Discourses on Quality Care: the Investigating ‘Quality’ project and the Canadian experience

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ABSTRACT This article describes the contexts within which reconceptualist approaches to research and practice in early childhood education are taking place in British Columbia, Canada. The authors situate their work on a project entitled Investigating ‘Quality’ in Early Childhood Education within national and international early childhood discourses.

Introduction

This article contextualizes the authors’ work on a project entitled ‘Investigating “Quality” in Early Learning Environments (IQ)’, conducted in British Columbia (BC), Canada, within national and international contexts. One of the project’s primary objectives has been to engage in discussions that situate British Columbia’s promotion of ‘quality’ in relation to child care discourses found globally. British Columbia, and Canada more broadly, self-identify as multicultural societies (Canadian Heritage, 2007) and regularly pledge promotion of a multicultural ‘ethos’ (Mock, 1989). Such political statements have a basis in population demographics. For example, in 2006/07, in Vancouver, BC’s largest city, 55% of primary students did not have English as a first language (Ministry of Education, 2007). In addition, a part of Canada’s diversity is represented by Aboriginal communities, including First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples. Although the overall national percentage of people who self-identify as Aboriginal is only 3.4% (Statistics Canada, 2001), in certain provinces the percentage is as high as 12% and 11% (Manitoba and Saskatchewan respectively), and in those provinces the percentage of all children aged 0-14 with Aboriginal heritage is approximately 25% (24.8% in Manitoba; 23.1% in Saskatchewan), and increasingly, representing a significant proportion of the future labour force.

Given such commitments to, and realities of, culture and diversity, it was important that the IQ Project examine closely the degree to which various early childhood discourses ‘open up’ to diversity, social equity and local voices in ways that are supportive of the multicultural realities of the province and the country. This article suggests ways forward that lie in facilitative critiques of certain long-established approaches to Canadian early childhood programs, policies and research that can provide spaces for additional and alternative discourses and methods that better align with the multicultural dynamics of the country. In many respects, the dynamics witnessed in Canada – concerns with diversity, equity, cultural appropriateness, and community support and development – are also of concern internationally. In that context, this brief ‘case example’ of Canada may represent a useful microcosm for consideration of similar dynamics internationally.

The article has several components. First, the authors will briefly situate the article within a rapidly expanding international, critical literature addressing early childhood care, development and education. Secondly, the evolution of Canada’s early childhood care and development...
literature will be described, before introducing a call to broaden the base of that literature in the future. The final section will discuss in more detail the means through which the IQ project is attempting to engage in that broadening and deepening process.

**A Word about Conceptual Orientations on Quality Child Care**

Our discussion of Canadian, and more broadly North American, early years literature on quality is informed by certain philosophical and theoretical orientations commonly referred to as postmodern, post-structural, post-colonial and critical theory (Bloch, 1992; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg et al, [1999, 2007]; Viruru & Cannella, 2004). A position of this article is that the field benefits from diverse orientations and critiques that open up to voices and possibilities that some perspectives are not designed to provide. Ours is not an either/or position, but advocates for a both/and inclusive approach that appreciates diverse theories, voices and methods. Canadian early childhood scholarship has relatively few examples of such engagement at present. It is essential that Canada expands its appreciation and use of diverse methods and approaches if it is to realize its social and ideological objectives. In seeking to do so, Canada will join other parts of the world that are actively engaged in post-structural, decolonizing, and critical explorations. For example, somewhat independent movements in New Zealand and Australia have led to a recent, stimulating ‘trans-Tasman’ dialogue addressing elements of critical theory, policy, practice and evaluation in early childhood (Keesing-Styles & Hedges, 2007). Those discussions join much earlier discourses emanating from northern Italy (Malaguzzi, 1971; Gandini, 1984; New, 1991; Rinaldi, 2006), Scandinavia (Dahlberg & Asen, 1992, 1994, Dahlberg et al, [1999] 2007), Spain (Balaguer et al, 1992; Blasi, 2005), and other, primarily European, locations.

Broadly speaking, post-structuralists, postmodernists and critical theorists, influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and other French philosophers, highlight ways in which ‘accepted knowledge’, or the formation of a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1975) is a function of power. Issues of power and knowledge lie at the centre of any discussion of ‘quality care’, for quality cannot be defined universally (Moss & Pence, 1994). Pathways taken in pursuit of quality care represent the domination of certain ideas and discourses, regarding children, care and development, over other ideas. Breadth of understanding is limited by the pathways taken, the discourses allowed. In order to understand differently, to open up to other possibilities, diverse approaches must be encouraged.

