



Reconceptualizing Quality in Early Childhood Education, Care and Development

Understanding the Child and
Community

Edited by
Zoyah Kinkead-Clark · Kerry-Ann Escayg

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Preface

The formative years of a young child's life are a critical period for optimal development. Scholars agree that parents, the broader society, as well as the schooling context, contribute substantially to such a process. Indeed, education scholars, and in particular, those invested in transformative education, recognize the power of the classroom space, of the knowledge co-constructed in that space, and the identities of students who embody and interact with multiple histories, lived experiences, and social-cultural realities. Indeed, what we often share in common is a guiding belief that shapes our professional and perhaps even personal trajectories: teaching and learning serve as conduits for thinking critically about the racialized order of society—and the iniquities therein. Therefore, we challenge, critique, and deconstruct with the intent to lay bare the power imbalances that privilege certain knowledges and bodies.

In the early childhood field, reconceptualist scholarship functions as a discursive space in which such symbiotic relationships occur, although the field is ever evolving. For instance, an increasing attention to social justice has further sharpened how we theorize reconceptualist philosophies and practices (e.g., Kessler & Swadener, 2020; Nicholson & Wisneski, 2019). Therefore, we continue to ask more nuanced questions—questions that force us to fracture the layers of theories and practice, of scholarship and activism. In doing so, we examine, and with much precision, a rich body of accumulated knowledge: the rhetoric

inherited with creative imagination and pursuits of justice—to determine whose voices are still yet to be heard? Who has yet to reconceptualize early childhood education—and from what vantage point(s)? Indeed, as reconceptualist scholars from across the globe join the conversations, local particularities, and the implications these hold for enriching the reconceptualist work, emerge. Reconceptualist scholarship reflects many voices—many stories.

Yet, a particular starting point, most notably, the reconceptualist movement of the 1990s identified central areas of critical inquiry, and these continue to inform much of the reconceptualist literature. From the initial years of its inception, reconceptualist scholarship problematized the overarching influence of normalized “truths,” such as the concept of universal child development and its application to early childhood curriculum, teaching, and research (Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, 2014). Conceptually grounded in critical theory, past and present reconceptualist efforts interrogate the dominant-subordinate power relationships informing knowledge construction and also how such processes undergird the educational inequities experienced by racialized and marginalized groups (Bloch, 2014; Yelland & Bentley, 2018). Indeed, questioning the purpose and content of early childhood curriculum remains a significant theme of reconceptualist work.

Scholars have expanded on these central themes by positioning social justice as a foundational area of inquiry, one which has produced ongoing debates concerning the centrality of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), children’s performances of racial discourse (Holmes, Garcia, & Keys Adair, 2018), curricula, and the need for teacher education reform (Schoorman, 2011; Souto-Manning, Buffalo, & Rabadi-Rao, 2020). While equity and a desire to “dream” (Lubeck, 1991) guide reconceptualist scholarship, it appears that over the years, a heightened awareness of the ongoing rigid racial and class demarcations affecting the daily lives of young children and families has permeated the reconceptualist discourse, such that the extant literature suggests not only new interpretations of current inequities but also creative solutions.

Taking into account the hostility and violence characterizing social and educational injustice, articulating a subversive agenda requires including cultural knowledges of diverse groups, as well as interrogating

the overt and covert ways in which curriculum, conceptions of family partnerships, and pedagogies reflect dominant interests and culture. It is within such advances we locate the present work. Our objective is two-fold: to deconstruct and to reconstruct; we reconstruct, however, with novel ideas alongside the perspectives of those who have not been traditionally incorporated in the canon of reconceptualist literature.

Significance and Contribution of the Book

Our conceptions of children determine how we teach and what we teach. For instance, assumptions of children as detached from the issues prevalent in their communities, their schools, and the lives of their families align with hegemonic approaches to schooling. As a result, critical consciousness is often supplanted by practices that delimit possibilities for awakening and celebrating children's innate and acute sense of justice; this further sanctions somewhat of a blind acquiescence to the status quo. Reconceptualists who anchor their work in both critique and social justice, however, view children differently.

