This series focuses on reframings of theory, research, policy, and pedagogies in childhood. A critical cultural study of childhood is one that offers a “prism” of possibilities for writing about power and its relationship to the cultural constructions of childhood, family, and education in broad societal, local, and global contexts. Books in the series open up new spaces for dialogue and reconceptualization based on critical theoretical and methodological framings, including critical pedagogy; advocacy and social justice perspectives; cultural, historical, and comparative studies of childhood; and post-structural, postcolonial, and/or feminist studies of childhood, family, and education. The intent of the series is to examine the relations between power, language, and what is taken as normal/abnormal, good, and natural, to understand the construction of the “other,” difference and inclusions/exclusions that are embedded in current notions of childhood, family, educational reforms, policies, and the practices of schooling. *Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood* will open up dialogue about new possibilities for action and research.

Single-authored as well as edited volumes focusing on critical studies of childhood from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives are included in the series. A particular focus is in a reimagining and critical reflection on policy and practice in early childhood, primary, and elementary education. The series intends to open up new spaces for reconceptualizing theories and traditions of research, policies, cultural reasonings, and practices at all of these levels, in the United States, as well as comparatively.

*The Child in the World/The World in the Child: Education and the Configuration of a Universal, Modern, and Globalized Childhood*
   Edited by Marianne N. Bloch, Devorah Kennedy, Theodora Lightfoot, and Dar Weyenberg; Foreword by Thomas S. Popkewitz

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*Comparative Early Childhood Education Services: International Perspectives*
   Edited by Judith Duncan and Sarah Te One
Rethinking Readiness in Early Childhood Education

Implications for Policy and Practice

Edited by

Jeanne Marie Iorio
and
Will Parnell
For Lucia Kai,

For Dylan, Connor, and Ellie and their futures

and

For all of the children who contributed in these stories
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After hours and hours of pain and labor—36 hours to be precise—our first child was born in the bedroom of our fifth-floor walk-up. Zayd burst into our world, triumphantly and noisily, to universal joy, and, quickly swaddled, was placed in his mother’s arms. Exhausted and exhilarated, ecstatic and awed, Bernardine put the newborn to her breast—she had reflected on this moment for months, listened to the advice of peers and elders, read books and articles, and joined La Leche League—and began to teach our baby to nurse. Was he ready? Was she? She held Zayd’s head and guided his mouth, and he pushed back a bit, readjusted, and began to tell her things about nursing she apparently had not gotten from books or friends. And he was only a few minutes old! She paid rapt attention, and together they negotiated the moment, Bernardine teaching him how to nurse, and, yes, Zayd teaching her how nursing works best as well. The first dialogue had begun, each participant a conscientious student, and each an engaged, committed teacher. This is profoundly human and powerful learning—innate, natural, self-directed, authentic, discursive, vital, multidimensional, and ongoing. So it begins.

Learning and living—they are each a half of an inseparable whole; they are in fact one in a critical sense. To live is to learn; to learn is to live. Both baby and mother are driven by an essential desire for life—so simple and yet so utterly profound—and no other motivation is necessary. The learning they are each experiencing and sharing between themselves is situated fundamentally in trust, respect, and care. This is primal. Trust means that the learner—each of them in this instance—is confident in the expectation that the other is reliable
and responsible, and that the developing faith in the other and in oneself is steady. The mother day by day is gaining self-assurance in her own capability, and the baby is becoming more secure as well, increasingly certain of being heard and understood. They are each supporting the other in respecting and trusting one another and oneself. The belief that they can know or discover their own deepest needs becomes self-fulfilling and begins to accelerate, leading rapidly onward—they listen more carefully to each other as well as to their own minds, bodies, spirits, and emotions as critical guides to future learning.

Rethinking Readiness in Early Childhood Education offers a theoretical framework and a practical guide toward reconceptualizing readiness. The smart researchers and brilliant educators gathered here by Jeanne Marie Iorio and Will Parnell come at the question of readiness from every angle and from a range of interests and experiences. The result is a text that will be of incalculable value in the discussions shaping early childhood education and policy today.

Let’s fast-forward a dozen years before circling back: in her autobiography, Under my skin, Doris Lessing (1995) provides a view of what she discovered when unleashed to be a youngster who is learning, stretching, sometimes failing but regularly being supported as she participates in her family and her larger community. By the age of 12, Lessing notes, she knew:

how to set a hen, look after chickens and rabbits, worm dogs and cats, pan for gold, take samples from reefs, cook, sew, use the milk separator and churn butter, go down a mine shaft in a bucket, make cream cheese and ginger beer, paint stenciled patterns on materials, make papier mache, walk on stilts..., drive the car, shoot pigeons and guineafowl for the pot, preserve eggs—and a lot else... That is real happiness, a child’s happiness: being enabled to do and to make, above all to know you are contributing to the family, you are valuable and valued. (p. 103)

To do and to make, to know you are valuable and valued: here is where teaching is set into motion; here is where the essential building blocks for a lifetime of productive learning are secured; here is where education toward freedom, autonomy, as well as social responsibility, begins to take hold. Thrust into life, was this daughter of Africa ready for the going world racing forward all around her? And was her farm and family and South Africa ready for her?

In Lessing we become aware of learning as an unpredictable and volatile energy force propelled from within and intent on exploration
and growth, unhooked from convention or any linear expectations whatsoever. We notice a central paradox: teaching is most difficult precisely because it requires teachers to let go, to get out of the way and to let learn. This is the first of the many contradictions and paradoxes—qualities to understand and work with rather than features to fear or to flee from—that characterize teaching and learning from start to finish, from top to bottom, from beginning to end. Daunting as they may seem at times, contradictions are indispensable in any project of real learning.

