

HERMENEUTICS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:  
BROADENING INTERPRETATIONS OF CHILDREN’S IDEAS AND ACTIONS, AND  
LEARNING IN THE PROCESS ABOUT OUR CONCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN, OUR  
EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES, AND OURSELVES

by

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PRACTICES, AND OURSELVES

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

Students, teachers, and instructors in early childhood education (ECE) in British Columbia (BC) have dedicated time and effort to understand and interpret children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices. Despite our willingness to perform as well-prepared professionals, we have not agreed sufficiently about *common* and *extended* uses of philosophies and strategies that might broaden our perspectives. While we have strived to prepare ourselves for interacting and fostering relationships with children, their families, and other educators, it is not uncommon that educators interpret children's ideas and actions according to dominant discourses of how children should develop.

Much scholarly attention has been given to pedagogical documentation in BC and other contexts. However, dialogue and mutual understanding of the possibilities for documenting children and teachers' pedagogy have not happened sufficiently within and across the institutions whose mandate is to provide an early years education that does not normalize children's initiatives and needs but rather fosters children's competence and interdependency with others and the world.

This study proposes hermeneutics, or the art of interpreting, as a valuable philosophical and educational approach in ECE for understanding and interpreting children and pedagogies. By assuming a hermeneutical attitude, educators become part of a promising, ongoing dialogue with ourselves and others that gives value to our existence in the world and influences children's experiences.

The study illustrates that the systematic use of circles of understanding in the practice of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation helped early childhood (EC) students to broaden their conceptualizations of the child, pedagogy, and themselves. It

addresses the participating EC students' capability to deal with resistance and frustration and to remain in hermeneutic dialogue while they studied scholarly literature and collaboratively interpreted a text or object of study. It also examines difficulties and challenges they encountered.

The study proposes that being and acting hermeneutically in ECE might provide a plurality of perspectives to engage in ongoing repeated circles of interpretation among educators that enrich our mutual understanding and encourage us to embrace differences thoroughly and respectfully.



## **LAY SUMMARY**

This study proposes hermeneutics, or the art of interpreting, in early childhood education as a valuable philosophical and educational approach for understanding and interpreting children and pedagogies. Particularly, it illustrates that the systematic use of circles of understanding in the practice of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation helped early childhood students to broaden their conceptualizations of the child, pedagogy, and themselves. The study addresses the students' capability to deal with resistance and frustration and to remain in hermeneutic dialogue while they studied scholarly literature and collaboratively interpreted a text or object of study, and it examines difficulties and challenges they encountered. Being and acting hermeneutically in early childhood education might provide a plurality of perspectives to engage in ongoing repeated circles of interpretation among educators that enrich their mutual understanding and encourage them to embrace differences thoroughly and respectfully.

## **PREFACE**

This dissertation is an original creation of the author, Alejandra Sánchez Alvarez. Ethics approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The certificate number of the ethics certificate is H17-02685.

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## **DEDICATION**

*To all educators and children who engage in listening, inquiring, and dialoguing to strive for understanding of themselves and others. They know to whom I refer. With profound love and gratitude.*

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Si yo creo que sí, que el mundo debe estar hecho de historias . . . . Son las historias las que permiten convertir el pasado en presente, y las que también permiten convertir lo distante en cercano, lo que está lejano en algo que es próximo y posible. . . . (Yes I believe in that, the world must be made of stories . . . . These are stories that allow us to transform the past into present, and that also allow to transform the distant to the nearest; what is far away to something close, possible, and visible) ~ Eduardo Galeano, 2012*

One day in a school in Monterrey, Mexico, a preschool teacher, “Liz,” found one of the four-year-old children, “Mauri,” hanging by his hands from a railing on the outside of a ramp five metres above the ground.<sup>1</sup> Liz was alarmed to see Mauri in such a dangerous situation. She helped him to safety, felt profoundly grateful that he had not fallen down, and asked him to come with her to meet with me, the academic principal. Liz seemed fearful and worried when she and Mauri approached me, and she asked me if the three of us could talk right away. Calmly, Liz asked Mauri to tell us *how* he had just climbed up the ramp. As I listened to Mauri’s narration, I also felt fearful and worried, and I shared Liz’s concern that we were the adults responsible for Mauri’s safety at school. As part of our chat, I nervously asked Mauri if he knew what would have happened if he had fallen down to the ground from the highest part of the railing. He quickly responded: “I would have become a mummy, wouldn’t I?” His response was unexpected and surprised his teacher and me. It made me think that he was aware of the possible

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<sup>1</sup> Liz and Mauri are pseudonyms.

consequences of his action, which could have been dramatic. Since 2000 when this incident happened, I have been curious about how Mauri understood this “adventure” and his explanation of the possibility of becoming a mummy. Was he actually aware of the dramatic result of being a mummy or a different being? Did he understand about living or dying as a consequence of his action? As the adults responsible for the safety of children at school, what would be right and truthful to do about Mauri’s action and his response to our questions?

This dissertation is a philosophical and educational study about what *hermeneutics* or the *art of interpretation* means and how it could be helpful in early childhood education (ECE). In particular, I claim that the *systematic* use of hermeneutic enquiry might help students and teachers in ECE, to whom I also refer as educators, to interpret children’s ideas and actions and to examine and problematize their theory and practice of teaching, or their pedagogy. I also address what the educators’ interpretive intents might teach them about themselves.

This is not an empirical study in which I gathered data to draw conclusions to generalize or propose universal solutions in early childhood studies. Rather, I am presenting philosophical and educational claims and inquiries sustained by arguments and illustrative examples that are narrated in stories. Andrew Davis (2010) explains: “Wittgenstein urges philosophers to scrutinize examples” because they help us to “embrace the fine grain of events and processes rather than forcing phenomena to fit preconceived theories” (p. 54). The study of examples—in the case of this dissertation, stories of interactions in early childhood communities—allows for attention to the specific contexts in which educational, political, social, cultural, and ethical issues are implicated. I agree with Davis that examples can help researchers to examine a “wide range of

situations” (p. 55) and will make evident “tensions and even contradictions” (p. 56) about the ideas that inform their pedagogy. In my research, examples illustrate how educators see children and other early childhood (EC) students and teachers, and how they examine their educational practices to revise and implement them.

### **The Meanings of Story**

In this study, the term *story* has two meanings: (1) a discursive framework to understand and practice education with young children; (2) a strategy to explain and illustrate the use of hermeneutic enquiry when educators examine documentation of children.

#### **Story as a Discursive Framework**

Peter Moss’s (2014) argument inspired me to understand story as a discursive approach or framework. Moss explains that in ECE, we construct the stories we would like to believe in and we choose the ones that help us to make educational decisions and lead our pedagogy. Reading Moss’s book, I became inspired to use interpretation and, specifically, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1975/2013b) hermeneutic enquiry and circles of understanding as *an* (not *the*) alternative or new story of ECE in contrast to the dominant discourse.

The stories that have imposed a dominant and restrictive view have been the story of quality and high returns and the story of markets, also referred to as the stories of DONA—a “dictatorship of no alternatives” (Unger, 2005a, as cited in Moss, 2014, p. 1) and TINA—“there is no alternative” (Moss, 2014, p. 4). Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010a) explains the trend of these stories as “a one-dimensional linear reductive thinking that *excludes and closes off* all other ways of thinking and doing” (p. 17, as cited in Moss, 2014, p. 5, emphasis in original). Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010c) explains the trend of these stories as “a one-dimensional linear reductive

thinking that *excludes and closes off* all other ways of thinking and doing” (p. 17, emphasis in original). Moss (2014) refers to the story of quality and high returns as “a story of control and calculations, technology and measurement” (p. 3), by which he means:

Find, invest in and apply the correct human technologies—aka “quality”—during early childhood and you will get high returns on investment including improved education, employment and earnings and reduced social problems. A simple equation . . . “early intervention” + “quality” = increased “human capital” + national success (or at least survival) in a cut-throat global economy. (p. 3)

I agree with Moss that this story is troubling and dissatisfying because it restricts the possibilities of viewing and understanding ECE and the implications of what it might be possible to think and do. If we do not want to perpetuate these dominant stories, ECE scholars and educators are obligated, ethically and politically, to propose and implement alternative stories that might help us to think in diverse ways about childhood and the images of children, about pedagogy, and about ourselves as professionals in the field. Moss (2014) emphasizes that “we need . . . to tell and hear more stories, old and new” (p. 75). He affirms that there are actually many more stories that could explain ECE which do not claim “a monopoly of the truth” (p. 75). In order that alternative stories not be marginalized or silenced, Moss (2014) encourages educators to embrace and deal with conflict as part of dialogue, as Rinaldi (2006, p. 156) suggests. (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 156) as cited in Moss, 2014)I agree, and I would add, with resistance and frustration (Biesta, 2012b). Conflict, resistance, and frustration can be complicated experiences that may manifest themselves as soon as educators problematize the dominant stories that, for the most part, have been overconfident in their claims of how children and education must develop (Moss, 2014).

Particularly, Moss (2014) has proposed a story of democracy, experimentation, and potentiality. In the same line of thought, the Comune di Reggio Emilia (2009) has explained a story in which “education lives by listening, dialogue, and participation; it is based on mutual respect, valuing the diversity of identities, competencies, and knowledge held by each individual” (as cited in Moss, 2014, p. 80). In this study, I propose a story of being and acting hermeneutically to perform as beings-in-question who also put-others-into-question (Vintimilla, 2016) in the process of becoming conscious of our prejudices or preconceptions, which helps us to enhance and refine our understandings of our own and others’ expressions and actions. In other words, I am proposing that the use of circles of understanding in the interpretation of documentation of children might become *a* (not *the*) story that might contribute, among other alternatives, to a philosophical framework and procedure that help educators to listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation about children’s ideas and actions and educators’ pedagogy.

### **Story as a Strategy to Explain and Illustrate Ideas and Practices**

When story refers to an example to help us to think critically and make truthful educational decisions, I refer to Iris Berger’s work. Berger (2013) explains storytelling as thinking, critical understanding, and reflective judgment, based on Hannah Arendt’s work. According to Arendt’s view, storytelling does not refer to a narrative that defines meaning, describes, or explains an event; rather, storytelling is a narrative methodology that implies “critical faculties” of the audience [educators], who think not about an objective and absolute truth, but about what the participants in the story are actually doing (Berger, 2013, p. 71). Moreover, Berger explains that “stories highlight the particulars of human experiences [that will trouble] pre-existing generalized categories of interpretation and preconceived theories” (p. 74). This view of a story

might allow educational situations to be understood as “contingent, emergent, temporal and unpredicted” (p. 74). Thus, by referring to Hammer et al. (1999), Berger (2013) notes, stories “open up the possibility to (re)think and learn something new from the sheer diversity and complexity of human experience” (p. 74). Berger emphasizes that learning and engaging with “multiple, new and surprising stories (about actions)” (p. 74) will interrupt educators’ practice, and that they will therefore keep thinking about and judging experiences that influence their educational beliefs and practices. For Arendt (1958/1998), all people in the world exist as part of a “web of human relationships” (p. 184). She adds that everyone emerges as a unique life story that affects, with or without intention, the life stories of others with whom the individual interacts. Arendt explains that stories “are not products [but] the result of action and speech” (p. 184) that reveal an individual. Therefore, Berger (2010) claims, the meaning of stories can be opened to public dialogue and contestation of discourses, particularly among the community of educators who collect and interpret them. Berger (2013) argues that the understanding of stories makes interpreters’ views visible and brings to the public sphere unlimited questioning about the narrated experience. Berger’s (2010, 2013) essential argument is that the use of stories, which she terms *pedagogical narrations*, might result in political action in ECE.

Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Fikile Nxumalo (2013) also explain the importance of stories when they introduce the notions of regenerating “change” and “relationality” within early years practices and, particularly, in the story of educators’ professional development. They write that educators do not refer to stories as if they were a linear trajectory, that is, a step-by-step procedure or recipe to attain specific results; rather, they refer to stories that speak about encounters that *trouble* the educators’ beliefs and practices. Moreover, stories that take place in relational spaces also disclose power relations in which conflict and tension are commonly



present. Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo emphasize that stories help us to remember what we think we know and to acquire new knowledge, which educators learn by exercising *collective thinking* that provokes movement and transformation.

### **The Value of Stories in My Educational Experience**

During my undergraduate studies in education at the University of Monterrey, Mexico, and throughout my professional career of almost 30 years, I have encountered (and eagerly gathered) stories that have surprised me and helped me to broaden my understanding of early childhood studies and practices, particularly when I have interpreted them repeatedly. I describe several different kinds of these stories below.

#### **Stories to Question and Think Differently About Education**

There are stories that have challenged my understanding and “forced” me to think differently about children, educators, and pedagogy. These situations that I still remember as valuable examples years later, have continuously made me think about my teaching of educators in Mexico, Canada, and Sweden. The stories that I narrate in this introduction and elsewhere in the dissertation have made me pause and think about what education is for. What does teaching mean and imply? What strategies and practices might help us (educators and EC instructors) understand and support children’s ideas and actions? Does thinking thoroughly and systematically about ideas and actions of children, and our interactions with them, tell us something about ourselves, as educators or EC instructors, and as human beings in interdependency with the world?

From Cristina Vintimilla’s (2016) perspective, it is fundamental to be-in-question and to put-others-into-question as part of an intersubjective space in which educators and children

engage in dialogue about the complexities, tensions, and frustrations of interacting with one another and the material world. Vintimilla states that “the double movement of being-in-question and putting-into-question” (p. 3) might be understood and used as a strategy to problematize educators’ assumptions and naturalized ways of thinking in order to help EC students, teachers, and instructors to “create a history bigger than oneself that whispers constantly of the impossibilities, inconsistencies and multiplicities of meaning within which education may, and must, continue to be reinvented” (p. 10).

### **Stories to Learn About Unexpected Ideas and Actions**

Many times, children’s initiatives have shown me unexpected and unfamiliar ways in which they were making meaning of the world. Their ideas and actions have made me think about alternative ways to engage if I aim to promote an ongoing dialogue among educators and children, and among educators and college instructor(s), which might support our interests and the involvement in our experiences. The story with which I opened this chapter is one example. The unexpected, worrisome, but also quite interesting answer “I would have become a mummy, wouldn’t I?” made me pause and think about the boy’s understanding of his action, the possible dramatic consequences, and his previous knowledge of a similar situation that he might have heard about or experienced.

A second example involves my then six-year-old son, Edi, whose school assignment was to write a story (in Spanish) that would be shared with the class. Edi chose to write down a story of an already published picturebook by Juan Gedovius titled *Trucas*. When I wondered about his decision, he explained that the author of *Trucas* had done the illustrations for the picturebook, but had forgotten to write down the words; therefore, he decided to help the author *fix* his omission.

Edi wrote a story to go with the illustrations on each page. Below, I include Edi's original text as he wrote it on each page of the storybook. Just beside Edi's original text, I include the same text as it would appear if it had been written grammatically correctly in Spanish. Below each sentence, I translate Edi's original text into English.

*EsTba mui susio TRUCAS* / Estaba muy sucio Trucas  
Trucas was very dirty

*digo, Ai Ai, NO-mEcE ro dAÑAr* / Dijo, ¡ai ai,! no me quiero bañar  
He says, ai! ai! I do not want to take a bath

*MiREN como Quedé* / Miren como quedé  
Look how I ended up

*SOi – grUÑÓN* / Soy gruñón  
I am a grumpy guy

*¡¡QUe, Ai-Ai* / ¿Qué hay ahí?  
What is it right there?

*UNA COLa* / Una cola  
A tail

*Que SesO* / ¿Qué es eso?  
What is it?

*UN DRAGoN* / Un dragón  
A dragon

*AAAA QUeSe SO coReLe* / AAAA ¿Qué es eso? córrele  
AAAA What is it? Run away

*MAS RARido* / Más rápido  
Faster

*¿AAMecede ceMAdO* / ¡Ah Ah! Me quedé quemado  
AA! I burnt out

*Que e SeSo / ¿Qué es eso?*  
What is it?

*MiReN MiO bRA de ARTe / Miren mi obra de arte*  
Look at my art work

*FiN / Fin*  
The end

Initially, I assumed that Edi had a novel and creative idea, unexpected by me and possibly his teacher. I also wondered how the teacher had responded to Edi's story-to-go-with-a-picturebook, as this type of story was probably different from what the teacher had in mind and from what most other children had written. Furthermore, this story challenged me to examine Edi's narration or text (i.e., its grammar and semiotics) as an opportunity to learn with the children, but also with educators, about the use of language and to apply any learning drawn from this interpretation into further educational situations. Finally, I noticed Edi's competence to interpret the storybook's pictures and translate them into words as he deliberately sought to fix the author's omission of any text. In relation to the purpose of this study, the systematic and repeated interpretation of this example might have helped educators and EC instructors to learn about Edi's knowledge and understanding in more depth, and might have also enhanced their teaching.

### **Stories to Enquire About Educational Assumptions**

To illustrate these stories, I quote and explain the reflection of an EC student named Margaret in which she made visible that the course literature she read, as well as the in-class dialogue, had helped her to become conscious of new ideas about ECE and about herself in the practice of examining and questioning her educational assumptions. On this occasion, I asked a group of EC students to read and reflect about an article by Lenz Taguchi (2007) in which she emphasizes the

importance of engaging in self-reflection and collective thinking to *deconstruct* practices in ECE.

Lenz Taguchi explains that deconstructing pedagogical practice implies the disruption, destabilization, and challenging of taken-for-granted ideas, values, and actions in education.

Margaret wrote, in part:

I found this to be reassuring because I realized that I was feeling uncomfortable because I was beginning the process of deconstruction. Instead of building on previously attained knowledge, I was being forced to take apart that old knowledge and I am assuming that I will re-formulate it in a different way. I could identify that I was engaging in the process of “resistance, affirmation and becoming” [as referred to in Lenz Taguchi 2007, p. 285]. . . . During my previous class, I had felt so intimidated by the unfamiliar concepts and my understanding that I had seriously considered withdrawing, now I feel open to the process of learning and I am anticipating the journey.

I interpreted Margaret’s response as discussing how the theoretical ideas explained by Lenz Taguchi helped her to become aware of herself as an educator. I assumed that Margaret had been profoundly influenced to embrace the challenge of studying the unfamiliar and “sophisticated” literature that was part of the course and that initially frustrated her. However, the article’s content and the course expectations (i.e., written self-reflection and class discussion) might have helped her to persevere and to remain open to the transformation of her perspective about education and herself. Students’ responses like this one have led me to wonder if certain educational strategies practiced both individually and collectively in the ECE classroom teach students insights about their conceptions of children, their pedagogy, and themselves. Later in this study, I refer to Margaret’s response, and a few others, to illustrate the importance of a

systematic and continuous enquiry that educators might engage in as part of their professional education to teach young children.

### **Stories to Practice Hermeneutic Enquiry**

Completing my PhD has been a long endeavour that has caused me resistance and frustration, but it has also been an opportunity to put into words experiences relevant to my education. These experiences have taught me about myself as an individual who aims for ethical and political decisions and actions, both when educators teach children and when they interact with other educators (i.e., students, teachers, managers, instructors, and parents). In the process of completing my dissertation, I gained mastery of theoretical ideas and examined and interpreted examples gathered in early years communities, with my own four children, and with many more children and educators. Also, I understood that my intent of being and acting as a *hermeneutical* individual, and my interest in promoting the use of hermeneutics among educators to interpret children's and educators' ideas and actions, imply a practice that, while certainly difficult and complex, might help educators to contribute with a new and innovative approach. Furthermore, I learned about the benefits of being exposed to multiple readings and re-readings that transform the interpreter's understanding, in contrast to engaging in familiar and repetitive interpretations of children's ideas and actions and of educators' pedagogy. This systematic intent of engaging in readings that transform the interpreter's understanding aims to create a new or alternative story (Moss, 2014) that leads us to interact with children and educators in more meaningful and truthful ways, both in ECE and in our existence in the world.

## Documentation of Children and Pedagogical Documentation

The use of hermeneutics in ECE focuses on interpreting children's ideas and actions as gathered by educators in visual and audio media in their ongoing interactions with children. *Ideas and actions* refer to the children's ways of expressing and making visible knowledge that they have acquired or imagined about the world in which they are living. With *ideas*, I refer to children's concrete productions (e.g., drawings or other objects) or verbal expressions of thought that inform others about their knowledge and imagination. With *actions*, I refer to children's initiatives to act upon and establish interdependency with objects, materials, animals, spaces, and other children/individuals with whom they interact or relate within a context.

This collection of children's ideas and actions is known as documentation of children, to which I have referred in this introduction as examples that turn into narrations of situations or experiences. Documentation of children has functioned as a predominant tool or strategy to gain in-depth understanding of young children in a majority of ECE programs in BC, as well as in other ECE programs in Canada and other countries in the world.

In BC, the familiar term within the ECE community to speak about pedagogical documentation is *pedagogical narration*. Pedagogical narration was introduced as a theoretical concept in 2008, when the BC Ministry of Education, in partnership with the Ministries of Health and of Children and Families funded the development and publication of the BC Early Learning Framework (ELF), an educational project led by the University of Victoria. In my dissertation, I have opted to refer to *pedagogical documentation*, a term used primarily and more widely in early childhood research.

Throughout my dissertation I use the terms *documentation of children* and *pedagogical documentation*. Inspired mainly by the Reggio Emilia and Swedish ECE philosophies and

pedagogies, I refer to documentation of children as textual, visual, and audio recordings that capture children's interactions with other children, adults, animals, and materials as they unfold in particular contexts. In other words, these stories are not objects of study or examination in isolation. Specifically, this documentation of children is collected in photos, videos, written stories, transcripts of dialogues, and children's productions that speak about spaces, times, and materials. This textual, visual, and audio material, within its contexts, evolves into pedagogical documentation when educators individually and collectively *revisit* and *interpret* the example or story. Educators who revisit and repeatedly interpret the example may or may not have been part of the interaction that is being examined. The revisiting and interpretation of the object of study might take a variety of forms in which it might be read to make meaning and to be used for further educational decisions. In other words, the story might be interpreted in reference to educational purposes (e.g., assessment intentions). Later, when I illustrate circles of understanding in ECE, I refer to an example in which a teacher asked her preschool class to complete an activity in which the children had to demonstrate their knowledge about animals and their habitats. I propose circular interpretations to show how this practice might help educators to enhance both their conceptualizations of children and their pedagogy, and also to demonstrate what educators might learn about themselves by systematically creating pedagogical documentation out of examples or stories.

