working for social change through education that it did in the early 1970s.

If I ever worry about risking my reputation by being too radical as a feminist in early childhood, I remember he was imprisoned for his efforts to make a better world through education. Despite increasing regulation by the state of our work in early childhood, it is unlikely that will be consequence of my own risk taking.

I now know Friere's method of praxis became a lifeline through which to build a feminist praxis in early childhood education. Much has happened in my life since those early and somewhat stumbling efforts at feminist early childhood education. Other texts now inspire me to action and force me to question. The texts of feminists are still key but the texts and lives of those who fight against racism have been added to them as have those of many radical academics. I am still bored by reading Piaget and, whilst I have forced myself to read and re-read the texts of neuroscience, I cannot find within them the same excitement and source of inspiration for my work with children as those offered by 'giants' of social change. Giants such as Nelson Mandela who in Inauguration speech as President of South Africa in 1994 said:

No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

Or Afro-American writer bell hooks who wrote:

...we can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity (1989).

These texts offer ways to be human that return me refreshed and renewed to children and to those who work with them. They offer me a source for critical reflection on my work and force me to ask, why can't it be different and how can early childhood education help it to be so. They do not offer me recipes, desirable learning outcomes, curriculum frameworks or answers and yet they have never stopped me acting as an early childhood educator. Instead they have prompted me to act and to find ways with others to act with children.

Imagine if such texts became our new 'certain body of knowledge' in early childhood. Imagine setting aside a certain scientific knowledge of the child and creating an early childhood course, an early childhood journal, an early childhood training program, an early childhood curriculum that had a politics of possibilities as their foundation. Imagine if we created a new early childhood hall of fame populated by a different set of

'giants' - men *and* women, white *and* black, straight, gay *and* lesbian, old *and* young – offering us new ways of being as we create (e)quality in our lives with children.

What if early childhood educators lived under a quality assurance system that said we will accredit and fund you to take your daily issues to an educational conscious-raising group and to critically reflect on those issues using texts written by the 'giants' of the politics of human possibilities? You will be judged only by your efforts to use them to make a difference in how you honour the child and honour equity in what you do. What might happen to those who are bored by or fearful of their current knowledge and practice? What new possibilities for our work with children might be generated if all other accountabilities and responsibilities were lifted from the shoulders of those who work under a growing range of responsibilities and accountabilities? What if curriculum mandates were directed to curriculum policy officers whose responsibility was to engage in praxis with educators and share what is being learnt through educational conscious-raising groups in their state? Their job would be to find and share texts about the politics of possibilities, to make funds available for educational conscious- raising groups and to ensure the stories of what happened through this were told. Our responsibilities in this profession would be to rewrite the politics of human possibilities not act as the handmaidens of the mainly male giants of a science of the child. We would lead what happens for children and for us, not follow the science of others. We would become known as experts in 'making a better world'.

We need a new certain body of knowledge that takes us towards freedom and dignity in our own work with children, rather than beyond it. We need policy and curriculum documents that inspire positive action for change, rather than gathering dust and breeding resentment on the bookshelves of early childhood centres. We need new foundational texts containing new and risky images of who we are, what we do and where we look for inspiration. If our texts enabled and encouraged us to become politicians of possibility, rather than scientific experts, in our relations with their child, parents might connect with us in the ways we now struggle to create.

Consider what has taken this parent who participated in a research project on socially relevant curriculum in 2001 to a powerful sense of why tolerance should be at the heart of what her child learns in an early childhood centre:

Just returning to the teachers and their negotiation I guess that one thing I'm interested in is if you could say to the teachers here what you think - what would you say you think are the most important things they should be teaching children at this age from your perspective about the social world and about living together in all its complexities?

I think what you said, tolerance. I think that sums it up in a word almost. Just respect the different people and be nice to people. If you've got a problem, talk about it - if you've got an issue, say something - if you're not happy or if

you're sad about something, talk about it, don't bottle things up and just realise that lots of people are different and it doesn't mean they're worse or better than you, they're just different. I think greater issues like war can wait. At this age, as we saying before, it's such a - this the time where children can grow up and become horrible at this stage - you even see - sometimes you go to the park and you see children the same age as yours and you go "ugh, how can they turn out that way and they're only that age", what are they going to be like when they get older. I'm actually reading a book at the moment - it's got nothing to do with - on J. Edgar Hoover - how he got to where he is - I'm only in the 1920's now - and how he grew up with that incredible hatred of (unclear) And he grew up in a loving family but he grew up in a society where there was no - no one talked about anyone being different - there was no different. He wasn't exposed to anyone different other than white, middle class America. That's how he grew up. I wish there were more different children here so she could get used to seeing it - it's such an important time for the way they are going to be for the rest of their life in their tolerance of differences.

There is a dignity and strength of will that comes from being with others who are taking risks to make a better world. What will we need to risk to make (e)quality always in our present with children not a future dream of maybe? What dignity and strength of will might we gain in taking those risks?

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