
Too Academic? Too Hard to Pronounce? The Un/familiar Language of Pedagogy

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Professor Elizabeth St. Pierre wrote about reading difficult texts and said:

It is understandable that words that cannot be understood... may put off readers who expect language to be immediately transparent and clear. What happens is that texts dense with “special language” are sometimes dismissed as deliberately [unclear] and full of jargon. But, as Eagleton (1990) explains, “jargon just means a language not natural to me” (p. 35). (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 330)

In our work with educators and student educators, we—Kathleen and Veronica—often hear about struggles with language. Concepts such as pedagogy, colonialism, neoliberalism, and common worlds are terms we use in the BC Early Childhood Pedagogy Network (ECPN) that are often met with hesitation. They are words that do not feel “natural” to many educators, yet we see them as vital to the project of early education. In this article, we want to open a conversation by arguing that reading difficult texts is worth the struggle.

A similar struggle occurred 30 years ago when our field was required to shift from the language and practices of multiculturalism to those of anti-bias as we began to understand the legacies of stereotypes and racism in education. We can also look back to 2008 to the first edition of the BC Early Learning Framework (Government of British Columbia, 2008) to see how the field has demonstrated the ability and capacity to take up new language. This is evident in the innovative and culturally responsive practices educators are implementing with children across the province (e.g., Argent, 2016; Yazbeck & Wapenaar, 2019).

Today’s early childhood graduates from post-secondary institutions are entering the field using what many of their more experienced colleagues refer to as “new” language. The recent graduates studied early childhood education immersed in the language of the revised BC Early Learning Framework (Government of British

Columbia, 2018) and the literature and research that supports it. For recent graduates, the new language is the familiar language that defines our field. This situation is mirrored in every profession. All fields require the use of unfamiliar language as new research leads to new understandings and as current conditions change. Early childhood education is no exception!

A conversation Veronica had with Peter Moss in 2020 explored this dilemma. In this interview, Moss reminds us that ethical practice always responds to current conditions. As educators, we recognize that children today live in a world filled with challenges unheard of in our own childhoods. Technology, social media, climate change, and a pandemic are creating new knowledges and new ways of being in the world. If we are to engage with children in co-constructing curriculum that is relevant to the challenges children face in the specific place where they live, early childhood education needs new language—language that allows us to reimagine our practice and our ways of being with young children.

Introducing new language is not a critique of practice “as it used to be” but rather an ongoing response to children’s ever-changing lives. For example, the term *social distancing* emerged from living with COVID-19. It is a phrase that supports us in considering how we move our body in relation to others to reduce the spread of the virus. The term comes to us from the discipline of epidemiology, and in just two years it has become as familiar as wearing a mask. We cannot escape the reality that we are of the world. We therefore need new language and new theories that make it possible to think about, and talk about together, what we face in our worlds.

Let’s begin with the challenges we often hear expressed about the specialized language of pedagogy. For example, some terms are perceived as “too academic,” “too hard to pronounce,” or “too removed from practice.” Educators are not alone in the discomfort of learning new concepts and language. As academics, we too struggle when we meet new concepts in our pursuit of

new ideas. We persist because we have a responsibility, as professors of early childhood education, to maintain currency in the field and to respond to the conditions of our times. New language pushes us to think differently, and thinking differently is hard work—“surely the hardest work” we will undertake as educators (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 478).

Foucault, whose difficult language and theories challenge everyone who reads his work, said he “worked like a dog” all his life because his project was his own transformation (as cited in St. Pierre, 2015, 42:30). Transformation is exactly the process we are engaged in today in early childhood education. Our field is transforming, and we who work in the field are changing with it. This transformation has created a situation where early childhood educators range from university graduates to responsible adults or assistants who have taken one course over a five-year period. Many early childhood educators do not have ready access to professional development. Many are undervalued and underpaid. Some are learning English as a second language, and they may be particularly challenged by the specialized language of pedagogy.

We fully understand the difficulties these circumstances pose. Yet, the solution is not to simplify the language of pedagogy or avoid big words. Instead, we need to address the systemic and structural issues facing our field. We need to ensure that early childhood educators are seen for who they are—strong, competent, and capable (Rinaldi, 2005). We must provide young children with the innovative educational spaces they deserve. Careful pedagogical work is required to provide these spaces, and to address, for example, global pandemics, the effects of climate change, and the way these events are increasing social inequalities. As St. Pierre asserts, being “theoretically impoverished” leaves us “ill-equipped to critique the dominant, normalized structures” creating inequality (2015, 29:45).

We in early childhood education cannot wait for structural and systemic problems to be addressed. We have a responsibility both to children and to the project of early education. Meeting these responsibilities requires taking up the challenge of unfamiliar language. In our work with pedagogists, the ECPN is ensuring that new language is introduced in early childhood centres. Pedagogists will work with educators, giving them space and time to ponder with new language, and adequate resources will be provided to support their learning. We

see the work of the ECPN as staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) of new language. Together we will struggle to transform our field and to co-create alternative understandings of early childhood education that are always contextual, responsive, and becoming in the ever-changing worlds we live in with young children.

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