

KERRY H. ROBINSON  
CRISS JONES DÍAZ



# **Diversity** and **Difference** in Early Childhood Education

Issues for theory  
and practice

# **DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:**

ISSUES FOR THEORY  
AND PRACTICE

KERRY H. ROBINSON AND  
CRISS JONES DÍAZ

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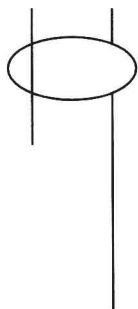
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## FOREWORD

This book by Kerry Robinson and Criss Jones Díaz brings a dynamic mix of poststructuralist theory and early childhood classrooms into the present, providing a wonderfully clear and accessible introduction to poststructuralist theory and to its implications for early childhood classroom practice. They take as their central point of departure the rich diversity of modes of being that children bring with them to the preschool in this endlessly changing, globalizing world. It is an important and original innovation in this book that they situate their analysis in the context of that globalized/globalizing world. At its best, that world is one where borders can be crossed and multiple ways of seeing and of being can be honoured and respected, and where pluralism, inclusion and the principles of democracy can be lived out in everyday lives. At its worst that globalized/globalizing world is a neoliberal nightmare, where the world's wealth is skimmed off by major corporations, and ordinary people become useful as consumers and as commodities to be manipulated and disposed of when it suits the market. In this worse form of globalization, ordinary people are made as homogeneous as possible to ensure that diversity and difference do not interrupt the easy substitution of one worker for another, one consumer for another, one commodity for another. In this version of globalization, borders are relaxed when it suits the flow of money to the corporations, and they are fiercely tightened when it comes to the ordinary poor seeking refuge from terror and annihilation (George 2004).

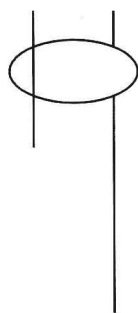
It is rare to find a book on early childhood that situates itself in this wider political context. Neoliberalism is in fact extraordinarily clever at disguising itself, dressing itself up in equal opportunities policies, for example, while actually producing something very far from equality (Lakoff 2004). In a recent review of early childhood texts (Davies 2005a), including those by Fraser *et al.* (2004), Lewis *et al.* (2004), Lareau (2003) and Anning *et al.* (2004), I found that they included no mention of the pervasive effects of globalization and of the neoliberal forms of management that have impacted on educational

institutions everywhere and on the subjectivities of our children (Davies 2003, 2005b). But understanding the historical and political contexts inside which current subjectivities are being shaped is important, and Robinson and Jones Díaz make this clear. We live in deeply contradictory times, constituted through deeply contradictory discourses. As early childhood educators, we need this kind of book to enable us to articulate our professional values and to bring them to life in our everyday practice.

Many of us who worked as and with teachers during the late 1960s and 1970s took part in huge social changes. Groups of people who had been excluded from social power could, and did, insist on change. We lived at that time in a kind of Hegelian or Age of Enlightenment ethos, believing that through an ongoing dialectical process, knowledge improves on itself – it works towards the betterment of society and of humanity generally. In this model, government pours resources into education and funds the teleological march of knowledge, believing this will create a more productive and innovative workforce, which will in turn accelerate progress and economic growth. In the 1980s and early 1990s this model shifted towards a neoliberal model in which those ideals were undermined and displaced. Neoliberalism has introduced, over the past two decades, increasing government of individuals, including both greatly increased surveillance and accountability *and* a relinquishing of care and responsibility for individuals. Care and responsibility are shifted back to individuals themselves. Funds are withdrawn from education, and discourses of choice and privatization are pushed instead. At the same time as responsibility is moved from government to the individual, mechanisms of surveillance are used to compel compliance with neoliberal practices mandated by government. Auditing and accounting discourses thus take on greater power than, and undermine, professional discourses (Davies 2005c; Rose 1997).

The urgent task for those working in the early childhood area is the recuperation of professional discourses such that they are not simply mimicking what neoliberal doctrines require of them – and are not ignorant of those requirements – but have the power to question them. Those dominant, neoliberal discourses that homogenize students and instil competitive individualism in students, aggressively undermining strategies of inclusion and the valuing of difference and diversity, currently have enormous power. In this deeply contradictory space of globalization, this book provides a clear map for thinking through the issues that are relevant to early childhood practice and sets out the theoretical frameworks through which readers can make sense of their own insertion into deeply contradictory discourses. The subjectivities of early childhood teachers and of the children they work with, as well as the nature of that work, are constantly being produced in ways that teachers and children are not necessarily aware of. To become reflexively aware of the discourses through which we are formed, moment by moment, is an extraordinarily difficult task (Davies *et al.* 2004).