### **Central Argument and Research Questions**

In this study, I argue that hermeneutic enquiry or circles of understanding, as explained by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, might help educators and EC instructors (including myself) to improve our ways of interpreting both children's ideas and actions and educators'



pedagogy. We can “read” and “reread” children’s and educators’ ideas and actions similar to how we read and reread texts. And, in the process of interpreting, we might learn about our conceptualizations of children, our educational practices, and ourselves. According to Gadamer (1975/2013b), circles of understanding are continuous and circular attempts to read and make meaning of a text or an object of study. In ECE, this text or object of study might refer to a story, situation, or experience that happens when children and educators interact within a context. In the activity of making meaning, the interpreter goes back and forth between the parts and the whole. These circular readings of the text or object of study start with the use of the interpreter’s *prejudices*—meant here not in the negative, everyday sense, but in the sense of the inevitable *preunderstandings* that we bring to the situation—that become conscious to her and other interpreters who practice these circles.

Moreover, these circular readings help the interpreter to modify her initial interpretations by forcing her to look at and make meaning of the same text or object of study from different angles, and by referring to specific (parts) and general (whole) characteristics that are part of the context in which this text or object belongs. In addition, the initial preunderstandings are modified when the interpreter refers to theoretical insights and practical experiences that become conscious in her effort to make multiple meanings of what she is interpreting.

I argue that becoming conscious of our assumptions (prejudices) when we interpret children’s ideas and actions and educators’ pedagogy opens possibilities for thinking or engaging in self-dialogue about the text or object of study, as well as for dialogue and exchange of perspectives with others. The continuous and circular revisions of our assumptions (prejudices) might lead us to change how we conceptualize children, our pedagogy, and what we gain personally and professionally by doing this type of work. If I refer to educational strategies with

which educators are familiar, I claim that the practice of hermeneutic enquiry into examples or stories encourages students, teachers, and instructors in ECE to *systematically* (1) *listen* to children, which implies thoughtful observation, (2) *think* for understanding, (3) *dialogue* about children's ideas, actions, and interactions, and (4) *create* an *interpretive* story, which in ECE is known as pedagogical documentation. In this study, I explain circles of understanding and the use of them in early years education in further detail. When these claims are framed as research questions to orient this study, they read as follows: How might hermeneutics be a valuable approach, or story (Moss, 2014), for early childhood educators? How might hermeneutic enquiry be practiced in ECE? And, what are educators' stories of being and acting hermeneutically that have broadened their understandings of children, their educational practices, and themselves?

### **Potential Contribution and Its Significance**

In my practice and in this dissertation, I work from the assumption that children, students, teachers, and instructors in ECE are intelligent and capable individuals. I argue that the use of Gadamerian circles of understanding may help educators and instructors to broaden their conceptions of children and their educational practices and lead them to propose curricular activities that formally consider and challenge children's interests and interactions within their contexts and circumstances. Moreover, circles of understanding might become the *space*, *time*, and *resource* to problematize pedagogy that limits children's real and potential capabilities in the ongoing interactions between children and educators. In other words, circles of understanding might become a pedagogical strategy for educators and instructors to systematically listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation about children and pedagogy in ECE contexts.

This pedagogical strategy might encourage educators to (1) choose activities that offer meaningful and visible children's engagement with the curriculum; and (2) practice a systematic way to revise the educators' and instructors' understandings and experiences in order to help them contest pedagogy that otherwise might diminish and restrict children's initiatives and capabilities. Without such a systematic practice, students, teachers, and instructors in ECE might either miss or take for granted children's ideas and actions. This systematic practice does not mean that listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation is a technique or recipe. *Systematic practice* refers to an orderly and structural way to examine and interpret documentation of children and educators' pedagogy; it does not dictate steps to be followed or results (i.e., fixed truths) to be obtained. Particularly, the use of circles of understanding does not imply a method for interpreting, but refers to a circular movement of understanding in which "insights are acquired and truths known" (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, p. xx). Gadamer (1975/2013b) resists "the universal claim of scientific method" (p. xx) and explains that the hermeneutical phenomenon seeks "the experience of truth" (p. xx) and "modes of experience" (p. xxi) that are part of the human sciences in which truths are found out and "cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science" (p. xxi). Gadamer encourages the search for approximations of truth while individuals engage in dialogue with the text or object of study. Gadamerian interpretation is also explained as a "theoretical *attitude* towards the practice of understanding" (Weber, 2011, p. 155, emphasis added) rather than a method to be applied to situations. Barbara Weber (2011) suggests that using a hermeneutical attitude might dig into and expand our views and experiences and help us to learn what understanding actually entails and requires.

In summary, by using circles of understanding, I am proposing a thorough, thoughtful, and complex process of understanding and interpreting that is neither linear, simple, or methodical.

### **Dissertation Overview**

In the next two chapters, I present the study's literature review. In Chapter 2 in particular, I explain perspectives of childhood and conceptualizations of the child in ECE by reviewing literature that provides a historical and contemporary background to understand and interpret children's ideas and actions and educators' pedagogy. In Chapter 3, I explain two pedagogical strategies that have been widely studied and discussed in early childhood studies: the pedagogy of listening, and the creation and use of pedagogical documentation. These strategies, when they are practiced regularly, inform the field about ways to understand and interpret children's and educators' capabilities and interactions. In my view, they are necessary activities in being and acting hermeneutically.

In Chapter 4, I explain and interpret Gadamerian hermeneutics and circles of understanding in relation to conceptions and practices in early childhood education. In Chapter 5, I expand on the study's framing of an enriched and capable child (Part One) that sustains the systematic practice of four pedagogical strategies (Part Two): listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation. Particularly, I explain thinking and dialoguing as the activities to be practiced along with listening and creating pedagogical documentation. I claim that the systematic use of these four strategies in ECE constitutes hermeneutic enquiry, or circles of understanding. Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate the use of hermeneutic enquiry, or circles of understanding, with detailed examples. Particularly in Chapter 6, I argue that using circles of

understanding to interpret stories collected in ECE contexts is valuable as a pedagogical approach in the education of EC students because it makes visible the students' preunderstandings or prejudices when they interpret children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices. Additionally, I show how the initial interpretations are continuously and circularly revised and enriched by interpreting literature and engaging in dialogue with oneself and others. In Chapter 7, I examine EC students' reflections by interpreting how the practice of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation, which I define as their intent to be and act hermeneutically, was demonstrated. The interpretation of EC students' reflections seeks to augment Gadamer's hermeneutics by referring to two practices: (1) studying and interpreting selected academic literature (i.e., philosophy of education and early childhood studies), and (2) engaging in dialogue with others. Lastly, in Chapter 8, I revisit the questions and central argument of this study and address the study's limitations and challenges, implications, and recommendations to expand on the understanding and uses of hermeneutics in early childhood studies.

## CHAPTER 2: PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDHOOD AND IMAGES OF THE CHILD

*Much of what is considered “scientific fact” in understanding childhood is in fact biased towards a particular societal view . . . . There are pervasive views about the ideal family, the ideal child and the ideal surroundings that imbue understandings of young children.*

*~ Helen Penn, 2005*

This chapter discusses perspectives on childhood and images of the child presented in the scholarly literature. The understanding of children that we have consciously or unconsciously constructed impacts and reveals what we value in our educational practice. Becoming conscious of how we understand childhood and the child will equip us to interpret and reinterpret children’s ideas and actions, as well as our pedagogies.

Perspectives of childhood and conceptualizations of the child have been widely discussed in the natural and social sciences, including ECE studies. Anthropology, biology, health, education, history, politics, economics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and theology have all examined childhood in specific times and places. Perspectives of childhood have not followed a linear and uncomplicated trajectory; rather, documentation and testimonies from the past and the present show drastic differences, contrasting positions, and progressions and regressions in the early childhood field regarding who has been considered a child during different epochs. As Gaile Cannella (1997) points out, “a ‘child’ in one context is not necessarily a ‘child’ in another” (p. 42).

Dictionaries define childhood as the “period of life from birth to puberty” (Douglas Harper, 2018) or “the state or period of being a child” (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Childhood has been considered as both a universal biological stage determined by nature and as a social

construction (Ariès, 1962; Burman, 2008; Cannella, 1997; Corbett, 1985; Kincheloe, 2002; Prout, 2005; Prout & James, 1997) that offers multiple (sometimes contradictory) meanings, complexities, and challenges. Childhood is variously constructed as a *choice* of making young people into children based on their given nature (Corbett, 1985), an *invention* that is always unfolding despite pauses and difficulties in its trajectory (Postman, 1982), a *political project* sustained by the activities of the state and civil society (Prout, 2003), a *cultural project* of the modern and postmodern subject (Burman, 2008; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Penn, 2005; Viruru & Cannella, 2001; Zhao, 2011), and a *category*, created using language, that may “limit and control the lives of those who are ‘constructed’ (and potentially those who are part of their lives)” (Cannella, 1997, p. 27, citing Foucault, 1980).

### **History of Childhood and Its Effects**

Perspectives on childhood are rooted historically and inform how children and adults have related throughout the centuries. There were periods in which the idea of childhood as a distinct period in a human life did not exist (Ariès, 1962). In Neil Postman’s (1982) terms, the idea of childhood was disappeared. For example, the Greeks did not categorize children into a special age, and “there were no moral or legal restraints against the practice of infanticide” (p. 6). According to Postman, the Romans “developed an awareness of childhood that surpassed the Greek idea” (p. 7). The Roman rhetorician Quintilian expressed a preoccupation with establishing a law to prohibit infanticide, which in history was interpreted as the belief that “children required protection and nurturing, and schooling, and freedom from adults’ secrets” (p. 11). When the northern barbarians invaded Rome and the Roman Empire collapsed, Europe

experienced the Dark and Middle Ages, in which literacy (readers' capacity to interpret the alphabet), education, shame, and the idea of childhood all disappeared (Postman, 1982).

According to Philippe Ariès (1962), "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (p. 128). This absence of the concept of childhood does not imply a lack of affection for children, but rather suggests that adults underestimated children and did not consider them to be fully human. Age was a "scientific category" that was part of a "system of physical description" (p. 19). Chronologically, "childhood was located in one direction, and maturity in the other" (p. 30). Ariès notes that in medieval art, until the twelfth century, childhood was not portrayed and that this apparent indifference toward children speaks about the conception of an innocent newborn infant and a fragile child. In the words of Ariès, "childhood was a period of transition which passed quickly and which was just as quickly forgotten" (p. 34). For example, John Dardess (1991) explains the construction of childhood in Confucian China: Childhood was

rooted in the philosophical and political context of life. . . . A young person was expected to display good conscience and behavioural control as soon as he/she was able to walk and talk. Even toddlers were expected to display respectful responses and actions. Play was not appropriate. (as cited in Cannella, 1997, p. 26)

Cannella (1997) states that in constructing childhood, "we have created the ultimate 'Other,' a group of human beings not considered able or mature enough to create themselves" (p. 19). She inquires whether the "younger members of society" (p. 19) are benefiting from adults' construction of childhood. This type of discussion has generated multiple reflections and interpretations of the meaning of a child. In particular, in early childhood studies and in the field, it seems to be desirable to practice pedagogy by referring to a capable or competent image of the



child; however, it is a continuous struggle for educators to uphold, through their practices and educational contexts, an image of a child with responsibilities and rights who is capable of performing as a respected and supported individual in the world.

Historically, certain disciplines, such as child development and developmental psychology, have dominated the ECE field more than others in explaining the contributions and effects of conceptions of childhood and images of the competent child. Lourdes Diaz Soto asks, “Whose childhood are we reflecting? Are we reflecting dominant assumptions?” (Hatch, Bowman, Jor’Dan, Lopez Morgan, Hart, Soto, Lubeck, & Hyson, 2002, p. 451). She states:

The century-long domination of psychological and biological child development perspectives in the field [of ECE] has meant a lack of recognition or acceptance of alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives. . . . Much of this discourse has become “taken-for-granted” knowledge, and has been, until recently, rarely critiqued. . . . Many of the proponents of child development perspectives have tended to portray themselves as the only knowledge brokers in the field. . . . How we summon our imaginations to formulate, envision, and implement a liberating praxis that integrates theoretical understandings, critique, and transformative action will help determine what happens to young children growing up in a postmodern context. (p. 450)

In Annika Månsson’s (2008) opinion, statements about what a child is reflect the adult’s perspective on the child. For example, contrasting conceptions of the child are constructed in authoritarian and fascist regimes and in democratic societies. These constructions are neither neutral nor innocent; all constructions of images of the child display adult power and control (Dahlberg, 2000).

Literature addresses how childhood has been defined, how its meaning has shifted over time, and how claims about childhood have impacted and challenged practices that seem to nurture, respect, ignore, contradict, or fail to sustain children's rights and well-being.

### **Images of the Child**

According to Erica Burman (2008), there are tensions and contradictions within current models of childhood that determine children's positions and adults' relationships with children, particularly when children do not fit, or deviate from, these models or classifications. These current models or classifications refer to images of children who are idealized, pathologized ("at risk"), or defined as neoliberal children who are "active" and flexible individuals who become autonomous and economically self-sufficient citizens (p. 100). Basil Bernstein (2000, as cited in Emilson & Folkesson, 2006) stresses the importance of noticing the power exercised between categories, rather than within the category itself. In other words, conceptions of the child may support, contradict, or displace each other.

In literature about childhood and construction of images of the child, there are plenty of models in which children have been classified (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; MacNaughton, 2003; Zhao, 2011). These classifications show the spectrum in which childhood and children's capability or competence have been studied and problematized. Based on historical and contemporary work that refers to perspectives of childhood, in this study, I identify three influential conceptions of the image of the child which explain how adults have referred to their interactions with children and their understanding of the child's capability or competence. From my view, neither perspective one nor two describes the child as a competent individual, even though these discourses might aim to offer a capable image of the child. Evidence of these

conceptions of children can be found in ECE centres in BC and elsewhere. Below I explain each conception of the child by referring to historical events and contemporary arguments. Also, I contest with inquiries and arguments the understanding of each approach about its image of the child. The conceptualizations of children that I examine are (1) the child who is immature, fragile, innocent, ignorant, and colonized; (2) the child who is classified, normalized (or punished) and assessed (or judged) according to standards of normality, competence, and intelligence; and (3) the child who is intelligent, curious, explorative, able to learn autonomously, and capable of engaging with the environment and in social, ethical, and political relationships with individuals and groups.

### **The Child Who Is Immature, Fragile, Innocent, Ignorant, and Colonized**

According to Ariès (1962), the concept of childhood appeared in the thirteenth century. He believed it is possible to trace its development by studying the history of art in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and that childhood development became more significant by the end of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth. Respect for children shifted, from being absent to becoming important and something to be practiced. In times of lack of respect for children, Ariès states, “everything was permitted in [children’s] presence: coarse language, scabrous actions and situations; [children] have heard everything and seen everything” (p. 103); even sex was talked about and practiced openly, since people believed that “before puberty children had no sexual feelings” (p. 104). In the seventeenth century, limiting children’s access to books deemed as indecent was seen as a way that adults showed respect for children. The innocence of childhood also became a common conception. Children were compared to angels, and devotion to the Holy Childhood was represented in art (Ariès, 1962). F. Guérard (n.d., as cited in Ariès, 1962) states:

This is the age of innocence, to which we must all return in order to enjoy the happiness to come which is our hope on earth; the age when one can forgive anything, the age when hatred is unknown, when nothing can cause distress; the golden age of human life, the age which defies Hell, the age when life is easy and death holds no terrors, the age to which the heavens are open. Let tender and gentle respect be shown to these young plants of the Church. Heaven is full of anger for whoever scandalized them. (p. 110)

According to Ariès (1962), there were two essential aspects in the conception of childhood in the seventeenth century: “the innocence which has to be preserved, and the ignorance or weakness which has to be suppressed or modified” (p. 122). This contradictory paradigm was commonly practiced from the middle of the seventeenth century until the nineteenth, and it still occurs today in Catholic communities. For example, the celebration of First Communion at the age of seven manifests the contradictory conception of considering, simultaneously, the innocence of children and their “rational appreciation of the sacred mysteries” (Ariès, 1962, p. 127). According to Postman (1982), this tradition explains “why the Catholic Church designated age seven as the age at which one was assumed to know the difference between right and wrong, the age of reason” (p. 14). In other words, biology determined people’s rational competence.

The eighteenth century was a time in which the state declared its responsibility to protect children. This was a novel and radical idea, since it required parents to become partners with the state in nurturing and protecting children. This was also a century in which John Locke’s and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ideas about children were spread, and these ideas functioned as the parameters within which to relate to children (Postman, 1982). Locke’s and Rousseau’s

contrasting perspectives of children are still discussed and critiqued in early childhood education. Locke, on one hand, stated that “at birth the mind is a blank tablet, a tabula rasa” (as cited in Postman, 1982, p. 58). He explained this idea in terms of the symbolic development that follows a sequential, segmented, and linguistic process; childhood was not a natural or biological process. Locke assumed the child “as an inadequately written book, advancing towards maturity as pages are filled” (Postman, 1982, p. 60). This assumption gave parents, schools, educators, and states the big responsibility of what would be eventually written in children’s minds and confirmed the potential competence in any child that is “rightly” nurtured by the adults in the child’s life (Postman, 1982). On the other hand, Rousseau’s conception of the child explained the child’s uncorrupted nature, which makes the child happy and good. After birth, the child is corrupted by history and education, which, over time, produce a civilized adult who has become unhappy and immoral (Rousseau, 1764/1979). Rousseau (1764/1979) believed that children “are born capable of learning but able to do nothing, knowing nothing” (p. 61). In other words, Rousseau explained a competent potential of the child at origin or birth who engaged in experiences before lessons on how to move, to talk, and to walk, and through these experiences, the child learned and advanced according to his natural talents and the opportunities he had to commit and practice the skills (Rousseau, 1764/1979). Rousseau’s contributions to child development include the ideas that “the child is important in himself, not merely as a means to an end; [and the] child’s intellectual and emotional life is important” (Postman, 1982, p. 58). Locke’s, or the Protestant, view of the child was as “an unformed person who through literacy, education, reason, self-control, and shame may be made into a civilized adult” (Postman, 1982, p. 59), Rousseau’s, or the romantic, view of the child, in contrast, was expressed in the belief that “it is not the unformed child but the deformed adult who is the problem” (Postman, 1982, p. 59).

Again, age, as biological status, was not a necessary condition for being considered a child in the mid-nineteenth century. Guoping Zhao (2011) explains that adults expected to find in children inability or incompetence. According to Zhao, if one

“knows too much” about life, takes care of one’s own interests, and “submits to no control” (Hendrick, 1997, p. 43), one is not a child. Being a child has to do with being naïve and knowing nothing about life and the world. One has to be totally inexperienced, dependent, and uncontrollable. The constructed image of childhood defines for children what they are and how they should fit into the larger society to be considered a child. (pp. 244–245)

In contemporary literature, Gunilla Dahlberg (2000) refers to this conception as the “poor” child who is interpreted as an individual in “deficit or . . . at risk, with limited capacities and in need of protection”; she regards this image of the child as “common in educational settings” (pp. 180–181). In Cannella’s (1997) terms, the knowledge that children possess is denied; therefore, an image of an “innocent” and “needy” child is constructed. “The discourse of innocence most obviously implies lack of knowledge or ignorance,” Cannella writes, “as opposed to adults who are not innocent but are intelligent” (p. 34). Emily Cahan, Jay Mechling, Brian Sutton-Smith, and Sheldon White (1993) explain adults’ imperialist practices towards children: Imperialism happens when “older human beings (and often a particular expert group) will decide for young people exactly what life will be like” (as cited in Cannella, 1997, p. 35). Cannella (1997) states that “imperialist adult practices silence children with the message that they are not competent to determine their own needs [and interests]” (p. 35). Children’s knowledge is not only ignored and denied, but considered nonexistent. Peter Moss and Pat Petrie (2002) refer to this view as the “image of the weak, poor and needy child [which has drawn

from] a particular understanding of public provision of children [or] children's services" (p. 55). In Burman's (2008) opinion, this view speaks about children "as passive, to be serviced, protected and provided for, rather than to be engaged with as active participants" (p. 73).

According to Burman (2008), the introduction of compulsory mass schooling (public education) relates to theories of child nature that present an image of the child who is ignorant (p. 75). Cannella (1997) notes that since children lack knowledge, or their knowledge is of poor quality, their innocence (and ignorance) should be treated by offering education, which in turn should be controlled by only allowing children to access "safe" knowledge. For example, since the sixteenth century, the Bible has been considered to be knowledge that should be taught and learned (Cannella, 1997). Moreover, the concept of graded classes was invented to protect the younger students from the debased worldly experience already gained by the older ones (Cannella, 1997). Burman (2008) states: "The model of the vulnerable, ignorant child positioned them as requiring protection; children were also portrayed as a source of disruption requiring control and discipline" (p. 89). Burman (2008) notes that, in current practices of child protection, we often do not really want to know what is happening to children. Thus "protecting" children can function as a way of pre-empting answers / silencing children, so closing down rather than opening up arenas for discussion with children since parents/guardians are required to be present. (p. 91)

This construction of the immature, fragile, innocent, ignorant, and colonized child gives total power to adults, who produced this view of childhood and the image of an incompetent child by maintaining that children are weak and innocent, lack experience, and need to be protected, in contrast to adults, who are "strong, wise, mature, intelligent and experienced (Cannella, 1997, p. 37).

## **The Child Who Is Classified, Normalized, and Assessed**

Historically, respect for children was shown by people's interest in childhood, not as isolated individuals, but as an institution or an organized and structured group of young people that could be normalized and regulated, as child development had explained. In the early seventeenth century, child psychology and regulations for children became increasingly familiar topics in Jesuit colleges and the schools at Port-Royal-des-Champs (an abbey of Cistercian nuns) in Paris (Ariès, 1962). According to William Kessen (1979), the emergence of child psychology coincided with industrialization (as cited in Burman, 2008, p. 16). Enlightenment and industrialization in the eighteenth century both nourished and attacked the idea of childhood. Postman (1982) writes that industrialization “was a constant and formidable enemy for childhood. . . . The special nature of children was subordinated to their utility as a source of cheap labor” (p. 53). The history of children who were seen as cheap labour shows again the contradiction of adults' intentions to conceptualize, protect, and promote children. In those days (as in present times in some parts of the least developed countries primarily), it became convenient to use children for adults' economic and industrial purposes. Even laws showed there was no reluctance to apply penalties to crimes committed by children (Postman, 1982). Postman (1982) states, “As late as 1780, children could be convicted for any of the two hundred crimes for which the penalty was hanging. A seven-year-old was hanged at Norwich [in UK] for stealing a petticoat, and after the Gordon Riots [an anti-Catholic protest against the Papists Act of 1778] several children were publicly hanged” (pp. 53–54).