Look at a new toddler negotiating her apartment or a nearby park or the beach—all five senses are fully engaged, every discovery considered and touched and smelled and—oops!—into the mouth for a taste! Is she ready for this? And soon she is imagining stories and inventing words, putting her hand prints on everything, sorting and building, drawing on paper or painting at the easel if the materials are at hand, that is, if the adults are ready for her. Did they put red, yellow, and blue paint at the easel so that one day she can exclaim to her surprise: “Look! Red and blue makes purple!”? This is different from knowing what primary and secondary colors are; this is constructing a world. Are teachers ready to create the dense and layered environment that will elicit discovery and surprise, construction and rethinking? Every child comes to school a question mark and an exclamation point—her work after all is the assembling not only of a life but of an entire world.

Every school, every classroom, and every teacher must choose whether to support and aid in that construction, whether to help unhook the vitality of the world, or to hide and repress it. Diving into that energy is not exactly smooth but it is learning—letting go, yielding, being here now, and stepping onto shaky ground not knowing what the result might be. Every school and each teacher must decide whether—and then how, in the hard-edged spaces we often inhabit—to keep the questions and the passions alive—creating environments for exploration, for doing and making, for experimenting and hypothesizing and failing and succeeding—or to hammer the children into shape so that they leave her classroom, no longer as vital question marks or exclamation points, but as dull periods.

Schooling based on the insight that learning is for all intents and purposes living would move us away from an obsessive focus on externally developed or teacher-directed approaches, and would foreground the foundational qualities that promote trust and confidence, curiosity and imagination, self-direction and internal motivation. After all, without any bribes or stars or grades whatsoever, most
children most of the time learn to nurse and to eat, then to babble and talk, creep and crawl and walk, and to engage in a thousand other complex skills and undertakings. Long before we arrive at the schoolhouse door we are motivated by enthusiasms that spring from within, the deep innate human yearning to learn and to live. There is no valid reason—if constant growth and permanent development are our goals—that school should throw all of this away in favor of a regime of external and distant stimulations. Educators can choose to build on what is already there—in natural abundance.

When we respect a child or a student and support her or him in the work of unfolding what is within and creating a unique and specific identity, the signals of what to do and how to respond come from specific encounters with unique persons—complex, culturally informed, dynamic, ambiguous, twisty, and wiggly—and not some disembodied, one-size-fits-all rule or principle. This reality inspires an ethic of care and a sense of reverence and awe in teachers.

Each of us is the one and only who will ever walk the earth, each lives life in unique ways. Teachers who acknowledge this evident fact build flexibility and openness into the work, allowing for authentic curiosity, deep creativity, and wild diversity to hatch and flourish. The project then becomes to unleash the human mind and spirit rather than to search for techniques that will cast us as circumscribed predictors of what cannot be predicted, or authorities who enforce obedience and conformity to top-down directives.

Learning is at the core of our human experience and central to our relations with one another. In those first moments of existence we see the becoming and unbecoming, the push and pull, the mixed and received messages that characterize all forms of learning through the entire span of our lives. Learning is idiosyncratic, more unpredictable than predictable.

In her novel *The golden notebook*, Doris Lessing (2008) offers a compelling image of education as it is:

> “You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry, but it is the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent
these must be. You are being taught by people who have been able to accommodate themselves to a regime of thought laid down by their predecessors. It is a self-perpetuating system. Those of you who are more robust and individual than others, will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself—educating your own judgment. Those that stay must remember, always and all the time, that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society.” (p. xxii)

But we know we can do so much better. And *Rethinking Readiness in Early Childhood Education* can be an essential companion and a thoughtful guide in those efforts.

**References**


Series Editors’ Preface

Beth Blue Swadener and Marianne N. Bloch

We are delighted to welcome this timely volume to the Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood Studies series, after actively recruiting it for the series. “Readiness,” and its various social, cultural, political, and economic constructions, remains one of the most critical arenas in the fields of early childhood education, childhood studies, and policy studies. Pervasive assumptions about school readiness drive policy, federal, and state programs and funding, assessment, and standards discourse, and work with children and families. In the words of the co-editors, this volume uses “research and theory to disrupt limited ideas of readiness in order to rethink readiness that includes the voice of the children, teachers, and families.”

Jeanne Marie Iorio and Will Parnell bring together a powerful collection of essays and research studies that help the reader understand the complexities, contradictions, and nuances of readiness discourse and related intervention policies in order to rethink and reconceptualize this central construct to the field. Offering alternatives to the narrowing early childhood curriculum, impositional assumptions about parents and families, and creating space for debate, it is our hope that this book gains wide use in teacher education, critical advocacy, and early childhood research. Its reframing of assumptions of children (parents and communities) as being versus becoming competent and full human beings, and as capable participants in portraying their own experiences and ways of learning is a welcome perspective in the still “risk-ridden” discourse of readiness (Heydon & Iannacci, 2008; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

The Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood series was established through Palgrave Macmillan Press to interrogate just such taken-for-granted notions as readiness for school, testing, and, especially, constructions of communities, teachers, caregivers, children,
and families as “known” and assessable through preconceived notions or tests that have, often, been based on a lack of knowledge about the children’s thoughts and actions, or the diverse funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that communities and even the youngest children bring with them into larger programs, such as preschools and schools. In an era (the past few decades especially) filled with increasing calls for accountability, standardization, and testing of even the youngest children, and at a moment when assessments and standards are narrowing the very idea of what children are able to do, learn, and think about, this book brings powerful new questions and possibilities to current practice and policy.

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