Eclipsing the other:
Minority world influences in majority world child care and development
Keynote Presentation

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- In thinking about my presentation today, several phrases and images came to mind.
- Perhaps because I knew Peter [Moss] would be here and because the historic site of Dickens' office is not far from Peter's office in London, Dickens' quote "it was the best of times; it was the worst of times", was one phrase that seemed to fit for what I had in mind—but those words seemed more than a bit shopworn.
- Another image, which I picked up while walking through the underground at Heathrow Airport a few months ago, that came to mind was the HSBC ad series that shows two sets of two photos with their titles reversed. Here's one:

(Slide of HSBC cat and dog, 1st one of HSBC to use)

- (I'm a dog person with allergies to cats, so the set on the right resonated for me!)
- I decided to go with these images because partially, I find them so unusual for an international ad campaign. The idea that dissimilar understandings are 'okay' and should be valued is not exactly a cornerstone of the 'same-think' marketing industry nor of our globalizing, westernizing world.
- I also find the lightness and the touch of humor appealing as having different perspectives and understandings is often a difficult issue to broach in our own and many other societies.
- The ads caught my attention because I have been searching for ways to explore *diversity and different perspectives* in our early childhood discipline that would generate enjoyment and exploration.
- Here are a couple of other HSBC slides that seemed 'to work' for me.

(Two other HSBC slides: Perfect/Imperfect/ Pisa/David and Scary/Reassuring/ mask/toy slides)

- This second set of culture and context gets close to some of the issues I'd like to explore with you.
- This ad series is selling the idea that *individual perspective* and *context matter* and that the HSBC bank doesn't expect that all of its customers are the same.
- The message that *I* am trying to 'sell' is that *'context matters'* for early childhood care and development *as well* and that not all children, parents and programs are – or should be – the same.
- Different groups and individuals see and understand things differently. It's not that one is right and the others are wrong, but that there are *different* 'right ways'.

- One theory, one program, one instrument, *one size*—does *not* fit all!
- This view, however, is not universally accepted. I remember a piece that Dr. Joseph Tobin at Arizona State University wrote a few years ago describing his experiences trying to publish an article about ECE in Japan.
- Some of you will know Joseph's work. Joseph Tobin, David Wu and Dana Davidson produced a book and a video in the late 1980s that were both called *Preschools in three cultures* (1989).
- The video is fascinating. The methodology was to film the 'everyday' life of early childhood programs in Japan, the U.S. and in China. The video tapes were then played to staff and parents in their 'own culture' and then to staff and parents in the two other cultures and see what the viewers had to say.
- Uniformly, the parents and staff from the *same*-culture reacted positively to their *own* culture's program. Equally uniformly, they were also *critical* of what they saw in the two other cultures' programs.
- If I could play the Japanese tape for you here now, I think most of you would be concerned about two things: a high staff-child ratio (approximately 1 staff to 15+ three-year-olds) and the behavior of one little boy in particular who is making trouble with other children throughout the centre. Most of us would be *very* concerned that the 'teacher' does not intervene with this child. Playing this tape, however, to the Japanese parents and staff, the lack of intervention by the teacher is seen as being *appropriate* because '*how will the child learn to not bother other children if the teacher continually intervenes before the other children do?*'
- Along a related theme, when you play the U.S. program tape to Japanese parents, they complain that the U.S. teachers are *always* interfering in the activities of the children and never giving the children a chance to take the lead, to resolve conflict, nor to learn from *each other*.
- At a somewhat later point in time Joseph attempted to publish an article based on the Japanese program approach as it clearly violated NAEYC group size and staff ratio guidelines. *Nevertheless*, Japanese parents and staff felt they had an *excellent* program and their children were growing up to be capable, healthy citizens. There was a clear dislocate between the *U.S.* approach and regulations and the Japanese approach. The publication, however, refused to publish the article unless it was re-cast as a presentation of what '*not to do'.*
- From that publisher's perspective, the HSBC ad regarding Joseph's work might look something like this:

(HSBC-type slide with "Good Care" and "Poor Care" signs.)