Before formal recognition of the field of psychology, there was a “lay or folk psychology” (Gardner, 1999, p. 61). As part of traditional educational systems, assumptions



were built that were taken for granted and barely discussed. For example, as Howard Gardner (1999) writes,

it was widely assumed that older people know more than younger people; that older persons should speak and demonstrate, while younger ones should be silent and observe; that rewards should be given to those who learn well, and punishments to those who seem slow or lazy. (p. 62)

In the mid to late nineteenth century, developmental psychology was positioned among other disciplines, such as natural history, anthropology, physiology, and medicine. This new psychology, Burman (2008) suggests, focused on shifting from the “romantic fiction of children as innocent bearers of wisdom” to produce children as “objects and subjects of study” (p. 14). In Cannella’s (1997) terms, the positivist view of science recreated the image of the child produced by the church into a psychologized and biologized conception.

According to Burman (2008), children were “equated with the ‘savage’ or ‘undeveloped’” (p. 15); they needed to be studied to determine stages of development and to produce technologies of measurement. Observation and mental testing thus emerged as “avenues for the scientific control of the social order” (Cannella, 1997, p. 33). These tests extended to adults; Stephen Jay Gould (1981) explains that immigrants to the US were tested in the military, hospitals, prisons, and schools (as cited in Cannella, 1997, p. 33). Viewed through this lens, children were classified “as normal or abnormal, competent or incompetent, intelligent or slow” (Cannella, 1997, p. 33), and a language of normality and pathology was generated.

Nikolas Rose (1990) explains that “developmental psychology was made possible by the clinic and the nursery school” (p. 142). He adds, both services used and promoted standardization and normalization to construct norms which were used to determine normality

according to age and to assess children's performance as normal or abnormal. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, psychology and educational sciences "were used as governing strategies to categorize, assess and normalize children, as well as their families" (Dahlberg & Bloch, 2006, p. 105). Dahlberg and her colleague Mimi Bloch (2006) narrate the example of the "development of psychological laboratories that included one-way mirrors to observe children" (p. 105) to illustrate the use of governing technologies. This governing technology "was similar to the prison or the concept of the panopticon in Foucault as a way to visualize, regulate, normalize, and discipline from a distance" (Dahlberg & Bloch, 2006, p. 105).

According to Gardner (1993), in the early 1900s in Paris, Alfred Binet and his collaborators worked on identifying whether children would likely succeed or fail in elementary school. The work of Binet and his team "led to the first intelligence tests and the construct of intelligence quotient, or IQ" (p. 163). This work has also been considered the beginning of the extended use of formal testing. Within a few decades, there was a proliferation of instruments to test students' intelligence, such as the Stanford-Binet, the Army Alpha, and the various Wechsler intelligence instruments (Brown & Hermstein, 1975, as cited in Gardner, 1993, p. 163). Gardner (1999) explains:

Once the instrumentation for assessing intelligence had migrated to America, a quite different worldview emerged. First of all, intelligence tests were standardized and "normed", so that any test-taker could be compared in mental age to any other. Then youngsters . . . were tested for their intelligence; decisions about their educability, and their proper track in school or life, were made on the basis of their recorded intelligence quotient, or IQ—the amount of the trait of intelligence that they exhibit on a particular linguistic or pictorial measure. (p. 65)

This new worldview resulted in psychologists creating an orthodoxy about intelligence rather than conceiving it as mutable or transformable (Gardner, 1999). Intelligence was conceptualized as a “largely genetic or innate trait; it features a single general capacity, often termed ‘g’ for general intelligence; and there is not much that one can do about one’s intelligence” (p. 65).

In the last 25 years the ECE field, particularly educational services for children and families, has been dominated by the notion of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) proposed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC published *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8* (Bredekamp, 1987; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) and *Effective Practices in Early Childhood Education: Building a Foundation* (Bredekamp, 2011), which affirmed a dominant psychological trend in the field of ECE (Cannella, 1997). These documents are “grounded in developmental psychology, most obviously exhibiting a Piagetian influence” (Cannella, 1997, p. 9). According to Craig Hart (Hatch, Bowman, Jor’Dan, Lopez Morgan, Hart, Soto, Lubeck, & Hyson, 2002), the DAP explained in these documents

is not a prescriptive set of rules by which teachers are bound. Rather, the DAP concept provides general guidelines for classroom instruction that stem from a systematic knowledge base of research, theory, and practical experience that is informative about normative development and learning processes at different ages. (p. 447)

Sue Bredekamp (1987) explains that educators understand and practice the scientific notion of the child by referring to theory, research, and practice of the most current knowledge about teaching and learning. Even though Hart’s perception of the DAP proposal refers to

guidelines for teachers to interact with and support children's learning rather than rigid standards, Christina Lopez Morgan (Hatch, Bowman, Jor'Dan, Lopez Morgan, Hart, Soto, Lubeck, & Hyson, 2002) notes that the original 1987 version of DAP "rapidly became the 'bible' of what good teaching was supposed to be for children [and what were the] right and wrong behaviors for classroom practice" (p. 446). Dahlberg (2000) argues that DAP is seen in the classroom environment "wherein the teacher monopolizes most of the classroom time, and where the teachers ask the questions" (p. 181). It is common that the questions teachers pose to children are inquiries that reflect teachers' expectations and satisfy fixed responses; there is little openness to children's unexpected questions, interests, and ideas. From my perspective, this type of educational practice promotes and sustains the construction of a child as an incompetent and unintelligent subject who is normalized by education. In the same line of thought, Vivian Gussin Paley (2004) explains that

we are always on the periphery of the child's world. . . . Today we judge or prejudice every shade of difference between children. We scrutinize their responses according to arbitrary scales that seldom include the unfolding of children's imaginations as revealed in their play. (p. 25)

From my view, Paley (2004) declares the dominant influence of developmental psychology in the education of children. Due to this influence, educators continuously judge and compare children by assessing their ideas and actions according to fixed scales that restrict teachers' capacities to perceive and appreciate the richness of children's imaginative play. Paley (2004) claims that this way to educate children puts us inevitably "on the periphery of the child's world" (p. 25), which does not promote education *with* children; in contrast, educators focus on judging, classifying, and restricting children's

ideas and actions. As such, developmental psychology has shown a lack of “critical orientation” and the tendency to repress “contradictions and ambiguity” that might help us to expand our understanding of children (Dahlberg, 2000, p. 181). In Dahlberg’s terms, developmental psychology promotes the normalization of children.

Developmental psychology can be a real hindrance when it comes to creating a pedagogy that speaks in the voice of the child. The field of developmental psychology does not have very much of a critical orientation. . . . The search for definite structures and stages—like Piaget’s operational structures—surely represses contradictions and ambiguity and promotes normalization. (p. 181)

Lopez Morgan (Hatch, Bowman, Jor’Dan, Lopez Morgan, Hart, Soto, Lubeck, & Hyson, 2002) explains that DAP became a dominant discourse in ECE based on the assumption that the universal and absolute “truth” of development for all children was the one “described by Western European psychologists and supported by research on predominantly white, middle-class children” (p. 445). In current research, it is widely accepted that “the development of guidelines that are constructed on too narrow a view of development diminishes a wider range of potential understandings of appropriate practice” (p. 446). Burman (2008) notes:

Developmental psychology’s commitment to a view of children and child development as fixed, unilinear and timeless is not only ethnocentric and culture-blind in its unwitting reflection of parochial preoccupations and consequent devaluation of differing patterning, but it is also in danger of failing to recognize changes in the organization of childhood subjectivity and agency. (p. 82)

From my view, the explanation and use of DAP and development psychology (Lopez Morgan, 2002; Burman, 2008) refers to a dominant discourse in ECE explained by

Western psychologists and their research about primarily white, middle-class children. These discourses focus on the domination of a story (Moss, 2014) that frames the “right” educational and cultural view to interact with and teach children. Assuming that DAP and developmental psychology are *the* truthful ways to understand and practice ECE dismisses other approaches that could also work as *a* (not the) truthful theoretical and practical story to understand and interpret children’s ideas and actions and EC educators’ pedagogy. Moreover, DAP and developmental psychology neither value nor promote systematic dialogue about the *differences* in which children construct their subjectivities or become individuals who are always emerging within their contexts. In alignment with the acknowledgment of difference and diversity in the conceptualization of images of the child, which are realities in past and present histories of childhood and their influences in ECE, Dahlberg (2000) asserts that in the last 20 years, EC educators inspired by evidence of children’s competence and difference have referred to postmodern perspectives to disrupt “processes of normalization, standardization and neutralization and make way for and celebrate diversity, difference and pluralism” (p.181).

### **The Child Who Explores and Engages With the Environment and With Others**

My first encounter with the concept of the capable or competent child relates to my learning about the Reggio Emilia preschools in northern Italy, which were recognized in 1991 by *Newsweek* as one of the “top ten schools in the world” (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1991).

Philosophically and empirically, Reggio Emilia early childhood education has inspired educators, EC instructors, politicians, parents, and children all over the world to conceptualize children and teachers as competent subjects and to consider the use of time, space, and materials as priority educational issues in preschools and infant and toddler centres. Moreover, educational

practices in Reggio Emilia schools have inspired the elaboration of socioconstructivist and postmodern analysis that reflects critically on issues relating to power relationships, gender, racialization, inclusion (or social justice), and exclusion (or social injustice). Even though Reggio Emilia pedagogy has inspired many people and educational frameworks in the world, such as the BC ELF (Government of British Columbia, 2008) and its revised draft version (Government of British Columbia, 2018), socioconstructivist and postmodern perspectives have not been positioned as a common, familiar, and extended discourse in ECE. In this section, I explain and elaborate the philosophical principles of the Reggio Emilia approach.

Loris Malaguzzi, initiator of the Reggio Emilia preschools, explained children's competence through his theory of "the hundred languages" (Rinaldi, 2001a, pp. 29–30). In his poem "No way. The hundred is there" (Filippini & Vecchi, 2000, p. 3), Malaguzzi metaphorically expressed that any child, when they experience the world, uses a hundred languages, hands, thoughts, and ways of thinking, speaking, listening, marvelling, and loving—languages in which they sing, understand, discover, invent, and dream. Malaguzzi claimed that adults "steal ninety-nine" of the hundred languages, by which he means that they steal children's opportunities to express themselves. He stated that school and broader culture are responsible for impeding and limiting the full expression of children's competence by promoting children's involvement in actions that "separate the head from the body" (Filippini & Vecchi, 2000, p. 3) or, in other words, for conceptualizing the child as a fragmentary individual whose organs, affections, interests, and emotions function independently, rather than as interconnected parts of a complex and reflective human. Malaguzzi explained that school and culture ask the child "to think without hands, to do without head, to listen and not to speak, to understand without joy, to love and to marvel only at Easter and Christmas" (Filippini & Vecchi, 2000, p. 3). He claimed

that these expectations and ways of relating to children express distrust and ignorance of children's possibilities to be and act as competent individuals. They also encourage children to relate to a world in which "work and play, reality and fantasy science and imagination, sky and earth, reason and dreams are things that do not belong together" (p. 3). Metaphorically, Malaguzzi affirmed that school and culture steal opportunities that might help children to construct themselves as capable beings. He also emphasized that children resist the attempts to suppress them by claiming and demonstrating their "hundred languages" or multiple ways to encounter and deal with the world in their establishment of relationships with people, other beings, and things around them.

In contrast to this suppression of children's "languages," the Reggio Emilia preschools' pedagogy constructs an image of a child "who is competent and strong—a child who has the right to hope and to be valued, not a predefined child seen as fragile, needy, incapable" (Rinaldi, 2001b, p. 79). Malaguzzi (1994) encouraged educators to hold an image of the child who is intelligent, strong, and beautiful and who has desires that are very ambitious. He also claimed that educators should recognize children's "rights and strengths" (p. 61) rather than only protecting children.

From a psychological perspective, educators at Reggio Emilia have defined the image of competent children as individuals with "enormous perceptual and cognitive powers and motivations" that have showed teachers "remarkable performances of understanding—ones that have actually expanded the world's appreciation of what young children can accomplish" (Gardner, 2001, p. 27).



Dahlberg (2000) examined what motivated citizens in Reggio Emilia “to design an education system founded on the perspective of the child” (p. 177). In an interview with Bonacci, the mayor of Reggio Emilia, she learned that the Fascist experience taught this community that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous, and that in building a new society it was imperative to safeguard and communicate that lesson, and nurture and maintain a vision of children who can think and act for themselves. The mission was to teach children not to obey! (Dahlberg, 2000, p. 177)

This community-based choice demonstrated a deep understanding of the importance of acknowledging and respecting children’s competence and intelligence by restraining adults’ historical tendency to exercise power and domination over children (e.g., adults in the Fascist period might have intended to normalize children according to standards that were institutionalized to regulate and direct childhood). Also, they might have chosen to teach children to become informed, to challenge the irrational effects of politics in the past, and to use their voices and actions collectively to resist (and possibly disobey) the instructions (ways to be and do) that restricted opportunities to think and act for themselves. After the Second World War, the community of Reggio Emilia chose to formally offer children the possibility of engaging in dialogue with the present (Dahlberg, 2000). Furthermore, teachers in Reggio Emilia (Diana: Scuola comunale dell’infanzia, 2000) explain in *The World in Words* that attentive conversation with children has revealed “children’s words that travel in freedom” (n.p.). These teachers declare that children’s voices (e.g., thoughts, ideas, and assumptions) make visible a portion of the world that children experience,

a world that is unknown or disorienting for many adults who persist in cataloguing early childhood by means of an image of children as unaware

individuals to be educated according to pre-established models, or as subjects to be protected from the reality. (n.p.)

These teachers have continuously confirmed that children “are unique subjects and in continuous relation with the reality. They think, they reflect, they wonder and ask questions; they explore events and emotions, they construct theories” (n.p.) that often surprise the educators’ paradigms of their competent image of the child. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the pedagogy of listening developed at the Reggio Emilia preschools, a pedagogy that first and foremost teaches children to think and act for themselves, the legacy of resistance to fascism.

Elsewhere, early childhood educators have been inspired by similar emancipatory ideas. For example, as part of their research on children’s participation and teacher control in Kalmar, Sweden, Anette Emilson and Anne-Mari Folkesson (2006) refer to Georg Henrik von Wright’s (2000) work to explain that in participatory and democratic learning environments, children do not always do as they like; rather, teacher–child encounters “reflect a more symmetrical relationship, with respect and mutuality” (p. 236).

Continuously, people from all over the world, organized in delegations of 1600 visitors per year, visit Reggio Emilia preschools and infant and toddler centres aiming to discover the “invisible” strategies of pedagogical project work that have revealed the potential of children’s thinking and acting in relation with their teachers and the world. Educational projects that have emerged, unfolded, and been documented in the Reggio preschools and toddler centres have shown the importance of deriving a curriculum from interdisciplinary work, rather than promoting the study of individual disciplines that are isolated from each other.

From my perspective, the documentation and the critical and collaborative reflection involved in promoting education in Reggio Emilia and in Swedish pedagogical project work is

significant evidence for Jacques Rancière's (1987/1991) idea that whoever emancipates the student should not aim to explain or determine what this student learns or is taught (Biesta, 2005b, 2013); rather, the educator verifies that the student has learned and requests the student to study further if needed. The practice of emancipation demands that whoever participates in this process acts as an emancipated being. Project work and pedagogical documentation in which children and teachers engage collaboratively have made visible how education for emancipation embodies reciprocity (Rancière, 1987/1991), shared power relationships, and joyful and passionate education. It seems that the teachers' emancipatory strategy has led to educational environments in which a more truthful construction and experience of the competent or capable child can take place. Being emancipators demands that educators "give, not the key to knowledge, but the consciousness of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself" (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 39). Educators and EC instructors may choose to act as emancipators or, conversely, as madmen "who insist on inequality and domination, [as] those who want to be right" (p. 72). Additionally, Rancière claims that we should not look for or promote "the coincidence of intelligences" or the normalization of what is learned by children. This, he argues, is stultification, which produces demotivated and non-innovative students. Rather than restricting or exposing students to tedious education governed by adults who must explain to educate them, Rancière believes we should promote "the reciprocal recognition of reasonable wills" (p. 96), which refers to the mutual acceptance of individuals' distinctive and varied interests and purposes to be searched and learned. In other words, this construction of the competent or capable individual might offer children the ability to navigate in a world they may continuously encounter as complex and contradictory.

## **The *Capable* Child and Early Childhood Pedagogies**

In this chapter, I explained three conceptualizations or images of the child which I drew from the history of childhood and its influence in ECE. These images might certainly be expanded, and I did not intend that they be the only ones discussed regarding childhood and the child. I assume that each of these conceptualizations values its claims about how a child is seen in the world and how educators support the image they believe in. I also assume that each conceptualization considers the child as a capable, or potentially capable, individual, and that each of these views refers to a philosophical and educational framework that reveals multiple and diverse preconceptions about how the child is defined and how the child's interactions with others and within the context should be supported to unfold.

The third conceptualization of the child, which refers to an individual who explores and engages with the environment and with others, assumes that children are able to continuously encounter the complexities and contradictions of the world in which they live, and that early childhood pedagogies such as listening pedagogically and creating pedagogical documentation might support the child and the educator to encounter the world satisfactorily. In the following chapter, I review and discuss literature that refers to a pedagogy of listening and the creation of pedagogical documentation. Both activities have been studied and proposed as strategies to interpret documentation of children and educators' pedagogy from the assumption that children, educators, and instructors in ECE are capable beings in the world.

### **CHAPTER 3: THE PEDAGOGY OF LISTENING AND THE CREATION OF PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION**

*When teachers allow their listening to be interrupted by a challenging perspective, they open themselves to recognition of heretofore tacit beliefs, to new questions, and to new ideas about the resolution of those questions. ~ Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, 2010*

This chapter reviews and explains literature about listening in education, or a pedagogy of listening, and the creation of an interpretative narrative, or pedagogical documentation, two pedagogical strategies that have been widely researched and discussed in early childhood studies. The explanation of the two activities refers to their conceptualization and use in the field of ECE.

In my discussion of listening, I identify and explain some historical and philosophical understandings of this activity and how it has been understood and practiced in contemporary ECE. Specifically, I narrate the meaning and uses of listening in education from two approaches: Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the Reggio Emilia perspective on listening. In reference to the Reggio Emilia approach, I explain aspects such as the importance of the child's perspective, which might be different from the adult construction of a child's perspective, the conceptualization of a pedagogy of listening and its association with project work and pedagogical documentation, and the effects of using a pedagogy of listening that makes visible children's provisional theories, as well as multiple perspectives about the examples or stories that are examined. Finally, I address the challenges of practicing a pedagogy of listening.

When I explain the creation of an interpretative narrative, I focus on conceptualizations of pedagogical documentation as a strategy for educators to interpret documentation of children

and educators' pedagogy. Pedagogical documentation was initially introduced and practiced in the preschools and infant and toddler centres in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Later on, this activity was extended worldwide, with some local variation. In this chapter, I focus on the understanding and use of pedagogical documentation in Italy, Sweden, and Canada due to the significant influence of concepts and practices emerging in those countries. Particularly, I refer to scholarly work on pedagogical documentation that has been published from 1950 to the present.

### **The Valuing of Children's Voices in History**

The idea of listening to children presupposes that children have a voice and that it is one worth listening to. Neither of these ideas has been self-evident throughout history. Historically, childhood has been a phase of life intensively governed and regulated by adults. As discussed in the previous chapter, representations of childhood have shifted between contradictory discourses and images of the child that refer to angels (innocents) or devils, criminals or victims, autonomous and interdependent subjects or needy and fragile individuals whose development depends on being controlled, cared for, and protected (Prout, 2003; Viruru & Cannella, 2001). Theorists, researchers, and institutions have struggled to point out and defend the importance and utility of considering children's voices seriously (Formosinho & Barros Araujo, 2006). Including children's voices in ordinary matters that affect them demonstrates an understanding and representation of children as citizens who deserve respect and possess rights. Even though multiple efforts have been made to defend and respect children's rights (Engdahl, 2005; Formosinho & Barros Araujo, 2006; Lansdown, 2011; Prout, 2003; Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996), there is still disparity between conventional ways of representing and constructing children and the realities many children live (Penn, 2005; Prout, 2003, Viruru & Cannella, 2001).

Even the discourse of postcolonialism includes a series of contradictions and contestations; for example, positioning children at the bottom end of the hierarchy reveals that their colonization remains a vivid reality (Viruru & Cannella, 2001). In other words, there is nothing “post” about their colonization (Loomba, 1998, as cited in Viruru & Cannella, 2001).

It is known that in medieval society childhood was considered inexistent (Ariès, 1962) or was disappeared (Postman, 1982). Children’s voices did not count and were practically ignored. Ariès (1962) explains that this indifference toward childhood demonstrated a conception of an innocent newborn and a fragile, innocent child. Children’s voices were simply dismissed.

Situations and decisions during the twentieth century formed historical trends that shaped what *listening to children* meant and how it has functioned. According to Alan Prout (2003), childhood turned into a project when state and civil society decided to intervene in it and invest in children for the future. Two particular trends developed: (1) interest in offering protection and care for children by providing resources and services that improved their lives and well-being; and (2) the conceptualization of children as objects of knowledge who should be under adults’ surveillance and protection. This latter trend manifested particular interest in shaping children as citizens and workers. “Shaping children as the future labour force,” Prout writes, was seen as “an increasingly important option” (p. 17) that came from augmenting control over children in association to the complexities of the mechanisms of economic control and competitive pressures produced by the world economy. In similar terms, Rose (1989) notes that childhood is

the most intensively governed sector of personal existence. In different ways at different times, and by many different routes varying from one section of society to another, the health, welfare, and rearing of children have been linked in thought

and practice to the destiny of the nation and the responsibilities of the state. (p. 121, as cited in Prout, 2003, p. 12)

In early childhood studies, these trends have manifested in the construction of a colonized child (Viruru & Cannella, 2001) and the image of an individual who reproduces culture (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Engdahl, 2005). These images of the child offer a discourse of need that has given adults the power to practice this discourse under their understanding (separate from children's) and desire for control, protection, and structure (Viruru & Cannella, 2001). The colonized child has meant a human being who is lacking, is not fully advanced, and is in need of intervention that will transform the needy child into a "well rounded" adult, who can meet the needs of society (to be a tax paying citizen)" (Viruru & Cannella, 2001, p. 151). Under this discourse, parents and children have learned to construct themselves as consumers of services that fulfill needs (Viruru & Cannella, 2001).