Canada’s history of early years research is steeped in modernity and positivism. Both are based on a tenet that there is an objective, universal and singular knowledge that exists outside of context or subjective understanding (Harvey, 1989). Historically, through understandings developed initially as part of the Enlightenment, the scientific method was identified as the means through which humankind could release itself from ‘beliefs’ (primarily religious in nature) and embrace ‘scientific truth’ (some readers may hear, ironically, ecclesiastical overtones in this profession of singular access to singular ‘truth’). Through nineteenth-century Darwinism and Social Darwinism both individuals and societies came to be understood as progressing from states of lesser to greater development. Given such a ‘scientific belief’ it became the moral imperative for those at a ‘higher’ level of development (Europeans) to assist those less developed (non-Europeans) up the development ladder (a process identified with colonization).

We are familiar in Canada with both the concept and the effects of colonization, in part through the experiences of Canadian Aboriginal peoples. Increasingly, the term has been applied to the idea of child development as well (Morss, 1990; Burman, 1994), seeing the early childhood field as a colonized activity dominated by certain thought and interest groups (Viruru, 2001; Soto & Swadener, 2002; Viruru & Cannella, 2004). Just as challenges to physical colonization opened up new and dynamic possibilities within the international order of countries and peoples, such challenges are opening new possibilities and ways of understanding within early childhood care and education as well. Those new possibilities will be explored later in this article, but first we provide a brief overview of Canada’s historical engagement with early years and child care research.
Canada’s Path of Quality Care

Much of Canadian early childhood research, policies and practice tracks closely with the United States. US early childhood and child development journals, associations and conferences have historically been influential in Canada, and the nature of the two discourses is similar. In both countries child care-specific research literature (the care of children while parents worked) first emerged in the 1960s, closely associated with an increase in the percentage of mothers of young children entering the labour force. In Canada, that early literature was predominantly survey and needs-assessment related with municipalities taking a lead role (for example, Calgary Social Planning Council, 1967; Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council, 1967; Toronto Social Planning Council, 1966; Vancouver Community Chest, 1965). Canada’s first quasi-experimental child care research, focusing primarily on the effects of different types of programs on children, as measured by language or other development measures, was not published until the 1970s (Brouwer, 1971; Haffenden, 1972; Fowler & Kahn, 1974, 1975; Doyle, 1975; Fowler, 1975; Shaefer, 1975; University of Western Ontario, 1975). Their appearance in timing and focus is similar to that in the USA (for example, Caldwell et al, 1970; Lally, 1974; Kagan et al, 1976; and others). Studies from the 1970s, in both the USA and Canada, painted a far less dire outcome for children receiving non-maternal day care than the ‘first generation’ (Pence, 1983) of child care research from the 1940s and 1950s (which included, for example, Goldfarb, 1943; Spitz, 1945; Bowlby, 1951; Baer, 1954). That early literature was actually not based on the day care of children, but on orphan and residential care which was extrapolated as part of a ‘science-based’, socio-political polemic against non-maternal child day care. ‘Expert’ voices were sought then, and such voices continue to play a central role today, despite the historical repositioning of such commentary over time (Pence, 1989; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2005, 2006a, b).

Politics, values, and social movements have long played a key role in early childhood care and development in Canada, and in the United States.[1] As maternal employment numbers increased in the 1960s and 1970s, so too did the number of studies indicating that child day care was not necessarily ‘bad’ or developmentally problematic – an increasing number of studies indicated that ‘it all depends’ (Pence, 1989, p. 145). ‘Depends on what?’ became a major research focus in the early 1980s, and researchers on both sides of the border began to move beyond a micro-system focus on specific child care settings, to employ a more ecologically informed approach including various meso-, exo-, and macro-system variables in line with Bronfenbrenner’s influential work (1979, and see Pence, 1988).

