future directions for EC education: 10 concerns

by Colin Gibbs

My task is to draw together themes from this Working Forum. I am mindful of not forcing conclusions, but rather allowing the space for us to keep on dwelling in the questions so that, as Michel Foucault (1989) puts it, the questions remain permanently open. Lilian Katz (2008) asked: "What are the problems that as early childhood educators we are trying to answer?" Well, these are my ten concerns for early childhood teacher education.

1. A concern about policymakers' pottery wheels

We need policy makers. Policymakers should enable fair and equitable systems for early childhood education. My concern here relates to those who may be seen as potters, and those who may be seen as clay when it comes to early childhood education.

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An example: The achievement of Māori is reported as being lower than non-Māori students. In response, recent curriculum documents emphasize enabling the educational systems to function effectively so that Māori students' achievement will increase. Such an argument suggests that if systems are effective, then achievement will increase. A desirable outcome, except that such increases in achievement are inevitably attributed to policymakers who orchestrated changes in the systems. If, however, Māori students fail to make gains, then teachers are to blame. Teachers become the blame for failure, but are absent when the praise is given.

Another example: As part of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, all states are required to analyse *gains, growth in scores, or the amount of knowledge added from year to year as students progress through school* (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008, p. 65). This is popular among policymakers (Olson, 2004a) for it means 'good' teachers can be statistically identified as those who produce the most gains in students. Furthermore, some of these testing methods are claimed to be *unimpaired by students' backgrounds (race and levels of poverty), which* [are seen to] *distort all other analyses of test score data* (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008, p. 66). In short, the testing regime has ethnically and socially cleansed students' backgrounds.

Not surprisingly, such methods are popular with commercial test-developers who stand to gain from the investment of between US $1.9 billion and US $5.3 billion from 2004 through to 2010 (Olson, 2004b).

The testing business in education may well become what the pharmaceutical business is to health. When policymakers run away with such ideas we need to ask the question — what are you doing to our children? We protect our children from unsafe environments. We need also to protect them from such unsafe policy excesses.

2. A concern about 'white shoe' education evangelists

Education is not exempt from profiteers who claim quick-fix solutions and who take the money and run. Teaching and learning are too complex for simple solutions, and are relational and therefore need time to nurture. Beware of educa-

tion evangelists who promote the all-in-one solution at a financial cost, for their shoes gather no dust.

3. A concern that increasing control may cripple autonomy and build distrust

Control, by its very definition, serves to limit or even close down. It reduces risk of failure and increases certainty that a predetermined pathway will be adhered to. When we are being controlled we are likely to also perceive that we are not trusted to act in ways that will bring about what others want. Climates that cultivate 'conform and perform' policies cripple autonomy and build distrust.

Perceptions of autonomy, on the other hand, generally enable the opening of opportunities to explore, to experiment, and to give things a go. Innovativeness, creativity, and risk-taking thrive in situations where people perceive a genuine sense of responsible autonomy. When teachers believe they are trusted to be responsible in exercising that autonomy, then they will be more innovative (Locke, Zubritzky, Cousins, & Bobko, 1984), they will take on new educational practices and teaching approaches (Stein & Wang, 1988), they will be more resilient and they will be more likely to take chances even if it means failing (Guskey, 1988). Furthermore, they will also be more likely to be satisfied with their job, and less likely to be absent from work (Friedman & Farber, 1992).

As early childhood teacher educators we need to be vigilant to ensure we retain genuine professional autonomy in decisions about teaching and learning.

4. A concern about producing products rather than nurturing people

What we emphasise in education is generally what we get. When we emphasise achievement above all else, then we are likely to produce achievement above all else. High achievement is desirable. But at what cost? When education becomes focussed on production — namely, evidence of demonstrable achievement — then we have lost what it means to be educated. Teaching and learning are not just about achievement or quality-assured products. They are about care, compassion, love, hope, joy, passion, grace, relationship, and more (Gibbs, in press a; in press b) They are about people and how we nurture and are nurtured on our learning journeys (Gibbs, 2006).

5. A concern about compulsory school creep

Many new school curriculum initiatives have been driven in the first instance by the political aspirations to increase secondary school achievement. The result has been that much of the innovative practice that has traditionally been rich in the elementary and early years has become submerged under the pressure to produce demonstrable performance on specified learning outcomes. Lily Wong (2008) warns of the 'push down' effect in Singapore where children do a preparatory year before entering school.

6. A concern about dependence on educational myths and fads

Education has its share of myths and fads, and unfortunately early childhood is not exempt. Many of these have now become enshrined in the dialogue and literature as 'given truths' in spite of often dubious research support. Ivan Snook (2007) provides a critique of learning styles (and what he terms as other modern educational myths such as multiple intelligences, and emotional intelligence) and suggests that we ought not uncritically accept *fashionable concepts which often serve ideological purposes* (p. 8).

7. A concern about undervaluing families

Rightly or wrongly, there is a tension when government activity regulates in matters concerning families for there may be unintended messages conveyed.

Take, for example, New Zealand's current policy of increasing participation rates in early childhood. This is a laudable goal — after all we want our children to participate in quality care education. But does this also convey an unintended message that early childhood centres are 'more' valuable environments for children than those provided by families? Remember the words of our Māori elder at this Forum who reminded us that grandmothers are the first teachers. And Andrew Gibbons (2008) who concluded, "I would say to your child, stay at home with your grandmother. She is far more important to your education than I."

8. A concern about living in unquestioned rhetoric

Early childhood has its jargon which serves to not just communicate between its members, but also include and exclude people. We hear of *scaffolding, constructivist, social constructivist, critical reflectivity, reflective practitioner*, and so on. Interestingly, as I discussed with Lilian Katz, the term 'scaffolding' probably is used inaccurately — from an engineering point of view the term is better translated as bracing rather than scaffolding. Builders know that bracing and scaffolding have different meanings and functions — one holds the structure together; the other provides access to the structure.

When language is used this way, it no longer becomes part of meaningful communication. As teachers, the language we use must reflect our commitment to inclusive, not exclusive, communication.

9. A concern about the stifling of special character

We know that there are many expressions of special character in early childhood — Montessori, Steiner, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, as well as the numerous indigenous early childhood programs, to

name just a few. These challenge us to reconsider our philosophies and to remember that there is not just one way to teach. We have much to learn from these approaches, and therefore we must resist attempts to stifle their presence.

10. A concern about resisting the new and devaluing the old

Living in the status quo leads to a place of either complacency or powerlessness. The ways of old provide insights into the ways of the future. Likewise, the new provides ways of re-interpreting the old. Technological advancements, for example, open many possibilities to both enrich as well as restrain early childhood education. By valuing the wisdom of old we may better appreciate the potential of the new.

Final comment

Traditionally, early childhood teachers hold firm to their beliefs about what matters in education. As we watch the signs we may become more attuned to the challenges which lie ahead. Our concerns, then, may become less about distress and alarm, and more about quiet unease over which we know we have the capacity to exercise positive control.

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