In their work as early childhood educators these authors work with students who are being formed by discourses to which they are exposed in higher education, by discourses they encounter in schools, by discourses in the media, and by discourses everywhere around them. Kerry and Criss teach



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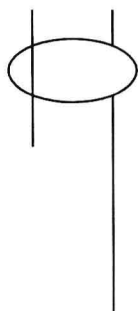
We would especially like to thank Tania Ferfolja for her tireless and careful editing and formatting of the final manuscript. We are also indebted to Bronwyn Davies and Nola Harvey for their comments on the book as a whole. Finally, we would also like to acknowledge the many early childhood educators and preservice teachers we have worked with over the past decade or so; your valuable contributions and voices are always respected and appreciated in our work.

them to be reflexively aware and to see the processes of discursive formation at work on them and on others. I believe this book brings to its readers some of the passion, insight and commitment to high standards that is evident in Kerry's and in Criss's teaching. It is a marvellous resource and a very timely contribution to making our way in this globalized/globalizing world.

*Bronwyn Davies*

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# CHANGING PARADIGMS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

Critical perspectives on diversity  
and difference in doing social  
justice in early childhood  
education

## Introduction

The international field of early childhood education is currently experiencing a major challenge to the authority of many of the long-standing traditional theories and practices that have been utilized in approaches to children and children's learning. This challenge has largely stemmed from the new sociology of childhood, critical psychology and the utilization of post-modernist/poststructuralist frameworks, which call for educators, researchers and others working with children to begin to reconceptualize their understandings of childhood and their work with young children. Consequently, many of the universalized 'truths' about 'the child' established in modernist perspectives and underpinning taken-for-granted or common-sense assumptions about childhood and what it means to be a child, are being seriously critiqued and disrupted by these new and different ways of understanding children as subjects. This book has been written in the light of these significant and exciting social and educational changes and is a contribution to the growing body of work that aims to reconceptualize childhood and early childhood education. These perspectives have particular significance for understandings of diversity and difference, social inequalities and for doing social justice education with children and their families. Utilizing a feminist poststructuralist approach, informed by other social theories, including queer, critical, cultural and **postcolonial** theories, we explore the possibilities that these perspectives have for extending understandings of childhood, constructions of **identity**, and the negotiation of power that underpin social relationships and perpetuate social inequalities, as well as for personal, institutional and social transformations.

Since the late 1980s there has been a significant increase in awareness of the importance of early childhood education policies, practices and curriculum

## 2 Diversity and difference in early childhood education

positively reflecting the diverse cultural identities of children and their families. Today, this embracing of the pluralism that exists in children's lives is a central feature of the different philosophies that broadly underpin early childhood education in Western countries – for example, those encompassed within the *anti-bias curriculum* that emerged from the United States (Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force 1989) and in the perspectives of Reggio Emilia, stemming from Europe (Dahlberg *et al.* 1999). Such philosophies that enhance and foster diversity and difference are critical in a world that is encountering broad social, economic, political and technological shifts that are continually challenging and changing the lives of children, their families and communities at both the global and local levels. In this book we are particularly concerned with how and to what extent these philosophies, founded on concepts of pluralism, inclusion and democracy, are put into practice on a daily basis in early childhood institutions. How diversity and difference are perceived, taken up by individual early childhood educators and included and articulated into everyday policies and practices with children and their families, is critical to the impact and success of such philosophies in addressing social justice and equity issues. To date, there has been limited research on how early childhood educators' perspectives of diversity and difference impact on their pedagogy and how early childhood institutional policies and practices either disrupt or perpetuate the social inequalities that exist broadly in society.

This book is also a reflection of our growing concern with the potential impact that the global movements of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and the marketization and corporatization of childhood can have on children, families and early childhood education. Of particular concern is the growing homogenization of social, cultural and linguistic identities of children and their families. Discourses of neoliberalism and neoconservatism have the potential to seriously impact on what knowledge is included in programmes, how it is to be taught, the recognition and inclusion of cultural diversity and difference, and the abilities of families, particularly from low socio-economic backgrounds, to meet the financial commitments of their children's early education. The marketization of childhood and early childhood education is about shareholder profits, rather than the quality of service provision. As Apple (2001: 18) argues, 'Neo-liberalism transforms our very idea of democracy, making it only an economic concept, not a political one'.

Hence, within the discourse of neoconservatism, which operates in tandem with neoliberalism, diversity and difference become problematic, as they are perceived to undermine Western values and traditions regarded as essential to the prevention of the social decay that is seen to be operating in society. Consequently, within this discourse, founded on the cultural **binary** opposition of us/them, a fear of the **Other** is maintained and perpetuated. The impact of these discourses is already being felt in early childhood education throughout the world – for example, the vigour with which standardized testing has been taken up in early childhood education, and the economic spin-offs that have been captured by corporate bodies in preparing children to meet the requirements of such testing (Cannella and Viruru 2004); and the recent public outcry from neoconservative politicians in Australia, when the

long-running children's television programme *Play School* ran a segment depicting a young girl named Brenna and her friend, being taken to an amusement park by Brenna's two mums (Krien 2004; Nguyen 2004). This event has critical implications for social justice education more broadly, including addressing gay and lesbian issues in the early childhood curriculum.