It was at this point that ‘quality’ became one of the key terms to appear in the early childhood field in North America. To a surprising degree (given the rise of qualitative methods and the importance of post-structural and post-colonial perspectives throughout the arts, social sciences and sciences), the interaction between ‘quality’ and ‘eco-system factors’, using positivist, quantitative instruments and methods, continued as the major activity in North American quality care research to the present. Phillips’s 1987 National Association for the Education of Young Children volume, *Quality in Child Care: what does research tell us?*, with both Canadian and US chapters, would fit as well into most early childhood courses today as it did two decades ago. As one of the contributors to that volume (Goelman & Pence, 1987), it is of concern that there has been so little paradigm expansion in the Canadian field since. The work done in the 1980s was good and useful, but the trinity of North American indicators of quality (group size, staff–child ratios, and pre-service training) have long since been geographically and socially bounded, clearly falling short of their universalist aspirations (Moss & Pence, 1994; Tobin et al, 1989; Woodhead, 1996). It is a function of ideational governing (understood from a Foucauldian power-knowledge dynamics) that Canadian research has not expanded into post-structural and post-colonial understandings and approaches over the last two decades. Unfortunately, our research discussions have remained restricted and predictable, becoming mired, in parallel fashion to our limited public discourse that has yet to escape the ‘is day care good or bad’ and ‘should mothers work or should they not’ quagmire. Such sticking points have become stopping points, as evidenced in early 2006 by the Conservative Government’s dismantlement of the preceding (and short-lived) Liberal Government’s Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) plans and commitments – but more on this later.
Despite this recent move (2006) by the Conservative Government, certain types of progress were made in the field of child care in Canada between the early 1980s and the present. The field moved to a new level of organization, and research activity expanded. A stimulus for this multifaceted set of organizational advances was the federal Liberal Government’s funding of the 2nd Canadian Child Care Conference in 1982. The conference included a broad range of child care interests and a number of the resolutions proposed were hotly contested, resulting in a total of eight ‘Minority Reports’ submitted for inclusion in the Proceedings, alongside the 30 approved resolutions (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1983). Importantly, the conference served as the launch-point for two ongoing national organizations in Canada: the Child Day Care Advocacy Association (CDCAA) and the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF – a professional association), and for the creation of a Federal Task Force on Child Care (see Government of Canada, 1984) under the leadership of Dr Katie Cooke, first President of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The Task Force report was published in 1986 (Status of Women Canada).

Stimulated by organizational activities in the field, the impending creation of a Federal Task Force, and the need to assess the ‘state of the art’ in early childhood research across the country, the small group of Canadian academics then active in child care research (less than 20 across the country) came together to share their work and to identify key national research issues (Goelman & Pence, 1983). Out of one of those meetings, a loosely organized National Day Care Research Network identified the need for a national study of child care use across the country (despite national debates, Canada did not know where its children were receiving care). Subsequently, a large-scale project (24,000 interviewed families) was undertaken by Network members from four universities in 1988/89 with support from Statistics Canada. The Canadian National Child Care Study (CNCCS) was the largest national study of early childhood care to be undertaken internationally at that point in time and resulted in the completion of a massive set of eight major reports addressing various facets of employment, child care use, satisfaction with care, and preference issues from across the country (see Statistics Canada and Network members: Lero, Pence, Brockman & Goelman authored the Introductory Report in 1992).

The early 1990s saw a gradual fading away of close, ongoing contacts amongst the research network, and the formation of another – this one with sustainable funding, but, for the most part, composed of a very different set of academics and disciplines. The new group was the approximately 15-member Human Development program within the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIAR), created through the instigation of Dr Fraser Mustard, then President of the CIAR. While the first organization was represented primarily from individuals based in Faculties of Education and Child, Youth and Family Studies, and had child care (broadly defined as embracing issues of development as well as pedagogy, care and parental employment) as central foci, the new group was more diverse academically (and geographically, with some members from the USA, including one primatologist) and had a much greater medical and biological orientation focusing on child and social development. By the late 1990s the influence of the CIAR Human Development group was being felt nationally, largely through Mustard’s effective communications with the media, key private sector leaders, and senior government officials regarding the importance of early brain development on subsequent lifespan trajectories and broader socio-economic indicators (see McCain & Mustard, 1999; Keating & Hertzman, 1999). It was a message that Mustard was to carry forward into international forums as well, largely through the support of the World Bank and the Aga Khan Development Group.

