On knowing the place: Reflections on understanding quality child care

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In the spring of 1997, the *Canadian Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education* put out a call for articles addressing "New Trends in Early Childhood Education". At the time I was preparing for the University of Victoria Summer Institute, which had as a theme "New Directions in Quality Child Care." The two events provided an opportunity to reflect on my own experiences in early childhood care and development, commencing with my first full-time employment as a child care worker in 1971 and carrying through to the present. In looking back over these years of work several lines by T.S. Eliot in *Little Gidding* come to mind:

> *We shall not cease from exploration*
> *And the end of all of our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time.*

The reflections that follow represent events in a personal journey of exploration, one that has criss-crossed my earliest ideas concerning quality care several times. In many respects the most recent examination of quality care represents a "know[ing] the place for the first time."

That new place represents a significant personal change in my understanding of quality care, but more importantly there may be broad implications for the field as a whole and for the lives of children and families in viewing quality from a different perspective. This process of reconceptualizing early childhood care, education, and development is one that is gaining strength in diverse quarters. Given the personal focus of this paper, it may be useful to trace briefly my journey through early childhood practice and research, in an attempt to understand why the call for papers on new trends caught my eye.

Personal Background Sketch

My first ten years in the field were spent as a practitioner: specifically, as a child care worker, then program director, later a field instructor and trainer in a large rural area, followed by additional years creating and coordinating a group of seven school-age care programs. During the final years of this period my doctoral research focused on the 19th century history of preschool/child care programs in North America. For most of this period I was a supporter of the view that professionals were best suited to guide directions in defining quality early childhood education.

The next ten years, 1981-1990, were spent at the University of Victoria, both teaching and conducting research. The Victoria Day Care Research Project, 1981-84 (Pence & Goelman, 1981), was one of the first Canadian studies to employ an ecological approach in early childhood research. One of the research questions was: What influence does program quality have on child outcome measures? In the 1980s I was also Co-Director of the large-scale Canadian National Child Care Study (with Donna Lero, Hillel Goelman, Lois Brockman, and Statistics Canada). That study

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interviewed 25,000 families with 42,000 children under the age of 13 and was interested in a broad range of topics, including how families valued child care.

Finally, towards the end of this second decade a new opportunity arose to become involved in a project that would dramatically change the nature and trajectory of my work. In many ways, this experience radicalized the view of child care that I had known and practiced over the prior 20 years. This third decade has very much been about coming to "know the place for the first time."

First Nations' Partnerships. The event that precipitated this change was an invitation from a First Nations Tribal Council in northern Saskatchewan, the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC). The MLTC expected to receive funding to develop on-reserve child care and wished to develop an educational program to support their own people in staffing those and related programs. They wanted that program to prepare their students to work either on or off-reserve. In other words, the program needed to be truly bi- or multicultural.

The Tribal Council was concerned that most aboriginal training programs presented a thin veneer of native culture—a few add-ons, a quote here or an example there, pasted on to a fundamentally Western program and approach. Many First Nations peoples

saw such programs as essentially assimilationist in nature and also as promoting a pan-aboriginal image of what in reality is a culturally diverse set of communities. What they desired was a program that reflected their own communities' values, as well as Western ideas and perspectives. The aboriginal experience of cultures coming into contact with each other was the domination of one cultural group by the other, as represented in Figure 1. What they desired was a respectful recognition of each culture by the other, which is graphically represented in Figure 2.

The challenge of devising processes that build respectful bridges between cultures and communities has been the essence of my work since 1990, both with Canadian First Nations, and more recently, in international, Majority World[1] work. A primary challenge Minority World academics and professionals face in working on the international scene is accepting that the Euro-North American perspective on quality care and child development does not necessarily hold in other cultures and communities. Rather than searching for or promoting "Best Practice" in the singular, we should be looking for the many "good practices" that reflect the diversity of human experience and understanding.

