Chapter 12
The Relation of Research on Readiness to Research/Practice of Transitions

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12.1 Introduction

It is only in the last 25 years that US researchers and policymakers have begun looking beyond the child- and skill-centered notion of readiness to include ideas about ready families, schools, and communities (Graue 2006; Kagan 1990; National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) 1998; National Governors Association (NGA) 2005). This shift has paralleled the progression of transition research, framing transition as a process that is facilitated through an ecological systems understanding of early childhood education (Pianta and Cox 1999; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000; Rous et al. 1994).

To better understand the ebb and flow of the relationship between readiness and transition in research and practice, we contrast these two constructs across several dimensions. By examining their theoretical foundations, their evolution over time, and their inherent complementarity, we will illuminate how they have shaped and are shaped by early learning initiatives in the past, present, and future. We ask that the reader recognize that our approach is parochial, representing only our experience in the United States. We are confident that our colleagues' work in other chapters will connect ours to global notions of transitions so that we are not quite so isolated in the story we tell. We will begin by providing a brief historical overview, working to define commonly used ideas in transition and readiness in the United States, exploring the theoretical foundations of our research, the challenges and resources these foundations have provided, and the future directions of our research in the area.

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12.2 Theoretical Foundations

Our intellectual work around transitions and readiness comes from a stance of critical constructionism. From this perspective, these constructs are not self-standing entities "out there" but are instead, products of historical, social, cultural, and political forces. Rather than counting ready children or working to find the best transition plan, we assume that readiness is socially constructed in local communities that differ in terms of their ideas about children, the role of schooling, and the nature of development (Graue 1993). As a result, one child will be ready on one side of town and not ready on the other.

The same is true of transitions – transition practices develop in response to, and reflect, local values and power relations, typically serving the needs of some but not of others. Looking closely at the interactions among people, places, and local practices shows that children experience readiness and transition practices in real time and in real life. Social constructs create material realities. Conversely, material realities create social constructs. But it does separate to some degree the constructs from the child and makes us, as capable adults, culpable for the consequences of our measures and practices. Critical constructivism is a step away from the mainstream developmentalism that has shaped so much of thought and practice in early childhood education as it examines how children, families, and educators come to think about readiness and transitions in particular social and historical contexts. It leads us to look at how these ideas have historical legacies and to look carefully at the consequences of our conceptualisations.

For example, readiness and transition did not exist until children and education were placed into a life-stage framework. That is, neither construct was conceivable until children moved from home to school. This life-altering transition has historically been wrapped around ideas about developmental maturation, environmental opportunities, or the interaction of the two. In each of the perspectives, the role of intervention is seen as a mechanism that can leverage success.

Early in US history, readiness took on a remedial tone, with interventions provided for children from impoverished environments. Often children of immigrants or children living in poverty were provided socialisation so that they could succeed not only in school but in life as well. This notion is observed in the development of the US settlement house that served an explicit transitional purpose in the nineteenth century (Bloch 1987). Through the settlement house, immigrants (parents and children) were to be socialised to American ways of life, taught hygiene and language, and given childcare for working mothers. The transition in this case was from one culture to another, from one set of norms to another. The most relevant issue was leveling the playing field for children with fewer resources at home than their more affluent peers. Readiness for these children was framed from a deficit perspective as illustrated by the sparse institutional surroundings in Fig. 12.1.

This can be contrasted to the other side of town shown in Fig. 12.2, where children attended private nursery schools offering sandboxes, dress-up clothes, and