Mustard’s and CIAR’s efforts created a ‘tide that lifted many boats’ in Canadian early years work. Brain development, and the linkage between individual, social, and economic development, were the ‘hooks’ that brought the early years back onto provincial and national agendas in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This renewed visibility coincided with a commitment by the Federal Liberal Government to play an increased role in promoting academic research in child and youth areas, leading to Health Canada’s funding of four ‘Centres of Excellence for Children’s Well-Being’ in 2000 (Health Canada, 2000). Academics were encouraged to create consortia to apply; however, a difficult dividing of the early childhood field ensued with different streams of researchers aligning with different proposals. One of the CIAR members, Dr Richard Tremblay and colleagues at the University of Montreal, were the successful applicants for a Centre of Excellence for Early Development.
Childhood Development (CECD). The Centre was heavily influenced by the Cochran and Campbell Collaborations, becoming a key advocate of a particular (positivist) approach to ‘evidence-based practice’ relying on random control trials (RCTs) and meta-analysis approaches to research (see Pence & Hix-Small [2007] for a critical analysis of these approaches, especially in regard to their use for directing early childhood care and development activities internationally).

Within Canada, political and academic interest in early learning and child care (ELCC) reached a peak in 2005 when the Martin Liberal government, influenced by CIAR, advocacy organizations, and professional activities in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but also ‘shamed’ by the findings of an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report (OECD, 2004) on child care in Canada noting its continuing inadequacies, initiated agreements with provincial governments based on the QUAD principles: quality, universality, accessibility and development (see Government of Canada, 2005). Late in 2005, the Martin government fell, and was replaced, as noted earlier, by Canada’s first Conservative government in 12 years. The new Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, quickly back-tracked on the QUAD agreements, instituting a ‘payments to parents’ scheme that avoided creating a ‘system’ of child care cost-shared by the federal and provincial/territorial governments.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were an active period for early years and child care research and writing in Canada, stimulated by the events described above. However, it is the authors’ position that the academic and research communities should reflect on the degree to which its priorities and patterns of activity throughout this recent period have contributed to processes of standardization, managerialism, and top-down idea formation at odds with principles of diversity, equity, capacity promotion, and local control. Much of the work, even though emerging from diverse disciplines (for example, economics) and authored by different groups (many of which are identifiable by their shared history in events of the 1980s and 1990s), is too often externally conceived, academically driven, and quantitatively based, seeking a singularity of ‘best practice’ to be applied across diverse contexts. Such modernist, structuralist understandings are driven by images of an objective and external ‘truth’, only obtainable through reductionist processes that devalue the reality and the importance of diversity. Rather than building from the particular and allowing those local voices to form and shape ‘what is important’ and ‘what we need to know’, positivist practices privilege the few with access to the tools, methods and dollars that shape and perpetuate uniform policies, programs, research and practices. It is interesting to note that similar concerns regarding a restricted and unidimensional understanding of science are emerging in other parts of Canada’s human and health services as evidenced by the recent, provocatively titled article, ‘Deconstructing the Evidence-Based Discourse in Health Sciences: truth, power and fascism’ (Holmes et al, 2006).

Such limitations in early childhood research have been increasingly critiqued in other parts of the world (Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and in the United States) where various groups are producing volumes of well-received and increasingly influential post-structural, postmodern, post-colonial and related critical work (see Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence [2005] for a brief review of this literature). The concern here is not so much that Canada can be seen both as limited in its approach to research and in its failure to create a public system of early learning and child care, but for the disconnect between its social values of diversity, equity and democratic voice, and its early years research literature that remains expert driven, methodologically restricted, and contextually limited.

**Other Pathways to Quality:**

*expanding conceptual methodological and practice approaches*

The 1980s and early 1990s saw the emergence of critical literatures in child development, sociology, women’s studies, cultural studies and other fields and disciplines that stimulated the rise of alternative perspectives in early childhood studies as well. Approaches used are varied, and the literature has grown rapidly since the mid 1990s. A few of these early ‘other’ literatures will be very briefly noted, as they provide a context for alternative agendas in ECCD being adopted in countries such as Sweden, New Zealand, Australia, and, in a very initial way, Canada.
Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, and Feminism Meet Early Childhood

Valerie Walkerdine (1984) was perhaps the first to work with post-structural critiques of child development, extending them to practice within early childhood education, care and development. Walkerdine (1984) troubled the term ‘child centred’ and the influence of Piaget on pedagogical decisions in the early childhood classroom – both iconic symbols within the field. She states that practices based on developmental perspectives ‘are normalizing in that they constitute a mode of observation and surveillance and production of children. Given this, it is difficult to conceive of these practices as being the basis of any kind of pedagogy which could potentially ‘liberate children and respect the diversity of the world’ (p. 195). Similarly, Burman (1994), building on the work of Rose (1985, 1990) and Morss (1990), amongst others, questioned well-known theories of child development (such as Bowlby’s attachment and Piaget’s cognitive theories) and their role in creating ‘oppressive’ environments for children and women. Elly Singer (1992), a feminist thinker, showed from a historical perspective how psychological and educational theories that form the basis for child care policies fall short on integrating the realities of contemporary societies.