As Ayers (2020) so poignantly noted, “a child is a whole human being with full human rights...with hearts and minds and bodies and experiences that somehow must be taken into account” (p. 181). Viewing children in such a holistic manner reaffirms their humanity and their dignity while demonstrating respect for who they are: the sum total of their individual and collective experiences. It is from such an awareness that authentic activism can arise, for the child, and an understanding of his/her community (e.g., and how such community is often affected by racial injustice), are placed at the centre of the discussion. In the process of rupturing the margins of silence and exclusion, therefore, we resist and we re-create.

As part of this iterative yet imaginative process, we have conceptualized community in relation to the more micro components of the classroom space, such as teaching practices and curriculum, as well as teacher education, and the society in which young children are raised. In broadening the parameters of what is considered community, we gesture towards an intersecting analysis of children's lives, one which considers

carefully how curriculum, as a cultural product, positions them for success through culturally relevant modes of learning and teaching. The child and the community is a holistic narrative: one interacts with and shapes the other. Reconceptualizing the social, emotional, and cognitive interactions between the child and the community prompts us to reconsider the prevailing assumptions of quality—and the social values that underpin them.

Apart from new conversations about children and their community, broadly defined, this text responds to the ongoing critical discussions surrounding quality in early childhood education. In the U.S. context, for example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (n.d.), arguably the most significant early childhood organization that exerts a profound influence on early childhood policies and practices, conceptualizes quality as pertaining to the following standards: *relationships, curriculum, teaching, assessment of child progress, health, staff competencies, preparation, and support, families, community relationships, physical environment, and leadership and management*. While each of these standards represents an important domain of teaching and learning, it is important to bear in mind that the overarching framework has been, and continues to be, developmentally appropriate practice.

Reconceptualist scholars, however, highlight how such framework represents racialized power relations, which further normalize and elevate dominant White identities (Abawi & Berman, 2019). As Lubeck (1998) rightfully asserted, “Is DAP for everyone?” Given its positivist orientation, it is only fitting that DAP assumes universality. Although in recent iterations DAP has incorporated tenets of social constructivist theory (Lubeck, 1998, p. 286), a reconceptualist approach is to consider the worldviews and experiences of the marginalized, including those brought on by racial discrimination, dehumanization, and oppression. In short, reconceptualist literature does not defer to developmental theories as the superior and only lens of viewing children and childhood.

Examining NAEYC’s standards of quality alongside the body of reconceptualist work offers a rich imaginative space to probe deeply how quality practice is defined and enacted in early childhood spaces across the globe—not only in the U.S. As we write this introduction, anti-Blackness, that is, the devaluation and dehumanization of Black lives, pervades

schools, cities, communities, and other social institutions across the U.S., Canada, and, indeed, the Western world. We cannot ignore the real presence of fear, death (including social death), and violence that Black adults—and children—encounter in their daily lives. Thus, in reconceptualizing quality, we are also seeking to rupture schooling approaches that are complicit in denying the realities of anti-Blackness and the psychological and material effects of racism.

Indeed, at the heart of the reconceptualizing quality discourse is the fundamental question: Whose definition of quality? For what purposes? Who is advantaged and/or disadvantaged by these definitions? What are other practices of quality that are silenced by dominant epistemologies? In light of such a critique and with an aim towards critical understandings, we first interrogate the term “others.” In doing so, we reconceptualize views of children and include the perspectives and practices of those situated in non-European contexts, such as the English-speaking Caribbean. The various authors challenge existing notions of quality, while others draw upon similar NAEYC standards, but they do so from their own cultural/theoretical orientations. And such is a central goal of the text: to move beyond binary models, often imposed by dominant cultures, to embracing inclusive definitions and practices.

Thus, an essential tenet that binds the various chapters is that of quality as both conceptual and operational tools of pedagogical and cultural resistance. Quality, as the various authors illustrate, is not tethered to a monolithic cultural construct, bearing no relevance or transformative power for their respective ecological context. Rather, quality is multilayered, conceived from a standpoint of critical inquiry: a vision for educational practices that centre the child as a social agent and a learning environment that fosters holistic well-being.