## Writing this book

This book is primarily based on the research we have conducted together and separately around issues of equity and social justice in early childhood education in Australia. It is also based on our experiences as pre-service teacher educators working with early childhood students for the past decade in a metropolitan university in Sydney, in one of the most culturally diverse communities in Australia. Despite the fact that it is Australia-based research, we feel that the issues that we are dealing with are equally relevant to early childhood educators elsewhere in the world. The social, political and economic factors that are impacting on children and their families, as well as the social inequalities that continue to plague the lives of many of these families, are operating on both global and local scales.

Our joint research has focused on exploring early childhood educators' perceptions of diversity and difference and the impact these have on pedagogy, policies and practices. Through the utilization of surveys and individual interviews we have focused on early childhood educators' perceptions and practices around issues of gender, multiculturalism, bilingualism, sexuality, Aboriginality, family and social class issues, as well as how early childhood institutions incorporate these equity issues into their policies and organizational practices. Unfortunately, a book of this scope that critically examines difference and diversity within a social justice agenda in education cannot adequately deal with all the relevant social, political and economic issues facing children and their families. Consequently, the different foci of the chapters are a representation of our combined and separate areas of research expertise, particularly in the areas of bilingualism, multiculturalism, gender, sexuality, family and social class issues. It is these areas that we feel that have particular international relevance and significance.

It is also important to highlight that early childhood educators are a heterogeneous group from a variety of backgrounds, with a multiplicity of perspectives and voices based on their different locations within social discourses that operate around diversity and difference. Consequently, the perspectives and voices present in this book do not speak for all early childhood educators, but rather they represent the dominant discourses prevailing among those educators, other staff, resource workers, children and their families, and pre-service teachers with whom we have worked in Australia in recent years.

## Children's perceptions of difference

The early childhood years (from birth to age 8) are formidable years in the growth and development of cognition, language, social, emotional and physical competence. This development takes place within different social contexts where issues related to human diversity and difference impact significantly on children's understandings of and ways of being in the world. Over the past twenty years research has increased educators' awareness of the bias and discrimination that young children can hold and perpetuate towards those who are perceived as different from the dominant culture and those who engage in social practices different from their own. This research highlights that by the time children enter primary schooling their perceptions of difference largely reflect and perpetuate the dominant racialized, gendered, sexualized, classed and body **stereotypes** and prejudices that prevail in the broader society (Palmer 1990; Glover 1991; Troyna and Hatcher 1992; MacNaughton 1993, 2000; Alloway 1995; Makin *et al.* 1995).

Children do not enter early childhood programmes as empty slates but rather bring with them a myriad of perceptions of difference that they have taken up from their families, peers, the media and other social sources and negotiated in the representations of their own identities. Glover (1991) in the early 1990s found that as 2- and 3-year-old children become aware of differences they simultaneously develop positive or negative feelings about the differences they observe. For example, racial awareness is developed early in young children, impacting on their perceptions of skin colour and on their preferences in the social relationships they initiate and foster with other children (Aboud 1988; Katz 1982; Palmer 1990; Averhart and Bigler 1997). Glover (1991) reports that children frequently exhibited negative behaviours towards children from different racial backgrounds: refusing to hold their hands, never choosing to play with dolls from different racial backgrounds and always picking same-race' pictures for collages. An Australian study by Palmer (1990) clearly illustrated how preschool children were able to make negative evaluative judgements based on racial characteristics. In Palmer's study, the non-Aboriginal children made negative comments such as 'Blackfellas dirty' and children were reported as saying 'You're the colour of poo ... Did your Mum drop you in the poo?' and 'Rack off wog. We don't want to play with you' (cited in Glover 1991: 5). Kutner (1958) found that racial prejudice in young children affects their ability to make sound judgements and often their perception of reality is distorted. By age 3–4 years they are becoming more aware of ability and other differences and are developing critical understandings of their own identities, as well as the diversity and differences of others. Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1991) pointed out that 2-year-olds are already aware of and curious about differences and similarities among people, and they construct 'theories' about diversity congruent with their cognitive stages of development and life experiences.

As children grow older, other differences such as language variation and linguistic diversity become obvious. By 3 years of age, children are aware that speakers use different language codes in different contexts and bilingual children are highly aware of contextual differences in language use (Genesee

1989; Lanza 1992; Makin *et al.* 1995). Lanza (1992) investigated the language use of her bilingual 2-year-old and found that the child was able to separate the two languages or mix them according to the social expectations and context of the language used. Non-bilingual children also demonstrate an awareness of language differences and comments such as 'he speaks funny' or 'I don't understand her' are not uncommon.