Another trend that has impacted children is the "institutionalization of childhood" (Nasman, 1994, as cited in Prout, 2003, p. 16). This term refers to the control of institutions over children. An example is compulsory education, which works toward "children's increasing compartmentalization in specifically designated, separate settings, supervised by professionals and structured according to age and ability" (Prout, 2003, p.16). This trend has also embraced the image of the child as a reproducer of culture, which assumes that "children come empty to school and they need to be taught everything (the teachers know)" (Engdahl, 2005, p. 5). This view also assumes a lacking child whose teachers have "the privileged voice of authority" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 103).

According to Johannes Giesecke (1985, as cited in Prout, 2003), an additional trend that has impacted children is that of living in a pluralistic society; this trend confronts children with



“competing, complementary and divergent values and perspectives from parents, school, the media, the consumer society and their peer relations” (Prout, 2003, p. 16). In a pluralistic society, parents, teachers, and other adults who care for children have less power to control and guide their lives, while children, individually and collectively, make their own efforts to make meaning of their lives and the world.

The trends explained above that occurred during the twentieth century seem to exist in contradiction to the “idea that children have a voice in decision-making at all levels” (Prout, 2003, p. 17), a trend that has developed during the last few decades. This idea demanded that philosophies and strategies of listening be broadcast and put into practice within institutions that might reimagine and reconstitute them. In Prout’s (2003) terms, the emergence of the importance of children’s voices has brought “the installation of techniques of reflexivity into institutional practice . . . [and the result has been] the summoning up of the voice of a multitude of actors” (p. 17). However, the desire to control and regulate children’s voices and actions derived from neoliberal practices (Davis & Bansel, 2007, as cited by Davis, 2011) has put open listening and strategies of attention at risk, to be shifted back into what Davis (2011) refers to as “mundane, repetitive [practices] not in need of reflection, but serving to reiterate the already known” (p. 123).

### **Philosophical Meanings of Listening**

I include a brief overview of philosophical meanings of listening that refer to similar understandings that have explained listening in education. Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon and Megan J. Lavery (2011) identify traditional and modern conceptions of listening in which this strategy has been related to speaking, thinking, and acting. Referring to listening, they explain

the concepts of receptivity and attentiveness. They define attentiveness as “a discipline that the self engages in for the express purpose of *seeing* reality or the other” (p. 118, emphasis in original). As an example, they mention Immanuel Kant’s view on attentiveness, which “involves seeing the world as if it were art” (p. 118). In this case, “attentiveness is both representational and individualistic” (p. 118). Moreover, Haroutunian-Gordon and Lavery argue that new perspectives developed in the twentieth century considered that people are born into language-user communities make meaning of their world through language. Language was considered a social and not a representational phenomenon. Within this context, they argue, “receptivity means listening in the right way” (p. 119), with the purpose of understanding the other.

Furthermore, Haroutunian-Gordon and Lavery (2011) refer to six scholars who studied listening as part of a philosophical tradition in which the listener engages actively in producing dialogue: Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, Suzanne Rice, Megan Lavery, Andrea English, Leonard Waks, and Mordechai Gordon. According to Haroutunian-Gordon (2003), for Plato, listening meant “to form and answer a question” (as cited in Haroutunian-Gordon & Lavery, 2011, p. 120) and to draw inferences about what the person hears. Rice (2004) explains that, for Aristotle, “good listening is a virtue that makes effective communication possible” (as cited in Haroutunian-Gordon & Lavery, 2011, p. 121), and “good” listening will depend on the circumstances. Lavery (2003) explains Rousseau’s perspective of listening as being part of interpersonal relationships: “Listening is to understand the person speaking” (as cited in Haroutunian-Gordon & Lavery, 2011, p. 121). English (2003) refers to Johann F. Herbart’s conception of listening, which involved “a critical mode of listening to the learner and a self-critical reflective mode of listening” (as cited in Haroutunian-Gordon & Lavery, 2011, p. 122) with the purpose of identifying tensions of egoism and respect that students feel. Herbart’s

conception is a receptive form of listening that teaches both the teacher and the student. Waks (2005) explains that, according to John Dewey, listening has multiple purposes, such as “mutual cooperation between people . . . to modify and redirect one’s energies in the interest of becoming a more flexible and effective agent . . . to create and participate in democratic relations with others” (as cited in Haroutunian-Gordon & Laverty, 2011, p. 123). Waks writes that Dewey identified “active and passive listening” by indicating that listening is not just receiving what others say; rather, it is seeking to comprehend the other’s experience, which involves trust, affection, and “cooperative friendship . . . an act of sympathetic imagination” (p. 123). In these terms, the listener and the speaker become friends in a communicative joint adventure toward democracy. Finally, Gordon (n.d.) explains Martin Buber’s perspective on listening: Listening refers to “embracing the other” (as cited in Haroutunian-Gordon & Laverty, 2011, p. 124) by acknowledging or giving rights to the unique perspective that the speaker offers. According to Gordon, Buber shared Plato’s view of seeing the listener as a seeker who aims to understand the other person. Listener and speaker engage in an interchangeable, mutually dependent relationship that is not molded by predetermined conceptions.

Previous interpretations of philosophical perspectives on listening speak about an active subject who listens to the other and tries to understand what is communicated. In this way, listening to the other is a form of attentiveness, and this unique condition of listening makes the listener surrender to the *pace* of the other and thus to be willing to give the other *time*. Perspectives on listening have shifted over time, from individualistic to more collaborative engagements of listening to others. It has not been explicitly described how often and in which ways listening focuses on children’s ideas, actions, and interactions. It seems that listening to

children is a recent phenomenon that is revealing benefits and difficulties that are still under examination and negotiation.

### **Meanings and Uses of Listening in Education**

In contemporary pedagogy, EC educators have been encouraged in their professional development to *listen* to children's ideas, actions, and interactions as an essential disposition for teaching children and for engaging actively and collaboratively in learning *with* children.

Evidence based on listening to children is demonstrated in ongoing pedagogical work produced by nontraditional or alternative educational communities around the world. In contrast, other evidence suggests that listening to children has not yet functioned as a predominant philosophy that permeates and orients either adults' interactions with children or educators' practices. I address two current approaches that have declared their belief and value for authentic listening, and particularly, for systematically considering children's voices and perspectives.

### **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and consequent actions that have occurred over the last two decades are part of a trend that has increased acceptance of children's rights and acknowledged and respected children's voices (Engdahl, 2005; Formosinho & Barros Araujo, 2006; Lansdown, 2011; Prout, 2003; Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996). In particular, the UN Convention has made explicit the act of listening to children's perspectives. Article 12 (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) states that

- (1) States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child,

the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (2) For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13 (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) states:

(1) The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice. (2) The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.

Contemporary understandings of listening in education predominantly discuss, problematize, and expand on the UNCRC, particularly, Articles 12 and 13. For example, Gillian Pugh and Dorothy Rouse Selleck (1996) and Gerison Lansdown (2011) note that this information has functioned as a foundation to reassess the status of children in all matters that concern them. In Prout's (2003) terms, this information is interpreted as "a more adequate way of representing childhood" (p. 13). He affirms that local and national projects in different countries have turned the mandate of listening to children into reality by seeking mediums by which to consult children and involve them in decision making. Lansdown (2011), author of *Every Child's Right to be Heard*, challenges the veracity of claims about listening to children's voices, stating, "The practice of

listening to children and taking their views seriously is not sufficiently recognized in the culture of any society” (p. 16). Articles 12 and 13, which state the right of children to express their views freely, have proven to be two of the most challenging articles of the UNCRC to implement (Formosinho & Barros Araujo, 2006; Lansdown, 2011; Prout, 2003). Pugh and Rouse Selleck (1996) point out that

in a society that is not used to giving weight to the views of children of any age . . . “listening” to very young children does not necessarily mean taking all their utterances at face value. . . . It does not imply that [children’s] views carry more weight than the powers of wise and loving adults over the outcome of any decision making process but it does require that their views are respected. (pp. 121–122)

It seems that interpreting what listening to children means has been controversial and problematic. The meaning of statements such as “the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [should be assured] the right to express those views freely” and “the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, p. 4), can be conveniently interpreted according to adults’ historical style of influencing and dominating children. In my experience, a problematic issue encountered while turning articles into practice has been adults’ convenient and partial interpretation of listening and a lack of consensus regarding strategies to consider children’s voices and views formally and systematically. I wonder about adults’ strategies to “weigh” and select parts of children’s voices and views to be considered as civic participation within society. What does respecting children’s voices mean when it is said that “listening to very young children does not necessarily mean taking all their utterances at face value” (Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996, p. 121)?

Putting into practice the idea of listening to children's voices and views seems to be a complex endeavour that demands from adults a disposition of not being the experts or the ones who always know best. It is fundamental to stop thinking and acting as adults who are reluctant "to view children as people with ideas, feelings and contributions of their own even if they may be too young to voice them directly" (Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996, p. 121). Rather, it is essential to be open to learning and interpreting the multiple languages (Malaguzzi, 1994) children use to communicate their views and interpretations of the world. Besides verbal language (Burman, 2008), children communicate by engaging in play (Engdahl, 2005; Paley, 1986, 1992, 2004) and through their drawings, their actions, and the subtle ways in which they express, represent, and imagine their thoughts, opinions, and feelings (Cagliari, Giudici, & Rinaldi, 2011; Filippini & Vecchi, 2000; Haupt, 2003; Malaguzzi, 1998; Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996). Listening to children's voices and views—which implies turning Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC into reality—demands a revision and reformulation of current models of citizenship that have not been extended to children (Roche, 1999, as cited by Lansdown, 2001), and doing so may result in the emergence of promising projects.

Rinaldi (2001c) states,

From the beginning, children demonstrate that they have a voice, know how to listen and want to be listened to by others. . . . Young children are strongly attracted by the ways, the languages (and thus the codes) that our culture has produced as well as by other people. Listening, therefore, seems to be an innate predisposition, present from birth, which supports children's process of acculturation. (p. 3)

This understanding of listening in education expands on the Article 12 statement that “children have a right to express their views and have them taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity” (Lansdown, 2011).

### **The Reggio Emilia Perspective on Listening**

The Reggio Emilia perspective on listening explains how children’s voices are understood and how educators listen to children and others. The meanings and uses of listening show non-traditional ways to conceptualize children’s voices and to interact with and teach children. Below I discuss a few understandings and practices of this way of listening.

### ***The Child’s Perspective and the Adult’s Construction of a Child’s Perspective***

There are scholars who explain the importance of listening to children’s perspectives or views. Ingrid Engdahl (2005) refers to Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi’s (1994) conception of the child as an individual who produces culture and knowledge. This construction of the child speaks about a human being with rights and unique perspectives. Children’s perspectives imply their experiences, intentions, and expressions of meaning that are different from adults’ interpretations of the children’s views. According to Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson and Sonja Sheridan (2003, as cited in Emilson & Folkesson, 2006) it is important to differentiate a child’s perspective from a child’s perspective that adults construct. Seeing or hearing a child’s view requires adults to adopt a disposition that allows children to experience knowing that their ways of understanding the world are seen and heard. The absence of this disposition on the part of adults prevents them from understanding children’s voices and views (Emilson & Folkesson, 2006). Lisa Burman (2009) notes that it is teachers’ task to find ways to listen to and learn about children’s thinking. Additionally, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) explain that listening to children from their own



position and experience, rather than assuming or inventing what children experience, prevents adults from making the other into the same. This perspective welcomes the other and opens us to embrace difference with no intention of fully comprehending the child.

### ***Pedagogy of Listening, Project Work, and Pedagogical Documentation***

The Reggio Emilia educational approach initiated and led by Loris Malaguzzi, Carla Rinaldi, and colleagues has proposed to the ECE field worldwide a *pedagogy of listening*. Rinaldi (2001b) explains that the activity of listening (i) implies all senses; (ii) is emotional; (iii) connects us with others; (iv) identifies and acknowledges languages, symbols, and codes in interactions with others; (v) is time that includes silences, pauses, and self-reflection; (vi) is driven by curiosity, desire, doubt, and interest; (vii) is open to embracing differences; (viii) involves interpretation; (ix) formulates questions rather than giving answers; (x) offers us visibility; (xi) is essential to establish relationships; (xii) is based on reciprocity; and (xiii) is not an easy practice. Listening to children (and to anyone) is a difficult task that demands hard work and time.

Malaguzzi (1994) claims that listening to children, instead of controlling, directing, and judging them, is not automatic. It is an *attitude*, a will that is learned and that implies waiting for the child. Rinaldi (2006) refers to “open listening” that suspends judgments and prejudices. A pedagogy of listening is considered a fundamental condition of acting politically and sustaining a democratic dialogue among educators, children, parents, and their community and culture (Rinaldi, 2001b, 2001c).

In alignment to the Reggio Emilia understanding of listening, E. M. Ross (1996) explains that hearing and listening are essentially different activities. Listening to children has to be learned; “it is not an intuitive matter” (Ross, 1996, p. 92). Nor is it common sense; in Davis’s (2011) terms, “common-sense can be a trap that closes down creative evolution [open listening]”

(p. 122). She considers it suspicious, or a half-truth, when educators justify establishing boundaries on the grounds that children need to feel that they are safe and in a predictable space to manifest their competence. Davis argues that children also “like to know how to successfully transgress those boundaries” (p. 122). This is why she believes that open listening is transgressive and enables listeners to come to know differently (Davis, 2011). Additionally, Pugh and Rouse Selleck (1996) note that listening to and communicating with children demand a cultural environment in which adults commit to establishing laws, structures, and procedures that define the conditions for understanding children and taking them seriously. A relevant project that exemplifies adults’ understanding and commitment in developing structures and procedures for listening to children is the *Children as Citizens* project in Denmark described by Ole Langsted (1994, as cited by Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996). Children aged 13 and 14 studied children in a kindergarten for two days and then met with teachers and parents to discuss their perspectives on how a nursery might be better run by considering youth observers’ preferences. The result was a reconsideration of the reasons for standardizing outdoor play for all children rather than offering them the possibility to choose (Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996). From my view, similar discussions should happen about naptime, bathroom time, and mealtime, activities that have been normalized in a majority of ECE centres. These taken-for-granted routines are rarely discussed, particularly with the children expected to follow them.

Davis (2011) affirms that learning to listen “is a difficult undertaking” (p. 120) since people have to open themselves to others and expose themselves to the vulnerability of the not-yet-known. A pedagogy of listening also implies a willingness to change our ideas and to learn to be comfortable with the unpredictability that is part of life (Dahlberg & Bloch, 2006). From this perspective, life is viewed as an ongoing journey of possibilities in which people relate in new

and innovative ways (Davis, 2011). In educational terms, what educators and children learn has not been specifically predefined as a strict curriculum or agenda to be accomplished. A pedagogy of listening proposes certain tools or strategies. First, it proposes project work instead of predefined curriculum, which is considered “normative, ordered and confined” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 106). In contrast, project work offers a dynamic process and space/time for real listening in which children and adults engage in experimenting and researching by formulating problems and negotiating each other’s perspectives. This relationship positions the educator to be open to unexpected responses and events in which children and adults necessarily engage in education together. Adults challenge children by augmenting connections that help children to revise and modify concepts and theories that expose them to new material and more technical understandings. Educators and children engage in co-construction processes and dialogue in which they negotiate, agree, [disagree], and encounter humour and surprise (Dahlberg & Bloch, 2006; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

Pedagogical documentation is a second tool or strategy that relates to pedagogy of listening. Pedagogical documentation is the visualization of meaning in a way that manifests the forces and energies of project work and functions as a point of departure for gaining awareness of one’s educational practices. This strategy encourages everyone involved in the process to resist dominant discourses and taken-for-granted ideas and to create new spaces for dialogue and negotiation of meaning in order to produce alternative discourses or counter-discourses (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In Lenz Taguchi’s (2008) terms, documentation of children helps educators to examine pedagogical practices that might reveal “the often-unconscious and unexamined discourses, biases, values, and taken-for-granted ideas that underline teaching decisions” (p. 270). Moreover, she refers to pedagogical documentation as a tool to understand

“power-production processes and resistance practices [while educators use] deconstructive talks and an ethics of resistance” (p. 270). Listeners engage in resistance practices when they produce multiple “readings” or assumptions about children’s ideas and actions and educators’ practices, and, when doing it, they do not aim to find the “right” answer or absolute “truth” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Later in this chapter, I expand on the meaning and uses of pedagogical documentation as one of the well-studied and discussed strategies that support how we understand and interpret children and pedagogy.

### ***Pedagogy of Listening and Children’s Provisional Theories***

A pedagogy of listening is also a strategy for learning about children’s theories or interpretations, which are provisional, continuously reworked, and listened to by others. These theories are children’s ideas or views to represent and reinvent the world they experience by engaging in project work (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Rinaldi, 2001b, 2001c). From this educational approach, children’s assumptions about the world, which educators are encouraged to document, do not intend to communicate absolute or fixed truths; they are provisional and constantly reinterpreted in a dynamic process of transformation. In contrast, in traditional or instructional education, children’s ideas are usually interpreted as if they were false knowledge that should be corrected by the adults who know or are considered the experts.

Dahlberg and Bloch (2006) note the evident difficulty for adults to truly listen to “children’s thinking, theories, fantasies, dreams and different constructions” (p. 118) that challenge the listener to be open to children’s inventive capability of understanding the world, rather than expecting children to reproduce and represent what is known and familiar to the adults around them. They argue, “We [adults] are so bound up with the idea of the true nature of thought and the right answer—the Truth” that we have already constructed who the child is (p.

118). Real listening demands that pedagogues start using a “nomadic” style of interpreting children’s ideas and actions, “outside the traditional compartmentalized disciplines and knowledge” (p. 117).

From a hermeneutic perspective, listening implies putting our prejudices at risk when we interpret, which implies also putting our identities at risk (Kimball & Garrison, 1996). This listening might be seen as dangerous, but it might also help us to understand, not the individual who speaks, but what she says. This hermeneutical intention of understanding what the other says might relate to the nomadic style of interpreting children’s ideas and actions explained by Dahlberg and Bloch (2006). Particularly, I relate a nomadic style of interpreting to Gadamer’s (1975/2013b) explanation of true conversation, which implies that each individual in relationship with others will remain open, participants will be conducted by the subject matter that is brought into dialogue, each individual will accept the other’s point of view as valid, and transpose herself into the other with the purpose of understanding what the individual says, not the person she is (pp. 375-376).

The following are examples of children’s provisional explanations of their understanding of facts and phenomena in the world, as documented by teachers and parents who have practiced hermeneutic listening when children engage in conversation.

*Mom: Do you know what “time” is?*

*Eduardo: Do you mean time? Time is life.*

*Andrés: Here it is! (pointing to his mom’s watch) Time is 1, 2, 4, 16.*

*Eduardo: Time is numbers, is a clock, too. The clock moves, that’s why time is time.*

(Boy, 9 years old, Boy, 7 years old, July 12, 2005)

*The ball is a circle from all its sides and the hoop is a circle just for one side.*

(Boy, 4 years old, October 26, 2001)

*Some dolphins, the good ones, breathe underwater, and the bad ones must jump to be able to breathe.*

(Boy, 4 years old, September 2001)

From the perspective of hermeneutic listening, the individual who documented the conversation above might have kept open to what the children spoke, considered their ideas valid, and focused on understanding what the children said, not who the children were. If I practice hermeneutic listening in the above conversations, I will interpret them as follows: In the first dialogue, time seems to be philosophically explained in accordance with the transcendental condition of life, that is, time and life are interdependent events in which time is life and life is time. Also, time seems to be explained by referring to numbers that are not static but dynamic (they become “time” only by moving). In the second example, it seems that the child made visible his understanding of concrete objects (ball or hoop) in relation to specific features of a geometrical shape (circle: all sides or only one side). In the third example, it seems that the child’s assumptions manifest association of the subject (dolphin) with the construction of moral understandings that transfer to easy or more challenging life circumstances (good: dolphin breathes easily / bad: dolphin encounters a challenge to breathe).

Children’s provisional explanations about the world offer adults multiple views to interpret as valid experiences and associations that adults may not have realized children could construct to understand concepts and phenomena. In searching for meaning and understanding, it seems that children’s minds are flexible and imaginative in constructing associations of their experiences.

From a different perspective, children's provisional explanations may be seen as formulations of their search for intellectual emancipation (Rancière, 2010). These children's ideas manifest their will and desire to pay attention and listen to the other, to interpret or make meaning, and to actively engage with the world. Their assumptions or prejudices explain their understandings, which are expected to transform in relation to the encounters in which they perform as "speakers" and "listeners" who engage in true communication with others (children and adults).

Predominantly, listening to children has not been an essential disposition, attitude, or right that adults have conceived, discussed, and practiced while they engage in relationships with children.

### ***Pedagogy of Listening and Multiple Perspectives***

When a pedagogy of listening is practiced in school environments or elsewhere, it produces a "context of multiple listening" (Rinaldi, 2001c, p. 3) that it is characterized by an atmosphere of "wonder, joy, enthusiasm and passion" (p. 3). Paley (1986) recalls that when she became curious about children, when she stopped talking and began listening to them, the school environment became a space for dialogue, "a living organism" or amiable school (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 54) in which "no right or wrong answers" (Paley, 1986, p. 122) have to be attained; rather, this space offered children the possibility of approaching problems intuitively and demonstrating how fantasy, fairness, and friendship were part of their ordinary relationships. Listening to children confirmed to Paley that "the rules for teaching had changed" (p. 125). She started to hear the answers she could not invent herself. She also realized that IQ reports were irrelevant when children engaged themselves in a deep exchange of opinions that demonstrated their understanding of the world. An additional comment that highlights the importance of listening to

children comes from a teacher at the Maple Ridge Environmental School Project in BC: “When I sat down and looked . . . and listened to the kids talk there was an incredible depth of richness in what they’ve learned. [One student] said, ‘I’ve learned about how I learn’” (Ecolearning Research Group, 2012, p. 9).

### **Challenges in Listening Pedagogically**

Pugh and Rouse Selleck (1996) refer to the adage “children should be seen but not heard” (p. 120). They believe this statement has described adults’ predominant attitude toward children under the age of seven. By contrast, Newson (1995, as cited in Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996) affirms that children should be heard. This affirmation challenges us adults: Are we prepared to listen?

