

Alliances for change: Conversations across the abysal line

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Abstract

This paper traces a conversation between the authors about their long-standing (Urban) and more recent (Gómez Muñoz, Zárate Pinto) engagement in and with RECE. The conversation revolves around the role and potential of reconceptualist thought in contexts of early childhood realities in the Global South, most prominently in Latin America, where two of the authors are based, while one has extensive work connections to the region. Given RECE's roots in US-American and English language worlds, what other approaches exist in Latin America contexts and beyond that enable us to challenge the dominant narratives of early childhood education, its narrow disciplinary base, its policies and practices? Drawing on work with marginalised communities, the conversation turns to necessities of advocacy and transdisciplinarity, and to possibilities of epistemic and new activist alliances.

Keywords

Epistemological allyship, Latin America, Reconceptualising early childhood education, Theories of the south

Instead of an introduction: Responding to an invitation

This themed issue invites contributions that respond to Sally Lubeck's imperative that reconceptualising early childhood education 'means to be angry and dream' (Lubeck, 1991: 168). Considering the state of the world there is much to be angry about. 30 years after the initial group of reconceptualists set out, in the US, to critique and deconstruct the impositions of what was deemed 'developmentally appropriate' in educational practices with young children (Bredenkamp and Rosegrant, 1991), and despite significant advances in culturally responsive pedagogies, the WEIRD hegemony (*Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic*; Nielsen et al., 2017) in mainstream early childhood thought, policy and practice is present as ever, if not more. The annual RECE conferences, together with a substantial body of critical early childhood scholarship produced over the years, remind us that, as stated in the editorial to this collection, it is still necessary to protest the same 'f***** s****'. However, there is reason for hope. Many of the

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tenets of reconceptualist scholarship and activism have entered mainstream early childhood policy and practice. They include, for instance, embracing diversity as the underpinning principle of early childhood education, recognising education as a universal right from birth, equity, social justice and inclusion, and the importance of culturally and locally appropriate, community-based approaches. We have traced and discussed these developments in the global policy space (e.g. Urban, 2022), and are actively engaging with them in the *RECE Policy Caucus*, which we set up in 2019.¹ The conversation that forms the body of this paper goes back to a shared concern that also inspired the creation of the *policy caucus*: despite the relevance of the critical scholarship and activism, conversations within RECE have tended to be rather inward facing. As a community of critical scholars and activists, we have created a much-needed supportive environment – but lack active engagement with the arenas where policies affecting young children and their communities are determined. There are good reasons for that, as I (Urban) have discussed elsewhere (Urban, 2023), not least the perceived indifference or outright hostility towards the kind of scholarship pursued by RECE members. As one (very!) senior colleague put it to me (Urban) when I began engaging with RECE many years ago, *they are just a bunch of likeminded poststructuralists* (personal communication). RECE members old and new would beg to differ, we assume, but that is not the point. More relevant for this piece is another set of arguments that emerges – broadly – from discourses that might be labelled as *theories of the south* (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Fanon, 1967; Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and *post-colonial theory* (Cannella and Viruru, 2004; Liebel, 2020; Marfo, 2024; Meneses, 2022): post-colonial thought maintains that (western) critical theory resides firmly on the same side of Fanon’s *abyssal line* that (re)produces the mindset of *coloniality* in the first place (Fanon, 1963; Meneses, 2022). This, as Maldonado explains, is deeply woven into our ways of being, knowing and doing:

Coloniality [. . .] refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday.

(Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 243)

What has this all got to do with RECE? To begin with, it is impossible to discuss understandings of childhood without considering the persistent impact of *coloniality*. This is relevant within a Western, Eurocentric context, but even more so beyond:

One aspect of reflecting about postcolonial childhoods is that the people living in Europe (as involuntary descendants of the colonial powers) know little about childhoods outside Europe and North America. [. . .] The history of childhood in non-Western regions has been ignored for a long time or has been viewed in a very one-side light due to existing stereotypes.

(Liebel, 2020: 1–2)

RECE has come a long way since its beginning in the US in the 1990s. It has developed into a truly international organisation. Yet, with one exception in 2013 (Nairobi, Kenya), the annual conferences tend to move around what Moss and others (Moss and Mitchell, 2024) call ‘the anglosphere’ – US, Canada, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, UK, Ireland. Having worked extensively in Latin America, we are curious about the possible encounters of existing *reconceptualist* early childhood scholarship with the existing critical early childhood scholarship and practice in this region of the world. It is, we feel, the beginning of a necessary conversation.

A necessary conversation

We – Diana, Camilo, Mathias – first met through research collaborations at the National University (Universidad Nacional) in Bogotá, Colombia, in 2010. Diana and Camilo were Master students, and members of the interdisciplinary Colombian research group PILIS (Primera Infancia, Lenguaje e Inclusión Social/Early Childhood, Language and Social Inclusion), based at the faculty of medicine of UNAL. The leadership of PILIS and I shared an interest in whole-systems approaches to early childhood development, education and care. Colombia was about to introduce the wide-ranging integrated early childhood policy framework *de cero a siempre* (Republic of Colombia, 2013); I (Mathias) was about to complete an EU-wide collaborative research project that resulted in the now widely recognised concept of *competent systems* (Urban et al., 2011). Since then, we have collaborated in a number of projects and writing activities (e.g. Urban et al., 2019). At the time of writing this piece, Diana and Camilo are in the final phases of their PhD studies at the Early Childhood Research Centre at Dublin City University.

During our early conversations we touched on the activities of RECE and started dreaming of the Colombian group hosting the first RECE conference in Latin America. At the time, Mathias was busy preparing the hosting of RECE 2011 in London, UK. 30 years after the first RECE conference at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, we live in hope of a first RECE conference in Latin America!

We recorded our conversation in summer 2024, over a series of video-conference calls (Zoom Workplace, Version 6); the following is based on an edited version of the transcription.

We begin by positioning ourselves and our relationship with RECE: how have come to connect with RECE, what were our first encounters, what does RECE mean to us?

Mathias: I first became aware of RECE in the early 2000s, about 20 years ago. I remember hearing about this group that had come together to think critically about early childhood, to create a space for alternatives to this mantra we kept hearing, about developmentally appropriate practices and all this. I was attracted to that and, in a way, it has become my intellectual home. It has created many opportunities to engage, but not always without problems. My question is how can we, as critical scholars, make sure we continue to engage in critical reflection about who we are, as a community, and how we relate to the outside world.

In any case, RECE for me is an important and supportive community. I have found friends, mentors, and people that introduced me to ideas that I wasn't necessarily aware of. and I found people that are prepared to listen to some of the ideas I am grappling with and that I need to discuss before I bring them out into the outside world. But what does RECE mean for you, I wonder?

Camilo: My impression of RECE a group of activists and scholars is that is interesting where, in what context, it was created. Because we know there have been significant developments around early childhood in the United States and in Europe, I mean the Global North. There are strong institutions that have developed this big narrative about childhood. At the same time there is this group of people in RECE that have created a different kind of institution, with an own discourse about early childhood that goes beyond the accepted fundamentals.

In political terms, and in terms of research, it is important to listen. To create other kinds of institutions that work in independent ways – political institutions in relation to early childhood policies. The work of RECE, I think, has been going in this direction, to position another kind of discussion about early

childhood, to focus on the social and political place children have in the society. To me, RECE is interesting because this is happening within the context where dominant discourses are produced and reproduced (for example by big institutions like the OECD).

Mathias: There has been criticism from authors in the so-called Global South (we should talk about the dichotomy of global south and north in more detail). Their argument is that while there is this dominant narrative, this regime of truths about children and education, and best practices, the critique of that narrative is also very much embedded in a Eurocentric, Global North debate. A lot of critical theory, for instance, is rooted in the same English language, US, European context and thought as the stories it seeks to critique. Are you saying RECE is a reflection of that?

Camilo: There is this big frame of US-American and European culture, and RECE is within this inner logic of that culture. At least as I see it as a person from Colombia, from the south. It is important to question the means of our resistance, and how we criticize, how we understand what it means to be critical – in the Global North or in the Global South. This is an open question for discussion, because sometimes every country, every town, every people have different views on that. I think RECE can be an example, but it is hard to see ourselves in the mirror.

Diana: I think my first approach to RECE was when we met at the National University,² in 2010. We were working with the Ministry of Education on the new holistic early childhood policy.³ And I remember you telling us about this organisation or movement. For me, this concept of reconceptualising was interesting, but I didn't really understand the meaning of it until I started to conceptualise things I had to do in my professional experience. As a speech and language therapist, my formation had been mainly from a developmental perspective. The texts we studied were mainly Anglo-Saxon sources. All I knew about development was written and researched in English. I haven't yet had the opportunity to attend a RECE conference, because of Visa problems. My encounter with RECE has been, after meeting you, through reading the founders, Mimi Bloch, Sally Lubeck, Shirley Kessler, and others who wrote in the first journal.⁴ Reading them was really important for developing my understanding because as an undergraduate, and even in my Masters and working as a researcher in my research group, we always talked about developmentally appropriate practices. We appropriated that discourse and used it without questioning, without really thinking about diversity, or contextual or structural issues.

As our conversation moves on, I (Mathias) reflect on my own early professional experiences, working with marginalised young children and their families in a community development project. The children we were working with were clearly not developing neatly, according to the textbook expectations. They didn't fit in, were always in trouble, making trouble. It was those early experiences that led me to reading Freire (1970), whose work had only begun to appear in the debate, and other authors of critical pedagogy, and to question whether 'the problem' was with the children – or with educational institutions and a system that was rigged against them. Discussing Freire leads us back to the Latin American context and its contradictions. Camilo offers:

It is quite hard to describe policy-making here in Latin America as something in opposition to the discourses in Europe or the US. In my work I found that the whole of Latin America embraced these dominant discourses. But at the same time the local or indigenous communities, that are not descendant from Europeans, like most people here in Latin America, are contesting in many ways such political practices, or the image of the child that comes from a white middle class environment.

So, on the one hand we have the discourse of the ‘gap’ embedded in official policies without questioning. But there is another kind of discourse, that often emerges from public⁵ universities, that I find appealing. Independent discourses in Argentina, in Ecuador, about not only to contest, but to recognise children in a different way. Here we have a discourse that understands the dominant, western, developmentalist view as a kind of colonialism, and offers a way of resisting. A good example is the work of Amador Baquiro (2012), or the resistance of indigenous people to official early childhood policy.⁶ The two things are happening at the same time.

We stay with the topic of alternative discourses as Diana talks about her current research with rural communities in rural Colombia. Having trained, initially, as a speech and language therapist, her work is now informed by critical children’s geographies and scholarship outside the mainstream of early childhood education and development (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Lanouette and Taylor, 2022). Diana reflects:

While writing my PhD thesis I have found very critical papers regarding childhoods, but they are from other disciplines. Not education, not pedagogy, but mainly sociology.

Diana recalls how the research groups that were invited to comment on the Colombian early childhood policy framework as it was developed – including the one she was involved in, PILIS – almost exclusively came for a psychology background (Republic of Colombia, 2013; Yoshikawa et al., 2014). This leads us to reflecting a topic we continue returning to: the need for more inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to early childhood scholarship, practice and policy (Guevara, 2022; Guevara and Cardini, 2019; Urban, 2022). Another thread emerges in our conversation: our shared experience that *criticality* in the mainstream education debate appears to be rooted in areas other than early childhood. Where are the critical voices we so urgently need in early childhood education in Latin America? Not in the mainstream academic journals, it seems.

Diana: Another issue I believe is important for us in the Latin American context is that we don’t publish as much as we should, perhaps. I have been reading entire theses for my research, and there are important critical approaches, but they are not in the journals.

Returning to the beginning of our conversation, we consider possibilities for decolonising early childhood theory and practice, and possible roles and responsibilities for RECE in building new alliances. We keep coming back to the macro-political context of our work with young children, with educators, policy makers and students. Funding is one of the critical issues that we identify across our different work contexts, in the neoliberal university as well as the wider neoliberal global and regional education context (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). As Diana reminds us:

Funding for research is mainly from the ministry or governmental institutions.

Yet, as we dig deeper, none of us seems prepared to give up hope in the transformative potential of the public university, as an agent for productive critique.

Camilo: In the space of the university our research can be a political expression, that can be heard. Ideas can spread to students and colleagues. But the transformation we need is not only about early childhood. It is about understanding what it means to be human, to be a human being on this planet. We are dealing with a big political structure, the politics of power.

We agree that despite increasing pressure, both external and internal, the university can still be spaces for critical interrogation. Which, as we also agree, comes with the responsibility for us, as critical scholars, to defend, and make use of the privileged space we inhabit: the university is a critical institution, or it is nothing (Stuart Hall).

Where to from here?

We reconvene for a further conversation, this time aiming at exploring ways forward for RECE in new alliances with organisations, movements, popular traditions and epistemologies in Latin America. Diana and Camilo suggest we might begin by suggesting possible agendas for the work ahead. This makes me (Mathias) think of Paulo Freire's insistence in the purpose, the *directivity*, as he puts it, of education: 'the revelatory, gnoseological practice of education does not in itself effect the transformation of the world: but it implies it' (Freire, 2004: 23). Across contexts and continents, we share an interest in education and scholarship as a means to achieve equity and justice for all children. We also share the belief that such a stance requires political action beyond policy critique. We talk about RECE as a necessary space for developing and exchanging critical scholarship in a supportive and protected environment. But we wonder whether this 'line of work' as Diana and Camilo call it, should be complemented by other initiatives. How about, Camilo suggests, a RECE lab for policymaking? A space dedicated to moving beyond contestation and policy critique towards proposing other possible forms of governance of childhood? It is an idea that has brought a group of us together in the RECE policy caucus.

As we call for policymaking action, our conversation turns to possible traps along the way. Well-intentioned but naïve activism is certainly one of them, inevitably resulting in frustration about those inhabiting the corridors of power ignoring our calls and demands. It is equally naïve (if tempting) to fall for the neoliberal university's obsession with 'impact' at the cost of considerate thought, scholarship and theorisation. Should our work really 'speak in terms that policymakers understand' (Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2013)? 'Policymakers have limited time so tell them up-front what you're trying to say and justify yourself later', we are advised (otomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2013: 2). can this be academically sound, or even ethical? We think not. We need to talk about his more, suggests Diana:

When I read John Horton and Peter Kraftl's piece 'for more-than-usefulness' (Horton and Kraftl, 2005), it got me thinking about whether my research would actually be *useful* for policy and whether it should be . . .

The Latin American context, we feel, has much to contribute to the necessary conversation, in RECE, about early childhood education as a transformative force. But the new alliances we imagine are to be found beyond the familiar territory – and vocabulary – of dominant early childhood development, education and care. Eduardo Gudynas, one of Latin America's main activist social and environmental theorists, traces the transformative potential of contemporary Latin American scholarship to its connectedness to social movements, in particular indigenous⁷ and, in the case of Diana's research, rural, peasant communities (Gudynas et al., 2016). His, and others, ethical research stance emerges from deep-rooted resistance to *extractivism* that is rampant in the region, and a destructive consequence of persistent colonialist structures. The concept stems from the natural environment (mining, e.g. lithium and other rare earths needed for electric car batteries, exploitation of biodiversity for pharmaceutical industry, deforestation); it extends, however, to the epistemological, to the knowledge extraction practices of much of established research, and even into areas like critical accounting (Chagnon et al., 2022; Gudynas, 2019; Igwe et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2022).

We conclude our conversation – it’s recorded and transcribed for the purposes of this paper part – on a hopeful note. We feel much can be gained from a more systematic engagement of critical early childhood scholarship in RECE with the scholarly and anti-colonialist social activism in Latin America. Let the conversation begin!

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Notes

1. <https://receinternational.org/policycaucus>
2. Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá
3. Republic of Colombia (2013).
4. (Lubeck 1991)
5. As opposed to private .
6. (Guevara et al., 2022; Urban et al., 2019).
7. See for instance the Colombian *Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca* (CRIC) <https://www.cric-colombia.org>

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