Overview of Book

This book is organized in four overarching sections that largely respond to four key questions:

1. How does reconceptualizing quality challenge perceptions of young children?
2. How can the reconceptualization of interpretations of quality inform teachers' pedagogical practices?
3. In what ways is the curriculum informed by perceptions of quality?
4. How can play-based learning be reconceptualized in early childhood programmes?

In Part I entitled, "Reconceptualizing Quality: Perceptions of the Child," the authors draw our attention to the changing views of children through a reconceptualized understanding of early childhood development. In chapter "The Child as 'Other': The Duality of the Other and the Pedagogy of Care," Wasmuth and Nitecki discuss the philosophical and ethical implications of "othering" young children. This chapter is followed by Portelli and Shalimo who explore the relationship among teachers' awareness of critical discourses and pedagogical approaches that recognize the child as a social agent.

We believe the exploration of how children are perceived provides a robust basis for Part II which offers an analysis of the reconceptualization of pedagogical practices in classrooms. Three chapters are included in this part; in chapter "Questioning Quality in Early Childhood Teacher Education Through the Lens of Culture," authored by Kim-Bossard and Eberly, deep insight is provided in relation to how early childhood teacher candidates reflect on the roles of culture in a teacher education programme in the Northeastern United States. In chapter "Indigenous Children's 'Ways of Knowing': Exploring Literacy Learning for Indigenous Preschool Children in Remote Communities in Australia," Spencer and Rouse present a critical analysis of the interconnections between these well-promulgated models of ECE, broader ECEC pedagogies, and Yunkaporta's 8 Ways, to understand effective approaches to teaching and learning that encourage Indigenous children's cultural identity whilst becoming literate in today's global society.

Chapter "Rethinking an Early Care and Education Program: Responding to Linguistic Diversity" by Meléndez and Syc situates the history and current practices of an early care and education programme in a large urban centre in the context of literature challenging hegemonic

conceptualizations of early education quality grounded in restrictive understandings of child development.

Part III of the text focuses on reconceptualizing the curriculum used in early learning spaces as well as teacher education programmes. Four authors contributed to this section. Chapter “Every Learner Succeeds: Reconceptualising Quality in Early Childhood in the Organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States,” authored by Burns, discusses notions of quality in the Eastern Caribbean states. She addresses how the background of the communities that served as incubators for some established assumptions of “quality” is the basis for some of the current policies, curricula, and practices that thrive in that region. In chapter “Knowing Differently/Teaching Differently: Transforming a Teacher Education Program,” Calderon-Berumen, Tanner, Mong Cramer and Shear depict how teaching practices and approaches to challenge and disrupt traditional perspectives to education can be done in a teacher education programme.

Chapter “Using Social and Emotional Instructional Activities to Indigenise Early Childhood Education in a Post-Colonial Society,” by Edwards-Kerr and Spencer-Ernandez, discusses how children’s socio-emotional well-being shapes their identity. They then draw on Nettleford’s notion of “indigenization” as the central idea of understanding Jamaica’s early childhood curriculum. Finally, in chapter “Building on Funds of Knowledge: A Basis for Reconceptualising Early Childhood Care and Education in the Caribbean” by Kinkead-Clark, a historical overview of the development of educational offerings in the Caribbean is provided with a focus on how colonization has shaped early education in that region. This chapter speaks of the need to decolonize education in order to reconceptualize it.

In Part IV, the final part of the book, which comprises three chapters, a central tenet of child-centred early childhood pedagogy, that is, play-based learning, is explored. In chapter “‘Ting-A-Ling Ling!’ Twentieth-Century Snack Time Culture and Friendship Bonds in Young Caribbean Children,” Abdul-Majied explores “snack time” and the centrality of the meal/feeding process as an avenue of social and emotional learning for young primary school students. She examines the value of the authentic play which children engage in throughout snack time and which benefits

children. In chapter “The Case of a Self-Developed Community of Learners Outdoors: Benefits and Challenges for Stay-at-Home-Moms and Their Toddlers,” by Rentzou, home-based parental care is explored. In this piece, she outlines the role of culture in play and how parents support children to develop core social behaviours.

