

Inaugural Jean Ferguson O.A.M Memorial Lecture
Tuesday, 6 August 2002

Lecture presented by Professor S. Vianne McLean

The Kaleidoscope of Early Childhood Education:
Enduring Convictions, Shifting Meanings

Executive Summary

Introduction

When I first encountered Jean Ferguson, it was as a first year student at BKTC in the late 1960s- almost 40 years ago. She didn't pack the same punch as Sheila Dawson, who was unforgettable for her powerful brand of eccentricity, nor as immediately loveable as Barbara Poulter, whose deep convictions helped open my mind to the social sciences. But Jean Ferguson was noteworthy for a different reason. She was a scholar through and through- the first teacher educator I encountered who believed utterly in the importance of research-generated knowledge about child development for beginning kindergarten teachers.

At the time, I had no idea what an iconic figure Jean Ferguson represented in early childhood education- how influential this perspective, this confluence of factors was, in shaping our whole field. As novices, we were inducted into a field that enjoyed a robust self-image; a deep certainty about the rightness of our views on children and their education, as well as a fearlessness when it came to criticizing practices in other domains of education. Yet our study lacked a critical self-awareness. Our critical gaze was directed outward, rather than focused on the nature of our own field- the ways in which the ideas that characterized our thinking came to be, and were maintained. So in the time-honoured manner of many educational experiences, some things became readily visible to us, while other things remained invisible, and thus unknown.

Deciding on a metaphor for this lecture about both the continuities and discontinuities in the nature of our field, I played with notions of telescopes, prisms, and windows, but finally settled on the kaleidoscope. Kaleidoscopes are really quite miraculous devices. From just a small fragment of an image and some mirrored surfaces, your eye and more importantly, your mind, replicates this single fragment until it becomes the totality- *inevitably*, a beautifully harmonious whole. And the whole *is* beautiful. Seductively so.

Early childhood education too can be a harmonious beautiful whole. The theoretical perspectives, the practices, the commitments we share can seem to fit together so well, there is sense of rightness and comfort that seems sacrilegious to challenge... especially from within. But challenge we must, if our field is to remain alive and vital.

A key component of the knowledge base characterising our field is Child Development. But I believe the hard research-generated factual content is not what matters most from our field's longstanding commitment to child development research. What matters is the mindset that we have generated through studying this body of knowledge... the deep interest in and respect for children... the observational skills that allow us to see the puzzles and conundrums that their actions represent, and the exploration of various theoretical perspectives to try to resolve those puzzles and conundrums... this has been the wonderful legacy of child development as a major plank of our knowledge base.

For example, just prior to her death, Jean Ferguson wrote about joining the New Education Fellowship in the mid-thirties and the powerful sense of connection it offered her. She said:

It was through this organization that we first met Dr. Susan Isaacs. She and other educationalists of note visited Australia in 1937 or '38 to speak at a conference....She reinforced and further clarified what we were trying to do. Her theories supported our belief in free play and also stressed the need to observe children's play, to learn more about them, to discover their interests and needs and learn how to guide them wisely.

Such continuity across the generations of early childhood educators brings a warm feeling to the pit of the stomach. It helps us renew our robust self-image; the sense of comfort that comes from believing that our field does know what is best for young children. After all, these ideas have been around for a very long time.

But there also are clues in Susan Isaacs's observations that times *have* changed. If we ignore the continuities for a moment and instead focus on the discontinuities, what meanings are contained within these changes about how we think about and carry out our work?

As we read Susan Isaacs's observations, almost 80 years after they were recorded, two layers of questioning are possible. What did she see and not see, given her own background, training and context? And what do we see and not see as we perceive her observing children? How does our own background, training and the

contemporary context within which we are located help us see some dimensions and fail to see others? Do we look to the continuities - some of those enduring and endearing characteristics of children that make us feel so familiar and comfortable, or should we focus on the discontinuities... those clues that confirm this was indeed a different era, with all sorts of themes and sub-themes running beneath the surface of this apparently familiar world?

The kaleidoscope too is paradoxical, because while it is the infinite variety that holds our interest, these ever-changing images are created from components that remain unchanged, sealed for all time within the walls of the kaleidoscope. Perhaps it is this deep paradox of continuity and discontinuity that attracts us most of all. And it is this quality that attracted me to the kaleidoscope as metaphor, for considering the paradoxes of early childhood education as a field.