In 1991 the then Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, University of London, Dr. Harry McGurk, invited me to participate in a symposium on
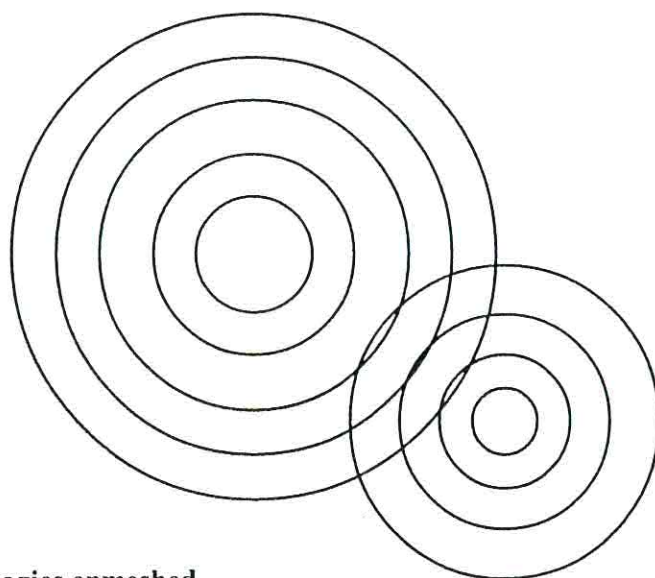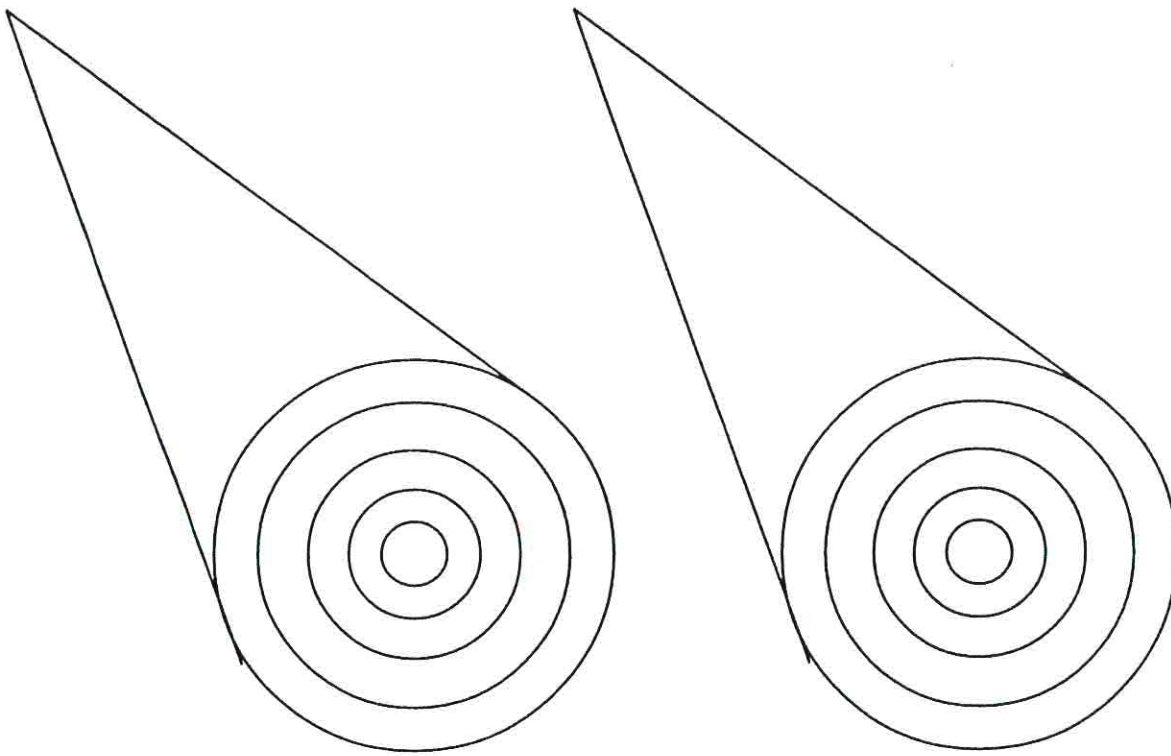

Figure 1   **Two ecologies enmeshed**

Figure 2   Two seperate ecologies

quality care to be held in Seville in 1992. Insofar as the majority of my work on quality care had been based on the Victoria and Vancouver Day Care Research Projects (Pence & Goelman, 1981; Goelman & Pence, 1984), utilizing caregiving assessment instruments developed by Drs. Thelma Harms and Dick Clifford, my initial assumption was that the paper would address that work, yet a very different paper began to take form. The alternative paper questioned the orthodox approach of devising instruments to measure quality care, with a heretical question: From *whose* perspective do the measurements arise? The title chosen for the presentation was a play on the word Ruler/ruler. What follows are excerpts from this workshop.