- In the eyes of the publisher, these labels were *not* inter-changeable.
- I won't go into detail now but it is this sort of dualistic, right/wrong thinking that I believe poses a problem for our field. We see it in our research, our policies and our practice.

- We often hear the term 'Best Practice'. The presumption is that there is a *best* way of doing things that overrides context and if we could just get these children, parents, policies and programs to do it this *'best in the world way'*, then everything would be fine.
- I'm sorry but I don't think so. I believe we have ample evidence from the history of humankind that efforts to get us all to see and understand in *one best way*—whether identified by *Rectors or Researchers*—has *not* led to a better world, but too often to strife and conflict, as there are very different understandings of <u>best</u>.
- I prefer Arab philosopher Kahlil Gibran's perspective that: "God created *Truth* with many doors—to welcome all who come there."

 (Slide: "God created Truth with many doors—to welcome all who come there.")

- Tobin's *Preschool in three cultures* (1989) came out at the same time that I was beginning to work with First Nations communities in northern Saskatchewan.
- I was invited there because the Tribal Council decided there was a problem with the forms of tertiary education that had been delivered in their communities.
- The problem was that there was nothing of *them* in the courses their people were taking. Now this may be okay for a computer technology course, but they wanted to introduce an early childhood training program in the Tribal Council's area and they were very aware that culture—*their* culture—*mattered* for the rearing of *their* children, yet there was nothing of their own Cree and Dene cultures reflected in the educational programs that they were considering.
- I worked with the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and subsequently many other Tribal Groups throughout the 1990s to evolve an approach to tertiary education we named the 'Generative Curriculum Approach'.
- That approach used an 'open architecture' in the training process ensuring that students were engaged with *diverse knowledges*—knowledge from Euro-western sources, knowledge from various Aboriginal sources and knowledge *from knowledge-holders in their own communities* identified by community leaders. Students' learning was 'generated' out of this diversity in interaction with their *own* knowledge and experience.
- On the books of the University these courses looked the same as any other course, covering topics regarding development, programming, communications and so on. But in the classroom in the communities, in addition to the instructor employed by the university, you would also have Elders sharing their knowledge. In addition, assignments asked students to seek out local knowledge and perspectives on classroom topics and asked them to consider how those ideas might have a place in the programs they wished to create.
- At the outset of the First Nations Partnerships program we didn't know how the Generative Curriculum approach would work. However, we were very clear that the established ways of doing things were *not* effective since Statistics Canada (at

that time) indicated that *less than 40%* of Aboriginal students who entered one- or two-year post-secondary education programs completed the programs. (Such percentages should negate the idea that all educational experiences contribute to capacity building. Indeed, if less than half are successfully completing, it is more likely that capacity is being undermined, depleted, rather than built).

- When the Meadow Lake program ended in 1993, we had a completion rate of approximately double that percentage and it stayed in the 80% range throughout nine subsequent deliveries of the Generative Curriculum in various parts of western Canada between 1993 and 2006.

- Jessica Ball joined me in that work in the mid-90s. She and I, with support from the various tribal councils and groups with whom we have worked, recently published a book describing the 17 year history of the First Nations Partnerships Program that used the Generative Curriculum Approach.

(Slide: of First Nations Book –with 'What of us is in here?' quote)

- At the end of the Meadow Lake program in 1993, the Tribal Council hired a respected and influential Elder to evaluate the program. Her name was Debbie Jette and what she described in her evaluation transformed my own sense of what such an approach could accomplish.

- Debbie noted the high completion rate of the students, but what also caught her eye was an unintended outcome but one which she felt was *probably even more important.* She noted how the role of the *Elders* in the communities had changed as a result of the program. The Elders started being recognized as 'professors' in the program and as people who had something to contribute to learning. They began to move into key advisory and consultation roles throughout the communities and the tribal structure. *Virtually every* key committee now had Elders on it and Elders were being seen as useful resources to the communities, which had not been the case before the early childhood program began.

- Greater Elder involvement was associated with other positive changes in the community, as these words of a Meadow Lake administrator indicate:

(Slide-read): *"Because the community was invited into the classroom and the students' learning extended into the community, the impacts of the training were not limited to the student cohort. There was a ripple effect that reached out to all aspects of the way we as a community think and act with respect to young children and families. Everyone was transformed."*

- It was during this same period of the early 1990s that Peter Moss and I first met and discovered that we were both in a place of questioning the basic tenets of the field we had each worked in since the early 1970s. We began to explore our shared concerns and reached out to others we felt were in a similar place, which led to our collaboration in producing a volume in 1994 entitled: *Valuing Quality.* That volume

explored the diverse ways one can understand quality and how quality, at the end of the day is: *"…a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interest, rather than on an objective and universal reality."*

- *Valuing Quality* was followed in 1999 with a book we wrote with Gunilla Dahlberg entitled *'Beyond Quality'*, which has just come out in its 2nd edition.

- So what we had by the early 1990s in the field of early childhood care, education and development were two quite different understandings of 'Quality Care'. One perspective saw it as being something 'out there', external and objective, discoverable and definable.

- The other understood it as constructed and subjective, open to variability and to being defined in diverse ways.

- The first understanding leads to standardization and uniformity—a normative template.

- The second approach opens up to *diversity.* It presses early childhood educators to engage with and learn from the inherent diversity of the children and the setting.

- The first is externally prescribed and then applied in pre-determined ways.

- The second emerges or is *generated* out of a unique and particular context formed by children, staff, parents and program at a particular time and place. With such an approach, no two programs would necessarily look, sound or feel the same.

- Reggio Emilia, and other programs of acknowledged 'quality' are of this second type. They embody Lorus Malaguzzi's quest to preserve the hundred, hundred, hundred 'languages' of children and all the joy, surprise and energy they hold.

- We are wrestling at this point in the field regarding what is 'universal' and what is 'contextual'. I don't think this is an 'either/or' situation. We need to open up to 'both/and' ways of understanding.

 (HSBC-type slide)

- At the time we had begun to write *Beyond quality* (1999), I was invited by UNICEF to work with them on addressing the need to promote leadership and build capacity for ECD as a key part of international development in the Majority World.

- I continue to be deeply involved in that work, primarily in Africa but also in the Middle East.

- I have carried our learning from work with Aboriginal communities and the Generative Approach into this work in the Majority World. Students, nominated by committees in their own countries, work with each other and with online instructors to advance the goals and objectives of their countries and their employers.

- Such work is never the same in any two countries; it is heavily *contextual* and pulls on identified country-level priorities, each student's skills, abilities and understandings, and the learning they take away from the ECDVU program and from their colleagues in the program.

- The dynamics that I described earlier— the tensions between those who believe there is an objective reality 'out there' regarding who children are or who they should be and those who believe that childhood is a social construction, that diversity should be valued, and that context matters is a very significant feature in *international ECD* discussions today.
- It emerges in an interesting and challenging way. Those of us who are advocates for children and their well-being, working internationally and nationally, are always trying to find an issue or a focus that will help us move the child agenda forward.
- Early years' brain development research has been one such 'hook' in Canada and in other parts of the world in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Brain development work appeals to the broader society, including business leaders.
- The *downside* of this 'hook' has been that some people focused on cognitive development *exclusively*, as if it were the *only* thing that really matters. It leads to the mistaken conclusion that earlier and earlier instructional education is a reasonable response to the findings of the brain researchers.
- Those of us in the early years field get nervous about such narrow focusing that does not take into account the 'whole child', the many ways to learn, or the diversity of children's environments.
- In the Majority World ECD there have been several 'big hooks' over the past decade and a half that have helped bring children onto the international development agenda.

(Slide: Each one of the following 3 points comes on the screen as addressed/clicked: Children's Rights (CRC); Education for All (EFA); Brain and Socio-economic Development).