While Walkerdine, Burman and Singer were working within Australian and European contexts, an interesting group emerged in early childhood education in the United States. A key text, Reconceptualizing the Early Childhood Curriculum: beginning the dialogue edited by Kessler & Swadener (1992), brought together a group of scholars who were to form a reconceptualist early childhood movement in the USA. The contributors to this text engaged in reflecting upon assumptions embedded within the work of the key US professional association, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), regarding ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ (Bredekamp & Copple, 1987). They argued for thinking critically about concepts such as play-based pedagogies, school readiness, discourses of care, and quantitatively-focused research, as well as providing alternative analyses of issues of cultural and linguistic pluralism.

Social Constructionism Meets Early Childhood

Much work has been done around the idea of childhood as a historical, social construction embedded within discursive relations of power/knowledge. The work emerging within the discipline of sociology, questioning the naturalness and normality of childhood as a stage of development and borrowing from social constructionism, is one example (e.g. James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1982, 1996; Mayall, 1994; Qvortrup et al, 1994). Social constructionist theories begin from the idea that the knowledge we have about different phenomena is socially constructed and this construction takes place through the active engagement of human beings in everyday meaning making (Gergen, 1994).

Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence (1999; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), and Gaile Cannella (1997) carried concepts of social constructionism forward in rethinking the role of children in society and in early childhood institutions. Through social constructionism, children can be rethought as human beings with rights, strengths and multiple identities. This fluid and strength-based approach disestablishes the developmental psychology perspective of the unified, vulnerable child. Also, it allows for multiplicity and diversity in how we understand children. It shifts the focus from shaping the ‘normal’ child (a child that fits the norms of developmental psychology) to paying attention to how we can understand children from a multiplicity of perspectives and the effects that our understandings of childhood have on the lives of children and families.

Post-colonial and Indigenous Studies Meet Early Childhood

While the theoretical influences reviewed above began to influence early childhood more than a decade ago, early childhood post-colonial analyses are a more recent, but rapidly growing, phenomenon. Post-colonial studies provide useful critical lenses for understanding the histories and continuing influences of colonialism, imperialism and neo-capitalist ideologies. Decolonization is also a political act taken up by post-colonial studies that have influenced the work of early childhood scholars like Soto & Swadener (2002) and Viruru & Cannella (2004). These scholars
argue against colonial, oppressive, and exclusionary understandings and practices of early childhood education. They have been influential in questioning the taken-for-granted globalization of developmental theories that reflect the colonial pattern of the minority world [3], ‘helping’ the majority world to understand children (see also Viruru, 2001; Nsamenang, 1993, 2007; Pence & Hix-Small, 2007).

The work of Indigenous scholars has also been influential in rethinking the exclusionary and oppressive nature of normative, colonial discourses on Indigenous communities around the world. Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s important contribution, *Decolonizing Methodologies: research and Indigenous peoples* (1999), has been used to think about the invisibility and silence of Indigenous knowledges, and these ideas have found expression in certain early childhood education and training programs (Ball & Pence, 2006; Pakai, 2007; Pence et al, 1993; Ritchie, 2007). The academic sharing of diverse Indigenous perspectives regarding early childhood care and development is at a very early stage of development in Canada (e.g. see Rodriguez de France et al, 2007).