Prout (2003) indicates the importance of resisting “unhelpful stereotypes of children” (p. 22) and reformulating the representation of children politically, culturally, and socially. The reformulation of children’s representation may transform the involvement of children’s voices as part of the public discourse and policy making from which children have ordinarily been excluded based on their supposed incapacity to actively contribute. Prout emphasizes that institutional arrangements are required to open spaces for listening to children; however, it is how children are seen or constructed that will make children’s voices really be heard.

Biesta (2010b) proposes that how students (children) speak, more than what they study or learn, is the important aspect to focus on. This proposition brings into discussion a reconceptualization of education for emancipation; it offers an alternative starting point in education in which any participant (e.g., educator, child) is already a speaker who uses speech to



manifest their “equal” intelligence. According to Rancière (1987/1991), “equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is *verified*” (p. 137, emphasis in original).

Rancière (1987/1991, 2010) claims that explanation is the social mechanism that stultifies or restrict students and society at large to tedious education, since it depends on experts for explanations rather than permitting students (e.g., children) to formulate their own perspectives. Malaguzzi (1994) argues that “overactivity on the part of the adult is a risk factor” (p. 54). He explains that adults tend to do too much for children because they care about them; however, this attitude gives children a passive role in their educational journeys.

Ordinarily, adults help children to become citizens and to learn roles and ways to function within their communities that would fit and be expected in the adult world (Pugh & Rouse Selleck, 1996). In similar terms, Radhika Viruru and Gaile Cannella (2001) explain that the separation between childhood and adulthood “creates a group of colonized people whose goal in life is to be like (to become) the colonizer (the normal adult)” (p. 146). In particular, they discuss ways in which adults interfere in children’s lives, such as assuming they have the right and ability to control children’s lives, their practice of institutionalizing children’s needs, and their direct physical control of children’s bodies.

If we focus on the “not-yet-listening contexts” that are usual in the ECE field, I wonder if teaching children has been misunderstood and has functioned as a system of power that blocks, prohibits, and invalidates children’s right to speak on their own behalf. Has the absence of adults’ listening to children censored and silenced children? Has it prevented the formal and systematic consideration of children’s individual theories and desires?

Claudia Ruitenberg (2008) writes, “Today, increasingly, those without *evidence* of schooling . . . are ‘not really speaking beings’ in scenes of schooling. They are the educational

equivalent of *sans papiers*, or undocumented aliens; uncertified and unaccredited” (“Teaching and Learning,” para. 4, emphasis added). Ruitenberg asks: “What if we/they [men and women *sans papiers*] inaugurate equality by speaking where we/they [men and women *sans papiers*] are supposed to have no voice? What if democracy enters the scene of schooling and disrupts the order of rank, degree, and inequality?” (“Teaching and Learning,” para. 8). From my view, Ruitenberg challenges that if everyone who participates in education is equally able to express their ideas and actions, education could turn into a practice of democracy. In democratic early childhood education, from Ruitenberg’s perspective, equality among the participants (children and adults) will disrupt the control and domination that is commonly associated with adults who believe that hierarchy and expertise should determine everyone’s education. This assumption of age superiority, I claim, could be false and will not promote the practice of a pedagogy of listening.

Prout (2003) notes that what Ellen Key (1900) referred to as the “century of the child” aims to address rights and benefits towards children. In current times, our discussion and strategies should focus on offering spaces and opportunities to promote and embrace children. This new perspective on children’s contributions to society, or “civic childhood,” demands reconsideration and reimagination of children’s claims to citizenship. Children’s citizenship may materialize into establishing procedures to listen to their voices and involve them in making decisions that consequently promote the transformation of institutions into flexible, responsible, and engaging agencies (Prout, 2003). An example of how children have contributed to society is the night school project for children in Tilonia, India, which offers education to 60% of the young individuals in this community (Roy, 2011). It is also evident that authentic listening has materialized in this instance into an alternative and reimagined institution. The project started

and developed based on the children's perspective that night schooling was the most convenient option for them, not for teachers, to organize their responsibilities effectively and smoothly in their particular context. These young individuals dedicate their daytime hours to looking after their animals. In Tilonia, 75,000 students have attended night schools, where the topics of study always relate to their lives (e.g., learning about democracy and citizenship, measuring their land, what they should do if they are arrested, and what they should do if their animal is sick).

In contrast to the tradition of shaping children's lives, or colonizing them, as Viruru and Cannella (2001) see it, Pugh and Rouse Selleck (1996) argue that it is "important for adults to find a way to access the world of childhood" (p. 126). Children are usually more capable and creative than adults give them credit for; therefore, capable and intelligent adults listen to children "to gain real insight into children's preoccupations, thoughts and feelings" (p. 126). In the Reggio Emilia approach, teachers and children are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge (Giudici et al. 2001). In this respect, Engdahl (2005) adds that educators who listen conceive "the child and the pedagogue as constructors and co-researchers" (p. 5). Pugh and Rouse Selleck assert, "young children are well able to voice their ideas, listen to each other's ideas and question and comment on them" (p. 126).

The following conversation between a primary school student and a researcher demonstrates the child's capability to be a listener and a speaker. According to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), if we learn to listen, we will provoke ourselves to think, to revise and enhance preunderstandings, and to produce new ideas.

*Child: If you see a piece of grass or a spider web, you don't grab a stick and ruin it. That's actually someone's home. That'd be like a giant coming in and poking your house with a stick.*

*Researcher: Why shouldn't we be able to do that?*

*Child: Just because we're bigger doesn't mean we have the bigger rights . . . to go and stomp over everything that we see that has a home, is building a home or is living.* (Ecolearning Research Group, 2012, p. 12)

In the above conversation between a child and a researcher, the child is indirectly speaking and demonstrating awareness about looking after the other's belongings (i.e., spider web or spider's home), and consequently is showing understanding of ethical consciousness towards the other. When the researcher questioned the child about the importance of their proposal, the child's response narrated a comparison of what destruction of a home might mean in the relationship between human-animal or human-giant. The child's explanation expresses that respect is necessary in all relationships, independent of the individual's size and empowerment.

Júlia Formosinho and Sara Barros Araujo (2006) alert us not to make the mistake of assuming "that children are too immature from a developmental point of view to be able to think conceptually or to use the necessary language in order to express their ideas" (p. 26). Domination or colonization of children devaluates their experiences and ideas and constructs them as incompetent beings who need to be controlled and turned into the "normal" (Viruru & Cannella, 2001). Additionally, Viruru and Cannella (2001) alert us that "simply looking (and listening) for the voices of children is to continue to function within colonial discourses"; they argue that "we have to go in different directions to discover [children's] perspectives" (p. 144). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) proposes transgressing the colonial structures and including the voices of the subaltern. She claims that "if the subaltern can speak, then s/he is no longer a subaltern" (as cited in Viruru & Cannella, 2001, p. 155).

Viruru and Cannella (2001) wonder whether early childhood education can ever “become something else” (p. 138). I extend this wondering to the urgency of continuously examining, discussing, and practicing listening to children as a major strategy to rethink early childhood pedagogy. Dahlberg and Bloch (2006) propose the formation of communities of inquirers with an experimental spirit in which real listening and radical dialogue become the required practices. Viruru and Cannella (2001) note that real listening offers a multiplicity of narratives that may promote a truly postcolonial discourse or language of hope. This language of hope promises to function as a frame to critique what we think we know, to sustain our willingness to listen, and to act inclusively and collaboratively with the voices that make us uncomfortable (Cannella, 1997).

To conclude this section, I refer to Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1990) encouragement to listen to and embrace different voices because they bring “conflict, struggle and the threat of disruption” (as cited in Viruru & Cannella, 2001, p. 153). From my view, it is common that educators and children encounter opportunities to embrace multiple voices that disrupt familiar and comfortable ways of thinking and acting that undoubtedly expose all who participate in education to the uncertain and the unexpected. If we embrace these opportunities formally and systematically, children and adults might make visible the conditions to continuously live *with* difference and produce new thought, which will in turn allow for more inclusive and respectful relationships among the people, other beings and things we cohabit with and listen to in early childhood education.

### **Meanings and Uses of Pedagogical Documentation**

In the last 50 years, pedagogical documentation (as a process of creating meaning of children’s ideas, actions, and interactions) has gained importance among educators around the world. Even

though it is possible to trace relevant initiatives about documenting young children in contemporary times, there are multiple and contrasting interpretations of how to conceptualize and use documentation in ECE settings and, very importantly, how to interpret and narrate what educators document. Teaching educators how to document children and what to do with this documentation has been an important component of early childhood certification and of diploma and degree programs in public and private colleges and universities in BC and elsewhere around the world.

The practice of documenting young children was introduced in the well-known preschools and infant and toddler centres in Reggio Emilia, Italy, in the 1960s. The documentation displayed at the Reggio Emilia sites, in travelling exhibits such as *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Filippini & Vecchi, 2000) and *The Wonder of Learning* (Cagliari, Giudici, & Rinaldi, 2011) and in a variety of publications have all been considered original work on pedagogical documentation and has likely provided the most relevant source of inspiration for the many educators who have studied, followed, and challenged this strategy. It is extensively written that pedagogical documentation examines and contests encounters among humans, other beings, and things that take place in specific times and educational contexts.

### **Visible and Reciprocal Listening**

Rinaldi (2001c, 2006) explains that documentation in ECE has been seen as *visible listening* that ensures that participants (e.g., children and educators) in the educational process listen to and are listened to by others. She explains that documentation collected in photographs, videos, audio recordings, written notes, and children's productions has made visible the strategies children use while engaging in education. Also, it has enabled the possibility of revisiting, interpreting, and assessing children's interactions with others and the world, and it has functioned as an essential

meta-cognitive process of rethinking and revising children's initiatives and educators' practices. She notes that observation, documentation, and interpretation form a "spiral movement" (Rinaldi, 2001c, p. 4). They are interdependent strategies used by educators to embark on the "collective process of knowledge building" (p. 4). From my view, this "spiral movement" is very similar to the hermeneutic "circles of understanding" that I describe in this dissertation. In fact, some have referred to the hermeneutic circle as a hermeneutic "spiral" (e.g., Misgeld, 1979). Deborah Harcourt and Johanna Einarsdottir (2011) note,

Over recent years, there has been increasing attention to the importance of involving children and listening to their voices and perspectives in research. . . .

All young children have the competence to engage in research as sophisticated thinkers and communicators and the inclusion of children's views is pivotal if we are to understand their life worlds. (p. 301)

Photos and video documentation of children's interactions with each other and the world have proven to be valuable materials for educators to focus on, to contest, and to use as a foundation to generate new perspectives about current practices. From my view, conceptually and practically, educators have trusted children to perform as competent users and discussants of digital photography while producing documentation that will engage participants in doing project work (in ECE settings).

### **Children and Teachers as Co-Researchers**

Referring to Malaguzzi's (1998) educational philosophy in Reggio Emilia, it seems that documenting and interpreting children's ideas and actions and educators' practices is rooted in the belief that teachers and children perform as co-researchers in a process in which children are

conceived as producers, not consumers, of knowledge (Malaguzzi, 1998). Malaguzzi (1998) writes that teachers

must learn to teach nothing to children except what children can learn by themselves . . . teachers must be aware of the risk in expressing judgment too quickly. They must enter the time frame of the children, whose interests emerge only in the course of activity or negotiations arising from that activity. They must realize how listening to children is both necessary and expedient. (p. 73)

Malaguzzi (1998) expands, saying that teachers do research independently and with colleagues about preschools' project work to continuously offer children strategies and opportunities to make ongoing decisions. Moreover, teachers do research and transfer it into action and vice versa. What they document, according to Malaguzzi, "become[s] common objects of study, at times with so much substance as to become of interest to a wider audience" (p. 87). In other words, a child's initiative to explore a particular inquiry, such as why leaves change colour and fall down from trees during the Fall, might influence other children's interest in this topic, and drive this exploration farther. The documentation of such a study project will bring about the children's assumptions or provisional theories as well as new inquiries (individual and collective). Also, according to Malaguzzi, preschools' organization and practices permit "good observations and organically developing research about cooperative learning as well as about the bartering and marketing of ideas" (p. 87). From my perspective, this research offers and sustains the foundation of the early childhood pedagogies of listening and of documenting and interpreting children's work.



## Current Views of Pedagogical Documentation

Current views in educational philosophy (Biesta 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012a, 2013; Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Foucault, 1977; Rajchman, 2001), postmodern perspectives in early childhood studies (Dahlberg & Bloch, 2006; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Honan, 2004; Lenz Taguchi, 2010a, 2010b; MacNaughton, 2003; Olsson, 2009; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010; Rinaldi, 2006), and innovative studies on qualitative methods (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011; St. Pierre, 2011) have influenced the conceptualization and use of pedagogical documentation.

On the one hand, in everyday activities at ECE sites, innovative conceptualizations and use of pedagogical documentation have not become familiar and usual theory and practice among many childhood educators; rather, they have remained as part of scholars' discourses and academic research. Commonly, educators have used the term *pedagogical documentation* for visual displays that depict children's interactions in preschools and childcare centres in ways that *describe* and *represent* knowledge. In other words, pedagogical documentation about children's interactions is reduced to representing and disseminating the "reality" children experience at their preschools and childcare centres using displays of photos and video clips. Rarely has this documentation been used to promote a deeper understanding of the children's production of knowledge and the rationale for educators' pedagogy.

On the other hand, there are educators and EC scholars who have explained and created pedagogical documentation by using sophisticated strategies to observe, discuss, and theorize about children's ideas, actions, and interactions that help them and additional audiences, such as children, parents, and community members, to question, reformulate, and elaborate meaning

differently and creatively. For instance, Lenz Taguchi (2010b) notes that Malaguzzi and his colleagues in the Reggio Emilia preschools were determined to contest traditional ways of documenting children in terms of “normal development”; instead, they used this tool to make visible “the voice of the multiplicity of differences of children’s strategies and conceptualization” (p. 72), and they did not aim to *categorize* the ideas or actions they observed and interpreted. Since its origin in the late 1960s to the present times, the work of Malaguzzi and his colleagues has constituted “a resolute resistance” towards normalizing and simplifying the uses of early childhood practices, such as observing and documenting (Lenz Taguchi, 2010b, p. 73). Based on this origin of pedagogical documentation, Lenz Taguchi’s (2010b) approach focuses on theoretical discourses of *what to see*, which I explain further in this chapter. Moreover, pedagogical documentation has been visualized and explained as a *rhizome*. Such a conceptualization refers to an activity that renders visible complex, sophisticated, surprising, and nonlinear or rhizomatic ways in which children make meaning of their interactions with people, other beings and things in educational contexts. From this perspective (Olsson, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010a; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kocher, Sanchez, & Chan, 2009), pedagogical documentation might also offer possibilities to produce ways to think differently about ECE that I do not discuss in this study, but that should be acknowledged as part of the pedagogical documentation approaches that exist.

In my dissertation, I focus on the use of philosophical hermeneutics and Gadamer’s circles of understanding and their associations with pedagogical documentation, which I explain in further detail in the next chapter. I may assume that, even though representation of reality has been the usual interpretive strategy, it has also been challenged with the purpose of encouraging educators to think about theory deeply and extensively by putting different theories to work (Fay,

1987, and Mouffe, 1996, as cited in St. Pierre, 2011; Tobin, 1995) in ways that may move us away from representation and reproduction to the generation of different knowledge by producing it differently (St. Pierre, 2011).

### **Scholarly Contributions**

Pedagogical documentation as elaborated by educators in Reggio Emilia has attracted the attention of many educators from all over the world with appreciation and will, not only to understand it, but also to challenge it and to promote new ways to conceptualize and use it. In particular, educators in Sweden and Canada have proposed appreciative perspectives about Reggio pedagogical documentation and their intentions to produce further knowledge to theorize and practice it. Educators and EC scholars in Sweden are known both for their profound and extensive pedagogical documentations that focus on interpretive project work and for their construction of teachers' networks that encourage reflective practice (Dahlberg & Bloch, 2006; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Government Offices of Sweden, 1999; Lenz Taguchi, 2006, 2010b; Olsson, 2009). In 1993, Dahlberg and her colleagues introduced pedagogical documentation by piloting the Stockholm Project (Dahlberg et al., 2007), whose origin relates to the documentation elaborated in the Reggio Emilia municipal preschools. Swedish perspectives on pedagogical documentation have explained it as an innovative and effective tool "to better understand the child's learning processes and provide a platform for co-operation, reflection and communication, between teachers themselves and together with children, parents and other interested parties from outside the preschools" (Government Offices of Sweden, 1999, p. 37). Another view offered by Dahlberg et al. (2007) is that pedagogical documentations are acts of social interpretation that make visible multiple perspectives of interactive learning that take the

form of rhizomes (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Dahlberg et al., 2007) produced among people, other beings, and things in ongoing encounters.

### ***The Investigating Quality Project and the British Columbia Early Learning Framework***

In BC, Canada, important provincial initiatives (e.g., the Investigating Quality in Early Learning Environments Project [IQ Project] and the British Columbia Early Learning Framework [BCELF]) have encouraged educators to understand, use, and challenge pedagogical documentation in the ECE field. The IQ Project has intended “to broaden and reposition early childhood discourses that have long dominated early childhood care and development practice, as well as programme and policy directions, in Canada and also throughout North America” (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010, p. 121). The foundations of the IQ Project declared interest “in the ways in which ‘Reggio Emilia’ had become a symbol of innovation and quality in North America . . . [and in] the adoption of Reggio-inspired ideas in Sweden” (New, 2000, 2003; Dahlberg et al., 2007, all as cited in Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010, p. 124), particularly in the work they have done in pedagogical documentation (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Project Zero, 2004; Rinaldi, 2001a, 2001b, 2006). The IQ Project was proposed to educators as a multifaceted experience influenced by the interpretation of documentation of children and pedagogical documentation in Reggio Emilia and in Sweden, New Zealand, and Australia. Pedagogical documentation and learning stories, the version of documenting and assessing children used in New Zealand (Carr, 2001; Carr, Hatherly, Lee, & Ramsey, 2003; Carr, Jones, & Lee, 2005; Carr & May, 2007), were the tools used by early childhood educators “to network and critically reflect on their practices” (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010, p. 129). Based on work produced in Australia by Glenda MacNaughton and colleagues (MacNaughton, 2003, 2005), the IQ Project engaged in learning how to use “postmodern” practices in early childhood classrooms. In the IQ

Project, pedagogical documentation was introduced “as a tool for reflection, planning and action within the discourse of making meaning” (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010, p. 131) and for considering learning and life as ongoing experimentation and research (Dahlberg et al., 2007). From my perspective as a facilitator of IQ Project monthly learning circles with educators for four years (2007–2011), pedagogical documentation helped us to attain the overall purpose of this initiative, which was to provide “a space for professional revitalization of educators by engaging in reflection and critical analysis and challenging each other to think differently about early childhood education issues” (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010, p. 132).

In addition to the IQ Project, the BCELF (Government of British Columbia, 2008) was launched and published in 2008. This project has also impacted early childhood conceptualization and practices across BC and nationally. The BCELF incorporated innovative educational philosophies and pedagogies proposed in Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, and Italy (Reggio Emilia), among other local and national early learning frameworks, such as BC School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan) and the province of New Brunswick (Government of British Columbia, 2008; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010). The BCELF aimed at giving early childhood educators “tools to reflect on the early learning experiences [they] create with and for children, to guide programs and activities [they] provide for children, and to support dialogue with and between families about their children’s early learning” (Government of British Columbia, 2008, p. 3). The extensive training offered all across the province in learning and using the BCELF has focused on promoting, among early childhood educators, the production of *pedagogical narrations* (the term adopted in BC to refer to pedagogical documentation) in which educators interpret children’s ideas and actions and EC educators’ pedagogy in relation to four

areas of early learning: well-being and belonging; exploration and creativity; language and literacies; and social responsibility and diversity (Government of British Columbia, 2008).

### ***Narration-as-Action***

Another initiative to understand and use pedagogical documentation is explained in Iris Berger's (2013) doctoral dissertation *Narration-as-Action: The Potential of Pedagogical Narration for Leadership Enactment in Early Childhood Education Contexts*. In her study, Berger explored the leadership potential of pedagogical narrations to promote public conversations about purposes and values in ECE. Berger explains that educational leadership might refer to a relational, political, and ethical phenomenon that situates educators to think about leadership differently. She refers to Arendt's political action as relating to "acts of storytelling or narration" (Berger, 2013, p. 3). From Arendt's perspective, Berger explains, "storytelling is about telling a provocative story that stirs people to think about what they are doing" (p. 4), and she argues that the narratives "reinstate possibilities for renewal or change" (p. 4). It is on the particular aspect of thinking about what we do and the use of educational stories for renewal and change that my study of hermeneutics and pedagogical documentation connects with Berger's. Both Berger's study and my own consider EC educators as narrators of stories that are brought to dialogue and critical reflection to generate multiple interpretations or meanings about children's experiences. In both studies, it is assumed that when meaning is elaborated about children's ideas and actions and educators' pedagogy, both individually and in collaboration, there is "potential to challenge and expand the discourses and identities" (Berger, 2013, p. 5) that are currently present and in use in the ECE field. Moreover, Berger focuses on studying the leadership enactments and identities that might be produced in pedagogical narrations; she finds that when teachers engage in this practice, their pedagogy might transform into public, political, and ethical actions in

benefit of their ECE communities. This pedagogy refers to a new understanding of leadership among educators. In my study, I propose the use of circles of understanding to elaborate multiple meanings of the story or situation that is being interpreted and reinterpreted within a context in order to approximate truth(s). This practice might help educators to make decisions that benefit children and teach us about ourselves.

### ***Systematic Documentation***

Karin Alnervik's (2018) research, *Systematic Documentation: Structures and Tools in a Practice of Communicative Documentation*, is also relevant for my study. Alnervik proposes to structure or make systematic the documentation of children and the production of pedagogical documentation. She argues for an organization within the ECE centre that supports the collection and interpretation of "stories of practice" or, in other words, children's ideas and actions and the educators' pedagogy. Alnervik argues that structure is required to determine the time to observe and frame what is documented. Also, a structure is required to visualize and organize the documentation of children and the interpretive dialogue that usually happens among educators and with the children. She finds that systematic documentation produces *communicative* documentation, which has functioned as a transformative force in ECE. Alnervik's approach is a way of thinking, in contrast to a fixed method to be followed.

Alnervik's (2018) study draws from Wartofsky's (1979) explanation about primary, secondary, and tertiary mediating artifacts that function as tools for analysis in the process of documenting and interpreting children's ideas and actions and educators' pedagogy. She explains primary artifacts as any tool, such as a camera or a computer, used to document children and educators' practices. Secondary artifacts are the ideas and knowledge that the interpreters generate to understand what is documented with the primary artifacts. Finally, tertiary artifacts

are the interpreters' creative expressions and scientific reasoning about the documentation of children that aim to produce multiple ways to visualize and understand the documentation gathered.

In both Alnervik's (2018) study and mine, we inquire about ways of interpreting documentation. Both studies emphasize a systematic way to interpret children's stories that will determine how the object of study is understood and how educators will approach truth(s) of what is interpreted. The two studies differ in concepts and practices to be undertaken to elaborate meaning of the stories of practice; however, ideas explained in Alnervik's study might enhance my claim of the relevance of using circles of understanding for interpreting children's ideas and actions and educators' pedagogy. For instance, Alnervik explains an "abductive process" or method of analysis explained by Starrin (1994) that refers to "a movement that goes back and forth between ideas and observations and between parts and wholes" (as cited in Alnervik, 2018, p. 6). In my study, circles of understanding are used to elaborate meaning about the text or object of study in a continuous and circular process in which the interpreter goes back and forth between the parts and the whole to produce meaning. Alnervik also explains the use of theoretical ideas to support making meaning of empirical findings, a strategy that I claim in my study might contribute to Gadamerian hermeneutics when it is used for interpreting documentation of children individually and collectively.

### ***Intra-Active Pedagogy***

Beyond the uses of pedagogical documentation that might follow the procedures grouped as part of visual ethnography research, such as photo and video elicitation, more current conceptualizations have been inspired by other disciplines, such as philosophy and physics. For example, Lenz Taguchi's (2010b) approach to pedagogical documentation is as a *material-*



*discursive apparatus* to produce knowledge, “not a thing but a doing” (Barad, 2007, p. 183) and “*in itself* an active agent in generating discursive knowledge” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010b, p. 63, emphasis in original). This approach contrasts with the familiar production of pedagogical documentation that describes and represents what is observed and documented. Lenz Taguchi’s (2010b) posthumanist approach to intra-active pedagogy is different from my study’s hermeneutic framework for interpreting children’s ideas and actions and educators’ pedagogy. However, I want to acknowledge Lenz Taguchi’s approach as an initial perspective on pedagogical documentation that I discussed and practiced with educators and that enabled us to generate new ways of understanding and interpreting interactions among “agents” who/which were involved in educational situations.

Lenz Taguchi (2010b) explains how educators have observed and learned about children throughout time and, as a result of these observations, what pedagogical documentation has come to be—and might become, if further theory and language (Foucault, 1977; Lenz Taguchi, 2010b; St. Pierre, 2011) are embraced by educators and their communities. Lenz Taguchi’s (2010b) discussion about “three ways of using observational apparatuses and producing knowledge” (p. 75) illustrates a spectrum of possibilities—from normative and restricted to generative and creative—for understanding and engaging with pedagogical documentation. She asks, “What is it that we see when looking out of the box at the playing children and observing them?” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010b, p. 75) and argues that the answer to this question will produce very different ways to understand and practice education for young children. The first way for observing and producing knowledge is oriented by the discourse of child development and developmental psychology. It assumes the educators’ acquisition of this knowledge, which is considered accurate and normative. Moreover, the adult and the child are understood as separate

individuals who create representations of each other; usually, it is the adult who represents and makes educational decisions about who the child is and what this young individual should do (Lenz Taguchi, 2010b). Lenz Taguchi writes:

We think it is possible to know the “true nature” of the child so we check our developmental protocol with its fixed age-related categories for motor, social, emotional or cognitive developments. . . . The practice of the observations box is done from within a representational and binary paradigm, where the observer is separated from the observed (a subject/object binary divide). Scientific knowledge is understood as an accurate reflection in language of a physical reality, and actually mirroring it (the discourse/reality divide). (p. 75)

The second way of observing and producing knowledge is oriented by the adults’ subjectivities to describe and understand the realities of children according to what the adults see and hear in their interactions. Also, these observations and productions of knowledge refer to the adults’ understanding about familiar discourses and culture (Lenz Taguchi, 2010b). In this approach, Lenz Taguchi (2010b) says, “we may simply write down what we see and hear, like an ethnologist, sociologist or social constructivist educational researcher and then try to understand it in terms of different cultural notions and discourses” (p. 75).

Lenz Taguchi (2010b) proposes going beyond the first and second ways or apparatuses for observing and producing knowledge because they are partial or insufficient. She argues against the belief that adults construct the child based *only* on what we know about nature, culture, reality around us, and the discourses with which we have gained familiarity. She notes, “[Both cases] constitute a polarization: a belief that we can observe nature and reality ‘out there’

is polarized against a belief that all we can observe and know is human constructions in culture and discourse” (p. 75).

Lenz Taguchi (2010b) suggest “a third way of observing in an intra-active pedagogy” (p. 75). Her proposal is built on the Reggio Emilian pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2006); however, what she describes as an intra-active pedagogy includes “the agency of the material in the production of knowledge” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010b, p. 65). Inspired by Karen Barad’s work (1999, 2007, 2008), Lenz Taguchi (2010b) adds that “an intra-active pedagogy explicitly focuses on the phenomena produced in the inter-relations, inter-connections, interferences and waves of diffraction that emerge *in-between* the material, the discursive and human beings” (p. 65, emphasis in original). An intra-active pedagogy means “an interdependent and mutual ‘listening’ and observing” (p. 65) that should not be reduced to understanding the intra- and inter-personal relations among children, and with educators; instead, the observing and producing of knowledge focus on understanding the performative agency of the material in the intra-actions that take place in-between the material, the discourse, and the individuals in educational situations (Lenz Taguchi, 2010b).

To summarize, Lenz Taguchi (2010b) claims that observing and producing knowledge in the first two cases results in the production of pedagogical documentation as if it were ethnographic research. This approach to pedagogical documentation is “presented as an important but passive tool . . . [which relates to educators’] lack of language and concepts to use in order to make visible or actualize process in-between organisms (human and non-human), objects, matter and things” (p. 65). Lenz Taguchi’s approach, which is a doing or an active agent for generating discursive knowledge, has challenged the practice of documenting and interpreting the material gathered as if it represented or described what happened when it was

collected, and has promoted a new, unfamiliar, and possibly sophisticated practice of observing and producing knowledge about the intra-activities that are performed in ECE settings.

### **Early Childhood Pedagogies and Gadamerian Hermeneutics**

In this chapter, I reviewed literature about two early childhood pedagogies or strategies, pedagogy of listening and pedagogical documentation, that have been extensively researched in early childhood studies. Both strategies were originally conceptualized and practiced in the Reggio Emilia preschools and infant and toddlers centres, and they have been widely discussed and used in the ECE field worldwide. The further study and practice of these strategies has produced multiple diverse understandings and interpretations towards children's ideas and actions and educators' pedagogy. In other words, this review of literature presents historical and educational meanings and uses of both strategies to inform the reader about the scholarly work that has been done and how this discussion and practice might continue and build.

As I have said, this study explains and illustrates that the systematic use of both strategies—and the practice of two more early pedagogies, thinking and dialoguing—promotes the use of hermeneutic enquiry to interpret documentation of children and educators' practices. In Chapter 5, I revisit and expand on the discussion of a capable image of the child, a preconception that frames this study, and I argue that the systematic practice of the four strategies—listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation—is implied in the use of Gadamerian hermeneutics in ECE.

In the following chapter, I explain how the theoretical framing of Gadamerian hermeneutics and circles of understanding might contribute in early childhood studies to broaden our conceptualizations of the child, educators' pedagogy, and ourselves.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE USE OF GADAMERIAN HERMENEUTICS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES**

*We all are interpreters of the world. ~ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1975/2013b*

### **The Meaning of Being and Acting Hermeneutically**

In this chapter, I discuss the use of Gadamerian hermeneutics and circles of understanding, or hermeneutic enquiry, in early childhood studies, drawing primarily from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher who lived from 1900 to 2002. Hermeneutic enquiry enables educators to engage in thoughtful and challenging dialogue with themselves and others with a view to revising and reformulating their perspectives on children, pedagogy, and themselves as educators. In so doing, educators engage in (1) self-education and thinking, and (2) dialogue with others to expand their knowledge and seek “truth” about what is examined and interpreted. I find Gadamer’s ideas about hermeneutic enquiry a particularly useful approach for interpreting documentation of children and educators’ pedagogy. Additionally, my purpose is to promote the use of circles of understanding as a discourse and practice, or an alternative story (Moss, 2014), in early childhood studies.

John Cleary and Pádraig Hogan (2001) elucidate what it means to act hermeneutically, not only when the individual relates to herself, but also when she enters into dialogue with others to gain understanding about herself and the others in the task of interpreting a text or an object of study. Cleary and Hogan highlight Gadamer’s “commitment to philosophical enquiry as an invitation to critical dialogue” (p. 519). Rather than opting for a “traditional epistemological quest for certainty” (p. 520), the hermeneutic individual who searches for “truth,” they suggest, would find it promising to engage in a “self-critical venturing of different perspectives” (p. 520).

When Gadamer explains the search for “truth,” he rejects both *relativism* and *objectivism*; he believes that “truth” is attainable in reference to the context in which the acts of interpretation take place (Cleary & Hogan, 2001). In this search for “truth,” Cleary and Hogan explain, “absolute knowledge or complete rational self-clarity” (p. 520) is not the purpose. Rather, in pursuing a plurality of perspectives, the intention is to understand one’s own and others’ views. From my perspective, Gadamer emphasizes that acting hermeneutically is not an adversarial undertaking. Instead, it implies both the process of understanding oneself and the act of taking responsibility for understanding the other’s point of view. For Gadamer (1975/2013b), speaking, or the use of language in conversation rather than communicating ideas in writing, is the primary way in which individuals gain insight and approximate “truth.” Later in this chapter, I expand on the importance of the use of language in Gadamerian hermeneutics.

In this study, to engage hermeneutically means to deliberately examine children’s ideas and actions (texts or objects of study) circularly and continuously. In ECE, this practice challenges or interrupts the educators’ current knowledge/perspective, or, in Gadamerian terms, their prejudices or preunderstandings. While these prejudices or preunderstandings might help educators to create accurate or “correct” interpretations, they might also produce inaccurate or “incorrect” interpretations which the educators should try to “correct” by generating further insights through interpretive cycles. Gadamer (1975/2013b) explains: “All *correct* interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze ‘on the things themselves’” (p. 279, emphasis added). He adds that “methodologically conscious understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire *right* understanding from the things themselves” (p. 282, emphasis added). These cycles of

interpretation involve moving back and forth between the parts and the whole of the situation as they emerge through close readings of the documentation, always with a keen attention to particularities of history and context. Truthful understanding must rely on “correct” interpretations that result when the interpreter mediates between history and the present (Gadamer 1975/2013b, p. xxix). The perspectives of others, such as the beliefs of EC students, teachers, children, and parents, as well as insights from the literature, are key to such hermeneutic enquiry.

While Gadamerian hermeneutics emphasizes seeking truthful or “correct” interpretations, inaccurate or “incorrect” readings are both desirable and hopeful practice in circles of understanding. Not only do “incorrect” readings encourage more precise readings of what is examined, thereby approximating “truth,” they help the interpreter to become conscious of the limits of her current understanding.

Based on these propositions, a few more questions are addressed in this study: (1) How is the elaboration of meaning and “truth” understood and applied in ECE philosophy and practice? (2) What are truthful or “correct” interpretations, and how do they contribute pedagogically? (3) Does engagement with scholarly literature help educators to generate insight (self-education) and to elaborate truthful interpretations?

My intention in studying ways of understanding children and educators’ pedagogy is not to gather more scientific knowledge about developmental stages and categories that are frequently used in this field to assess children’s performance or behaviour. Rather, I focus on refining educators’ ways of observing and listening to children’s ideas and actions, of thinking about and understanding them, and of speaking about and documenting them, individually and collectively with colleagues. I suggest that educators draw on Gadamer’s circles of

understanding to interpret children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices that they have documented. In similar fashion, Paul Regan (2012), when he explained Gadamerian hermeneutics in relation to his work in nursing, emphasized that in making sense of the text as part of the interpretive process, the person practices application, listening, observing, testing, judging, challenging, reflecting, and looking for bias whilst being-with-others. The actions undertaken while interpreting a text or object of study might differ from one proposal to another (for example, Regan's and mine). In both approaches, however, emphasis is given to the interpreter's intent to advance understanding of both herself and others in relation to the story (text or object) that is examined. The interpreter approximates "truths" that reveal what is meaningful for her within her context, considering both its history and its tradition. This process implies an initial and progressive understanding of her prejudices and the acknowledgment of an inner world of subjectivity (Regan, 2012). In ECE, the EC student or teacher makes sense of documentation of children by becoming conscious of her initial preunderstandings and her subjective thinking within her context, and by elaborating new meanings of what is read or examined.

### **Gadamerian Hermeneutics: Not a Method But a Search for "Truth"**

Paul Fry, in his 2009 Yale lecture *Ways In and Out of the Hermeneutic Circle*, explains that hermeneutics has a long history in philosophy and other disciplines, such as theology, art, and legal studies. Initially, hermeneutics related to the interpretation of religious texts, such as the Christian Bible. In the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, interpretation referred to being disposed to learn what the text/author said. In other words, the individual had to be open to understanding what someone else had proclaimed or stated. Prior to Heidegger's and Gadamer's



contributions to the reformulated view of philosophical hermeneutics, the history of German philosophy was dominated by the legacy of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and was “trapped in a Cartesian and Neo-Kantian subject–object dualism” (Nicholls, 2004, p. 2). Dilthey’s hermeneutics was considered “a methodology that could ‘ground’ or secure a *method* for the human sciences and that might, in its rigor, be comparable to the methods of the natural sciences” (Nicholls, 2004, p. 2, italics added). In other words, for Dilthey, the individual learns true understanding and knowledge about what is examined when she approaches it by using the scientific method to acquire objective knowledge (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, p. 320) and a “convincing logical coherence” (p. 183).

For Gadamer, Heidegger’s lectures on the hermeneutics of facticity in the 1920s provoked “a radical reinterpretation and reorientation of the term ‘hermeneutics’” (Nicholls, 2004, p. 2) that influenced Gadamer’s philosophical ideas from that point in time into the future. Heidegger’s broader perspective about the human-being-in-the-world, or *Dasein*, with which Gadamer agreed, contrasted with Dilthey’s view and resisted and rejected the idea that objective understanding and knowledge about what is examined (e.g., children’s ideas and actions, educators’ practices) can be attained by the method used in the natural sciences. Human initiatives and actions throughout history showed Gadamer that the individual’s understanding and interpretation, or elaboration of meaning, is always provisional and never absolute (Nicholls, 2004).

In his 1957 essay “Was ist Wahrheit?” (What is Truth?), Gadamer asserted that the method used in the natural sciences does not explain “everything that is worth knowing, not least that which is most worth knowing” in relation to the purposes of control that nature and humans must serve (as cited in Nicholls, 2004, p. 4). Gadamer (1985) also wondered whether method

could be a guarantor to achieve truth. He explained that the hermeneutic phenomenon is not a method; nor is it concerned with scientific examination aimed at accumulating verified knowledge (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, p. xx). Instead, hermeneutics “is concerned with knowledge and with truth” (p. xx); it refers to a process in which “insights are acquired and truths known” (p. xx). In explaining Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Andrzej Wiercinski (2009) states that

understanding in the human sciences cannot be ruled by any specific methodology but needs to be confronted and verified in the hermeneutic horizons of the experience of life. . . . Gadamer offers a non-objectivistic view of interpretation in which understanding happens within a fusion of horizons of the text and its interpreter. . . . [U]nderstanding is never a subjective relation to a given “object” but to the history of its effect. (pp. 4–6)

Wiercinski’s (2009) explanation emphasizes Gadamer’s understanding that there is no method that teaches the interpreter how to make sense of the human sciences; rather, the interplay between an individual and a text or object of study is a phenomenon that the interpreter should make meaning of by referring to the historical effects in which this experience happens. It is in this process of understanding and creating meaning that the individual learns about the hermeneutic horizons, which are historical because they are always formed in relation to the past and the present. The interpreter’s horizon indicates her current range of vision or her conscious prejudices (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, pp. 313, 317). In her process of understanding, she experiences a fusion of horizons, which also means a fusion of prejudices that are not fixed but provisional and changeable, particularly when the individual intends to open up to new views or possibilities to understand and interpret (p. 317).

In the field of education, behavioural objectives such as norms and standards assume that aligning with a method (DAP) saves individuals from the task of interpreting. Joseph Dunne's (1997) critique of the behavioural objectives model resists and rejects the use of a method to understand, interpret, gain knowledge, and seek "truth." Dunne explains that this model dictates instrumental steps toward the achievement of learning outcomes or goals that define the meanings of success and effective teaching. His resistance to the use of a method for seeking "truth" relates to the model's concerns about "the possibility of misinterpretation by removing the need for interpretation itself" (p. 3). The language of behavioural objectives implies eliminating the hermeneutical dimension from teaching and assuming that education can be exercised from a neutral position; instructional methods are considered instructional means (Dunne, 1997). In agreement with Dunne's resistance to a method for seeking "truth," in Gadamerian hermeneutics, interpretation does not imply a fixed scientific method to be followed and verified; rather, hermeneutics "is an investigation into the nature of understanding" (Wiercinski, 2009, p. 3).

Additionally, Gadamer (1975/2013), when he explains education, refers to *Bildung* (culture) as the "properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities" (p. 10). As Paul Fairfield (2011, as cited by Kerdeman, 2015, p. 86) explains, learning does not refer to "achievable outcomes, [but to] forming the soul." Particularly, "*Bildung* does not aim to help students acquire information, master concepts, or increase their computational skills and reading comprehension [but] focuses on cultivating students' self-understanding by engaging them in experiences that challenge their expectations and beliefs" (Kerdeman, p. 86). In the context of ECE, educators and I practice hermeneutic enquiry to construct our conceptions of children and to challenge and revise our pedagogy. In our intents to understand and interpret, we experience

the not-yet-known and become conscious of being open to uncertainty. Dunne (1997) recommends that hermeneutic individuals “assemble a more ample discourse” (p. 8) that would enable us “to interpret and criticize, beyond the level of [our] own self-understanding” (p. 8). If we did not practice being and acting hermeneutically, we might choose, consciously or unconsciously, to believe and reproduce conceptions of children and pedagogy explained by only familiar and dominant discourses in the ECE field, such as developmental psychology and developmentally appropriate practice.

### **An Illustration of Knowledge and Truth**

Gadamer (1960/2004) asks, “What kind of knowledge and what kind of truth” (p. xx) is hermeneutics concerned with? In responding to this question, I offer the following story, drawn from an internet video clip (Kay, 2017), to show the formulation of knowledge and “truth” by a young child, “Andy,” and a middle-aged homeless woman, “Betty,” who meet at a local park (in the video, the characters are unnamed; I’ve given them names to aid in telling the story).

*Andy, a cheerful, self-confident boy, is preparing for a solo outing to a local park. Prior to leaving home, he packs two packages of Twinkies and two bottles of juice in his backpack. Watching him pack the treats, his mom asks, “What are you up to?” Andy replies, “I am going to find God.”*

*Andy’s mom smiles as her son goes out the door. “Oh, I see. Well, dinner is at six. Don’t be late!”*

*Andy, clearly a seasoned user of public transit, takes the subway to the park. Once he arrives, he sits down on a bench beside Betty, whom he doesn’t appear to know. Andy smiles at her and then opens his backpack to retrieve his snack. Betty watches him take out a Twinkie and*

*remove its wrapper. Just before he takes a bite, Andy looks over and sees Betty watching him. Smiling, he offers his second Twinkie to her.*

*“Thank you!” Betty says with surprise, and she accepts the offered treat.*

*Moments later, Andy and Betty are eating, chatting, and laughing together like old friends. Suddenly, Andy checks his watch and says, “Gotta go!” He hugs Betty and waves to her from a distance as he walks away.*

*When he arrives home, his mom asks, “Ah, so did you find him?”*

*Andy replies, “God is a woman, Mom. And she has the most beautiful smile I have ever seen.”*

*At the park, a smiling, laughing Betty meets another homeless woman who is sitting on the ground with a large cardboard sign that says “Need money for food.” Betty sits down beside her, grinning.*

*“Why are you in such a good mood?” the woman asks.*

*Betty responds, “I just ate Twinkies at the park with God . . . he is much younger than I expected.”*

This story illustrates two individuals’ formulations of “truth” about what God looks like. The story’s significance is not about the factual accuracy of what happens, but the way it shows how knowledge and “truth” were constructed from Andy’s and Betty’s perspectives. From my view, the story reveals the effects of the boy’s and the woman’s histories and traditions about *who* could be associated with God’s personhood and actions (and *why*). It also reveals their assumptions of what God looks like, and more importantly, how this encounter challenged their preconceptions. Both Andy and Betty expressed that their assumptions about what God looks like had been challenged and reformulated.

The story “Eating Twinkies with God” relates to Robert Sullivan’s (1985) assertion that “there is not truth that is ‘objective’ in the sense that it can be described and calculated and restated in a rigorous formula” (p. x). “Truth is frail, and human,” Sullivan wrote, “more a matter of ‘truth-for-us’ than ‘truth-as-such’” (p. x). In “Eating Twinkies with God” the “truth” of what God looks like appears to be different in the boy’s and the woman’s understandings, which speaks about their individual preconceptions to create truth-for-us, not truth-as-such. A hermeneutic approach would not focus on finding a fixed or true understanding of what God looks like, but on engaging in conversation within a context to get to know each other’s standpoints so as to intersubjectively create meaning of what is examined individually and collectively. In other words, Gadamer (1985) explains that “hermeneutic philosophy understands itself not as an absolute position but a way of experience” (p. 189). Moreover, he insists “there is no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation” (p. 189). From my view, Gadamer emphasizes that understanding as “a way of experience” would always be provisional and transformable when individuals engage in dialogue with self and others.

### **Interpreting Is the Art of Understanding, a Three-Way Relation**

Gadamer (1975/2013b) defines interpretation as “an art or technique of understanding” (p. 278). For Gadamer, Deborah Kerdeman (2015) explains, “understanding is not a willed act of cognition, a special method, or a general theory of knowledge” (p. 88). Instead, it is “the human way of ‘being’ in the world . . . a way of being involved with the world and is realized prereflectively in the form of moods, concerns, and unconscious practical engagements with people and things” (p. 88). In other words, our existence implies understanding, which might be

unconscious, of our interactions with ourselves and others (e.g., people, objects) within a context.