In the final chapter, “The ‘Race’ in ‘R.E.C.E.’: Reconceptualizing Play-Based Learning Through an Anti-racist Lens”, Escayg considers how existing reconceptualist scholarship has addressed race and racism. By bringing an anti-racist lens to bear upon the play-based literature, the author offers preliminary framing ideas for not only addressing theoretical limitations, such as the absence of cultural knowledges from subjugated groups, but also designing anti-racist play-based learning environments conducive to developing racial pride among Black and racialized children.

What started as a movement by critical and concerned scholars has now blossomed into a respected, valuable, and well-established body of literature. Yet, the reconceptualist work is far from over. As recent events have shown, injustices persist in various forms. Consequently, we must guard against the perils of inertia while seeking alternative possibilities, wherever they may arise. Thus, we challenge you, the reader, to advocate, create, re-imagine, and reassess with us. Reconceptualizing has no end point and no singular exit. Rather, it is a continuous and creative journey that shapes the courageous soul, bringing light to both professional and personal blind spots. In sum, to reconceptualize is to see beyond the barriers, to remain steadfast, and to transgress temporality by locating oneself in a vision for the future: a vision marked by justice. A vision that will serve us well.

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Alexis Spencer is an experienced early childhood practitioner, working with early childhood educators to support their acquisition of nationally approved qualifications and understanding of early childhood education pedagogies. As a teen, Spencer learnt of her great-grandmother's Aboriginality and embraces a personal journey of continuous learning about and through Indigenous knowledges to embed and privilege Indigenous perspectives in all aspects of early childhood education.

Joan Spencer-Ernandez is Head of the Joint Board of Teacher Education (JBTE) and Lecturer in Special Education in the School of Education. She spent seven years as the Testing and Measurement Specialist in The

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Part I

Reconceptualizing Quality: Perceptions of the Child



The Child as “Other”: The Duality of the Other and the Pedagogy of Care

Elena Nitecki and Helge Wasmuth

In this era of “quality” early childhood education, the child, who should be the central focus of our services, is not always at the forefront. Often, young children endure enormous pressure to fulfill taxing expectations, becoming an object of close monitoring and interventions set forth by adults, who do not always consider the child’s rights and needs. The result is that the child is not understood or valued as an “Other,”¹ one we

The original version of this chapter was revised. The first paragraph has been deleted and added to the abstract in the online version of this chapter. The correction to this chapter can be found at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69013-7_13

¹Philosophical thinking about the “Other” or “Otherness” with a capital “O” represents the translation of “autrui,” the personal or absolute other, making a distinction from “other,” with a lower-case “o,” otherness or alterity in general (Biesta, 2013, p. 19; Levinas, 1974).

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cannot know completely but who deserves respect (Levinas, 1974). In examining perspectives from “others,” we must consider who the “others” are. When the term “other” is used in an educational context, it usually refers to one from a different cultural, social, or racial group. Used in this sense, education aims to develop an understanding of and respect for the “other,” to support a learning process that enables one to respect someone from a different cultural or social background. Considering the perspectives from the “other” in this sense would mean to listen carefully to the perspectives of marginalized stakeholders, value them, and incorporate such views into the construct of quality education.

However, we propose a different interpretation of the term “Other,” influenced by the works of the Austrian-Israeli religious philosopher Martin Buber (Buber, 1923) and the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas, 1969, 1974). These ideas have recently emerged in a variety of educational discourses (Biesta, 2015; Liegle, 2017), as well as in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)² in particular (Dahlberg, 2003; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2014). Inspired by such thinking, we examine a different understanding of the child as an “Other.” Instead of understanding the child as “other” in the traditional sense, as a marginalized stakeholder, we aim to expand the concept of the child as an *absolute* “Other,” which applies to every child who is not valued in a system dominated by the Euro-American-centric context of neo-liberal “quality.” We explore how the dominant discourse of quality and learning does not respect the twofold “Otherness” of children. This duality helps think about children as human beings with different needs and expectations than those set forth by adults. First, the child is a not-adult with his/her own rights and understanding of the world. Secondly, the child may not follow the path of “typical” child development. In the current discourse of what “quality early childhood practices” ought to look like, this twofold “Otherness” is not recognized or respected, as adults constantly attempt to make the child “into the Same” (Levinas, 1974, p. 25). The “Same” means pushing the child to become more adult-like and more

