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# The impact of postcolonial theory on early childhood education

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## Abstract

In this paper a key concept in postcolonial theory, an unmasking of the will to power, that essentializes diverse ways of viewing and living in the world, is related to the field of early childhood education. Drawing on the work of such scholars as Young (2001) who suggest that the adopting of an activist position that seeks social transformation is a crucial concept in postcolonial work, this paper briefly reviews the work of various scholars across the globe who have used postcolonial theory in their analyses and reconceptualization of early childhood education. Finally and perhaps most importantly a discussion ensues as to why, despite the powerful nature of the ideas it has to offer, as well as its relevance to the lives of young children, postcolonial thought has had only minimal if any impact on the field of early childhood as an academic discipline and even less on the daily practices of early childhood educators.

## Introduction

Postcolonial theory has gained popularity within academic circles for over several decades now (Moore-Gilbert, 1997; Loomba, 1998), although as Moore-Gilbert has pointed out, its ideas predate the label by much longer. Although more of its scholarship has been in disciplines such as literature and history (Mongia, 1996), it has had some impact on fields such as education. In this paper, a brief summary of postcolonial theory is first offered, followed by an overview of some of the work of those scholars who have applied it to the field of early childhood education. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a discussion ensues as to why, despite the powerful nature of the ideas it has to offer, as well as its relevance to the lives of young children, it has had only minimal if any impact on the field of early childhood as an academic discipline, and even less on the daily practices of early childhood educators.

## What is postcolonial theory?

Postcolonial theory is a difficult concept to define or to limit (Young, 2001; Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001). At the same time, despite its longevity (at least since the publication of 'Orientalism' by Edward Said in 1978), and its interdisciplinary appeal, definitions of what it means are frequently requested, which in itself is a reflection of the forces that led partially to its emergence: an insistence on definitions and the simplification of complex bodies of ideas into neatly labelled categories (Viruru, in press; Mongia, 1996). As Mongia has put it, "rather than offer prescriptive definitions of what should or does constitute postcolonial theory, I find it more useful to explore and interrogate the arguments of different positions, to see contemporary postcolonial theory as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions" (Carby, 1987, cited in Mongia, 1996).

Young (2001) has suggested that since it originated in three southern continents, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, postcolonialism could also be called tricontinentalism. Whether labelled postcolonial or tricontinental, the purpose remains the same: addressing the legacy of colonialism imposed by western attempts to dominate the globe over hundreds of years. This particular 'will to power' is particularly remarkable as it attempted to essentialize diverse societies into one universal form, and to impose a narrow economic path on cultures that conceptualized not only economics but human experiences, from a range of diverse perspectives. As Said (1995, p.21) has described it, such visions of humanity included: "mankind" forming "a marvellous almost symphonic whole whose progress and formations, again as a whole, could be studied exclusively as a concerted and secular historical experience".

Mongia (1996) cites the publication of *Orientalism* by Edward Said in 1987 as a crucial moment in the emergence of postcolonial theory. The then revolutionary concept that the Orient was a European political, sociological, military, ideological, scientific, imaginative and discursive creation opened the door to many other such discursive analyses. The fundamental question of how knowledge was produced came to be asked in varied disciplines, with an emphasis on "race, colony, nation and empirehood" (Mongia, 1996, p.5). As Mongia points out, earlier analyses although critical of the relationships between colonizer and colonized and centre and periphery, still functioned very much within the knowledge structures that they were critical of. According to Hall (1996, p.247) postcolonialism "is obliging us to re-read the

very binary form in which the colonial encounter has for so long been represented. It obliges us to re-read the binaries as forms of transculturation, of cultural translation, destined to trouble the here/there cultural binaries for ever". Spivak's commentary on the politics of knowledge production further complicates this picture for as she points out, voice is not something that can be uncomplicatedly achieved. Attempts to let subalterns speak continue to subscribe to the binary concept of voice/silence, whereas she asks "with what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak" (1988, p.285)?