Quality Care: Thoughts on *R/rulers.* The small *'r'ruler* represents *how* we attempt to measure quality, and the capital *'R' Ruler, who* defines what it is that will be measured. An understanding of both *R/rulers* is critical to a discussion of quality child care. This notion of the two different *R/rulers* of quality has been made clear through my work with First Nations/

Aboriginal peoples in Canada and recent European experiences, as outlined below.

First Nations Child and Youth Care Education and Career Ladder Project. The First Nations Project is a unique Tribal Council and University partnership funded by the Canadian government. It was designed to serve as a pilot for the development of a culturally relevant, post-secondary education program for the training of First Nations' staff for a variety of on-reserve child and youth care programs.

The current context of relationships between the aboriginal peoples of Canada and the government of Canada is a movement towards self-government by those First Nations people living on reserve land. To this end, the Tribal Council has developed its own regulations governing the provision of child care services on the member reserves. In addition, each of the nine reserves of the Council have created their own unique guidelines regarding those regulations.

The development of separate regulations for unique peoples within a broader social and governmental structure introduces a key element in the big *R Ruler* issue regarding quality care. One of the conditions governing the Council's development of regulations was that the regulations had to be approved by the provincial government. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's ecological terminology, it is clear that the cultural macrosystem of the First Nations Tribal Council is considerably different from the macrosystem of the province as a whole and of the provincial government. Indeed, many of the micro to macrosystem dynamics of traditional First Nations' ways are different than those of the majority population in individual provinces, and throughout the country.

Examining those differences only briefly, one sees among the various reserves of the Tribal Council a number of communities that are structured, in part, along kinship lines with much less separation and division amongst households than would be the case in most non-First Nations communities. The assumptions of stranger-to-stranger relationships, and the contractually oriented approach of the broader society seem distant, insensitive, and impersonal in a community that has grown up together and possesses a shared history extending back over generations. The establishment of a power to enforce these foreign regulations outside of traditional channels of authority can also create dissonance within such a community. The regulations themselves, with their typical emphasis on the physical characteristics of the caregiving environment, seem oddly asocial for the very social activity of caregiving; and the characteristics of a safe and healthy environment penned by a bureaucrat in the provincial capital can seem quite out of place in a small, crowded home in the North lacking amenities and services of the city. To discuss the results of applying a small *r* measurement *ruler* to an environment based on such a different big *R* context seems problematic at best, and potentially destructive to the cultural fabric of the community.

The example of the Tribal Council is but one extreme of the *Ruler/ruler* dilemma. Ways of understanding quality, of measuring quality, and the nature of the measurement instruments are all functions of cultural values and beliefs. Viewed ecologically and systematically, the question is not simply one of adoption of one set of regulations or another, but at the very least, adaptation is necessary. For regulations are clearly not valueless, but are part of a complex set of interactive systems with their own ecological meaning and integrity.

In the case of the Tribal Council, *Who* is the Ruler? appears to be the question one must address, before we can consider the questions of *What* is the ruler? and *What* is to be measured? Day care research work in Victoria and Vancouver has shown that for one parent a well-equipped environment and a defined educational program are of greatest importance, while for another parent of a same-age child, the home-like setting and maternal warmth of the caregiver are most significant (Pence & Goelman, 1987). For the bureaucrat in charge of regulations, measurability itself is a key issue, while for an Elder in a Native community what may be of greatest concern is the less tangible and less measurable evidence of relationships, and the survival of language and culture.

Within, as well as between cultures, consensus on quality indicators is difficult to achieve. Roles, relationships, class, and culture all have separate agendas and shape different values. Given such an inherent lack of agreement on quality, perhaps the process of involvement should take precedent over the product of definition.

The dilemma of the Tribal Council and the province is, in a number of ways, not dissimilar to dilemmas faced by the European community. Thus, let us turn our attention to the process-oriented model of the European Commission Childcare Network.

European Commission Child Care Network. In May of 1990, the European Commission sponsored a seminar in Barcelona on *Quality in Services to Young Children*. Arising from the seminar was a discussion paper (Balageur, Maestres, & Penn, 1991) that acknowledged the between and within macrosystem

issues that arise in attempts to define and measure quality. Indeed, there are many parallels between the discussion of the Tribal Council and the provincial government issues and dynamics, and the issues facing the European Community. The Child Care Commission discussion paper acknowledged the "relativity of definitions of quality" and proposed a process-oriented resolution. The process involved the generation of discussion and debate amongst stakeholders.