**Alternative Perspectives embedded within Practice[4]**

This section highlights a selected number of examples of how early childhood scholars have transformed our conceptions of practice through their engagement with the above reviewed alternative lenses, and consequently began to elucidate different ideas regarding ‘quality’. Unlike positivist perspectives on early childhood that determine what the important knowledge about young children is and how practice should take place in early childhood settings (top-down approach, as exemplified in developmentally appropriate practice guidelines (Bredekamp & Copple, 1987), those working with reconceptualist perspectives have highlighted the critical importance of collaboration, as well as the value of knowledge creation at local levels. Practice is never ‘final’ and is always in flux because young children and the contexts in which they live are also constantly changing. Further, while positivist approaches conceptualize practice in opposition to theory (often theory informing practice), the examples provided in this section view practice and theory as inseparable. There is no practice without theory and no theory without practice (Hillevi Lenz, 2005). Finally, while positivist approaches think about issues of quality at a conceptual level (e.g. the development of grand narratives that concretely define quality identifiers which are then used to evaluate practice), the examples reviewed here conceptualize quality as embedded within practice and the realities of the children, families and communities involved (Dahlberg et al, 1999, 2007; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2006).

Our first example is the Reggio Emilia early childhood project in Italy, well known around the world. As it has been noted by scholars (Dahlberg et al, 1999), we believe that the work accomplished in early childhood by people in Reggio Emilia has been (mis)interpreted by many in the North American context as an evolutionary project – as building on already existing positivist ideas. Rather, the programs of Reggio Emilia and the words of their principal architects are revolutionary, reconceptualist and postmodern in nature. Developmental theories have been only one of the many influences on Reggio and at times they have been critically viewed (Rinaldi, 2006). Reggio leaders understood that no theory is the absolute truth, but is just a starting point for further investigation and discussion. One of the goals of those involved in the making of the Reggio programs has been to ‘open up’ to a multitude of perspectives (Rinaldi, 2006).

Those inspired by the revolutionary, reconceptualist nature of the programs in Reggio Emilia have transformed practice from a fundamental level – by re-imagining the child and the role of early childhood educators and institutions (Dahlberg et al, 1999, 2007; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Rinaldi, 2006). Pedagogical documentation, in particular, has provided researchers, educators, and young children with the opportunity to engage in collaborative reflection so that collective understandings may be gained. This aspect of Reggio Emilia’s early childhood pedagogical project transcends current understandings in early childhood education based on modernist approaches, and is consistent with key principles of social constructionism and postmodernism. The role of the teacher as an observer is extended to interpreter and researcher (Dahlberg et al., 1999, 2007; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Observation is an important skill for most early childhood teachers, but the educators in Reggio Emilia have taken observation to a different level. Dahlberg & Moss (2005) explain:
Documentation is not ... ‘child observation’ that assesses children’s progress (usually in terms of development) against predetermined and normative categories ... Instead, [Reggio Emilia educators] have shown how documentation, used in a critical way, can make us observant of the contingency of our constructions, and hence, make it possible to destabilise the meaning of that which we take for given and see as natural and true about the child ... [Documentation] has helped [teachers] to refuse to codify children into prefabricated developmental categories, and hence they have been able to transgress the idea of a lacking and needy child. (p. 109)

Pedagogical documentation, then, is a ‘tool’ for uncovering dominant discourses, social injustices, respect for diversity. Pedagogical documentation does not stop at the observation stage; rather it is always a beginning point. In the words of Dahlberg et al (1999):

Through documentation we can more easily see, and ask questions about which image of the child and which discourses we have embodied and produced, and what voice, rights and position the child has got in institutions ... The point of departure here is that the greater our awareness of our pedagogical practices, the greater our possibility to change through constructing a new space, where an alternative discourse or counter-discourse can be established producing new practices. (pp. 152-153)

Those who have reconceptualized early childhood practices by using pedagogical documentation as a revolutionary tool are not fixed in guidelines that provide one view of the child; rather, they are opened to multiple voices, multiple interpretations – opened to diversity.

Glenda MacNaughton (2005), within the Australian context, takes a somewhat different direction, yet still holding to post-structural, feminist analyses. She proposes to create spaces for practitioners in the early years to act in the name of social justice and work within spaces of difference that do not conform to uniformity. Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies: applying poststructural ideas (MacNaughton, 2005), is an innovative example of how early childhood educators transform practices that emphasize non-positivist knowledges and social change. MacNaughton (2003) plays back and forth in a fluid way between theory and practice and engages practitioners to be active participants in the construction and the deconstruction of their practices and the knowledges that underpin them. She challenges top-down approaches embedded in the idea of theoretical applications to practice (e.g. DAP, developmentally appropriate practice), and invites practitioners to engage in new roles as educators. These new roles require the transformation of traditional (positivist) models of learners and curriculum and engage with the economic, political and social contexts in which children live and educators practise.