In conclusion, as Young (2001, p.58) puts it, terms such as colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism adopt only a "critical relation to the oppressive regimes and practices that they delineate" whereas postcolonial thought goes further. If the post in postcolonial is interpreted as "the historical moment of the theorized introduction of new tricontinental forms and strategies of critical analysis and practice", it becomes apparent why postcolonialism continues to be a theory of hope for many. Thus, despite the complexities surrounding what it ought to be called and the dispute over whether or not it is truly independent of Western domination, it still offers a way to seek new possibilities and to resist forms of control, no matter how hidden or subtle they might be.

## Why use postcolonial theory?

As the above analysis has demonstrated, postcolonial theory is not limited to the study of how nations have recovered from colonization but is more concerned with the adopting of an activist position, seeking social transformation. As Young puts it, such activism can

emerge on different sites in any region: the academic, the cultural, the ecological, the educational, the industrial, the local centre-periphery structure of the city and the rural hinterland, the marketplace, the media, the medical in all its different manifestations, the mainstream political, the rainforest, and the social sphere (2001, p.58).

Macedo (1999) has given several convincing arguments as to why scholars of education should take postcolonial theory seriously. Deconstructing the idea that postcolonial studies belong only in formerly colonized countries, Macedo (1999, p.xii) points out that the colonized experience is to be found "in the concentration camps without barbed wires that abound within the First World in the form of ghettos, rural mountains of Appalachia and Indian reservations"

and in the large scale human exploitation produced by the policies of neo-liberalism. Further as Macedo puts it, there are many similarities between colonial ideologies and the ways in which subordinated groups in Western cultures have been treated. Colonialism, according to Macedo, imposes 'distinction' as an 'ideological yardstick' against which others are measured and found wanting. Schools, as Macedo points out, are often the institutions through which such measuring and relegation is done. Macedo traces connections between colonial ideologies of distinction and superiority to the debate over bilingual education in the United States and the world wide clash between education based on Western heritage and multicultural ideas. As Macedo concludes, unless the legacies of colonialism are examined within the field of education, "our minds, if not our hearts will remain colonized"(1999, p.xv).

McLaren and Farahmandpur (2003) argue that global capitalism has become the new imperialism and that this form of imperialism has had an enormous impact on schools. As they put it, the term globalization has been deliberately depoliticized, and been imbued with calculatedly innocuous images such as standardized commodities. McLaren and Farahmandpur, however, see globalization as "a new combination of old-style military and financial practices as well as recent attempts to impose the law of the market on the whole of humanity itself"(2003, p.53). They point out too that the concept of democracy itself is colonized through the forces of the market, as it is "emptied of all its content that is dangerous for the smooth functioning of the market". Using education in the United States as their particular focus, these authors cite multiple examples of how life in schools is being impacted by the market:

- Transnational corporations are trying very hard to privatize educational systems in many countries, especially in the United States where public education is often viewed as promoting a tolerance for diverse points of view
- The 'businessification' of schooling is becoming prevalent, as Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Exxon provide financial help to public schools
- There has been a remarkable increase in advertising directed towards children, with two billion dollars being spent on that market
- The schools themselves are being invaded with commercial products, as corporations display their signs on school buses and distribute free book covers for textbooks

- The curriculum taught in school is being significantly impacted by corporations as companies like McDonald's teach about the world of work, and Hershey's about nutrition, while textbooks make numerous references to commercial products. Thus as new forms of colonialism emerge, it is important to present critical analyses of how these have a direct impact on the processes of education.

Thus there are many reasons why scholars of education should take postcolonial theory seriously. I turn now to a more detailed consideration of how postcolonial theory has been used in early childhood contexts.