It is this broader, community-oriented, stakeholders' approach to understanding quality that has been neglected, in large part, by childcare researchers. By focusing primarily on our own in-group culture of research, and the traditions and values that feed that particular culture, we have isolated ourselves from other meaningful currents of thought and critically important groups of stakeholders. We have, thereby, neglected areas of research that are much needed in developing a more comprehensive understanding of quality in child care and the direct and indirect effects of those variables on children's development.

The European Commission Child Care Network identified three major perspectives in looking at quality: (1) children, (2) parents and family, and (3) professionals. The discussion paper noted that "The perspective of the *children* must usually be inferred by the adults responsible for them" (Balageur et al., 1991, p. 1). It is the children's perspective and the degree to which adults make inferences concerning the lives of children, that will be the focus of the third component of my argument, a consideration of the Childhood as a Social Phenomenon Project, a project supported by the Vienna based European Centre on Social Welfare Policy and Research (Qvortrup, 1991).

The Childhood as a Social Phenomenon Project. While the first two perspectives have argued that our efforts to understand quality care have been insufficiently sensitive to socio-ecological and cultural factors related to defining and assessing quality of care, the third perspective is perhaps the most challenging. I refer to it as the adulteration of child care.

The Childhood in Society Project may be the most conceptually challenging of the three Projects. The reason that this perspective is so challenging is that it involves more than a repositioning from the perspective of an adult in one environment to an adult in another environment. Rather, it requires a shift from that of an adult in one environment to a child in another environment. The first can be accomplished in part through a shift in lenses, the second requires a shift in being.

A second challenge for a child-centered perspective on quality care is the effort required to move beyond the adult-centered rhetoric of "in the best interests of the child." Like our often well-intentioned actions taken on behalf of minority populations, the rhetoric and the reality of what is in the child's best interests often present very different pictures.

The relationship between the call for quality care and the adulteration of childhood is clear when one considers what Deborah Phillips describes as the "Iron Triangle" of quality care (1992): (1) low staff:child ratios, (2) small group size, and (3) professional training. Clearly, each of these three components of quality care also represents opportunities for greater adult control of children's lives.

The purpose in noting the relationship between our call for quality child care and the increasing adulteration and curricularization of childhood is not to denounce the movement, but rather to highlight the paradigm of adult control, of which achieving quality child care is one part. In addition, we know very little about children's activities away from the direct presence and control of adults.

There are two facets to the Childhood as a Social Phenomenon question that merit discussion. The first aspect is the broad philosophical and sociological question about the curricularization of childhood and to what degree the quality care movement is part of an expanding effort to control more closely and submit all facets and all ages of childhood to adult control. The second question is to what degree we understand children and their behaviour in situations and environ-

ments outside of adult control, which are not observed.

In the Canadian National Child Care Study, (Goelman, Pence, Lero, Brockman, Glick, & Berkowitz, 1992) it was determined that over 44% of all Canadian children between the ages of 3 to 5 have two or more child care arrangements in a week. In terms of understanding a child's development, it is not enough to know about the quality of setting X (no matter who defines the quality or how well it meets the criteria) if setting X is but one of four significant environments every week, or if setting X is part of an ever-changing turnover of environments every few months. In the latter case, the change itself, may be the most critical element in the quality of care fabric for this particular child.

From a different perspective even if the caregiving arrangement is stable over time, and even if there are relatively few of those settings, the space between these threads — for example, the daily half-hour walk to the caregiver's — may be as salient to an understanding of that child's development as is the hour and a half in care. The second comes equipped with adult observers, the first seldom does.

The next question is perhaps the most challenging task of all to researchers, and indeed to all adults to address: How does the *child* understand the threads and fabric of his or her own life? Ultimately it is not the adult interpretation of the threads and patterns of a child's life that has the greatest impact on the child's development, but the meaning that the child makes of the threads and the fabric of his or her own life.

Response to the Seville Presentation. The reaction to the paper was decidedly mixed. Several of the Americans and a few Europeans took exception to the comments, but several others, Europeans primarily from Scandinavian countries, seemed to welcome my point of view.