- One facilitative 'hook' was the idea of children's rights**.** That idea had been put forward decades earlier, but in 1989/90 the idea really took hold and the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN General Assembly, and quickly followed by ratification in 20 countries. The Convention became international law in September 1990. UNICEF later noted that it had been "ratified more quickly and by more countries than any previous human rights instrument." *(We the children*, 2001, p. 1).
- A second 'hook' was the Education for All (EFA) initiative. In March 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand the World Conference on Education for All approved Article 5 that began with the words: "Learning begins at birth". This opened the door for ECCD to come into the world of education and international development.
- A third important 'hook' has been brain development research, which had also been around for some time. When that research became linked with *socio-economic development*, a third powerful hook had been forged.

- The three together have opened the door for discussions regarding the importance of the early years to take place at the highest levels of government in numerous countries and in international forums as well.
- These doors being opened represent the '*it's the best of times*' side of this Janus, two-faced figure.
- The troubling '*other-side*' is that the *image* of the *child* that is the basis for these movements is *very Euro-western* in origin and that image has had a difficult time opening up to the diversity of childhoods that exist around the world. The child development research and writing that both led to and leads from these Conventions or Initiatives is over 90% Western in origin. Within that very large figure, the majority is based on data and information from the United States.
- A dilemma we face is that over 90% of our information regarding children's care and development is based on the lives and experiences of less than 5% of the world's children and that 5% lead lives that are very different than the other 95%.

- When one pushes forward with this rather 'singular' image of the child as 'an individualized child, with individualized rights, whose most important role in life is to become an effective economic producer and consumer in a neo-liberal capitalist society'—then one is *pushing aside* many other images of, understandings of, and hopes for children that exist around the world.
- We don't hear a lot about these other perspectives. Like Joseph Tobin's experience with the U.S. journal, the early childhood powers that be are *not* very interested in '*other* perspectives' and particularly not those that challenge their positions.

- I've been working with Dr. Bame Nsamenang, who is a friend and colleague from Cameroon, to have these 'other perspectives' heard. Here are a couple of statements that Bame has been able to get published over the past several years and, as you've heard from Joseph Tobin, that's not always an easy task.

(Slide for the following from Nsamenang:).

   o "Whenever Euro-American ECD programs are applied as the gold standards by which to measure forms of Africa's ECD, they forcibly deny equity to and recognition of Africa's ways of provisioning for its young, thereby depriving the continent a niche in global ECD knowledge…" (Nsamenang, 2007, p. 196).

   o "The dominant ECD narrative assumes that children can learn a universal culture and has introduced an insidiously destructive force in the field –

acquiescence to the institutionalization of ECD…" (Nsamenang, 2007, p. 196).

- Bame's concerns are not that different from what I heard from the Meadow Lake Tribal Council over 18 years ago: *"What of us is in here?"*

(Slide: "What of us is in here?" & "Whose voices are heard?")

- That question, *"What of us is in here?"* and the related question *"Whose voices are heard?"* are *absolutely central* to ensuring that early childhood care and development does not become a monolithic template—a cookie cutter that imprints only one kind of child, through one kind of program, identified by one kind of assessment, and one kind of research, led by one kind of expert.
- There is something each and every one of us can do to help avoid this nightmare of uniformity. And that is to think carefully about the place *you* work in the world of ECE: *your* child care program, *your* agency, *your* government department, *your* training institution, wherever *you* work to support children and families and ask:
  - Whose voices are heard here?
  - Are they heard as responses, or do they initiate their own agendas?
  - Whose voices are not heard?
  - What might those other voices say if they were allowed?
  - How might you create a space where other voices can come and be heard in the work you do?
- And, in closing, as you attend sessions over the next two days, and as you listen to different speakers here at the conference, ask yourself a similar set of questions:
  - Whose voices informed their presentations?
  - Were they heard as initiators or as respondents?
  - Whose voices were not heard?
  - Whose ideas were not considered?
  - How might the work described have created space to hear other voices and to consider other perspectives?