MacNaughton (2005) proposes the creation of ‘Critically Knowing Early Childhood Communities’ where early childhood educators find spaces that ‘honour ethical engagement with children, respect diverse and multiple childhoods and embed quality in all that they do’ (p. 189). These communities are presented as an alternative to professional development models that provide educators with ideas that they can ‘put into practice’, and are in essence ‘quick fixes’ (p. 191).

The last international example that we have chosen to review involves the reconceptualist practices that emerged in Aotearoa-New Zealand in the last two decades. Perhaps one of the first important steps taken by Aotearoa-New Zealand was the development of a unique bicultural curriculum, Te Whariki. Anne Smith & Helen May (2006) explain:

The conceptualization of Te Whariki around aims for children was different than the traditional developmental curriculum map of physical, intellectual, emotional and social skills that dominated Western curriculum models. Te Whariki also made a political statement about children: their uniqueness, ethnicity and rights in New Zealand society ... Te Whariki provided a curriculum space where language and cultures could be in the foreground and not an add-on. (p. 102)

This socially engaged curriculum, building on many of the perspectives described above, does not prescribe practice and therefore does not restrict diversity. Practice is grounded on the child’s, families’ and communities’ perspectives, hopes, rights and voices. Practice is also connected to research in that educators use participatory action research ‘to set their learning goals and articulate their practice’ into new directions (Carr, 2003, p. 187).
An important aspect of practice transformation has been the way in which children’s assessment was understood and conducted.

An ethnographic and interpretive method of formative assessment, Learning Stories, was developed ... This holistic, transactional model of assessment seeks ways to focus on behaviours that are central to children becoming competent, confident learners and communicators, and focuses not on isolated skills, but on the coalescence of skills, knowledge and attitudes into learning strategies, attitudes and dispositions. (Smith & May, 2006, pp. 105-106)

Learning Stories look very different from performance goals that measure school readiness (the road that most of Canada has taken). They involve ‘collaboration with families, high expectations of confidence in the children, and multiple opportunities for children to tell their stories’ (Carr, 2003, p. 205).

Re-imagining Possibilities for Canada: the Investigating Quality Project

As of the early 2000s, the work described above had limited visibility and limited impact in Canada. As described earlier, Canada has long followed a US lead in early childhood care and development issues, perspectives, research and publications. Both countries are socially challenged to address roles of women that deviate beyond the bounds of mother-care, both privilege a narrow definition of ‘science’ that is inherently positivist and restrictive in nature and top-down in application, both have diverse populations but each retains great power and privilege for traditional elites. The reconceptualist literature in the USA, while growing and compelling to many, is largely marginalized (a point particularly evident by its absence as featured or keynote addresses at national early childhood education conferences) – a fate which has not been the case in many other parts of the world and a fate not wished for Canada. It was with a sense of movement and mission, as well as message, that the IQ project initiated its work in 2005, looking largely to those countries that had embraced change, inclusion and alternative ways of understanding and had been successful in moving such ideas from the margins to places of central importance for the future of early childhood care and education (ECCE), children, families and communities.