## Early childhood education and postcolonial thought

In this section, I would like to review briefly how scholars in the field of early childhood education have used and redefined the concepts of postcolonial theory. As will be evident, given the wide-ranging nature of the concerns that have been labelled as postcolonial, their early childhood education counterparts are similarly diverse. The selection of work described here is limited not only by constraints of space but by theoretical framework. There is a much larger body of work, much of it broadly known as reconceptualist, that has looked at how early childhood education can be recreated in ways that are most socially just and representative of diverse knowing (Cannella, 1997; Jipson and Hauser, 1998; Walkerdine, 1997; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997 to name but a few). However, in this paper, I have tried to look at work that specifically uses postcolonial theory as at least one of its theoretical bases. This is not to suggest that any of this other work is less valuable in the insights that it has provided. Other scholars such as Soto and Swadener (2002) have provided valuable analyses of the overall impact of such work. However, since the purposes of this paper were to look at the impact of postcolonial theory on early childhood education, the focus was necessarily limited. Although I have tried to classify these works into two different categories (eclectic works or those that use postcolonialism as one among other theoretical bases and works that focus on oppressive practices), these should not be interpreted as rigid boundaries. Many of the works cited in each section could traverse those limits quite easily.

## Postcolonial eclecticism

In this section, I would like to review the work of those scholars who have used postcolonial theory alongside other theoretical frameworks in an early childhood context. Expressing what one might consider a common theoretical basis for this kind of work, Kaomea (2003, p.16) states that “if we are to meet the demands of postcolonial studies for both a revision of the past and an analysis of our ever-changing present, we cannot work within closed paradigms”.

Kaomea’s (2003, 2001a, 2001b) own work is reflective of the open paradigm she so eloquently describes. Some of her work has described the multiple readings that can be made of the native Hawaiian elder programme that has been implemented in some elementary schools in Hawaii. According to Kaomea (2003, p.17), this programme was started in 1980 to include instruction about the “native” culture of Hawaii in elementary schools, and includes regular visits by Hawaiian elders to schools to talk about Hawaii’s culture. Kaomea acknowledges the many positive aspects of the programme (such as its popularity among teachers, parents and children as well as the ways in which respect for and connection with elders has been re-established). However when looking beyond surface appearances, Kaomea found several deeply troubling aspects of this programme. Kaomea analysed work by elementary school students depicting the Hawaiian elder programme and found that although on the surface, positive cheerful images were conveyed, the erasures, and absences that characterized the student’s work conveyed realities much more troubling than the “polished, staged version of reality” that was immediately apparent, such as the pressure on the elders to be almost the sole representatives of Hawaiian culture in the schools, and the uncomfortable conditions under which they were made to work.

Kaomea (2001a) has also used postcolonial theory to discuss her own situation, as an “indigenous academic” working in early childhood (Smith, 1999; Said, 1993; Spivak, 1990). Kaomea insists on maintaining a distance from what she calls methodological purity, which she sees as “consistent with the logic of post-colonialism and its declining emphasis on grand theories and narratives”(p.68), using Marxist, Foucauldian as well as postcolonial ideas in her analyses. Kaomea quotes the work of Prakash (1992, p.184) who urges post-colonial intellectuals to “hang on to two horses, inconstantly” as one of the bases for this decision.

Other scholars have also used postcolonial theory as one among a range of theoretical positions they adopted while looking at diverse aspects of early childhood. For example, Tobin has talked about the missing discourse of pleasure in early childhood education. While he uses postmodern perspectives to support his argument, he also refers to postcolonial theory to contextualize what he calls “the rise of consumer desire in contemporary early childhood settings” (2001, p.17). Post-colonial citizens, he suggests, in this age of hyper capitalism, experience pleasure as a commodity, to be consumed rather than produced. Tobin’s (2000) other works utilize postcolonial theory in his analysis of how children respond to media images, analyzing their reactions to popular movies. Tobin recorded the conversations of 7- and 8-year-old children’s reactions to the movie *Swiss Family Robinson*, and found that the children were able to read deeper meanings into the plot of the movie than one might expect. For example, even though the pirates who attacked the Robinson family were shown as Asians and Polynesians disguised as pirates, the children continually referred to them as ‘Indians’ as in Native Americans, indicating that they read it as part of the larger narrative of colonialism.