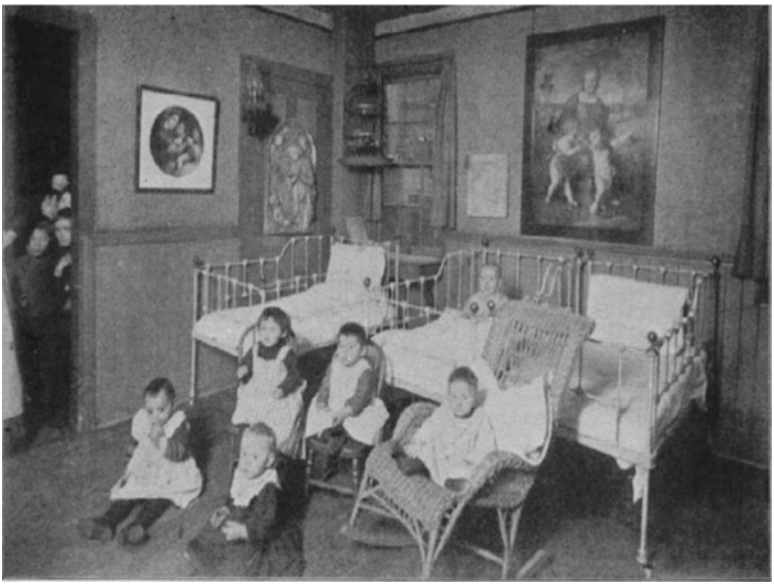

Fig. 12.1 Settlement house nursery (http://www.google.com/imgres?q=settlement+house+nursery&um=1&hl=en&sa=N&rlz=1G1GGLQ_ENUS377&biw=1260&bih=790&tbm=isch&tbnid=bDNuvVjQJEZ_GM:&imgrefurl=http://americafrom1865.blogspot.com/2012/02/early-20th-century-struggle-for-civil.html&docid=wwyYIc3z5vlxJM&imgurl=http://www.swarthmore.edu/Library/peace/Exhibits/janeaddams/photoshullhouse/Nursery1.jpg&w=900&h=577&ei=p6uXUMDfJ_GgyAGmzoFo&zoom=1&iact=rc&dur=429&sig=103433073126969172997&page=1&tbnh=141&tbnw=238&start=0&ndsp=25&ved=1t:429,r:0,s:0,i:71&tx=79&ty=39) (Originating in the Jane Addams Collection, Swarthmore)

a wide variety of freely chosen opportunities for play. Learning how to think and create were desired skills for success in the real world.

Transition and readiness for more affluent children was respectful of the resources that children had at home and was primarily a kind of bridge that facilitated the move from home to school. Rather than the institutional perspective of the settlement house, transition and readiness for these children was viewed as enrichment that occurred through interaction with the natural world.

While we could trace the discussion on developmental patterns, ages, and stages back centuries, the notion of readiness crystallised in the early twentieth century when the Child Study Movement claimed the potential to map children's passage through the early years. Through careful and systematic observation of thousands of children, scientists were able to describe patterns in development in samples of young children. The following image (Fig. 12.3) shows Arnold Gesell, a key figure in the empirical study of children in an observation room with multiple data collectors recording interactions. This practice was replicated with thousands of children to create a developmental map that was correlated with age.

Fig. 12.2 Private nursery garden (http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a25266/) (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC. 20540 USA)

Fig. 12.3 Arnold Gesell in the Child Study Center (http://www.childstudycenter.yale.edu/Images/med337_101604Gesell%20Dome4.jpg) (Image courtesy of the Yale Child Study Center, Yale University School of Medicine)

Developmental mapping moved early childhood education from the realm of the romantic and mystical (Froebel, Waldorf) to a practice informed by science. This created experts who could identify what was normal and give advice about practices to support children's development. The creation of the expert gave some people authority and minimized the expertise of others. Pediatricians rose in credibility as individuals well acquainted with ages and stages, and parents deferred to them in seeking advice.

Depending on how children were conceptualised, this empirical framing might take on a maturationist flavor, arguing that development was primarily a biological process that could not be changed. When this was the framework, à la Gesell, the role of early schooling was to support the natural unfolding of children's development, keeping educational demands slightly lagging behind maturation. Biology was the mechanism that shaped readiness, assuming that the home environment provided sufficient support for learning. Transitions often focused on determining whether children had sufficient maturity to benefit from schooling.

As the impact of environmental factors on readiness drew attention from researchers, another interventionist approach gained prominence and was at the heart of the development of Head Start, a key element of the US war on poverty in the 1960s. Developed in a period of faith in the federal government to move people from poverty to prosperity, Head Start included a comprehensive approach to child development (Zigler and Valentine 1979). This was comprised of preschool for children in poverty, health and social services, and a parent involvement program that was designed to move parents to teaching positions in the program. This kind of transition paired a deficit perspective with a community empowerment approach, based on the assumption that children in poverty lacked the skills and dispositions to succeed in school, while valuing the cultural cache that parents could bring to a community preschool program. The picture below (Fig. 12.4) shows the president's wife, Lady Bird Johnson, chatting with children in a Head Start program.

Head Start's introduction as a comprehensive program aimed at transcending poverty through child and parent success triggered an influx of research that looked beyond a child- and skill-centered view of readiness to thinking about the role of transition in linking preschool and kindergarten programs. Longitudinal studies began showing the benefits of targeted early childhood programs on school and life success (Campbell et al. 2002; Ramey et al. 2000; Reynolds 2000, 2011; Schweinhart et al. 1986, 2005). Economists used this information to show the economic benefits of these programs (Grunewald and Rolnick 2003; Heckman et al. 2006; Reynolds and Temple 2008). In 1997, the US National Education Goals Panel declared that "by the year 2000 all children will start school ready to learn" (NEGP 1997). Cumulatively, from this work, the role of early childhood program quality has emerged as an organizing factor for state readiness and transition work. This has resulted in attention on the ready child being coupled with thinking about ready schools (programs) and communities.

Responsiveness to these ideas is seen in the recent introduction of the US Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grants designed to support the state's work of building quality early learning systems. US Secretary of Health and Human

Fig. 12.4 Lady Bird Johnson at Head Start (http://www.google.com/imgres?q=lady+bird+johnson+head+start&um=1&hl=en&rlz=1G1GGLQ_ENUS377&biw=1260&bih=790&tbm=isch&tbnid=kYO2iyioBgIIoM:&imgrefurl=http://www.tumblr.com/ZI1-WxIEXFNy&docid=K4S4TSGkGPermM&imgurl=http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m0jflkHZmZ1qjih96o1_500.jpg&w=500&h=333&ei=–6yXUL3ZOsOYyAHv84DAAg&zoom=1&iact=rc&dur=453&sig=103433073126969172997&page=1&tbnh=134&tbnw=226&start=0&ndsp=23&ved=1t:429,r:1,s:0,i:71&tx=83&ty=71) (©LBJ Library photo by Robert Knudsen)

Services, Kathleen Sebelius says, "The Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge takes a holistic approach to early education, promotes innovation, and focuses on what it takes to help put young children on the path of learning, opportunity, and success" (White House Press Office 2011). This effort is imagined to support continued construction of statewide systems of high-quality early learning and development programs by aligning and raising standards for existing early learning and development programs; improving training, support, and articulation for the early learning workforce; and building evaluation systems that promote effective practices and programs to help parents make informed decisions about their child's early learning (LeMoine 2008).

A critical constructionist perspective reads these examples as historical moments that created resources for thinking about children, their needs, and their education. Rather than make an argument about their readiness over time or testing transition practices for their effects in the long or short term, we are interested in how the practices and processes related to readiness and transition came to be and how they were taken up by parents, teachers, politicians, and even children. Each of these moments reflected a particular set of social and cultural forces. The ability to know patterns in development, particularly in a scientifically validated way, was made possible because observational methods, including the development of scales and the use of both still and action photography provided tools that supported the

documentation of development as well as the very patterns themselves. The need to close opportunity gaps, which were created when immigrants came to the United States or when poverty was an enemy to be conquered, opened the window to programs that framed readiness in terms of deficits to be filled and transitions as critical periods between contexts. The intervention was focused on changing the consequences of poverty or immigration rather than eradicating the risk itself. It is not clear yet whether the newest initiative will make any greater progress.

In the meantime, while these questions persist and early learning system work continues, a growing body of research is influencing normative readiness and transition practices (Crosnoe 2007, Dockett and Perry 2009; Graue 1992, 2006; Kagan and Tarrant 2010; Moore 2008; Pianta et al. 2007). This work is enhancing initial transition research that presented a two-dimensional model looking at the vertical (across time) and horizontal (across contexts) progress of children (Doucet and Tudge 2007; Kagan and Neuman 1998). Publicly adopted documents, definitions, and recent initiatives support a multifaceted understanding of readiness and transition. This encourages a perspective that moves from an individually child-focused event to creating larger institutionally linked agendas looking at processes occurring between contexts, stakeholders, and time.

This nested ecological systems perspective first described by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) has been adopted by some researchers aiming to describe how 'links among child, home, school, peer, and neighbourhood factors create a dynamic network of relationships that influence children's transition to school both directly and indirectly' (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000, p. 492). This can be understood by looking briefly at the framing of transition goals that attempt to build synchronicity between pre-K and kindergarten systems, thereby establishing ready schools.

Ready schools need to base transition on three related principles:

1. Reaching out. Schools reach out and link with families and preschools in order to establish relationships and engage in two-way communication about how to establish effective transition practices.
2. Reaching backward in time. Schools establish links particularly with families before the first day of school.
3. Reaching with appropriate intensity. Schools develop a range of practices with varying intensity (i.e., low-intensity flyers or pamphlets, high-intensity personal contacts or home visits) (Pianta et al. 1999).

The continuity espoused by this model is rooted in the chronological links created as the child moves from pre-K to kindergarten. Presently, it appears that little readiness information from the model's pre-K side is transmitted to teachers at school during the transition to kindergarten. This correlates with transition research studying ways that kindergarten reaches out to pre-K parents, which indicates that schools often share information about kindergarten with parents but seldom initiate relationships that encourage parents to share developmental information about their children (Boethel 2004; Bohan-Baker and Little 2004). This is particularly curious considering the emphasis placed on continuity in the transition research. In part, this may be due to the "reaching back" instead of "sending

forward" conceptualization of transition often encouraged in transition work guides (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre 2003; Sullivan-Dudzic et al. 2010). This research has formed an institutional conceptualisation of the transition process, looking primarily through a lens focused on elementary school practices informing parents about kindergarten. Current NAEYC and Head Start program standards require transition activities prior to kindergarten entry (Head Start 2012; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) 2006). Compliance with these standards is encouraging the pre-K community to collectively reach forward to kindergarten classrooms. This change in momentum, with activities being initiated by pre-K professionals, places greater focus on the types of relationships needed for school success rather than the informational emphasis found in the institutional conceptualisation of transition. The relationship-based framing of transition emerges from research highlighting the importance of relationships in the teaching/learning process (Harrison et al. 2006), ways that children's and parent's knowledge about school is constructed (Bohan-Baker and Little 2004; Doucet 2008), and showing types of information and relationships that prove most successful for children as they enter school (Boethel 2004; Weiss 2003). This relational framing of transition seeks to understand readiness and transition implications for children from different backgrounds (Crosnoe 2007; Magnuson et al. 2006). Researchers studying readiness and transition from sociocultural perspectives have provided insights about transitional triggers and relationships that are needed between parents, classrooms, and communities to support transitions (Arimura et al. 2011; Bohan-Baker and Little 2004; Corsaro and Molinari 2005; Doucet 2008; Doucet and Tudge 2007).

From a more distant policy perspective, a layered, ecological systems approach has emphasized intensified collaboration among education, health, and social service agencies as they attempt to understand and address community readiness and transition needs. This approach has led to increased interagency discussions as organisations identify, pool, and blend limited resources for targeted projects. Unlike previous Head Start work, which offered multiple services for children, current efforts look for ways to collaborate in their support of families with comprehensive programs under one roof. Kagan (2010) suggests that the diverse nature of this work needs a more systematic focus that can be framed by looking at structure through the lens of pedagogies, programs, and policies. These efforts, while deemed essential, must find connections to the realities of the families that they are designed to serve. This includes understanding transition through the eyes of children and adults as part of the larger effort (Laverick and Jalongo 2011). Researchers who recognize the potential for disconnect among children, provider, and policy system layers are calling attention to the need for reflexive research and systems with mechanisms that are culturally and locally responsive (Brown and Gasko 2012; Patton and Wang 2012).

In an attempt to understand the needed reciprocity between layers, a more modern ecological approach, as theorized by Bronfenbrenner (1995), is being suggested (Graue et al. 2011; Tudge et al. 2009). This more comprehensive approach – known as the Person-Process-Context-Time theory (PPCT) – provides a holistic means of

understanding and building a dynamic framework for amalgamating transition and readiness work. The complementary nature of these concepts becomes apparent as readiness is viewed as a flexible construct that develops across time and contexts, and transition focuses on the relationships and processes connecting preschool years to kindergarten classrooms. This foundational reconceptualisation offers new implications for our readiness and transition research.

12.3 Implications for Practice and Research

Using this framework from a critical constructionist stance makes it challenging to give concise answers to typically asked questions about transition and readiness – or even to frame a concise question. Questions like, "At what age should children begin kindergarten?" or "How should we organize transitions to school?" elicit very unsatisfying answers like "It depends" or "There isn't." Framing questions is just as nebulous – you end up tripping over queries like, "Who is advantaged by particular transition practices?" The implications or the "so what" are not directly derived – there is something unsettling about an expert who does not profess with certainty or who professes uncertainty with certainty. It tends to undermine authority.

From this stance, readiness and transition are framed relationally – children are always ready for something or they are transitioning to something. But just as importantly, their readiness or transition is always in comparison to others – to other children, to other families, and to other classrooms. This normative component puts a kink in defining, building, or evaluating policy and practices that are responsive to the assets that children bring – how do you make sense of something whose meaning and implications are framed in absolutely relative terms?

Some of this tension may be eased by using an elongated and enmeshed view of readiness and transition that provides a natural transparency with which to look 'simultaneously forward and backward evaluating the adequacy of social, personal, economic and educational resources afforded by communities' (Graue 2006, p. 51). The PPCT framework has the potential to shift from a deficit to an asset-based way of thinking about children and their opportunity structures by focusing on how families understand, access, and use community-constructed readiness and transition mechanisms. By understanding what children and families from diverse backgrounds understand about schools and schooling, professionals have the opportunity to be responsive in their construction of systems.

Unfortunately, policymakers who want easy answers to simple questions are permanently irritated by critical constructionist analyses. The best example of this is the response to a recent grant proposal that said: "We don't need any more research that says, 'It depends!'" For those without a willingness to deal with the relational aspects of these constructs, the value of this approach is quite limited. However, when given a different lens for asking those questions, the answers and subsequent questions become influential in current readiness and transition work that is often

initiated federally but enacted locally. Critical constructionism using social, historical, and cultural analyses becomes a viable approach for encouraging examination of ready schools and communities.

12.4 Challenges and Issues

We have come to this place in our research from different paths. Beth has spent more than 20 years doing research related to readiness. She has actually been trying to leave the readiness business for at least 5 years. One narrative would be that her research interests have evolved to focus on other topics. But also true is that she is tired – of feeling like Sisyphus, pushing a critical constructionist perspective up a hill, and not going anywhere; of worrying that her research is irrelevant; and of the deep dark fear that her perspective is just as arbitrary as those who have competing views. She recognizes that as a social scientist, it's not supposed to be about her – it is supposed to be about the research. But from a critical constructionist perspective, she is indistinguishable from her research, as it is, in the very same way that transition and readiness are, a relational activity. While Beth has tried to back away from this complex and very messy topic, the historical, cultural, and social forces she depends on in her research are pulling her back into the middle of this discussion during an unmatched time of intensity in early childhood education and care.

June has spent more than 20 years working as a pre-K teacher and program administrator of a campus-based early learning center enmeshed in local readiness and transition practices. As a Ph.D. candidate, her emerging research agenda is focused on the construction of local, non-urban, birth-to-grade-three early learning systems. Her years of interactions with early childhood professionals and deep relationships with children and families led her to methods that were contextually and process based. Working in real time with real people provides the opportunity for detailed understanding of complex questions that cannot be gleaned from faceless methods. Understanding the questions from the outside-in and inside-out creates challenges and opportunities for shaping emerging early childhood education systems.

But from a perspective broader than our own, the US context provides unique challenges and issues. The culture of individuality, particularly prominent in middle-class white communities, frames the issues of readiness and transition in very different ways than a more social or community perspective prevalent in communities of colour and in poverty. The culture of individuality sees parenting as concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003), with efforts by parents and educators focused on the individual child. The point of parenting is to situate your child for success, with success defined as a child who is a leader, emotionally secure, socially adept, physically robust, and academically open to learning. Readiness for many middle-class families has a competitive flavor, requiring children to be the biggest, oldest, and most mature.

In contrast, less affluent families seek to have their children in school as soon as possible, often without a résumé of enrichment activities. The parents are no less committed to their children, as they approach the task of caring for their children as a natural task, one that emerges out of the interactions of family and community.

These different perspectives on readiness set up what seem to be parallel universes, where the roles and responsibilities for early education promote different practices and different consequences. What is particularly vexing is the value placed on concerted cultivation, often seen as the "right" way to raise children and approach schooling. Further, when moving children to the top is seen as the goal of parenting, any critical constructionist critique of concerted cultivation is met with disbelief or even disdain as it conflicts with its central goal. "Do you mean I am supposed to worry about the experiences of somebody else's kid as I make decisions about my child? And that somebody else isn't willing to invest in the way that I am? Forget it!" This view of parenting as investment with both short-term and long-term dividends makes discussion of equity in readiness and transition a dead end for many families.

From a systems perspective, significant challenges exist as more emphasis is placed on the alignment and regulation of early childhood systems as part of the pre-K and K-12 networks. The affordances created by this system also provide possible constraints. The birth through five education system is the last educational system for a professional that offers curricular freedom and responsivity to children's interests and abilities in a non-prescribed environment. The daily early learning curriculum is integrated across content areas and offers choice and freedom to make friends through each activity. By creating systems that seek to align practices, we risk losing one of the most intrinsically motivated educational opportunities of one's life. The challenge that exists will be crafting a readiness and transition system with accompanying research that is beneficial to the other. This notion has implications for our future research agendas.

12.5 Future Directions

In the past, Beth has described the social processes and meanings that shaped children's, families', and school experiences related to readiness. From these descriptive accounts, she has suggested implications for enhancing transitions for children and families through more equitable school entrance practices and less normatively framed curriculum that put less mature children at risk.

She continues to view the world through a critical constructionist framework but is shifting the focus of her work. Rather than study existing practices that vary by social and cultural resources, she is currently working to build capacity for equity in local pre-K programs. She is working very pragmatically on readiness and transition issues by designing and implementing a professional development program for public pre-K teachers in Madison, WI. She has joined forces with mathematics educators to develop a program that connects best practices in early education and

funds of knowledge teaching through a focus on early mathematics. Her group is working with multiple cohorts of teachers in both public elementary schools and community childcare centers to help individual teachers enhance their knowledge and skills in this area but also to develop a vibrant and well-educated community of early educators. A natural part of this program will be considering systematically, the transition practices at two points – the transition to kindergarten in which the teachers will be intimately involved as they work with 4-year-olds and a new transition which will occur as children come into the 4K (4-year-old kindergarten) program. The collaborative nature of this program, which blends the public schools with the early childhood community and the local university, provides an interesting opportunity to think about transitions.

Using a critical constructionist lens and the PPCT framework, June is researching readiness and transition issues in a midsized Midwestern community whose local school board has charged a task force with the responsibility of studying and implementing a seamless birth-to-grade-three early learning system. Working with a group of community members and professional early childhood/elementary stakeholders from the private and public sector, three areas of primary interest have been identified: curriculum and assessment, transition, and professional development. She is leading the transition subgroup charged with examining the current practices and identifying areas of interest. As part of this work, she is hosting four ongoing parent focus groups, each with membership from a diverse early childhood educational experience, Head Start, in-home childcare, center-based childcare, and family providers. Through across-time conversations, she will analyze the mechanisms accessed and used by diverse families to ready and transition their children into kindergarten. The results will be shared with the task force so that the family voices are integrated into institutional and community practices. This work models using a structure that collects family feedback shares it with the task force and in turn guides the construction of community readiness and transition practices. The reflexive work of the task force, families, and evolving community practices offers an interesting place to examine the notion of ready schools and communities.

Both of our projects are interventionist, strategically designed to enhance the capacity of early childhood educators, study processes, and explore how programs connect with local communities in meaningful ways. They also have the potential to study student/family careers longitudinally so that we can develop a better understanding of the outcomes of our projects. A key element is designing our projects from the perspective of what we are calling reciprocal funds of knowledge, working to highlight the knowledge and practices that all families bring to their children's schooling. We hope to make information and expertise flow in a two-way manner so that curriculum and school practice takes up the resources that children bring to school and so that families have access to high-status educational knowledge and relationships needed to succeed. Our projects are certainly critical in intention and constructionist in practice. We are each just beginning this work, and we are full of hope that it will provide useful knowledge locally and beyond.

We recognize that by taking up an interventionist agenda as part of our research, we run the risk of being criticized by other researchers as we teeter between research

and practice. We find the risk manageable as we see an ethical responsibility for researchers and their research in this time of advancement and refinement of early childhood practices and programs. It would be unconscionable to sit passively on the side observing when we are convinced that there are structural changes that are needed to create equitable opportunities for quickly growing populations of underserved children and parents. It appears that researchers with some early childhood education experience and knowledge can use their research as a tool to build the capacity of a system for children and families.

In many ways, we feel that we have come full circle. We began our work in early childhood teaching 3–4-year-olds and working with their families to enhance their experience. On reflection, we did not come with an openness for learning about what families had to give; instead, we came as parent educators, full of supposed knowledge in our 25-year-old heads. We are now much less certain of our knowledge but much more likely to be able to capitalize on families' deep cultural knowledge and resources because we finally recognize that we have much to learn from them. Our scenic trips through early childhood classrooms, graduate school, parenting, positions in higher education, and advocacy in political arenas bring us to our current readiness and transition questions and activities. If this is not evidence of the value of critical constructionism, we are not sure what is.

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