Multiple Perspectives on Early Childhood Education

I want to explore with you some of the ways in which these themes of complexity, paradox, continuity and discontinuity have played out and continue to play out in a set of alternate, and often competing perspectives on the field of early childhood education.

Even for those well-informed about the history of our field, there is a tendency to seek understanding through a set of lenses that can best be described as 'Progressive'. That is, to assume that with each passing year we know more about children and what is best for them. So *their* development towards higher and higher states of being is somehow paralleled by our *own* development towards a higher and higher state of professional being. But the developmental or progressive lens does not serve us well in better understanding the field itself.

As early childhood educators, we exist within a complex multi-faceted push-pull of influences that at best can seem uncertain and often is experienced as something close to chaos. But we are not strangers to chaos and uncertainty. We deal with more ambiguity and sometimes, pure chaos in our lives with children than many educators could tolerate even for a few minutes.

This characteristic of knowing that chaos is somewhat inevitable... but staying hopeful and optimistic, has always seemed to me to capture one of the most important qualities of early childhood educators. And it will be important that we maintain a similar stance as we face the vicissitudes of our field's journey over the years to come.

One of the most pervasive perspectives both for those within the field and those looking in from outside, is based on the children themselves. There is a rich array of statements within early childhood education that suggest what we are about more than anything else, is children. We care for them, we care about them. We advocate for what we see as best for them and we protect them however we can. Whenever we feel we are under attack, or shaken by some disharmony within the field, we touch the talisman of 'what is right for the child' as a way of restoring harmony, and reassuring ourselves that all is well.

But even this core value of the field is no longer as unquestioned as it once was. Critical theorists, reconceptualizers within early childhood education have made us aware that in making the child-in-need-of-protection the icon of our field, our own interests are being served. As Canella (1997:41) writes:

"The construction of universal child truth or reality creates a power position for adults, and especially psychologists, educators, and other 'experts', that sanctions judgment, control, manipulation, correction, and regulation of those who are identified as children."

This theoretical perspective brings into view a wealth of meanings around the claim that the defining characteristic of our field is our concern for young children. The perspective is undoubtedly an uncomfortable one for us, but such questioning of what we otherwise might not see is extremely valuable to our depth of understanding about who we are. And the strength of early childhood education in the future may well depend on our willingness to engage with such discontinuous, uncomfortable theoretical perspectives.

But perhaps the perspective that colours so many of our ways of understanding issues in our field relates to early childhood education as a rather diverse set of service types- child care, kindergarten/preschool, and early primary grades. Health care and social welfare services also lie on the fringes of the field- sometimes included, sometimes excluded. Each of these categories conceals a complex set of sub-components- different origins, different age levels of children, different working conditions and rewards, different professional preparation, different educational goals and constraints, sometimes different values and all too often, *very* different status. Is it any wonder that the field's history has at times been a battleground of disputes and contradictions among each of these services?

So many of our taken-for-granted as early childhood educators have depended on which type of service we are most familiar with and where our allegiances lie. We've had to work hard to maintain *any* level of common identity and shared commitments across sectors, and while we may support cross-sector integration at the level of ideals, in practice, both our minds and our workplaces are full of barriers that have to be overcome.

And it is in this perspective that the most striking changes are about to happen in early childhood education. The instigation of a whole new service type- the preparatory year, will open for debate every part of our field. I want to return to this in a moment, but there is one perspective remaining to highlight. Because, as well as an age specialization, and a group of services, early childhood education also can be seen as an educational or curricular philosophy- a perspective that recognizes that it is less the age of the children or the setting within which we work that matters, than our *ideas or beliefs*; our way of constructing 'the learner' and what constitutes 'good teaching' or 'best practice'. For many of us, these ideas are the cornerstone of who we are as educators, and as Jean Ferguson's memoirs suggest, many of these curricular and pedagogical beliefs have endured for generations of early childhood educators. But they too are not unproblematic.

All of these views of our field co-exist. They are the components of our early childhood kaleidoscope and as we look at our seesawing, winding, backtracking, dubious path of 'progress' over the last century, we see them rising and falling differentially, and creating an endless succession of patterns that are both unique and similar, continuous and discontinuous.

I've taken the time to lay out these various views on early childhood education because I think especially in times of uncertainty, there are no easy solutions to be had. When we can't hope for 'right answers', we have to rely on deeper insights about the place of our field in both the temporal and socio-political context, as well as about ourselves and the beliefs we share.