Some postcolonial studies of childhood have been historical such as De Alwis’ (1991) account of how British and American missionaries tried to impact the lives of Ceylonese women in the early nineteenth century, on the grounds that those women in turn would reshape their domestic worlds, including children, into proper citizens (even if second class) of the empire. Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) have also looked at the relationship between colonialism and children, stating that to European colonizers, Black Africans were seen as being very much like children and women, in that they exhibited uncontrolled passions and irrational behaviour. Thus, as Stephens (1995) and Loomba (1998) point out, early modern notions of childhood, as a stage characterized by irrationality and uncontrolled passions, is heavily influenced by colonial experiences. Zornado (2001, p.103) has looked at children’s literature in the Victorian era, and remarks upon the openness with which the right to dominate native people was expressed, with absolute conviction about civilizational, moral and racial superiority. This model, according to Zornado, is based on the relationship between parents and children during Victorian times: the physically dominated and the physically dominant. Thus “Victorian child rearing pedagogy – a fully fledged ‘black pedagogy’ in its own right – reproduced imperialist ideology on an individual basis, one child at a time”. Zornado shows how such popular works as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* are representative of this ideology of childhood subservience to adult authority.

## Postcolonial studies of oppressive practices

Various scholars have also used postcolonial theory to study the ways in which young children as well as early childhood professionals in various contexts have been subjected to oppressive conditions, and explored ways in which postcolonial theory can serve as a tool to combat that oppression. In my own work (Viruru, in press; Cannella and Viruru, 2004; Viruru, 2002; Cannella and Viruru, 2002; Viruru, 2001; Viruru and Cannella, 2001), I have tried to show how early childhood education world wide has been heavily influenced by dominant Western discourses about young children.

These dominant discourses draw heavily from the work of theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, Western discourses, and in contemporary contexts are embodied by the document(s) put forward by the National Association for the Education of Young Children in 1987 and 1997 that discuss the concept of 'Developmentally Appropriate Practice'. These ideas have dominated and some would say colonized the world of early childhood education (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Stephens, 1995; Burman, 1994). Dahlberg *et al.* (1999, p.160) suggest that the "imperium of the United States is the latest phase of Minority World dominance in relationships with the Majority world, which started several hundred years ago with expansion and colonialism". The core of this dominance has been based on ideas of linear progress and development, objectivity, universality and totalization. These ideas, according to Dahlberg *et al.*, have provided the basis for colonization and hegemony (Young, 1990). These colonizing ideas have internalized themselves into the 'life-ways' of those who live in colonized countries. A more detailed discussion of how discourses of child development are considered limiting would not only be redundant, considering the widespread discussion that this idea has already generated (Cole, 1996; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999) but beyond the scope of this paper. However, the fact remains that this is the discourse that heavily dominates the field and that has been the most resistant to questioning and change. The idea that children develop in a universal, linear sequence that all children must undergo to achieve maturity is one that very few early childhood educators are willing to forsake. Thus as Penn (1997) observed, in early childhood institutions in South Africa:

the written curriculum and pedagogy for the black nurseries were mainly provided by NGO's, almost all of it in English whatever the first language of the recipients. Despite the discrepancies in catchment, funding and organization of the black and white centres, the curriculum literature and training materials were all derived from western sources, mainly



adaptations of Montessori and High Scope methods. Although materials may be adapted for use in educare centers, the western tenets which inform them are generally assumed to be universal. There is perceived to be little or no ambiguity about what constitutes appropriate “intellectual” or “social” behavior (quoted in Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, p.162).

Other writers about Africa (Serpell, 1993) have expressed similar concerns as well as authors such as Cole (1996), Myers (1992) and organizations such as Save the Children United Kingdom (Molteno, 1996).

As my work in Hyderabad, India has shown, educators there, even though they engage with children in work that is thought-provoking, and designed to meet the needs of children within that culture, both feel and are told that the work they do is inappropriate, since it does not conform to Western (mostly play-based methods). My ethnographic work in India (Viruru, 2001) gives details about such methods of education. Although when I began this ethnographic work, I did not consider the study as operating through a postcolonial framework, the concerns that emerged from it led to its adoption. My work discusses how Western notions of childhood resemble Western notions of the Orient: based only partially on fact, but mostly on a fiction created through a combination of desire and the needs of the marketplace. This study also comments on the discourses of materialism that have invaded early childhood education, where the doctrine of children learning by doing, is interpreted more and more as justifying the need for material things in classrooms. Such an obsession with materials not only creates a larger market but also denies children the opportunity to create meaningful and self-directed social relationships among themselves.