Early childhood educators in our research largely perceive children's prejudice more as the passive reflections and expressions of adults' values towards difference, rather than as representations of the narratives and perceptions of the world that children, as individual agents, own themselves. This perspective is reflected in the following remarks: 'Children aren't aware of these things unless it is pointed out to them by adults'; 'Children's prejudices are just a reflection or a mimicking of what they directly pick up from adults' behaviour'; 'They don't really understand what it means, they just say it'. Dominant discourses of childhood that constitute children as too young to engage in or understand discriminatory practices or power, as naturally blind to differences, and as passive recipients who soak up adults' perceptions and values, are still highly influential in early childhood education.

However, in recent years, primarily with the influence of poststructural perspectives shifting understandings of childhood and constructions of identity, research has highlighted how children play a critical and active role in the constitution and perpetuation of social inequalities through their perceptions of the world and everyday interactions with each other and with adults (Aboud 1988; Alloway 1995; Averhart and Bigler 1997; Kaomea 2000; MacNaughton 2000; Grieshaber 2001; MacNaughton and Davis 2001). Children from early ages constitute, perpetuate and negotiate normalizing discourses around their identities, and are actively regulating not only their own behaviour accordingly, but also that of others around them.

Walkerdine (1990) found that 4-year-old boys were capable of yielding power, based on the way they repositioned their female teacher within the discourse of 'woman as sex object'. They utilized derogatory sexual language and explicit sexual references to undermine her power as an adult and a teacher. Research conducted by Alloway (1995), which studied the construction of gender from preschool to grade 3, consistently reported incidences in which boys employed subtle forms of manipulation to constitute themselves as the dominant gender. Such examples include preschool boys throwing objects at girls as they played on outdoor equipment and harassing them by lifting up their skirts and commenting on their underwear. In MacNaughton and Davis's (2001) study of non-Indigenous children's understandings of Indigenous Australians, their findings revealed how non-Indigenous children drew on processes of colonial 'othering' to position Indigenous Australians as exotic, creating the binary of 'us' and 'them'.

## **Constructions of childhood**

Postmodernist and feminist poststructural perspectives have been extremely influential in challenging modernist thinking that has dominated



understandings of childhood and children's learning (for example, see Davies 1989, 1993; James and Prout 1990; Walkerdine 1990; Cannella 1997; MacNaughton 2000; Grieshaber 2001; Robinson 2002, 2005b; Cannella and Viruru 2004). These perspectives disrupt and challenge modernist humanist perspectives of the universal child – the notion that there is an innate phase in human development that constitutes childhood, which is universally experienced by all children. Rather, proponents who take up these perspectives view childhood as a social construction – a social process in which understandings of what it means to be a child are constituted within the historical and cultural discourses available. The Piagetian theory of child development, which has dominated understandings of childhood and children's learning, is based on the perspective that children from birth proceed to develop along a biologically predetermined, clearly articulated, linear process towards becoming adults. All children proceed through this process, reaching certain cognitive development stages that correlate with particular chronological ages; adulthood is marked by the ability to engage in abstract and hypothetical thinking.

However, in recent times, theories of child development, like that of Piaget's, have been critiqued for their assumed biologically determined universalism, their generalization from small groups to *all* children, their linearity and their failure to recognize the importance of socio-cultural factors and other issues such as gender, ethnicity and historical contexts (James and Prout 1990; Gittins 1998; James *et al.* 1998). The categorization of children's behaviours within chronological 'ages' and 'stages' reinforces normative understandings about children's developmental pathways, especially if viewed from middle-class, Eurocentric perspectives. The 'idea of stages does not orient us to think in any but normative terms about children whose developmental trajectory might differ' (Lubeck 1998: 301).

Consequently, there has been an increased awareness of the need to view child development within different social, cultural, political and economic contexts of childhood. The child is born into society as an embodied being, who grows and physically matures over time, but the collective notion of 'childhood' and understandings of what this constitutes are primarily socially, culturally and historically variable across ethnicity, class and gender (James and Prout 1990; James *et al.* 1998; Gittins 1998; Jenkins 1998). The dominant discourse of childhood has tended to perpetuate white, Western and middle-class values that have historically been linked to strong religious and moral discourses. Childhood has been romanticized by adults and childhood 'innocence', a discursive construction, has been critical in justifying the way that adults have kept children separate from the public domains of active citizenry. Gittins (1998: 111) points out that 'Images of children are invariably constructed *by adults* to convey messages and meanings *to adults*'.

The discursive construction of childhood across different cultures and historical points in time means that there are multiple and different readings and experiences of what it means to be a child; therefore, understandings of childhood are not fixed. In terms of constructions of childhood, post-structuralists and postmodernists are concerned with several main issues: