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Progressive Teachers of Young Children: Creating Contemporary Agents of Change

By Susan Matoba Adler and Jeanne Marie Iorio

Abstract

This chapter describes how an early childhood teacher education program in Hawaii builds upon a history of progressivism in the field of early education in the U.S. to encourage students to become critical thinkers and agents of change. Reflecting through the historical lenses of educators such as Jane Adams, Patty Smith Hill, and Lucy Sprague Mitchell, two progressive teacher educators call on their students to become “transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, 1988) and move from being agents of surveillance to agents of change (Foucault, 1972, 1995). Student data from blogs and action research projects illustrate how students challenged habituated practices in the field of early childhood education (ECE), which has been rapidly narrowing toward academic readiness and standardization of children and programs due to No Child Left Behind legislation and the Race to the Top competition for federal funds.

Introduction

An agent of change is an advocate who is aware of policy and issues of social justice and is supported to voice resistance and question existing policies and practices. Agents of change can be seen as advocates, “speaking on behalf of others, often from within existing political, social, and economic frames of reference” (Sumsion, 2006, p. 3). In some cases, agents of change can also be activists “resisting and challenging those frames of references and the power bases that support them* (Kenny, 2004, cited in Sumsion, 2006, p. 3). Our bachelor’s degree program at University of Hawaii-West Oahu is focused on inspiring these described agents of change.

A common and stereotypical conception of the identity of teachers of children from birth through age 8 does not seem to include this description of professionals as agents of change. The historical perspective presented by Snyder (1972) (based on Froebel’s Mother Play) shows how teaching young children in the kindergarten (nursery school) was primarily women’s work, and mothers learned from the

kindergarteners (teachers). Snyder also argued that the teaching force needed to change, moving towards a “more responsible social role” (p. 376).

Following Giroux’s (1988) “category of transformative intellectual” (p. 99), we define what it means to be socially responsible. Giroux suggested that teachers consider suffering and conditions of oppression in order to understand the lived experiences of individual children, their families, their cultures and languages, their social economic status, and other conditions affecting the children’s lives. Becoming a transformative intellectual includes a mindfulness of the conscience and an engagement with social justice (Freire, 1973; Greene, 1998). When our students learn to become transformative intellectuals, they develop the mindset to become agents of change.

There are connections between the choices in the development and implementation of our early childhood program, our commitment to teachers as agents of change, and the work of the progressives. In the field of early childhood education (ECE), historic figures such as Alice Temple and Patty Smith Hill were students of John Dewey and “worked in close cooperative relations with him” (Snyder, 1972, p. 233). We consider Patty Smith Hill as a key model of an ECE “agent of change” because she challenged the prevailing rigid interpretation of Froebelian beliefs and practices with young children. The educational dichotomy of her time was that of “cookbook teachers” and “checkerboard teachers,” which is relevant today, as evident in standards and scripted curriculums and versus paradigms that follow the voices and actions of children. Yet how do we inspire “checkerboard” teachers? Patty Smith Hill, champion of play, author of many poems, children’s songs, and the famous Hill floor blocks, was trained in the kindergarten movement by Anna Bryant. Wolfe (2000) described the debates Patty Smith Hill had with the traditional Froebelian Susan Blow as a debate between the value of free play versus directed play. Hill was attempting to counter the rigidity of Froebel’s approach to including the needs and interests of children in more functional ways (p. 269).

These debates illustrate the kind of striving for change that we encourage in our ECE students. We want them to be critical thinkers and to challenge the status quo when they believe that the practices are not sound or good for children. This becomes evident through the readings we offer the students, the discussions using blogs, and the action research project all students complete as the capstone of the program.

Social Justice: Historical and Contemporary Issues

One factor central to the work in our program is deep discussions regarding social justice and education. This practice is also reflective of much of the progressive agenda:

Out of this unashamedly optimistic, ardent, democratically driven experimentalism came a deep and abiding belief in the creative capacity of the individual as a social being to devise intelligent solutions to real problems and to posit meaningful future plans—plans designed to ensure continuous educative growth. (Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p. 221)

We share with our students how Lucy Sprague Mitchell established the Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE), in which “initiatives were launched into areas of school nutrition, educational testing, visiting teachers, school playgrounds, day cares, nursery schools and demonstration programs at the grass roots of educational and social change” (Wolfe, 2000, p. 358). These topics ring true to most ECE students today, yet the reality is that contemporary ECE in the U.S. has become focused entirely on academic readiness.

As standards and federal grants continue to focus on the narrow view that literacy is the mainstay of ECE, our program bursts forth with emphasis on community and education. Interestingly, Jane Addams’s work at Hull-House disrupted this very same view as she saw the program “ultimately a protest against the restricted view of the school” (Cremin, 1964, p. 61). In our choice to inspire agents of change, we believe we are protesting against the restricted constructions of teachers as agents of surveillance.

The conception of teacher as an agent of surveillance is inspired by the work of Foucault (1972, 1995) and is in opposition to the positing of highly qualified teachers (HQT) according to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Foucault’s technologies of power, hierarchical observation, and surveillance are evident in the forms of enacted accountability and standards mandated by NCLB. Control is central and is utilized to ensure compliance and homogeneity and maintain the separation of teacher and student, positioning the teacher with power and the student as the object of manipulation. Many teacher education programs perpetuate the idea of teachers as agents of surveillance by only teaching standards with little or no understanding of the historical and social contexts of education. This is often masked in the overwhelming

amount of teacher education courses with scripted methodologies that teach lesson planning as the foundation of education.

Addams echoed many of these same ideas in her response to similar restricted perspectives of education,

We are impatient with schools which lay all stress on reading and writing, suspecting them to rest upon the assumption that all knowledge and interest must be brought to children through the medium of books. Such an assumption fails to give the child any clew to the life about him, or any power to usefully or intelligently connect himself with it. (Cremin, 1964, p. 62)

Addams's answer to these practices was to engage students with humanity, understanding historical and relational contexts of an industry along with the actual training. These very ideas are prominent in our program as we encourage our students to become agents of change. We hope that our students understand the humanness of teaching and its relation to the community, moving beyond methodologies to a comprehension of the historical decision making within the early childhood community. Lucy Sprague Mitchell wrote,

I was tired of working in an academic ivory tower, with golden domes but no firm foundations. I wanted to mix cement and sharp stones and build an educational foundation which would develop people with live thinking and live feelings. (Biber, 1967, p. 358)

Mitchell's conception of "live thinking and live feelings" expresses the hope of humanness we have for our students. All of our courses create spaces for students to both think and feel. It is common for a student blog response or discussion board posting to include both a critical discussion and a personal experience. The presence of thought and feeling contribute to the students' commitment to see early childhood education practices as otherwise, evident in our current students, as well as graduates.

Progressivism and an Early Childhood Degree

Our early childhood teacher education bachelor's degree program articulates with the university system associates degree programs in early childhood education based on a more mainstream perspective of early childhood focused mainly on child development. Our students are all practitioners working in the field of early childhood education. In the bachelor's degree program, we call for critiquing practice from

theoretical and cultural perspectives, interrogating power within the workplace and community, and embracing advocacy so that teacher professionalism evolves as society changes. A culminating practicum for the bachelor's degree is a six-credit course, which includes an action research project. In reality, the associate's degree maintains a more conservative norm of mainstream child development, while the bachelor's degree expands with more progressive and liberal orientations to the field. This creates a tension for our students as we ask them to disrupt what they know from their associate's program and begin to rethink practice within a critical framework.

The main format for our program is an online environment, servicing students throughout Hawaii and other Pacific Islands. Using an online platform supplied by the university and blogger.com, students engage with the readings and discussions based in a variety of texts. The process begins with each student writing a question in response to the readings and then writing an initial post to a blog or discussion board. Then both the professor and peers respond to the initial post with more questions. These questions are meant to inspire deeper thinking and more questions rather than a specific answer. Our process is designed to help the students develop clarity and discomfort in order to evolve in their thought processes and teaching practices. Resembling Freire's (1970) ideas of dialogue, respect, and engagement of students collaborating, our students have the space to disrupt "banking" notions of education. Students spend the first weeks of the course reviewing resources focused on Socratic ideals, and the first posting on the discussion board or blog for the course is the students' interpretations of these ideas in relation to their experiences and beliefs. This experience begins the process of students becoming critical thinkers. In one student's words,

To be true advocates in the field of ECE, we all need to look into ourselves and not be "sold" into one idea because it came from research or a textbook. Besides the universal ECE shortcomings (wages, respect, gender equity) there are opportunities within our programs to advocate for or against something.

This student, with others in the class, was willing to question his source of information and act as an agent of change based on what he learned. He was willing to disrupt expected assumptions in the field of ECE through dialogue with his peers and professors, rethinking what is possible in teaching and learning.

Pedagogical Choices of Progressive Teacher Educators

We encourage our students to experience teaching as an engaging, experiential process through the use of blogs and discussion boards. With each posting and growing facility with the process of responding to the readings through questions, students begin to imagine different possibilities in ECE. This includes developing an understanding of critical theory and how to use theory in order to disrupt common expected early childhood practices and beliefs. This process is how our students become advocates. This advocacy will be the source of their professional “voice” as agents of change. Bringing these elements of discussion into action is how these teachers create a humanity-central environment for themselves and the children they teach. For example, in one blog, a student reflects on a reading from *Making Learning Visible* (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001), sharing her deconstruction of power ideas surrounding truth:

I know I occasionally have a hard time accepting information that seems counter to what I've learned. Like Howard Gardner wrote about on page 337, learning new paradigms isn't always so easy. How do you un-think something you considered fact? Or, a bigger question could be, “What does it mean to know something?” This line of thinking takes me back to my philosophy classes discussing the concept of what is really truly real. Are your thoughts real? Are the things you can taste and touch (etc.) real? How can we ever really know the truth of life? Is there even such thing? And what, if anything, do these questions mean when working with young children?

Developmentally appropriate practice, teacher identity, standardization, and academic push-down are common ways in which ECE is taught and understood by teachers. Readings introducing these “grand narratives” within ECE are offered to the students in order for them to have a basic background to dispute. Alternative perspectives are also shared through the readings, presenting other ways to see these practices. Our hope is that students will consider how their experiences can disrupt a practiced pedagogy and move them from efficient practitioners to transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) and agents of change. As educators of early childhood teachers, we know that NCLB has taken away the beauty of childhood, interpreting each child as the same, meeting the same standards, without regard to culture or context (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). Sameness continues as those with the power—politicians, policymakers, and administrators—impose academic push-down in hopes of ensuring, ironically, that no child is left behind. Ideas of push-down echo in

children's texts, further pushing childhood to the margin and placing academic push-down as the norm. Student accounts depicted in the blogs focus on how academics for young children are perceived as both pervasive and problematic. Some of our students are Head Start teachers and have seen their paperwork increase as readiness testing and accountability rule their classroom time. Projects and play and emergent curriculum do not fit this paradigm.

One student discussed the victimization and rights of children from the academic push-down:

Tests and standards hold too much weight in our schools. In fact, they are more important than the well-being of the child. What kind of logic is this? I don't understand why, when there is evidence to suggest otherwise and examples in other countries, parents and educators still insist on the earlier the better. I love Elkind's (1981/1988/2001) phrase "an assault on childhood." We are forcing our future generation to grow up too fast in a system that leads them to feel like they are failures. Imagine a future with no imagination, no creativity and little social skills. What kind of world are we creating?

In chat discussions through the online teaching platform, students tell stories about their friends, trained in ECE, who have left public school teaching because the job was becoming so standardized and focused on high-stakes testing. They felt they had to develop teaching identities as technicians for testing rather than creative, child-centered teachers. Within our teacher education program, the development of identity is part of inspiring agents of change.

Action Research

Our students engage in change during our program through a capstone project using action research and a practicum experience. Action research is about social change (Lewin, 1946) and can empower communities to take action (Freire, 1973). Equity (Caro-Bruce, Flessner, Klehr, Zeichner, 2007) and teaching practice (Britzman, 2003) are central to the action research process, creating a cyclic space for contemplation, doubt, and revolution. This experience furthers the students as agents of change rather than experts in rhetoric-like standards and accountability (often defined outside of the community and construct of school). Being able to engage in action research throughout a teachers career is valuable to both teachers and students, as it gives

teachers a process with which to continually rethink practice in order to best meet the needs of the students and community.

Each student is expected to complete 120 hours teaching in a classroom outside the classroom she/he may be working in currently, as well as collaborating with teachers in the practicum classroom to complete the action research project. The purpose of the practicum is to utilize the experience as a mirror of current teaching practices. We expect students to become part of the practicum classroom, participating in the ordinary school day and observing daily practice. Each student then returns to her own personal classroom to consider her teaching practice through the action research process.

One student's action research project focused on the question, "Will openness in teaching and learning help empower children's learning experiences?" Upon entering the action research process, this teacher thought she created a classroom based on holistic ideas of learning. She constructed being a teacher by responding to her students. Yet after videoing herself teaching and reviewing her teaching practices, she recognized how she was manipulating her students as she attempted to "control" learning situations. She wrote:

Many of us as teachers and adults may think that we are providing rich learning experiences. But how can we define those experiences as rich when we are the one's controlling the learning taking place? I speak from personal experience. I thought that I was fair and open as a teacher. But when I heard and saw myself on video for the first time I was pleasantly awakened. I saw myself trying to control the learning that was already taking place. There was no need for me to control the outcome of the activity, or achieving the objective. I remember the feelings of frustration that I felt at the time. Why? I ask myself. For the first time, I realized that I needed to let go of my urge to control the learning that was evolving right in front of me. (Iorio & Parnell, in press)

This identification in her practice positioned her to reflect on power and manipulation in all of her teaching. The analysis of her data inspired her to begin letting go of her own power as teacher and start attempting to share power through conversations with the young children in her classroom.

This action research project illustrates how our program supports students in becoming agents of change, creating a space for students to question assumptions about policies and practices constructing early childhood education. The emphasis on critical perspectives within our program is evident as these look beyond

methodologies in order to understand conceptions of power and how power dynamics contribute to the teaching practices. The action research process gives students the chance to enact change. This experience carries forward into their teaching outside of the college classroom as they practice as agents of change.

Relationships with Community

Our program is informed by knowledge of the local indigenous, immigrant, and global communities. As our students dialogue through blogs and discussion postings and through the process of action research, our hope is that their work is furthering their communities while also inspiring new ways of action and change (Dewey, 1897; Freire, 1970). The critical component of all of this is a deep understanding and connection to their own community.

After reading several articles in *Rethinking Early Childhood Education* (Pelo, 2008) focusing on the sense of place in terms of connecting to the earth and its communities, students often comment in their blogs on how they define and understand their relationships with the local and global communities. Sense of place plays a large part, as indicated by this student's blog posting exploring how much the socio-cultural and ecological contexts of lived experiences contribute to identity:

When compared to cultural and social identity, how much weight does one's ecological identity hold? How much does one's understanding, knowledge, and love for a specific place grow to encompass love for other places? Coming from the tiny South Pacific island of Guam, I identify with island life. Island life on Guam centers on a few common values— love for yourself and your neighbors, a sense of community and looking after one another, respect for the elderly and authority, and belief that hard work pays off... Never has it been more apparent to me that my ecological identity is woven into the fabric of who I am as an individual and a contributor to society. We Westerners are more concerned with conquering nature and bending her to our will. In contrast, Eastern societies have lived in harmony with nature, coexisting together for centuries. We have harnessed nature and profited off of her. In turn, we have wounded her to a point almost beyond healing ... How has the U.S.'s lack of living off the land affected our views of the environment?

This student illustrates a sense of place, observing the small details of her communities and how these details inform perceptions and decisions. A student's racial/ ethnic identity, self-assessment as a teacher, and his/her epistemology (cultural

and social “ways of knowing”) are formed by these perceptions and inform their decision making. As part of the continuing dialogue to guide the connection between community and teaching practice, the professor might ask, “How might an understanding of the historical, political, and economic choices of the United States in terms of ecology empower teachers to offer children ways to connect to the environment?” Another question might be, “How might an ecological focus impact how teachers understand the importance of children developing deep relationships with the local and global world?” And finally, “How might this focus aid in rethinking early childhood practices to build a sense of place, especially in an era where accountability seems too primary?”

Another example of how we work in the community has been my (author Adler) consulting work with the Ho’okahua project with Early Head Start, Head Start, and kindergarten teachers at Kamaile Charter School, which is the catchment area serving the children from four homeless shelters. As part of our grant, we are focusing on providing the project approach as a way for teachers to engage the children and their families in culturally relevant learning. It is inquiry based and comes from the interests of the children. For example, one Head Start teacher (who is part of the grant) really listened to her children, some of who live in the shelter where the Head Start center is located. Her children referred to the shelter as a place (“my jacket is in the shelter,” or “we have a Christmas tree in the shelter”), but not as a home. So she queried her 3- and 4-year-olds about “What is a shelter?” to acknowledge their lived experiences and to debunk the negative stereotypes of living in shelters and of being homeless.

The shelter students did lots of drawing and documenting of their observations in their journals, group problem solving, making models of a shelter, class discussions with student responses on chart paper (which brought delight to parents as they read their child’s words), and survey work to gather data. One child asked if his home was a shelter, since there were 21 people living there. His mother described how he surveyed family members on whether they thought their home was a shelter. In our presentation of the Shelter Project at the Hawaii State Early Childhood conference, she described how family members were confused about why this 4-year-old was asking such complex questions of them. Using the definition the children had decided upon (“A shelter keeps us out of the weather and keeps us safe”), this child concluded that, indeed, his home was a shelter! “All of your children are so smart,” the teacher of the Shelter Project told her parents, “They did this project work themselves. I was

just the facilitator.” She encouraged her parents to really listen to the voices of their children, for by so doing, they will learn so much.

Active connections to the community are essential to a teacher’s acting as an agent of change. Our students are expected to make these connections throughout the program, beginning with blogging and continuing through action research, while we, as the professors, are also connecting to the community, embracing the very commitments we expect of our students.

Teacher Educators Walking the Talk

The expectation that our students will be agents of change is the same expectation of us as professors and researchers. Holding to this expectation positions us to share power with our students as we encounter what it means to challenge traditional assumptions as early childhood educators. For example, when I (author Iorio) encountered homophobic students, I immediately began to find resources and ask questions that countered the heteronormative assumptions of early childhood education. This led to the development of a documentary depicting lesbian adults and their early childhood experiences as well as a teacher and grandmother advocating for gender-variant children. The film has begun to create a space for both teachers and professors to discuss traditional early childhood practices that exclude and ways to rethink practice in order to advocate for children.