²ECEC focuses on Early Childhood Education and Care, as Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and others define it. We chose this term, instead of ECE (Early Childhood Education) or ECED (Early Childhood Education, Care, and Development) because we see education and care in ECEC as inseparable, two aspects of practice that are strongly connected. Further, the concepts of care and relationships are central to our chapter.

“typical” along the path of development, in an effort to meet the expectations set forth by the quality discourse.

Current expectations of quality ECEC, with their focus on academic learning as the key activity of ECEC, do not value such an “Otherness” (Biesta, 2016a; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). We outline an alternative to quality-based expectations, which draws from three ideas: a pedagogy based on an “ethics of care” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Noddings, 1984); the importance of relationships (Gergen, 2009; Liegle, 2017); and the German concept of *Bildung* (Biesta, 2016a; Horlacher, 2016; Siljander, Kivelä, & Sutinen, 2012; Sjöström, Frerichs, Zuin, & Eilks, 2017). Although these concepts are somehow similar to various traditional ECEC perspectives that focus on caring and social-emotional dynamics, we find that these three ideas go beyond and are most helpful when analyzing the child as “Other.” These alternative ideas present some possibilities that can be considered as an attempt to counter the quality-focused perspective of current policy and practice.

Understanding the Context: The Dominant Quality Discourse of ECEC

Currently, the field of ECEC is dominated by hegemonic, Euro-American-centric perspectives, which are based on the elusive ideal of “quality.” ECEC scholars have criticized the concept of quality for a long time (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, 2007; Penn, 2011; Tobin, 2005; Urban, 2012), arguing that it is “a search for fools’ gold” (Penn, 2011, p. xi) and that “universal, decontextualized, external standards of quality are conceptually flawed, politically dangerous, and often counter-productive” (Tobin, 2005, p. 425). ECEC researchers agree that quality needs to be understood as “a construct that is value-laden and dependent on expectations and perspectives” (Urban, 2012, p. 478). However, such criticism is essentially ignored by policymakers and those in power. A discourse based on a universal concept of “quality,” as vague and meaningless as it is, remains the prevailing way of thinking about and organizing of ECEC in many countries. It is the “story of quality and high returns, the story of markets” (Moss, 2014, p. 6), which continues to be attractive for

policymakers worldwide. Part of the reason that the “quality” narrative persists is due to the current context, which is mainly defined by the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM). GERM is an “unofficial educational agenda that relies on a certain set of assumptions to improve education systems” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 99). These assumptions, which are rooted in neo-liberalism and Human Capital Theory, are presented as ways to “reform” and “improve” education through standardization, high-stakes accountability, narrowing the curriculum, privatization, technology, among other worrisome trends (Nitecki & Wasmuth, 2019; Sahlberg, 2011; Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2017; Zhao, 2017). GERM has reframed and homogenized ECEC policies and practices around the world (Nitecki & Wasmuth, 2017).

Since the American economist and Nobel Laureate James J. Heckman highlighted early childhood education as an especially effective economic investment (with the convenient innocuous appeal of focusing on young children), children have become the target of adult-manufactured interventions to fix a multitude of society’s deep-rooted problems. Thus, the child is positioned as a savior of the future. Mainly for this reason, and not because children necessarily deserve it or have a right to it, ECEC systems must be of “high quality.” The most common rhetoric is that “high-quality ECEC programs are an investment in human capital that will lead to innumerable societal gains and strong economic returns in form of reduced cost for social and educational remediation and a more productive workforce” (Nagasawa, Peters, & Swadener, 2014, p. 284). This narrow economic-oriented approach, however, oversimplifies complex problems, marginalizes poverty and inequity, and ignores children’s rights (Zhao, 2017). Furthermore, children are often regarded as objects and not subjects, as pawns in this game, as “creatures to be manipulated” (Penn, 2010, p. 61) and not as an “Other,” who should be respected in the context of real relationships (Levinas, 1974). Despite this critique, the appeal of investment in “quality” ECEC to avoid future social problems is attractive for policymakers and investors worldwide (Moss, 2014; Penn, 2010). Thus, it has changed the field of ECEC, with far-reaching consequences, including the standardization of teaching and learning, an over-emphasis on core subjects such as mathematics and literacy,

