

What Matters

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Abstract

In this essay, I outline the development of my professional and personal commitments to research and teaching that focus on the alleviation of children's suffering in schools. I describe how undertaking a late-career practice as a psychotherapist has shaped my reimagining of classrooms as sites of vital possibility for children and their teachers.

Keywords: cultural studies, childhood studies, psychoanalysis

Starting Out

Across the thirty-five years of my career as a teacher, a teacher educator, and a researcher, I have been driven by a passion to understand children's experiences of marginalization, alienation, suffering, and failure in relation to learning and school. Drawing from feminist, queer, post-structural, post-colonial, and psychoanalytic theories at intersections of early childhood, literacy, and childhood studies, I have worked to document the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual realities of children's school lives, as viewed through the lenses of identity. I have work primarily through narrative research and on-going expansion of theoretical knowledge to examine how children experience success and failure constituted through expectations for normative forms of participation and conscious and unconscious biases about who and what is allowed to matter in schools.

In the 1990s, as a Ph.D. student who was simultaneously a classroom teacher and understanding everything that happened in classrooms as gendered, I hoped to engage pedagogies that exemplified feminist ideals of expanding what was possible for children in school, regardless of gendered identities. Doing my Ph.D. at the University of Hawai'i with Joe Tobin, teaching and then supervising in Hawai'i schools, my attention soon expanded to how colonialism, race, and class structured how children experienced themselves in school. The University of Hawai'i offered me the opportunity to do a cognate in post-colonial theory, which allowed me to understand how long-standing discourses about native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, along with poverty related to settler colonialism and exploitative history of the plantation system had deep, ongoing effects on how children were treated and assessed in Hawai'i schools. Reading and applying Judith Butler's theory of identity performance to understanding gendered, sexed, raced, and classed performances in Hawai'i elementary classrooms, including my own, became the topic of my dissertation research (Boldt, 1996; Boldt, 2001).

The Psychic and the Social

While this description of the early years of my career is accurate, it does not capture the depth of my feelings about the suffering of children. Perhaps not surprisingly, given how these kinds of feelings often develop, I was a child who suffered. In my graduate education, at the height of "the linguistic turn", I learned to understand the abuse I experienced as a child as an articulation of the highly patriarchal, sexist, and heterosexist discourses, systems, and structures within which I grew up. Drawing heavily from Foucault and Derrida and other theorists of systems and structures that were shaped by and shaped discourse, it was unfashionable in the 1990s to talk about individuals or

psyches. But by the early 2000s, I had begun to reject this binary; this division between the psyche and the social did not make sense to me. Intellectually, I understood that the abuses I experienced were born in the history of the intergenerational trauma of poverty, war, alcoholism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Whatever the psychic dynamics of the adults who imposed suffering upon children may have been, they were understood, articulated, and justified through the discourses of value – who counts as worthwhile, as deserving protection and who doesn't – that were dominant at those times. At the same time, it was the psyche that was shaped in these experiences and that carried them on through psychic formations. “All symptoms are theories,” Foucault might say. “All theories are symptoms,” the psychoanalyst might retort. “Yes,” I would reply to both. Beyond my intellectual reasoning that the psyche articulates the social and the social articulates the psychic, was the simple fact that no matter how often I articulated the historical and discursive antecedents to my own suffering, my intellectual understanding had little power to alleviate my on-going misery and self-hatred. That would have to wait for therapy.

During the early 2000s, I entered psychoanalysis as a patient and I became deeply interested in psychoanalysis as a theoretical lens for understanding the co-articulation of the psychic and the social. In particular, I was fascinated by why so many feminist theorists – Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz, and others – drew from psychoanalysis. I spent my sabbatical as a visiting scholar at the Chicago Institute, where Joe Tobin's father was (and is) a psychoanalyst. Later, I completed a post-graduate program at the Washington/Baltimore Center for Psychoanalysis and the Washington School for Psychiatry. I became an International Psychoanalytic Research Fellow for the Anna Freud Center at the Yale Child Study Center, the Freud Institution of Berlin and the Tavistock Clinic London. In 2010, while continuing my work as a professor, I undertook training to become a licensed professional counselor and in 2014, I began practicing psychotherapy with children at a rural clinic serving families living in poverty. For me, this was the next obvious step on the trajectory from a suffering child to a teacher and researcher who cared about children's suffering.

Therapy with Children

My work as a therapist has transformed me as a teacher and a researcher. Working with children in this way has prompted a dramatic reassessment of how children move from the rigid and fearful stuck-ness that trauma induces into greater possibilities for flexibility, self-articulation, creativity, and a sense of joyful vitality. For the past several years, my research has been focused on understanding how learning and change happens in child therapy and how that can affect our understanding of learning and change in classrooms. What I have found is that very little of what happens in child therapy is dependent upon language or representation that takes place in consciousness. Instead, most change in therapy happens through the tacit and unconscious ways that human interactions work through things like rhythm, pitch, texture, velocity, intensity, timing, routine, and difference to create both the conditions of learning and content that is learned (Boldt, 2019, 2020, 2021). What gets created in therapy and what gets created in classrooms are conditions of possibility and while what we say to children certainly matters, I now focus on how children's embodied experiences, their material experiences of possibility or of mattering are primary conditions of possibility and change in therapy. This understanding has had a profound impact in the ways I think about who and what get to matter in classrooms, how this is tied to identities that are valued and marginalized, and how that is expressed and experienced in deeply embodied ways.

Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of affect and the work of feminist new materialists such as Karen Barrad, Rosi Braidotti, and Jane Bennett are central to my perspective on the materiality of mattering (Leander and Boldt, 2013; Boldt and Leander, 2017). The infant researcher and psychoanalyst Daniel Stern's focus on vitality lies at the heart of

my understanding of therapy and its implications for classrooms. Stern (2010) focuses on the concept of vitality, the embodied dynamics of aliveness, of efficacy, of mattering. He came to vitality through infant research, in which there was little going on linguistically that would distract from a focus on how vitality arose and was carried through the ways that infant and adult interactants were attuned and responsive to what was happening largely below the level of consciousness, what Stern called “the forms of dynamic flow that carry social behaviors” (p. 110). Stern was not suggesting that when we get older, these exchanges become in our conscious awareness or under our conscious control, but rather that the adult–infant interactions he studied allowed him to focus on something that happens, largely unnoticed, throughout life - how vitality arises and is carried (Boldt, 2021). Stern (2004) argued that therapists would do well to attend less to language or representation and more to dynamic expressions of vitality, because these expressions carry information about the client’s embodied experience of what is occurring in that moment, which would allow them to value the flow of vitality, which makes therapy alive and full of potential for both clients and therapists.

Stern’s work demonstrates the potential for infant and early childhood researchers to contribute to a “push up” of research and knowledge in response to the constant demand that early years settings accept the “push down” demands of elementary grades curricular content. RECE colleagues Abigail Hackett (2022) and Christina MacRae (2020) provide two examples of researchers who focus on what the embodiment of young children teaches us about dynamic interactions with the worldⁱⁱ. RECE scholars have an important role to play in fighting back against all kinds of degradations of children’s lives, including the degradation that happens in classrooms and care settings in which curricular demands join with racism, sexism, classism, and other conscious and unconscious biases to deny that who children are and what they experience matters.

RECE as a Vital Space

The more that I understand about the kinds of dynamics that create conditions of vitality, the more I understand about the uniqueness of RECE as a site that has nurtured me intellectually and emotionally, providing a home that has allowed me to engage my work with passion and rigor. It is a home in which what I care about and have experienced matters. I presented my first conference paper at RECE as a first-year doctoral student in 1993. The responses of support I received to that and subsequent presentations were just the beginning of how RECE people shaped and advanced my career. More senior scholars at RECE provided references for my job searches, invited me to participate in professional activities, and later wrote my tenure reviews. RECE-related journals offered venues for early publications. As a young scholar, I connected with other young scholars and formed deep friendships that have persisted through my career. Later, RECE offered a place where I could bring my doctoral students to receive the support I experienced and provided an outlet for service and leadership. Through RECE, I share work and friendship with colleagues across the globe.

Much of my research career has been taken up by questions of curriculum and pedagogy as perpetrators of children’s suffering, but in practice, through my efforts as a teacher, teacher educator, and a therapist, my efforts have been to support children’s experiences of pleasure and possibility and of themselves as mattering in vital ways. I have consistently argued that more expansive and vitally engaging classrooms are central to our commitments to just and equitable education. The current political, social, and economic pressures on all of us – children, teachers, families, researchers – challenge us to continue to insist on creating spaces in which who and what we are matters. For me, RECE has been a living enactment of the power of just such mattering.

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ⁱⁱ Just two of many possible examples of their work are Hackett, 2022 and Macrae, 2020.