I (author Iorio) am always in dialogue with my students, my colleagues, and myself in order to continue to create spaces for rethinking practice. I value developing relationships with my students that encourage collaboration and support. Through these relationships, students take risks, challenge their own understandings of the world, and rethink what can be possible in teaching and learning. When I consider these relationships, I imagine a connection that is based in trust and respect, a foundation for creating a space where students can be in discomfort and evolve. Availability, space for honest reflection, sharing, and support, as well as mutual acceptance, all contribute to the development of relationships between student and teacher that can scaffold ways to engage and understand the content of coursework. This engagement has influenced the constant revision of my coursework. Since our coursework is online, I have been utilizing the variety of technologies available for online teaching. I have moved from discussion boards to various blogging and Wiki tools for discussion, I often found that the tools in our current online platform were

flat and did not help the students connect with each other. After researching and reading several resources regarding online learning (including Uses of Blogs, Bruns, 2006), began using blogger.com. It was remarkable to see the students begin to share more and reflect on a deeper level to each other. My willingness to understand my limitations as a teacher and to challenge my own teaching practices models the expectations of our program.

In another instance, one young student, who was feeling discomfort being asked to critique developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), a predominant practice in early childhood education, could not believe that the professor (author Adler) indicated that DAP was not accepted practice in all cultures for all children. I recall the student's passionate query about how this "small Japanese lady" could tell her that what she had learned for 2 years was wrong. For example, in some Asian school settings, education of young children is didactic and teacher centered, but this is countered by a collective social norm of nurturance and respect for developmental differences in childrearing practices.

As a teacher educator, I (author Adler) believe it is important to model ways in which we critique existing practices and find multiple perspectives to educational issues. As a result of my research, I am not surprised that many Japanese parents in Hawaii (mostly first-generation or recent immigrants) favor academically oriented preschools over play-oriented curriculums. The student who was disturbed by being expected to critique DAP was actually taught at an early age in the Philippines under teacher-centered pedagogy, yet when being "trained" as an EC teacher, she accepted the fact that differing rates of child development require a child-centered or play-oriented curriculum. Accepting authority was actually part of her personal epistemology; thinking "outside the box" to analyze and challenge norms, part of our progressive pedagogy, required a paradigm shift. It seems to be the reverse of the push-down issue previously discussed and illustrates our focus on finding multiple perspectives on issues.

Understanding our perceptions of ourselves as progressive educators, teacher educators, and researchers contributes to how we walk the talk. Identity, professionalism, knowledge, and epistemology further inform how we engage with our students and as agents of change. For both of us, social justice and democratic education are about freedom and respect for the voice of all students and teachers, directly linking our work to the progressives and framing us as agents of change. By

understanding our own histories and positioning of how we have become agents of change, we are better able to listen and respond to our students in order to support their becoming agents of change.

An Agent of Change In Action

We have been speaking about how our program inspires agents of change, but what happens when our students graduate and practice in the world? The story of one of our first graduates is relevant to this question. Shanda, a graduate from our program and now a graduate with her master's in educational foundations, has spent over 11 years in the early childhood field. She believes teaching and learning through the arts humanizes us as it creates learning situations engaging us in dialogue. Further, reflection defines how Shanda considers her own practice, often interrupting familiar practices in order to see another perspective. This is evident in her work as she recognizes how arts have been placed in the margins in schools as accountability affects the contexts of even the early childhood classroom. In order to understand the power of the arts, Shanda became involved in a community of at-risk youth engaging in graffiti by actually learning the art as well as creating spaces for the youth to practice graffiti. The creation of these spaces contributed to a shift in the community perception of both graffiti and the at-risk youth. Her master's project included revisiting this experience through an autobiographical, ethnographical methodology and comprehending the impact of the arts on disrupting assumptions in education and society. Shanda shared in the closing words of her paper,

I am personally invested in our future by acknowledging the present interests, talents, and cultural knowledge of our youth. And I hope that you the reader are also motivated to take a stand against the power structures that de-humanizes us by looking within and asking yourself, "Why do I want to teach?" The movement starts with you.