One outcome of the presentation was an edited a volume (with Peter Moss, then coordinator of the European Childcare Network), which attempted to provide images from the diverse eyes of child care beholders. The edited volume was entitled *Valuing quality in early childhood services: New approaches to defining quality* (1994). We focused primarily on the need for a more inclusionary approach to understanding the potential of early childhood care and development. This book stimulated a second volume exploring in greater depth and detail reconstructions of children and their care. Working with Gunilla Dahlberg of the University of Stockholm, this further investigation into an alternative discourse is entitled, *Beyond quality: Postmodern personalities on early childhood (1999).*

A second outcome of the new directions in my thinking was a series of international training Institutes, partly sponsored by UNICEF. The first of these was held at the University of Victoria in 1995 with a follow-up Regional Institute in Africa held at the University of Namibia. The workshop at the University of Nambia was a particularly informative experience. One of my central objectives in developing this workshop was to understand better the degree to which a Western or Minority World approach to developing early childhood training and programs has taken root in Majority World countries. Such rooting is viewed as problematic if the transplanted approach has suppressed the presence and vitality of indigenous knowledge and indigenous practices. The point is a contentious one because it strikes at the heart of Western, modernist beliefs in the irregularity and immutability of Truth. The Africa Institute provided me with the opportunity to explore the degree to which Western Truth had supplanted other, local and regional truths. This point had been previously raised with both academic and First Nation's audiences. Following is a brief description of the African Institute and the responses these ideas have generated in three different environments: Western academic, First Nations Communities, and in the African Institute.

Reconceptualizing early childhood care. The focus of my workshop at the Africa Institute was, to a large extent, a critique of Western, primarily American, early childhood care and development philosophies and

practices. While the critique at a practical level centered on the issue of exclusion versus inclusion, at a philosophical level the critique was couched in modernist versus post-modernist perspectives. The workshop topic was chosen, in part, in an effort to determine the degree to which exclusionary practices and modernist philosophy have been adopted in the Majority World countries attending the workshop. It was also critical to determine the degree of receptivity to a more inclusionary and post-modernist approach and the degree to which such an approach was already present in the participating countries.

As part of this critique, a number of questions and dilemmas were presented to the participants, including the following:

• To what degree do Western child development and child care theories fit local perspectives regarding development and care?

• What, if any, role should local perspectives play in the education or practice of early childhood education practitioners?

• If local and Western thought are not congruent, which perspective do you believe is better?

• In your country how congruent are parents' and trained caregivers' perspectives regarding appropriate child care practices?

• To what degree are early childhood education practices at program, parent and policy levels actively exclusionary—that is, developed by experts or small, restricted groups.

• To what degree are those countries or programs that challenge Western perspectives, prepared to see their own positions also as relative, when challenged by groups within their own country?

• To what degree has Western thought regarding children, child development, and childrens' programming influenced training and related support structures in the Majority World?

The questions were intended to be provocative. Individuals were expected to examine their own practice and ideology, as well as those of other individuals and institutions within which they worked.

The intent of the workshop was to explore certain tools, such as ecological frameworks, and certain reconceptualizations, such as modernist and post-modernist philosophy, as they apply to any level of early childhood care from front-line practice to policy development. The principle advanced was that inclusionary processes are far more powerful than exclusionary practices in stimulating broader community development. The challenge to the group was: How could these ideas be applied in your own area of practice, whether it was a front-line, instructional, program development, or a policy context? The workshop structure introduced a basic framework focusing on a socio-ecological perspective, and then proceeded to employ small group activities, including skits, intended to operationalize these concepts dramatically.

Reactions to the ideas presented in the workshops in several venues such as European and American academic and professional conferences, Canadian First Nations' communities, and African regional conferences was as follows.

Academic and professional reactions. In the academic and professional conferences it seemed there was often a 3-way split in reactions to the discussion: Type A, those who enthusiastically supported the ideas, sometimes breaking out in applause at specific points; Type B, those who emphatically rejected the ideas, seeing in them the not so thin edge of the wedge that would cleave expert authority from its influence over practice; and a final third, Type C, who indicated neither strong reception or rejection. Typically in the academic/professional conferences, the Type A enthusiasts were often individuals who had attempted to engage in community development or had worked with grass roots organizations; Type B critics were often members of the Academy whose careers rested on a foundation of authority and expert advice; and Type C individuals were more difficult to assess.

The reactions from First Nations communities. The experience with First Nations communities was usually quite different. The questions in these cases

focused much more on operationalization: How does the program work; what will be expected of them and the community; what does the University get out of this?

The context we operate within Canada with First Nations communities is one where aboriginal communities and cultures have been actively, or even benignly, destroyed. Most government activities designed to help aboriginal communities have been assimilationist in philosophy working to undermine or minimize traditional beliefs, values, languages, and practices. Most schooling, religion, and job opportunities, have been Western in orientation. Only in the last five to ten years have the federal and provincial governments moved to a policy of devolving authority for schooling, health care, social services, and employment training to the Native communities. In this environment there is a deep and profound distrust of the majority society and what it has done to Aboriginal Peoples' pride and traditions. At the same time, most communities feel they must not isolate their children from the Western world, rather, if their children are to be successful they must somehow find a way to walk in both worlds. It is a tremendous challenge.