In my later work (Viruru, in press; Cannella and Viruru, 2004), my co-author and I have tried to look at early childhood education as a discipline and subject it to the kinds of analysis postcolonial theory suggests all disciplines should undergo: critical looks at the past, contextualization, as well as scrutiny as to how the knowledge that forms a part of it was produced and what are the complexities that surrounded this knowledge production. Drawing on earlier reconceptualist work (Kessler and Swadener, 1992; Bloch, 1992; Cannella, 1997; Jipson, 1991), in our work we suggest that the study of childhood and early childhood education has been heavily influenced by the will to reason that characterizes the Enlightenment period during which dominant discourses about childhood first emerged. This will to reason, combined with the efforts to colonize the globe, which occurred around the same time historically, has had an enormous impact on how academic disciplines are constructed, as well

as ways in which human beings have come to see the world.

## Disbelief and disavowal

As the above very brief, and limited review has shown, postcolonial theory has been used by many early childhood educators and other scholars to draw attention to parts of the educational process that have hitherto been overlooked. The idea of colonialism, as has been pointed out, can be said to have been modeled on particularly authoritative and repressive models of child rearing. Furthermore, dominant ideologies of how children grow and develop have become another of colonialism's truths that permit no questioning, and that is imposed unhesitatingly upon people around the world for their own good. The idea that 'real' truth exists somewhere far away, that the privileged can visit, learn and take back home continues. And perhaps most disturbingly of all, the idea of binaries remains: a person, a profession, a field is either good or bad, going in the right or wrong direction, permissive or authoritative. There is little room for ambiguity and 'indeterminacy', for thinking about deeper levels of meaning, that as Tobin has shown, 7- and 8-year-old children seem to be able to engage in effortlessly. In this final section, I would like to consider why most of the reactions to the introduction of postcolonial theory into early childhood education circles has been so uninhibitedly negative. This is not to suggest that this is always the case, but it has certainly been a common reaction. Most times, there appears to be a complete unwillingness to engage with the idea, to even pause and consider the idea for a moment. There are several possible explanations for this, which I would like to consider in more detail.

## Liberal strategies of exclusion

The title of this section is taken from Uday Mehta's essay 'Liberal Strategies of Exclusion'. In this essay, Mehta (1997) discusses one of the most interesting paradoxes in the history of liberalism. As a philosophy on the one hand, it has prided itself on its "universality and politically inclusionary character". However, according to Mehta (1997, p.59) it is also unmistakably characterized by the "systematic and sustained political exclusion of various groups and 'types'". Mehta's analysis of liberalism as a philosophy acknowledges that as a doctrine, it is committed to freedom and that it has tried to limit the reaches of political power by defining rights for human

beings that cannot be taken away from them. According to Mehta such an orientation, however laudable it may appear, contains inherent problems. As Mehta points out, such a philosophy of human life, is based upon certain universal assumptions about human beings. All humans, according to liberal philosophy are born equal, free and rational. What liberalism does not recognize is what Mehta (1997, p.62) calls the “specific cultural and psychological conditions woven in as preconditions for the actualization of these capacities”. Rather it portrays itself as having recognized truths that transcend history, culture and race, based on claims about the universality of the human condition. Freedom, equality and rationality, according to philosophers are states into which all humans are born, simply by virtue of being human. As I have discussed in other work (Cannella and Viruru, 2004), no matter how universally appealing this idea of their being a natural law and order for all humans might appear, this kind of philosophical position continues to be oriented towards the idea of there being particular truths that are universal, a claim that many postcolonial scholars would rebut vigorously. As Mehta (1997, p.65) puts it,

For although, no doubt liberal institutions limit and give to the expressions of human freedom a measure of order, they are themselves never secure from the threat posed by the possibility that their authorizing consent will be withdrawn by anyone who thinks that the order is no longer just and therefore no longer binding.