In Gadamer's (1960/2004) terms, "understanding is the original characteristic of the being of human life itself" (p. 205). In other words, we are always engaging in understanding something. Understanding "is always occurring," Kerdeman (2015, p. 88) explains, and understanding arises in tension, in the space between *familiarity* and *strangeness*. Shaun Gallagher (1992, as cited in Kerdeman, 1998b) notes,

Without at least some familiarity with what we are trying to interpret, understanding never would get off the ground. At the same time, interpretation would be unnecessary if everything already were familiar. Interpretation is stimulated by difference and distance. As a consequence of encountering difference, the familiar is transformed. (pp. 245–246)

Gadamer's (1975/2013b) central line of investigation is about "the nature of 'understanding,'" which unfolds into "coming to an understanding with someone" or "coming to an agreement with someone" (p. xv). He proposes a three-way relation in which "one person comes to an understanding with another about something they thus both understand. [This means] when two people 'understand each other' (*sich verstehen*), they always do so with respect to something" (pp. xv–xvi). According to Gadamer, that something is not just an opinion or an exchange of views; it is an investigation of the other individual's perspective about the object of study. Understanding, he says, "is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning" (1985, p. 383). Additionally, this "self-understanding" (*Sichverstehen*) does not include only one's own understanding of the object of study. It also includes what *the other* understands about the object of study. In Gadamer's terms, it is "*knowing one's way around* in a certain matter"

(1975/2013b, p. xvi, emphasis added). In ECE, “knowing one’s way around in a certain matter” might refer to what the educator understands about the children’s ideas and actions, her own pedagogical practices, and what she and the other educators understand collectively. In Kerdeman’s (2015) terms, this understanding or knowing one’s way around is *Bildung*: “a conversation between students [children], teachers [educators], and texts [documentation of children]” (p. 86).

To illustrate Gadamer’s proposal of a three-way relation in understanding, I refer to an example that I narrated previously in Chapter 3. A child said, “The ball is a circle from all its sides and the hoop is a circle just for one side” (Boy, 4 years old, October 26, 2001). This child’s statement shows that he understands that two objects might be similar but also different. In this instance, from the child’s perspective, the ball and the hoop are both circular objects; however, the ball implies volume, which the boy explains as a circle “from all its sides.” This circular shape is different from a circle “just for one side,” as he perceives the hoop. The educator might have noticed the *imprecision* of the child’s understanding when he defined the ball and the hoop. However, in a three-way relation to understand the other’s perspective about an object under examination, the educator would have deliberately noticed and acknowledged the child’s view, which might be a definition of a ball and a hoop that the educator had not thought about before, but that she could welcome and think about for further dialogue and negotiation of meaning. The educator who examined this child’s statement might have also come up with more definitions of a ball and a hoop, such as, a ball is a round object with volume and a hoop is a round, flat object.

In a three-way relation, readings about an object that participants in dialogue propose might help to approximate “truth” within their context. Multiple interpretations of an object of study enhance individual and collective understandings of what is under examination and also



their negotiation of meaning (possibly contrasting meanings). This enhancement of the interpreters' understanding reveals their current knowledge or preconceptions and might also expand their horizons.

### **The Systematic Discipline of Hermeneutics and Self-Education**

Dunne (1997) explains that Gadamer's two major contributions to philosophy were (1) the foundation of a "systematic discipline of hermeneutics," or the study of interpretation, and (2) the recovery and confirmation of "Aristotle's practical philosophy" (p. 105). Here, I refer to the systematic discipline of hermeneutics, which does not offer a method of understanding and interpretation to be followed but implies an in-depth investigation of a *hermeneutic problem* that is posed by the interpreter(s). In ECE, the educators who interpret documentation of children and teachers' pedagogy outline a hermeneutic "problem" and aim to understand and expand their conceptualizations of children, teachers' practices, and themselves. Liselott Olsson's (2009) perspective might be helpful here. She proposes that educators ask themselves what problem children are constructing in their engagements with others and the world. The word *problem* in either case (i.e., in Gadamer's and Olsson's views) does not have a negative connotation. Rather, it is used with a constructive orientation of searching for meaning and interpreting the subject matter.

As educators interpret documentation of children and teachers' pedagogy, they play a *game of understanding* (Frazier, 2015) in which the text or object of study is opened to interpretation and meaning making in relation to the questions and assumptions they identify and discuss. Jessica Frazier (2015) explains that this shared activity is complex, has a life of its own, and encourages the participants or players to contribute with their individuality to create a new

interplay of the situation that is examined. Frazier adds that “truths” that are interpreted are neither completely relative nor objective, since they are drawn from the rules of the game within the context in which the text or object of study is examined and discussed, using language. In this way, language functions as the precondition and the structure of reality in using hermeneutics systematically (Frazier, 2015).

Gadamer (1975/2013b) notes that the way in which we experience each other and “*what happens to us* over and above our wanting and doing” (p. xxvi, emphasis added) is what opens us up to a philosophical hermeneutic experience. In such an experience, we are immersed in an uncertain world that asks us to become systematic interpreters, or hermeneutical subjects. Our existence and interrelationships with the world are not predefined, and our interpretation and understanding should be created and recreated in relation to the context in which we live.

Gadamer (1975/2013b) adds that hermeneutics “is concerned with the ‘scientific’ integrity of acknowledging the commitment involved in all understanding” (p. xxv). In other words, our search for the meaning of our individual existence and the world we live in requires a rigorous commitment to continuously and circularly interpret what happens in our experiences with ourselves and others and a diligence to understand how, individually and collectively, we think and act in the world. In ECE, performing as hermeneutical educators implies the systematic use of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation about similar/familiar, different/alien, and other contrasting assumptions about children and about the pedagogical practices educators examine and bring into dialogue.

Cleary and Hogan (2001) explain that, for Gadamer, the interpreter is not a spectator, observer, or jury member; rather, she is a participant who engages in and is critical about the unfolding of the hermeneutic enquiry. It is only through conversation with others, they assert,

that the individual engages in self-education or self-understanding, which, in Gadamerian hermeneutics, is seen as an emergent capability that is gradually embraced to construct a solid personal responsibility. In other words, the interpreter's role of being-in-the-world might advance into the fullness of being-with-others when the individual(s) opt for purposeful relationships, which Gadamer refers to as the reciprocal character of self-education (Cleary & Hogan, 2001). In reference to self-understanding, David Kennedy (1996) explains the importance of "the self in search for itself" (p. 195). It is in this interpretive, dialogical, and dialectical self-search that individuals problematize everything once they commit to hermeneutic enquiry. Kennedy adds that individuals engage in hermeneutic enquiry because they encounter a "situation of a break [or] division" (p. 195) that becomes *strange* when they contrast it with what they previously understood or accepted without questioning. In other words, it is this break with what was understandable or unquestioned that makes individuals who practice hermeneutics use dialogue within themselves and with others to regain and take to a higher level their understanding of the object of study. In Kennedy's words, they "seek to re-establish . . . a 'fusion of horizons' with the object [of interpretation]" (p. 195). I suggest that in ECE, educators might engage in hermeneutic enquiry if, in their engagements with documentation of children, their inner self encounters a "strange" idea or practice that disrupts what they had previously understood and accepted without questioning (e.g., something that was taught as a universal Truth). The educators' encounter with strangeness might make them experience a break or division in their understanding of the text or object of study they thought they knew. It is this experience with strangeness that will engage them in hermeneutic enquiry to further examine what they think now that they have to revise and understand in more depth.

A conversation about babies' capability to hold their breath under water illustrates how the experience of encountering strangeness in documentation about children engaged EC students and myself in hermeneutic enquiry. In this case, there were EC students who knew (as a universal Truth) that babies should not be put under water until they are old enough or have received swimming lessons (a child development teaching). However, as we dialogued about photo and video documentation concerning the experiences of babies who were capable of holding their breath under water because of their birth reflex of closing their throat, this new information or "truth" functioned as a "break" (Kennedy, 1996, p. 195) that made the students feel strange or confused about what they knew and had never questioned. As a result, they formulated new assumption(s) that contrasted with their previous understanding of how babies might respond to being under water.

### **Dialectic or Questioning to Conduct Open Dialogue**

Understanding always implies *questioning*, which, for Gadamer (1985) is what "opens up possibilities of meaning" (p. 383). To make meaning implies *thinking* about the text or object of study which is interpreted. In ECE, to experience hermeneutical understanding of documentation of children and of teachers' practices, the educators start by posing questions prompted by a genuine interest in knowing what is unknown, strange, unfamiliar, or uncertain. This real desire to know shows openness and also reveals their ignorance, or what they do not know about a particular subject, and this search for meaning and "truth" might help to expand their conceptualizations of children and of educators' pedagogy. The educators' questions might also make visible the limits or horizons of what they know and don't know about the subject matter in

reference to their life experiences within particular contexts. For Gadamer (1975/2013b), these horizons are expressed by the individuals' presuppositions or preconceptions.

Based on his studies of Plato, Gadamer (1975/2013b) determined that *questioning* was an activity of true superiority. He explained that Plato spoke about the relevance of the questions that could be drawn from knowledge and discourse because they reveal something about the object of study. Questioning is the essence of making sense or seeking meaning. It is questioning that points out the direction of what kind of understanding and interpretation might be produced. Gadamer writes, "Deciding the question is the path to knowledge. What decides a question is the preponderance of reasons for the one and against the other possibility. But this is still not full knowledge" (p. 373). In other words, knowledge seems to be always partial and temporary rather than fixed and final.

Gadamer (1975/2013b) also refers to the Socratic *dialectic* to explain the art of questioning. He writes, "It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue . . . [however] the art of dialectic is not the art of being able to win every argument" (p. 375). That is, the art of dialectic is about thinking rather than arguing. For Gadamer, the value of using dialectic lies in the individual's ability to remain in open conversation or real dialogue with (an)other individual(s) who has agreed to be oriented by the subject matter that is being examined and interpreted.

In early childhood studies, Vintimilla (2012) has reflected on and challenged the possibilities of and conditions for achieving a collaborative process of thinking and conversation by posing two questions that she studied in her doctoral dissertation: (1) "What does it mean to live well with others in educational contexts?" and (2) "What might the way we engage in this question mean for the possibility of the teacher [educator] as a thinking subject?" (p. 2).

According to Vintimilla (2016), the act of *putting-into-question* refers to welcoming a question (or questions) into the conversational encounter with educators. She explains that in putting-into-question, affirmation is given to the question itself, and also to the individual(s) who asked it. While Vintimilla draws primarily from Derrida's work and Derrida and Gadamer disagreed on the mutual "goodwill" required for a conversation (Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989), her emphasis on the affirmation that the question lends to the individuals who engage with it relates to Gadamer's proposal that questions are what orient the conversation between individuals.

To explain Derrida's understanding of questioning in our encounters with others, Vintimilla quotes him:

To ask a question, I must address someone. Even innocent questions presuppose a primary affirmation. I address myself to someone else and I am saying it's better we speak than we don't, it's better that I relate to the Other than not. And so I affirm a sort of yes, a sort of "anterior" acquiescence. (Derrida, 1995, p. 5, as cited in Vintimilla, 2016, p. 6)

Vintimilla's (2016) understanding of Derrida above emphasizes that questions put individuals into a relation with each other where answers or dialogue are not preplanned or predefined. Instead, questions might provoke conversation and discussion. Questions are desirable because they make educators aware that they do not yet know, or are dispossessed of knowledge that might open up new possibilities, in contrast to the common understanding that "good" or "effective" educators are ones who "feel in control and in possession of the objects (human and otherwise) that are proper to education [such as] daily routines, decisions, transitions, schedules, and so on" (Vintimilla, 2016, p. 7). Similarly, in Gadamerian hermeneutics, the questioning that reveals the individual's horizons of knowledge helps the person to affirm and become conscious

of her own and other individuals' preconceptions and current knowledge as they engage in conversation.

Vintimilla (2016) further explains that among educators in the ECE field, the practice of putting-into-question aims to reconceptualize children's and teachers' ideas in order to make curriculum and pedagogy an *existential* experience rather than focusing only on the programmatic organization of materials and activities. The practice of putting-into-question implies a place for/of intersection in which the participants confront their own "theoretical commitments, epistemologies, uncertainties, creativity, fears, resistances and routines" (Vintimilla, 2016, p. 2); in so doing, they become exposed as beings-put-into-question. In Vintimilla's view, educators might also be troubled by the complexities of these encounters and the generative and rich conversations that take place despite their difficulty. Referring to Derrida's ideas, Vintimilla adds that in this type of encounter, an educator who might be seen as a *foreigner* or *stranger* to whom a question has been addressed is herself in-question and might also put the other into-question. This practice among educators of being-in-question and putting-into-question, which I associate with dialectic or questioning in Gadamerian hermeneutics, has in Vintimilla's research shown the educators' ability to "problematize their assumptions and naturalized routines of thinking that limit ways of engaging with others" (Vintimilla, 2016, p. 3) and has prevented them from jumping "too quickly into predetermined ways of thinking" (p. 3) when they encounter tension or disruption in their pedagogy.

### **Prejudices, Preunderstandings, or Preconceptions**

*Prejudices, preunderstandings, or preconceptions* are terms used interchangeably in Gadamerian hermeneutics to refer to the constructions of knowledge an individual possesses and uses to

interpret a text or object of study. Gadamer (1975/2013b) explains that the word prejudice, as he uses it, does not have a negative connotation of exclusion or discrimination against something or someone; it simply refers to an individual's current understanding of concepts and experiences. A prejudice, for Gadamer, reveals how the individual understands and thinks, how she might act in relation to what she has experienced, and how she has constructed knowledge within a context over time. From this perspective, a prejudice reveals the beliefs and values that provide the individual's foundation of knowledge for being and doing in the world.

### **Prejudice and Tradition Are Conditions for Understanding**

Gadamer believed it was Descartes in the early modern world who gave a negative connotation to the term prejudice (Sullivan, 1985). Gadamer's realization of the "bad reputation" (p. vii) of prejudice led him to engage in a "straightforward attack on the Cartesian *prejudice against prejudices*" (p. vii, emphasis added). Thus, Gadamer focused on restoring the meaning and function of "historical and traditional prejudices to their pivotal position as the conditions of possibility of whatever understanding we can have" (p. vii). In practice, Gadamer considered and studied his teachers' understandings as initial prejudices, not as final positions with "truth value" (p. vii). He explained that these and any other prejudices are conditions of an *apprenticeship*, conditions of *learning* or *understanding* that transmit traditions and "that must be accepted as starting points for human discourse" (Sullivan, 1985, p. viii).

From the perspectives of Dunne (1997) and Wiercinski (2009), prejudice or prejudgment, as Gadamer understands it, is inevitable because we bring prior knowledge and experiences to bear on new interpretations. For Kerdeman (2015), "prereflective understanding and dispositions arise because human beings always and necessarily find themselves existing within a meaningful sociohistorical context" (p. 88). Gallagher (2011) calls this sociohistorical context a "massive



hermeneutical background” (p. 23) which “shapes the way that individuals interpret their experience” (p. 27). These preunderstandings can both help and hinder the interpretation process, but either way, they remind us that we are affected by our histories and the traditions we have inherited (Sanchez & Ruitenberg, 2014a, 2014b).

In reference to Gadamer’s (1975/2013b) explanation of prejudice against prejudices, the individual’s prejudices might lead her to elaborate “incorrect” or “untruthful” interpretations while practicing circles of understanding; however, continuous and circular efforts to read the text or object of study might help her to become conscious of her preconceptions and force her to approximate “truth”—that is, to arrive at more precise interpretations of what is examined. “Truth” is seen, not as fixed or universal, but rather as a more precise way to make meaning of the text or object of study within a context.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/2004, 1975/2013b) clarifies the meaning of *prejudice* and *tradition* as part of understanding and performing hermeneutically. In his view, Nicholls (2004) explains, “prejudice and tradition represent the necessity of human historicity and human finitude” (p. 2), which should not be seen as obstacles to understanding but as “conditions of possibility for any act of understanding” (p. 2). In philosophical hermeneutics, tradition is not seen as a conservative influence on understanding; rather, tradition penetrates and orients the questions and answers about the text or object of study that are posed by the interpreter(s) (Nicholls, 2004, p. 4). For Gadamer, tradition

inexorably infiltrates and shapes the ways in which we both pose and answer questions of importance. Rather than being inherently conservative, the recognition of tradition offered by philosophical hermeneutics is a mandatory preliminary procedure for any process of critique. (Nicholls, 2004, p. 4)

In ECE studies and practices, the ideas of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), child development, and behaviourism have functioned as a dominant tradition. This tradition has strongly influenced the preconceptions or prejudgments that many educators bring to interpreting children and teachers' practices. This tradition is not always a negative thing, because the fact that educators refer to child development reminds them that pedagogical approaches might change according to their observation of children's ideas and actions, and that children engage in learning best when they are asked to think and do something genuinely interesting that challenges what they already know. Gadamer (1975/2013b) notes that while tradition acquired a negative meaning post-Enlightenment, it is important not to reject or turn away from tradition. He argues in favour of engaging in critical examination of how tradition has shaped the prejudices, legitimate and illegitimate, that we bring to our interpretations. In the case of ECE studies and practices, Gadamer's argument might encourage educators to engage in critical examination of concepts and practices of child development and DAP. In doing so, they might realize that this tradition has become constraining because educators' interpretations of children's ideas and actions, and teachers' practices, have often been locked into levels or stages that describe how children are functioning, limiting the possibility of seeing how children say and do things that don't fit the expectation (Sanchez & Ruitenberg, 2014a, 2014b) and leading educators to understand these young individuals as "abnormal" or "special" when they may in fact be demonstrating that they are different but not less (Temple Grandin, as cited by Jackson, 2010): not inferior and not in deficit.

## Gadamerian Circles of Understanding

As noted earlier in this chapter, hermeneutics expanded, from interpretation oriented by scientific principles and a search for the “correct” interpretation, to a process of examining a text or object of study to make meaning of it within its historical and traditional context. This approach to hermeneutics implies the interpreter’s engagement in cycles of going back and forth between the parts and the whole to expand understanding of what would like to be known or understood. This circular practice is influenced by the interpreter’s prejudices or preunderstandings of what she interprets.

Gadamer (1975/2013b) refers to the circular investigation of meaning as circles of understanding, which in his view should aim to understand *what is there*. In finding out what is there, the individual’s interpretive intents should approximate “truth”—but not universal Truth. In Gadamer’s view, approximations to truth *matter* every time a person interprets a text or object of study. Further, cycles of interpretation should not get stuck in negative prejudices that are expressed in repetitive and vague or vicious circles. Rather, these interpretations should move into truthful or constructive prejudices that help the interpreter to see and understand what was initially not seen or understood. Gadamer writes, “All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must redirect its gaze ‘on the things themselves’” (p. 279). Such reflective understanding, Kerdeman (2015) explains,

does not extend or build on what we already know [prejudices] . . . instead [it] is an experience that “circles back” to prior understanding and exposes it, denying, contradicting, or otherwise disrupting what we thought we knew. Gadamer

stresses that disruptions in understanding are due to the circular temporal movement of human experience. (p. 89)

In ECE, the continuous and circular intents of interpreting and understanding children's ideas and actions and educators' pedagogy involve examining the parts and the whole of a text or object of study to elaborate readings that might approximate "correct" or truthful interpretations. Interpreters might also elaborate "incorrect" or untruthful readings that are distant from the significance of the object and the conditions of the context of what is examined. In this regard, following Dunne (1997), misreading is certainly possible among participants who engage in dialogue from diverse and contrasting historical and intellectual worlds that might differ both from the other interpreters' historical and intellectual worlds and from the context within which the text or object of study is interpreted.

Gadamer's emphasis on approaching truth when a person is interpreting refers to the notion that the way an individual chooses to elaborate meaning of what she is examining actually matters: The specific actions performed are not banal or superfluous; they are critical towards truth. The way we seek to understand ourselves and others within their contexts also matters. Gadamer (1975/2013b) considers this intent a philosophical, moral, and political endeavour, not a logical one. He considers it the most difficult task we will undertake in our lives. Aligning with Gadamer, I propose that it matters what (precisely) educators do and how (precisely) they listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation. These activities might also enrich the educators' understanding of themselves and others and the purposes of their being and doing in the ECE field.

## The Cycles for Understanding and Interpreting

In proposing that circles of understanding might become a valuable approach in the education of educators, I align with Dunne (1997), who refers to the individual's *foreknowledge*, which is opened for revision and expansion in continuous cycles of interpretation. Here, Dunne is thinking with Gadamer (1975/2013b), who refers to Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) when he explains "the movement of understanding and interpretation" (p. 280) as follows:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. . . . The process that Heidegger describes is that every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation. (pp. 279–280)

In ECE, the continuous and circular practice of creating pedagogical documentation would not be presuppositionless (Dunne, 1997, referring to Heidegger's explanation) of the matter or issue educators are interpreting. This means that educators' initial interpretations would be based on prejudices they have learned by interacting with others and experiencing life. The practice of *revisiting* and *reinterpreting* the documentation of children might augment educators'

ability to engage multiple interpretive lenses when they rethink their conceptions of children and pedagogy. In this circular process of revisiting and reinterpreting stories or documentation, educators would not seek fixed and final “truths”; rather, they would gain mastery in interpreting the text or object of study from diverse perspectives that would show their limits or horizons of understanding of education and themselves. The process would also offer them an interpretive platform from which to make pedagogical decisions. The circular readings that are formulated, individually and collectively, discourage educators from becoming too comfortable with their prejudices, which might prevent them from seeking further meaning of what they examine.

Thinking again with Dunne (1997), I suggest that educators should resist turning circles of understanding into “the level of a vicious circle, or even a circle which is merely tolerated” (p. 110). In other words, educators should become conscious that in the circle “is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing” (p. 110). Thus, when interpretation is practiced systematically in circles, there might always be more precise knowledge that is not obvious about the text or object of study. As I explained previously, the systematic practice of circles of understanding is not a step-by-step method. To move beyond what was at first evident and possible requires that educators force themselves to listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation to reach “truths” that were not evident initially. This practice of hermeneutic enquiry implies a conscious and deliberate effort to see and understand what was not seen and understood before, and to become conscious of the revisions and new readings that affect and transform the way the educator understands herself and others.