Out of this context, those communities that have heard about the partnership program between the University of Victoria and the Tribal Council, already have a basic level of trust because they have invited us in and not vice-versa. Typically, there is little Type B response because experts are not seen to have served them well. There usually is a Type A response, but it is subdued and the feeling is that time will tell if this may be a useful partnership. There are virtually no Type C responses. In working with the communities, usually one to two years pass before the program actually starts. The decision to commence the program typically depends on two things: sufficient levels of trust and funding. Maintaining that hard-won trust is the most important ingredient in the ultimate success of the Project. Four First Nations Partnership Projects have been completed and there are currently three in progress.

The Africa Institute. In Africa, the Regional Early Childhood Care and Development Institute/Summer School brought together 26 people from 11 countries. Virtually none of the inter-country participants knew each other and some of the intra-country participants were new to each other as well. As noted earlier, the workshop topic was predicated on the belief that an enhanced inclusionary approach to early childhood education would be of value in Africa as part of a broader community development and capacity-building process. With the Africa Institute, the presentation followed the first two days of official welcomes, orientation to the facility, and background to the Institute. On the third day the presenter/facilitator component of the workshop began with my work on some frameworks to be discussed for the following 2 1/2 weeks. The major objectives included: (1) introduction of an ecological understanding of early childhood education and child development as nested within broader social structures and values, (2) discussion of how ecologies were different across time and space, (3) the presence of multiple ecologies within communities or countries, (4) the need to introduce inclusionary processes as a means to bridging these multiple ecologies; (5) the nature of the Modernist agenda as a largely exclu-sionary dynamic with a reliance on "One Best Way", while the presence of multiple beliefs suggests "Many Good Ways", (6) Post-modernism as a more receptive dynamic in the presence of acknowledged diversity, (7) role playing of inclusionary approaches in program, policy, and parent education contests (used also as a means to observe group dynamics and individual comfort with role playing), and (8) presentation of the University of Victoria program as a case study of inclu-sionary practice in early childhood education training.

Personal reflections on the Africa Institute presentation. Reactions to the inclusionary, post-modernist ideas were somewhat between those experienced with academic/professional audiences in the West and the discussions with First Nations communities described earlier. The African audience was primarily professional in nature, with individuals having a range of program and policy responsibilities.

The critique was not one that most had heard before. A number of participants commented that the idea of early childhood education was unknown in some rural areas, and therefore there was an important role for experts to play in introducing ideas and options. In addition, most of those present seemed comforted to hear that the inclusionary approach was based on a *this/ and* belief rather than on *either/or.* In other words, the professionals were not required to abandon their training and ideas regarding appropriate care practices, but rather that these ideas and others (e.g., from the community), all needed to be present.

One of the questions I had prior to beginning the Institute was the degree to which Western education, values, and practices were seen as being problematic, because of their limited sensitivity to local and cultural differences in Africa. With Canadian First Nations communities, distrust of these systems, born out of years of oppression and destruction, translated into a fairly ready acceptance of alternative approaches. In the Africa Institute this willingness to depart from Minority World approaches was much more reticent. Again the idea of *this and* was much more acceptable for most than *either/or.*

Overall, the reaction in Africa to these ideas was uniquely different than the other two situations. Perhaps because the delivery system was a workshop more than a short presentation, there was a strong sense from the participants of actively assessing how they might apply these ideas or the impact on the way they had been working. With First Nations communities there was a stronger sense of wait and seeing or making an assessment after implementing the ideas. In the Africa Institute there was a stronger sense of a wanting to implement the ideas in practice. In short, receptivity and engagement with the ideas seemed high in Africa. There was a professional and academic reluctance to go too far too fast, but there was also little negative reaction, or a sense that the established structures and procedures must be protected at any cost.

Conclusion

The personal journey that commenced in the early 1970s, the quest to understand how can one promote and provide quality care for young children, continues into the late 1990s and hopefully in the field, will have no end. As professionals whose job it is to experience with young people their development of knowledge and understanding, it is critical for us to remain open to new and different ways of seeing and understanding, to encourage the many voices of child care to be heard and to allow each cycle and each experience to tell us more, to broaden our understanding, and to add rings to our growth. Like the children with whom we work, the quest *is* life—the danger is if we cease from exploration.

ENDNOTE

[1] 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.

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