Early Childhood Education: Curricular and Pedagogical Futures

With the advent of the Education Queensland reform package, that will see a major trial of a Preparatory Year begin in 2003, we'll be part of the great debate about how this new service type should be constructed, where it should be located, staffed, how it will be governed and resourced.

But for many early childhood educators, I suspect the issue that looms largest in the mind at this time has less to do with the location or characteristics of the new service type than with questions of pedagogical and curricular direction. What should this new program strive to achieve in terms of children's learning and development? How will success be measured against these goals? Will the holistic, integrated curricular approaches so dear to our hearts survive these changes? And should they? The last question will be the most difficult of all for us to grapple with. Our comfort zone is most definitely in the child-centered curricular approaches we have been advocating for generations, but is this the *only* option Queensland should explore? Can *any* one curricular model meet all of the diverse goals Queensland needs to address in order to improve the life chances of all its children? And from the perspective of those within the field, is it safe for us to contemplate a wider range of curricular and pedagogical approaches at this time?

'The Whole Child' has been our dogma and we have spent generations as the primary (sometimes the only) advocates for holistic views of the learner and of the curriculum. But we have often been criticized because of an assumption that because we don't see the world through the lens of one-discipline-at-a-time, that we are weak in terms of content knowledge.

But in this area too, we should be prepared to ask some uncomfortable questions. Is our content knowledge sufficient to meet the demands of designing curriculum for an increasingly sophisticated group of children, in a world that expects more and more of *all* its people? Thanks to their access to technology, (and their fearlessness in using it) even young children can now hold more public domain knowledge than some of their teachers. Can we continue to design challenging learning environments for them without cranking up our own knowledge base?

For me, the biggest issue is not whether we should accept a range of curriculum futures beyond our traditional child-centered pedagogy, or experiment with other ways to deepen our content knowledge beyond our comfort zone, or design some new types of service. The biggest issue is how we keep our teaching workforce thinking, questioning, and challenging the dominant ideologies of the system.

Flying Solo vs. Flying in Formation

For a very long time, our field has been flying solo, though we have all felt the tension between this sense of being a separate field, and the need to connect with colleagues elsewhere in education.

Times have changed, and pre-service teacher education today includes a goodly chunk of attention to both child care and primary education. But every childhood educator still has to struggle with the dilemma of wanting to stay separate, as a way to protect all that we hold dear vs. the need to reach out and work more closely with our colleagues in other parts of the education system. This theme has been revisited many times over the years, in Queensland early childhood education.

Especially when we feel under threat, there is a very human tendency to want separation- to retreat to home ground, and build higher walls around our patch. But we are kidding ourselves if we think the continuity of children's educational experience can be denied. Early childhood education is connected to what comes before,

after and beside it. For children and families, the connections are immediate and strongly felt. Increasingly, for teaching staff too, the continuities are very evident. Especially in the case of the preschool-primary intersection, the boundary has become increasingly blurred over time, and we can no longer retreat to a separate preschool sanctuary- a 'protected paradise' as Bud Spodek once called it.

We'll never know for sure, but perhaps our tendency for defensive separation has come at a price for our field as well as for the children and families who struggle with the discontinuities. Perhaps if we defined ourselves more as adherents of a particular learner-centered curricular approach or advocates for holistic pedagogy or integrated services; emphasising our philosophy of education rather than our age-specific specialisation, we would be better placed to build connections with our colleagues in other areas of education, and would be better able to advance the ideas and practices that are the core of who we are.

Conclusion

The current era contains some wonderful challenges for early childhood education. I hope we will meet them head on, engage with our colleagues elsewhere in education and advocate powerfully, without defensiveness for the best possible education for Queensland's children. But there are no recipes to follow, and in terms of what we stand for, it is always hard to tell 'the absolutes' from 'the negotiables'.

Recently, a colleague told me about some ancient words of Chinese wisdom that advised the key to a successful life was to: "Hold on tightly and let go loosely". I thought about that for a while and decided it was excellent advice really, as long as you knew the difference between what to hold onto and when to let go. As a field, I hope we will take some time to think carefully about what we should hold on tightly to, and what we should let go loosely as we approach the next era of our development as a field.

References

Canella, Gaile Sloan (1997). *Deconstructing Early Childhood Education: Social Justice and Revolution*, New York, NY, Peter Lang.