test-based high-stakes accountability, prescribed curriculum, and increased control over teachers and students (Nitecki & Wasmuth, 2017, 2019).

It has also resulted in a narrow understanding of the “education” part of ECEC—and sidesteps the “care” part, reducing it to only custodial care. Biesta describes this tendency as the “learnification” of education (2013), pointing out that it “has led some to the conclusion that education is nothing but learning” (2015, p. 672). It is also true for ECEC, where learning is increasingly seen as the self-evident key activity. Hence, education is understood as learning, or better academic learning: the learning of specific, predetermined knowledge and the acquisition of certain skills and dispositions. Consequently, other essential aspects of education, which are fostered through the “care” part of ECEC, including the so-called soft skills of relationships, personal development, interpersonal skills, creative thinking, decision making, motivation, flexibility, and numerous other personality traits that are difficult to quantify, are omitted. These skills—which encompass becoming a unique person—begin in early childhood. Children must discover who they are, a process that can be described as self-discovery or self-formation (or the German concept of *Bildung*), that is facilitated through relationships and care (Biesta, 2015, 2016b; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Noddings, 1984). Furthermore, children are granted less space and time to be children. Childhood as a unique life stage is not valued but reduced to a necessary step on the path of becoming an adult. Education is viewed as an “instrument for the delivery” (Biesta, 2013, p. 127) of an agenda set by the society (or the ones in power). The child is the powerless object of these interventions—the saviors that will lead us to a better future.

The Child as “Other”: A Not-Adult

What is the position of the child in this Euro-American-centric perspective context of GERM, quality, and “learnification”? Although the general perception of children has changed to the point that children’s rights are now recognized as an international priority (Krappmann & Petry,

2016; Swadener, Lundy, Habashi, & Blanchet-Cohen, 2013; United Nations, 1959) and children's rights are established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the reality is that most adults and societies still have adult expectations for young children and are focused on the child's readiness to become a successful adult. Thus, children are often treated less as subjects but as objects that are different and require interventions conceived by adults. Furthermore, children are not necessarily seen or respected as absolute "Others" with their own rights, needs, and interests.

The adults' attempts, whether purposefully or unintentionally, to make the child into a productive adult, are problematic. Such attempts reduce the "Other" into the "Same," without considering the separation between himself and the Other as inherent in the relationship (Levinas, 1974). For example, unrealistic expectations for children to behave as adults undermine childhood in their own right. While such efforts are often well-intended, it also means that the intrinsic value of childhood is not valued. Instead, childhood is understood as one of the necessary steps to become an adult: To become college and career ready, as well as a productive citizen of our society, someone who will later contribute to our economy through productivity and the consumption of material goods. What is not valued is that the child exists in the here and now, that childhood has a value of its own, which should be respected and supported. From birth, children are full-value human beings, and each child has the right to be herself or himself. Each child is an autonomous person, with dignity, interests, needs, and rights. Children have the right to be children, or as Janusz Korczak has emphasized: "Children are just as valuable humans as we are" (1929, p. 7). Taken seriously, one needs to wonder about the children's right to be a (non-responsible, immature, irrational, insensitive) child—and not to be an adult. If children are entitled to such rights, how is it justified that such rights are ignored constantly? The child's right for dignity (Korczak, 1929) is too often not respected. In too many educational settings, children's rights are overlooked or neglected (Krappmann & Petry, 2016).

If the child, an "Other," is forced into becoming the "Same," then the child's rights are ignored. It occurs in different ways. First, by applying our own, adult way of thinking when trying to understand children and