From these words it is evident that Shanda calls for change not only in herself but also in the people and community around her. These experiences are now being applied as she opens a new preschool classroom in the university children's center incorporating a central focus on the arts and awareness of power hierarchies as well as how to listen to and respond to children. For example, there was a young child in Shanda's classroom who kept playing with a small toy tractor, attempting to see how the tractor could jump between two points. Instead of saying "no" to a toy tractor

flying across the room, Shanda recognized the child's actions, thinking, and questions as a challenge for the rest of the classroom. She offered the child a variety of materials with which to create ramps and landing sites, inspiring the whole class to experiment, charting the jumps, playing different roles in the process, and making a space for the children's theories to be discussed. Shanda made the choice to see the child as human, contributing to the creation of a thinking community, rather than as an object to be controlled and managed by the adult with more power.

When asked how she is an agent of change, Shanda said,

I can only change my situation by changing myself. This means re-evaluating what and how I teach that respects children as individual human beings. How I choose to live my life, my values, the decisions that I make as a teacher affects the lives of my students. Because I am willing to evaluate myself, it helps me to better understand the situation that I may be struggling with—and change becomes a natural process. You cannot let fear control your actions of change. (Personal communication, June 18, 2012)

Reflecting on Shanda's final assertion, "You cannot let fear control your actions of change," we find that it is the individual students' risk-taking attitude, ability to identify and analyze barriers, and commitment to positive change for themselves and their students that enables them to overcome resistance to change. Often, workplace constraints, such as policies and practices, are named as barriers to change, yet when our students examine the larger context of teaching and learning, they have become agents of change. Shanda's current classroom is an inclusive setting, a partnership between the public special-needs preschool and the university preschool. Several times a week, both classrooms come together for play. The special-needs preschool is driven by a schedule, and time playing in the university preschool is short and often interrupted in order to meet the scheduling demands. Shanda is constantly pondering the rigid schedule as well as the control the teachers from this classroom exert over the young children. While she realizes how the structures are part of the larger school system structure, Shanda chooses to disrupt these constraints by giving the children space to explore, experience, and take risks during each visit to the university preschool. Her hope is to give the teachers from the special-needs classroom another way to view children beyond the schedule and as something to control. Shanda's choices reflect her commitment to being an agent of change, she recognizes the limitations, questions practice, engages change, and rethinks practice—all that we hope for each of our students.

Conclusion

Being an agent of change enacts a process of becoming. The process may begin with encounters of knowledge and models of the past. It continues by using these encounters as frames for self-reflection, offering spaces of discomfort and evolution, while understanding of identity. Action research becomes the vehicle for practicing change, comprehending positioning as teacher and learner, questioning policies and practices, and engaging in agency. The becoming of our students as agents of change is evident in their action research choices and their later decisions as working early childhood educators. Summing up this process, one student described her own becoming:

The trusting relationship is the foundation and then the teacher and the child co-construct knowledge, skills, language and more with pleasure and emotional sharing. Teacher is a co-constructor of children's future, not a person who "teaches." I didn't think we could "teach" young children, because they learn through doing/play on their pace and level, but I also didn't have the idea of we co-construct children's knowledge, skills, creativity, language, thoughts and their young lives. Those wonderful "happenings" happen in relationships among and between children teacher and community.

This student's rethinking of what it means to teach, critical importance of relationship, connection to the community, and sharing of power with children all construct the teacher as an agent of change. The disruption of "teacher as an agent of surveillance" through this rethinking furthers the future of teaching practices based in response to children rather than at children through rhetoric and scripted ideas.

As we consider our own place as teacher educators in the process, we come to better understand what it means to advocate and support resistance to traditional assumptions and expectations of early childhood. We take our professional obligations seriously, but with humor and compassion for our students' culture, knowledge, and epistemology. This is done within an articulated program with Hawaii Community Colleges, online, and with belief, similar to what was articulated by the Head Start teacher to her parents, "Our students are so smart and bring such rich experiences to their learning." We try to listen, respect their cultural knowledge, co-construct new ideas, and learn so much from them, which often causes us to inquire more. Thus, more questions move us forward.

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