It may be difficult to see how freedom and equality can be seen as exclusionary ideas, when they are extended to include all humanity. However, they remain one particular culture’s notion of what it means to be free and equal, and thus demand a kind of cultural allegiance for them to be valid. Freedom, equality and rationality are also set up as part of a dangerous binary: either one believes in them, or there is chaos and complete disorder. Ultimately they are truths that cannot be questioned, for to do so is to lead society in dangerous directions.

I would suggest that the situation of discourses of child development enjoy a similar status in the field of early childhood education. Its ideals are similarly laudable: a belief in every child as a unique human being, progressing gradually through stages, as they attain complete personhood. The kinds of programmes based on these philosophies similarly seem difficult to question, for example, many opportunities for children to play and experiment and ‘discover’ their world. However, this remains a culturally grounded belief. Furthermore, the claim that these processes are universal is exclusionary for it

does not admit other possibilities. Similarly, just as ideas about freedom, equality and rationality are ideas that cannot be questioned, as to do so invites chaos, it appears that questioning ideas about child development is similarly forbidden, as it too is linked to fundamental concepts about individual freedom and progress. Scholars such as Walkerdine (1984) have shown how Piaget's theories of child development in particular were heavily influenced by the need to create a rational world, in which such horrors as World War II could never happen again. Obviously, postcolonial ideas are not welcome in such situations.

## The principle of indeterminacy

As the above section has perhaps made evident, dominant discourses in early childhood education are not open to dialogue with perspectives that question fundamental realities. The alternatives offered by postcolonialism too, may have something to do with this rejection. As the work of many of the scholars quoted above has shown, children's lives have many complex dimensions and cannot be reduced to a simplistic formula. Postcolonial theory's insistence on and acceptance of multiplicities and ambiguities thus stands in stark contrast to commonly accepted ideas of how children grow and develop. They offer no neatly packaged formulas or universally applicable laws. Also, analyses such as those of Moore-Gilbert (1997) have discussed the fact that the term postcolonial has been associated with so many different time periods, countries, cultures and practices that it is seen as being in danger of imploding from within. Thus, it is often seen as a 'field' lacking in coherence and focus. However, scholars such as Anzaldúa (1999) refer to the need to tolerate the ambiguity that colonialism has created in the world, bringing diverse cultures into close contact with one another. For many people around the world, their situations resemble that of the *mestiza* that Anzaldúa (1999, p.101) describes:

In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior: these patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. *La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode) to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.

Thus, when the question is asked, if not child development then what,

postcolonialism's answer (if one could narrow down it to one answer) might resemble Anzaldua's statement. This, to a field that is based on principles of scientific study and the search for universal truths, can seem not only unintelligible but frightening and chaotic. However, I believe that it offers infinitely more possibilities for social justice.

## Civilized oppressions

To many professionals in the field of early childhood education, the very idea that theories of child development can be perceived as instruments of oppression is ludicrous, and therefore not worthy even of a moment's consideration. Oppression is associated with the denial of freedom, yet dominant Western modes of thinking about children emphasize more than anything else, the importance of freedom and choice in children's lives. Child development theories in particular are often seen as standing in opposition to those who would impose greater regulations on children's lives (such as an increased focus on academics in the early years), and as advocating for a child's right to enjoy the freedom from responsibility that childhood ought to entail. How then can these be considered oppressive? Harvey's (1999) work titled *Civilized Oppression* is particularly helpful in considering this question. As Harvey points out, the word 'oppression' is associated with images of abductions, torturings, lynchings, death and destruction. It is assumed that oppression is instantly recognizable and visible. However, according to Harvey (1999, p.1), there are forms of what he calls "civilized oppression" that are "by far the most prevalent in Western industrialized societies". Oppression is something that can "be buried in day to day incidents of no obvious significance" (Harvey, p.2). Harvey suggests that the analyses of civilized oppression includes studying the mechanisms through which power is wielded, how perceptions and information are controlled, as well as the kinds of harm that are done.