In examining those countries in which critical perspectives had become an accepted and valuable addition to the early childhood discourse, and had begun to ‘make a difference’ in the way in which programs, policies and interactions were being understood, it appeared that academia had worked closely with government, professional leadership, training programs and practitioners to effect a broadly effective shift in perspective – what we decided to call in Canada a ‘broadening and deepening’ of the field (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2006). New Zealand was of particular interest in this regard (given its shared UK and Commonwealth heritage with Canada, its population diversity, and importance of Indigenous history), but lessons from northern Italy (the province of Emilia Romagna as well as the city of Reggio Emilia) and from Sweden (as influenced by Reggio Emilia) were also of critical interest. The IQ Project felt it was important to engage government, the field, and training programs simultaneously with exposure to the ‘new perspectives’ that had taken root in these three contexts in particular. Heeding advice that ‘prophets’ more often come from ‘outside’ than ‘inside’, a list of key individuals from these various ‘outside’ locations was drafted and the project began with several forums that were designed to bring external stories of difference and change to British Columbia. Most forums featured individuals coming from several different locations, with the project leaders seeking to learn from interactions that would take place across contexts. In addition, each of the initial set of forums (typically composed of three days of in-camera brainstorming and idea sharing) also set aside one day for consultation/engagement with government and a day for presentations and interactions with the field more broadly. A pilot program Learning Circles approach was also taken to work with groups of early childhood educators from diverse types of programs in order to explore these ideas ‘at the front line’ (Paciini-Ketchabaw et al, 2007). Based on the first set of forums, from ideas gleaned from those interactions, and experiences in working directly with practitioners, a proposal was put forward to government for a second phase to extend the forums and the pilot work with practitioners, but also to engage directly with college instructors (those with the chief responsibility for the pre-service training of field-based early childhood educators in British Columbia, and in most of Canada). The forums continued to include time for in-camera brainstorming and sharing of experiences, but increasingly
time was also allocated for instructor-specific interactions (including leadership from the professional association), and broad field-oriented presentations continued. The field was also engaged through IQ’s partnering with the national association (Canadian Child Care Federation) to create educational materials related to the broadening and deepening theme (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005) and since 2006 in identifying keynote speakers for the annual conferences. At the 2007 and 2008 Conferences UVic worked with Conference organizers and the ECE Department at Ryerson University (in Ontario) to organize and sponsor a pre-conference day. Engagement with other tertiary institutions in Canada is seen as another critically important element in the overall broadening and deepening agenda. An additional component of Phase 1 and Phase 2 work has been to address the absence of third and fourth year coursework available through British Columbia universities for those interested in early years work. This lack of upper division courses has long disrupted the creation of an educational and professional career ladder, with most early childhood educators facing an ’educational dead-end’ after their two-year diploma from a college, or being forced to leave the field for another discipline. Under the direction of Dr Pacini-Ketchabaw, the School of Child and Youth Care has developed an ’Early Years Stream’ of four third and fourth year courses designed to take students from their two-year diploma work through to a bachelor’s degree in Child and Youth Care, with the availability of master’s and doctoral work beyond the bachelor’s.

The IQ Project is now three years into its mission to ‘broaden and deepen’ early years discourses in Canada, joining with other efforts across the country (for example, BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2004; Bernhard & Cummins, 2004; McIvor, 2006; Whitty & Nason, 2006). For the most part, the authors have been very pleased, and somewhat surprised, by not just the acceptance, but a sense of excitement about new ways of understanding early learning and care. To date, the resistance and reaction that met the Reconceptualist movement in the USA has not transpired in Canada’s approach to change (a comparative study across various countries would be useful for those interested in state and country level change agendas for ECCE). Some of the manifestations of change include: ever increasing numbers of participants for IQ supported events; consistently strong evaluations of such activities; growing numbers of applicants for undergraduate, master’s level and doctoral level programs; inclusion of IQ leaders in other provincial initiatives; increasing echoes of the terms used by various international guests (Learning Stories, Documentation, Diversity and Social Equity, and Te Whariki, are a few examples); and increasingly strong working relationships between IQ team members and government, the professional association, college instructors, and practitioners in the field.

Conclusion

While we are pleased with the progress to date, the journey is a long one and many challenges remain. Relatively few of the universities across the country have moved in the direction described above. Funding agencies, and leading centres are largely unfamiliar with the approaches advocated here, and turf is both protected and determinedly advanced. The tensions that have restricted the reconceptualist movement in the USA are not unfamiliar in Canada, despite the effort to find different, and less adversarial, ways forward. We do, however, feel that both time and tide are on the side of change, of expansion, of ‘broadening and deepening’ our understanding of ECCE, in Canada and in other parts of the world. Our quest is not an either/or dichotomy – both the established discourse, and new perspectives have a place in the future envisioned here. To anticipate otherwise would be inconsistent with a call for greater diversity, broader representation, and a polyphonic understanding of the complexities of our field.

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Notes

[1] The Infant School movement in the USA and Canada in the 1820s and 1830s was the beginning for a number of the dynamics we still witness in North America in the twenty-first century.
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[2] Early learning and child care (ELCC) was the term used by the Federal Government in its agreements with provincial and territorial governments.

[3] The terms Minority World and Majority World are increasingly being used in international development literature as they are more descriptive of world populations and avoid the value-based terms, Developed and Developing.

[4] Our use of the term ‘practice’ is broad. For example, we refer to the work that early childhood educators engage in daily with young children; the work that early childhood education instructors engage in with students in training programs; the work that researchers engage in with practitioners in the field in a collaborative manner.

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