Harvey develops the example of the concept of humour to illustrate what he means by a civilized form of oppression. According to him, having a sense of humour is a very important quality in many Western societies. People are commonly expected to both demonstrate as well as appreciate humour: those who do not exhibit these skills are made to pay the price. Yet, humour functions as a civilized form of oppression, as it remains one of the few socially acceptable forms of attack on the already disadvantaged. Humour is seen as symbolizing a form of character and an approach to life that are highly

desirable. People who have a sense of humour are considered enjoyable to be around, as well as possessing the right kind of sense of proportion about their lives. They are also seen as possessing a flexible rather than dogmatic approach to life. As Harvey points out, all of those qualities are highlighted by the undesirability of their binary opposites. Furthermore, he sees two problems with them: what he calls their individual basis (such as a quality that allows one to handle personal failures well, as having self esteem without being egocentric) and the drawing of sweeping generalizations about desirable behaviour on the basis of the lives of those who are socially privileged. Thus for the socially privileged, the kinds of failures they encounter may be the kind that humour can help in dealing with. For those who are struggling to make do under difficult circumstances, this is not always the case and it may not be something that has a humorous dimension. Yet, given the dominant idea that a sense of humour is a desirable quality, people who fail to exhibit this necessary quality can be cruelly judged upon this basis and consequences can be attached to that judgment. Thus, the insistence upon possessing a sense of humour can be a form of oppression.

I would suggest that although Harvey's work is not explicitly labelled as postcolonial, the concerns he expresses are very much in line with postcolonial theory. Invisible forms of oppression are no less destructive than overt forms, they are just elusive and harder to isolate, in that simplistic conclusions about causes and effects are harder to draw. Thus too, when particular kinds of beliefs about children are imposed in diverse cultural locations, I would suggest that a similar form of civilized oppression is enacted. The civilized and convoluted nature of this oppression can obscure its presence, which is often an hindrance in combating it. Thus one of the reasons that postcolonial theory has not enjoyed much popularity in early education circles could be that it often focuses on these hidden and civilized forms of oppression.

## Gripes and grievances

Scholars of postcolonial studies also point out that contrary to popular belief (at least in academic circles), postcolonial criticism does not enjoy full recognition as a legitimate mode of inquiry even in fields with which it has historically been connected. As Moore-Gilbert has said, many recent accounts of 'modern' literary criticism ignore postcolonial studies altogether or refer to it only in passing. In this field too, it has had a somewhat hostile reception in

some circles, with texts like Said's (1993) 'Culture and Imperialism' being dismissed as a symptom of a culture of "gripes and grievances" (Conrad, 1993, cited in Moore-Gilbert, 1997). Thus, postcolonial concerns in different fields have been affected by the backlash against 'political correctness'. This echoes some of the reactions that various scholars of education have had to endure when talking about postcolonial theory and early childhood education. As some advocates of developmentally appropriate practice in particular have said, the 1997 version of what it constitutes is substantially different from the earlier version, in that culture has been incorporated as a dimension of what constitutes developmentally appropriate practice. The implication is that the problem, if it existed at all, has been identified and fixed, and all these other allegations are nothing more than 'gripes and grievances'. The idea that in some cultures, equating childhood with development is culturally inappropriate, is not considered.

Another common criticism of postcolonial studies has been that its advocates are straying into places that they do not perfectly understand (such as a literary critic like Said commenting on anthropology as an instrument of colonialism). Jacoby (1995) has also questioned the ability of postcolonial scholars to integrate disciplines:

As they move out from traditional literature into political economy, sociology, history and anthropology, do the postcolonial theorists master these fields or just poke about? Are they serious students of colonial history and culture or do they just pepper their writings with references to Gramsci and hegemony? (p.32)

This too may be one of the reasons why postcolonial theory and early childhood education have enjoyed such a disharmonious relationship.

## Concluding thoughts

Despite the criticisms that have been discussed above, there is no circumventing the fact that the questions that postcolonial theory raises in the field of early childhood are questions that need to be dealt with if the field is to move in directions that represent all children. The unmasking of power structures is not a comfortable process but a necessary one, if real change and representation are considered desirable. Paying attention to the concerns of postcolonial scholars could be vital part of this process.

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