### **An Illustration of Moving Back and Forth Between the Whole and the Parts**

As I said in the introduction, in my trajectory of teaching educators, I have encountered numerous examples in which children’s initiatives and capabilities may surprise the adults in the

contexts in which the educators and children interact. These unexpected initiatives and capabilities might help educators to become aware, pedagogically, politically, and ethically, of the danger of interpreting children's ideas and actions through a single interpretive lens (the educator's horizon of knowledge) that discards any other readings to make sense of who children are and what they are capable of in the contexts they have mastered living in and which have impacted the individuals they have become.

Here, I refer to an example that might help educators understand the relevance of looking beyond a single theoretical approach to create meaning of children's ideas and actions. In this case, I aim to illustrate seeing beyond the lens of child development and behaviourism, which, in ECE, functions as a tradition (sometimes a constraining one) for interpreting children. This example shows the interplay of two Chinese children captured in a short video clip ("PicachuMan," 2017).

The video shows a preschool-aged girl cooking food, pouring it into a bowl, and feeding herself and a younger boy, all without adult intervention. The girl and boy appear to be "poor" children who live in precarious conditions and use an unsophisticated and rudimentary kitchen. For example, the food is not heated on a conventional stove but over a fire on the ground. The children are dressed in dirty clothing that looks as if it has not been changed in a few days.

I chose this example to point out the *whole* and the *parts* in hermeneutic enquiry. These parts help the interpreter demonstrate how circular readings of a situation orient her to dig into aspects that might challenge her initial prejudices about who children are, as well as educators' expectations of what children do. In this case, when my initial prejudices about who a preschool girl is were challenged by observing, listening, and thinking about the girl's actions, which are the *parts* of the story, this reflection led me to gain understanding of the *whole* situation and to

then rethink the parts to look for more to see and more to say. The example as a whole may initially show itself as a contradictory reality from that of a large number of children who belong to the middle and upper classes in British Columbia, Canada (my current context), and who attend preschool education in which they are not responsible for their own care, let alone the care of younger children. In contrast, the example reminds me of what I have seen many children experience in poor areas in Mexico when I lived and worked there. Initially, the whole example may speak about an “abnormal” situation in which two young children seem to take care of their own basic needs, such as cooking and feeding themselves, instead of dedicating most of their daytime to play, as it might be assumed that children should do because they deserve this “right.” If we understand this example as one involving abnormal children, the educator’s initial prejudices show the anomalies that characterize this situation and possibly the desire of the interpreter(s) to correct the children’s living conditions and education, which might be expected in wealthier and more privileged contexts. However, if educators are interpreting this situation and context with the purpose of advancing their conceptualizations of children and pedagogy, as well as better understanding themselves and the others with whom they are engaging in interpreting it, they may opt to embrace the pedagogical, ethical, and political opportunity to examine the story’s parts and to move back and forth between the whole and the parts. Doing so in continuous circles might lead them to learn about children’s educational and living conditions, not only in their own context, but in diverse and possibly contrasting contexts, such as the one shown in the video, in China.

Initially, when I watched this video clip, I did not want to interpret these children according to ages and stages determined by child development, developmental psychology, and DAP. The girl and boy did not fit the norms and parameters defined for preschool children that a



majority of developmental textbooks explain. Hence, would it be fair and true to call this girl and boy abnormal children, poor and fragile children, children in deficit? I resisted conceptualizing them in this way.

In further readings of this situation, educators might approximate truth by focusing on parts of this example to elaborate additional interpretations, with the aim to conceptualize children more broadly, but also more precisely. To explain the situation in the video more clearly, I described the girl's actions as demonstrating caution, mastery (knowledge), and responsibility. For example, her actions of pouring soup into a bowl, checking the temperature of the grilled corn (with her hand) and the soup (with a spoon), and feeding the young boy and herself provided evidence to resist the image of a child who is ignorant and fragile. Instead, this girl's actions showed me the opposite: She was smart, careful, aware of risks, self-confident in embracing them, capable of performing skills such as cooking and feeding herself and someone else, and empathetic about a fair order in which to eat, which means that she spontaneously took turns with the boy to eat bites out of the same cob of corn, and when having the soup, she made sure it had cooled down enough for him. Also, she did not eat the soup before she offered it to the boy. This action showed me that she was conscious, conceptually and practically, of what fairness and responsibility mean.

In summary, my interpretation of this situation aims to highlight both the practice of going back and forth from the whole to the parts of what is being examined and the relevance of elaborating readings systematically in continuous circles to dig into deeper, more precise, and more truthful interpretations of the situation. As my understanding of the situation deepens through these readings, I advance in understanding myself, becoming conscious of my own horizons of knowledge. Through this consciousness, I can challenge my horizons by forcing

myself to examine the example through a broader set of lenses—offered by colleagues and the scholarly literature—to gain a deeper understanding about children and educators’ pedagogy.

### **An Illustration of Prejudices That Are Not Negative, But Should Be Revised**

As I explained previously, the prejudices that educators and children express as they try to interpret “truth” might lead to imprecise understandings. Still, educators should look for precision. It is the continuous and circular readings of a text or object of study, elaborated individually and collectively, that help the interpreter(s) to formulate more accurate or truthful understandings—revised prejudices, as it were—about what is examined. Here, I give an example of a toddler’s production of knowledge about herself and the other. This example aims to illustrate how educators’ prejudices should be revised so that new and more accurate readings might be elaborated as a result of imagining new interactions of this toddler within her context.

This story refers to my daughter Regina, who has a fraternal twin, Natalia. The two girls look very much alike. One day when they were toddlers, Regina was getting her diaper changed in a public washroom at a recreation centre. Just beside the changing table, there was a large mirror that ran the length of the wall. Regina was looking at herself while she was getting changed. As soon as she was ready to stand up and walk away, she looked at the mirror, pointed to herself, and said “Regina.” Immediately after, she pointed to her reflected image in the mirror again and said “Natalia.” From my view, Regina’s exclamation expressed a prejudice that was “incorrect” or imprecise, but relevant. If an interpreter (i.e., educator) examines this example in circles, she might learn more about Regina’s prejudice. For example, a few circular readings of this situation might assume the following: (1) from Regina’s understanding, she and her reflected image in the mirror could be named as if they were two different individuals; (2) Regina’s reference to two different individuals instead of one (the same) might speak about an inner, but

conscious, awareness that she knows and has been in relation with someone else who is like her in physical and facial features; therefore, this intent of naming her self-reflection in the mirror with a different name is possible (and understandable); (3) in this event, Regina's miselaboration of meaning functions as a prejudice of who she and her twin are when Regina's self-image is reflected in a mirror; (4) this prejudice about herself when her image is reflected in a mirror is imprecise or misconstrued; (5) she might require further experiences (e.g., both twins in front of the mirror looking at their self-reflections) to revise this prejudice that she elaborated due to the physical/facial similarities between Natalia and herself; (6) her prejudice does not have a negative connotation that communicates exclusion or rejection of the other; rather, this knowledge might be seen as constructive, but one that should seek precision and truthfulness.

A second example might help to exemplify the constructive and beneficial meaning that could also be given to a prejudice. This situation involves a statement that is commonly expressed in the ECE field but rarely fully understood and practiced. This statement declares children and educators as intelligent and capable individuals. This prejudice regarding children and educators might be associated with a philosophical conception explained by Rancière (1987/1991), which refers to his argument of *equal intelligence*. In ECE, equal intelligence as prejudice might broaden educators' conceptions of children and of teachers' practices. Rancière explains that equality of intelligence is a premise to start with, rather than a goal to be achieved (p. 138). In interpreting documentation of children, Rancière's (1987/1991) premise of equal intelligence might be turned into a crucial prejudice to expand the understanding of images of children and teachers as always intelligent and capable individuals. This understanding of equal intelligence might help educators to listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation of children and educators' practices differently. In this way, educators' beliefs

and actions in regards to children would initiate from an enriched understanding of children's competencies and capabilities.

### **Meaning and Use of Language**

In this section, I explain language as a phenomenon rooted in history that produces dialogue as an effect of individuals' historicity. In hermeneutic dialogue, individuals seek understanding and approximations to "truth." Such truth cannot be achieved by domination, but only by goodwill that leads individuals to understand each other.

For Gadamer (1975/2013b), language makes it possible to reach an understanding or agreement with someone. He explains that language "provides the *Mitte*, the 'medium' or 'middle ground,' the 'place' where understanding . . . takes place" (p. xvi). Language establishes a common ground; it does not function as a prearranged social contract, nor come about as the result of "empathy or sympathy" (p. xvi). Instead, language requires the "willingness of the participants in conversation to lend themselves to the emergence of something else" (p. xvi). Therefore, in hermeneutics, language is not considered an object of scientific study subject to rules; rather, it is a historical event. According to Gadamer, "the language in which we live conditions us" (p. xxiv), and it should be used according to its full creative possibilities (Gadamer, 2013a).

Gadamer (1975/2013b, 1985) explains that in philosophical hermeneutics all understanding is conditioned by its relationship with language, and language belongs to dialogue. Gadamer (1985) refers to language as the way in which dialectics help individuals to initiate and follow up a conversation with themselves, or an "unending dialogue of the soul with itself" (p. 189), which he refers to as *thinking*. From this stance, language and thinking are interconnected,

and it is language that helps to extend the individual's thinking by raising questions and seeking answers. Also, Gadamer (2013a) explains language as the individual's experiment in which words, questions, and answers are exchanged or communicated. Referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gadamer (2013a) notes that language is more than an isolated event; language belongs to the ordinary dialogue with oneself and others. Particularly, language belongs to the relationship among individuals when they seek to understand each other. A common language is not a sufficient condition for individuals to understand each other; rather, understanding implies the rigorous task of learning to live with each other by becoming conscious of and embracing the differences in culture and language traditions. Gadamer (2013a) believes that when the individual fully listens to and actually understands the other's intentions, there is real possibility to find answers or solutions in the discussion with other people. In such a discussion, individuals do not intimidate each other or suppress each other's thinking; rather, they investigate and seek to understand each other's point of view.

For Gadamer, as explained by Sullivan (1985), language is both the "Being that can be understood" (p. xv) and the "phenomenon that speaks us before we speak it, and this means that we can never step outside of it, and stand over against it" (p. xvii). Thus, Gadamer understands language as the event that permeates one's everyday experiences with oneself and the world (humans, other beings, and things). The individuals' thoughts are prejudices expressed in language, which are examined as part of the interplay of understanding and interpreting.

Despite the important function that Gadamer gives to language for understanding that takes place in dialogue with oneself and others who aim to agree, Sullivan (1985) points out his insistence that not all human experiences happen "as language and in language" (p. 179). He notes that Gadamer acknowledges other mediums, such as "prelinguistic and metalinguistic

drawings, dumbnesses, and silences” (p. 179), as well as experiences such as “hunger and love, work and domination” (p. 179), which are not language or speech, but which make possible the speaking and listening with others to seek understanding and interpretation of these experiences.

### **Effective History and Plurality of Perspectives As Conditions of Dialogue**

Dialogue in circles of understanding helps the interpreters to become conscious of the traditions and histories that influence their understandings. Gadamerian hermeneutics explains that it is not simply history, but effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and historicity that impact our understanding of what we interpret. Our essence is that we are historical beings, and it is our historicity that makes the knowledge of ourselves always incomplete in the sense that it is limited to our horizons (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, p. 313). For Gadamer, in all understanding “the efficacy of history is at work” (p. 312); he refers to this phenomenon as *effective history*. From my view, Gadamer emphasizes that the power of history consciously or unconsciously affects our “finite human consciousness” (p. 312). Our need to become conscious of effective history relates directly to our capability to understand and to ask questions precisely or truthfully when we act hermeneutically (p. 312). Moreover, individuals in dialogue engage in a process of endless layers of meaning making about the situation under examination that they intend to understand. They also experience new horizons of understanding by remaining open and disclosing “new possibilities of interpretation” (Wiercinski, 2009, p. 11). Gadamer explains that the interpreters’ historicity of language refers to individuals who are never complete and who do not perform as experts in the matter of interpretation. Instead, these individuals in dialogue remain open to understanding and acknowledging the plurality of perspectives that are produced within the horizons of language, which are also the horizons of the contextual world they refer to when aiming to understand what is examined.

In ECE, being conscious of effective history or historicity might help educators dig into listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation of children's ideas and actions and teachers' pedagogy.

### **Dialogical Understanding Is Based on Good Will**

Gadamer (1975/2013b) asks, is hermeneutic truth ever achieved? From Wiercinski's (2009) view, hermeneutic truth is a "mode of being-in-the-world with its concrete existential and ethical implications" (p. 13). He states,

The experience of truth cannot be verified empirically. . . . There is, and can be, no final or absolute truth; it is a matter of openness to the ever new experience. . . . There will be no final word; understanding is a never-ending process. . . . Hermeneutic truth is a lived experience of a merging of horizons enabling us to encounter the other and to reach a mutual understanding. . . .

Gadamer's dialogical notion of understanding as a process of communication provides the model for a social order based not on domination (Herrschaft) but on the *good will* that seeks to understand the other. Hermeneutic truth is the horizon in which we live our historical existence. (p. 14, emphasis added)

Certainly, educators in dialogue encounter possibilities and tensions that might help them to broaden their conceptualizations of children, of their pedagogy, and of themselves. In this regard, it is also relevant to refer to Gadamer's claim of good will in the process of communication that fosters dialogue for understanding ourselves and others. In this regard, a debate was planned between Derrida and Gadamer at a conference in Paris in 1981, but it did not actually happen in person. The two philosophers' questions and answers were only presented in written form (*Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, Michelfelder & Palmer,

1989). In my view, this debate makes visible the risks, challenges, and impossibilities that language and dialogue may present to individuals when they seek consensus in the process of understanding themselves and others as they engage in examining a text or object of study. According to Derrida, these risks, challenges, and impossibilities are facts/realities that individuals might encounter when they interact in the world and seek understanding with others.

Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer's (1989) presentation of the Gadamer-Derrida debate relates to three questions from Derrida that contest Gadamer's claim about individuals' good will. First of all, Derrida enquires about "the absolute commitment to the desire for consensus in understanding" (p. 52) and wonders if individuals' good desires or intentions might ever unfold as "improbable debates, counter-questioning, and inquiries into unfindable objects of thought" (p. 52). From my perspective, Derrida contests whether it is actually possible to reach consensus in the event of understanding what others think and say. Second, Derrida enquires whether Gadamer is proposing that the condition or solution for consensus refers to simply enlarging "the context of interpretation" (p. 53) or to looking for a continual expansion of what could be thought and said in coming to an agreement or understanding with someone. Derrida claims that the search for consensus might necessarily imply a "discontinuous re-structuring" (p. 53) of the context. In other words, the search for consensus will not commonly happen in a linear, coherent, and predictable context.

In reference to interpreting documentation of children and educators' practices, would Derrida's claim about a discontinuous restructuring of the context mean that the interpreters, who also function as multiple audiences, would not necessarily help educators to enhance their conceptions of children and of teachers' practices within a linear, coherent, and predictable context? In contrast, the multiple views or perspectives of what is interpreted might cause the



educators to feel confused, lost, and overwhelmed when they think about and seek understanding of the text or object of study and the other individuals' understandings. From my view, being confused, lost, and overwhelmed might be caused by two factors: (1) the unknown or unfamiliar explanations might be seen as complex, sophisticated, and irrelevant for the educators who interpret the text or object of study; and (2) the educators might use narrow, fixed dominant discourses to approximate "truth" and be unwilling to contest or restructure their current knowledge and understanding.

Finally, Derrida's third enquiry is about the "structure of good will" (p. 53), which is implied in Gadamer's concept of understanding [*Verstehung*]. Gadamer explains that *Verstehen* means "understanding the other [and] understanding one another" (p. 53). Derrida challenges the meaning of *Verstehen* by proposing that it might have a precondition that is not "the continuity of rapport [but in contrast] the interruption of rapport [and] suspension of all mediation" (p. 53). From my view, in the ECE field, Derrida's explanation might refer to the conditions of resistance and frustration that take place as part of individual and collective interpretations of documentation of children and teachers' practices. Also, Derrida proposes the *impossible* event of understanding because it might be interrupted. For example, circular interpretations of what is examined might not be linear and systematic within a congruent and cohesive context; instead, this dialogue to seek understanding might be interrupted and suspended. Derrida questions whether anybody has ever had the experience "of knowing in a dialogue that one has been perfectly understood or experiencing the success of confirmation" (as cited in Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989, p. 54).

Gadamer's responses to Derrida's three questions about good will focus on arguing in favour of what good will means when individuals interact in the world and seek understanding.

Gadamer (as cited in Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989) explains that when an individual engages in dialogue to understand herself and others, her motivation is not to prove herself *right* vis-à-vis the other by pointing out the weaknesses in what the other communicates; rather, the individual's good will encourages her "as far as possible to strengthen the other's viewpoint so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating" (p. 55). This way to act is an essential attitude "for any understanding at all to come about" (p. 55). Gadamer firmly enquires how there could be any other intention among individuals that actually "lead[s] to mutual understanding" (p. 56), or, in other terms, "whoever opens his mouth wants to be understood; otherwise, one would neither speak nor write" (p. 55). From my view, Gadamer strongly trusts individuals' good will regarding communicating with and understanding one other. Because of this good will, Gadamer claims, understanding is possible and actually happens.

Gadamer (as cited in Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989) responds to Derrida's beliefs about the impossibility of a continuous understanding with the other and the idea that truth "is implied in harmonious agreement [and] defines the 'true' opinion of what something means" (p. 56). Derrida explains that, since Nietzsche, these notions have been seen as naive and cannot be accepted. Gadamer affirms that understanding oneself and the other, and with one another, through the lens of hermeneutics is indeed problematic; however, he claims as possible and real two things: (1) the essential "place of living dialogue [in a] lived context (*lebenszusammenhang*)" (p. 56); and (2) that "a genuine mutual understanding . . . can be produced" (p. 56) if a circular and continuous exchange of ideas takes place in which individuals engage with and examine words and their meaning and pose questions and answers. To reaffirm these beliefs, Gadamer recalls Plato's explanation that "one is able to eliminate the false agreements, misunderstandings and misinterpretations that cling to the words taken by

themselves” (as cited in Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989, p. 56). Plato’s statement might be used to claim that circles of understanding are promising avenue to seek understanding with oneself, with the other, and with one another when individuals engage in interpreting a text or object of study.

Even though I stand with Gadamer’s firm belief in hermeneutics, and particularly “the fundamental place of living dialogue” (p. 56) in which circular and continuous interpretations take place to facilitate coming to agreement or understanding, I also see merit in Derrida’s position of the impossibility of a continuous understanding with oneself and one another as part of a harmonious agreement. Particularly, in my engagements with educators to interpret children’s ideas and actions and teachers’ pedagogy (and their politics) throughout years of work, I have experienced the inevitable reality that interpretation is not linear and steady within a congruent, cohesive, and predictable context, and the approximation to “truth(s)” is extremely complicated. Instead, dialogue gets interrupted and suspended, and it demands that interpreters commit to a continuous restructuring or reconceptualization of understanding and knowledge that is never completed or ended and is always revisable and transformable. In other words, there is no final “truth” to believe in, determine, or impose, and even when an interpretation is finally considered truth, it might be a provisional/temporal or false truth that had been conveniently formulated, communicated, and used as factual reality.

To conclude, I emphasize that “hermeneutic truth is the horizon in which we live our historical existence [because] understanding is a never-ending process” (Wiercinski, 2009, p. 14).

## Examining Further the Uses of Hermeneutic Enquiry

In this chapter, I have attempted to orient the reader to a hermeneutic conceptualization and use of circles of understanding among educators. The following questions guided my discussion: How do educators come to an understanding or agreement about children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices? What are examples of educators' truthful interpretations, and what are they used for? How do circles of understanding help educators to enhance their conceptualizations of children and of teachers' practices? What are the whole and the parts in the documentation of children and of teachers' pedagogy? Does dialectic or questioning make visible the educators' prejudices? How do traditional discourses and historical effects influence the educators' understanding? Do cycles of readings help educators to approximate "truth(s)" of what they examine? How do educators prevent circles of understanding that are repetitive and vague? How do educators remain open to a plurality of views from other interpreters if different and contrasting views of children's ideas and actions, and teachers' practices, are examined in dialogue?

In other terms, in this chapter I have addressed how educators might perform if they were hermeneutical individuals who embraced the existential, political, and ethical implications of a hermeneutical mode of being and acting. Also, I explained that circles of understanding might function as a complex, nonlinear, and challenging educational approach or strategy. Every time documentation of children surprises, disappoints, confuses, or affirms, educators learn something new about their initial prejudices and might then intend to revise and expand them. In this way, the elaboration and discussion of readings go beyond the initial beliefs, interests, and understandings of *what is there* (Gadamer, 1975/2013b), which helps educators to broaden their understandings. Gadamer anticipated that our use of language might be unconscious and might

cause us to leave the text or object of study unexamined. The use of language in its full potential may require thinking and formulation of new terms or concepts that we will have to bring into dialogue with the purpose of coming to an agreement or understanding with ourselves and others.

Prior to further illustrating circles of understanding in Chapters 6 and 7, in the following chapter I focus on a hermeneutical framing of the capable child and of early years pedagogies of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation. I argue that these early childhood pedagogies offer the conditions for using circles of understanding with educators truthfully, and that this approach for understanding and interpreting might contribute a new story (Moss, 2014) that broadens educators' conceptualizations of the child, teachers' practices, and themselves.

## CHAPTER 5: FRAMING THE CAPABLE CHILD AND EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGIES HERMENEUTICALLY

*[Emancipation] is developing the capacity to see that there are alternatives, that it is possible to think and act differently, that life could be different, that there are many truths and knowledges, that there are other stories to tell . . . that these alternatives are not all of equal value, and that choices may need to be made. ~ Peter Moss, 2014*

In this chapter, I refer to hermeneutic enquiry as a framework to relate and further understand conceptions and practices utilized in ECE. The chapter includes two parts. In Part One, I explain that the conceptualization of a competent or capable child is a promising beginning or *premise* for using circles of understanding with educators. While I believe that any child can be seen as capable, I understand that the focus on *individual* capability may not align with all cultural values. Families within different contexts will differ in their understanding of the location of capability (in the community or in the individual) and of ways to foster their children's capabilities. I acknowledge, then, that my approach in this study is primarily Euro-western in orientation. In Part Two, I explain how the systematic and circular practice of (1) *listening* to children, (2) *thinking* for understanding, (3) *dialoguing* about one's ideas and interactions with others, and (4) *creating pedagogical documentation* are strategies implied in circles of understanding. I claim that the systematic and circular use of these strategies can help educators to examine and challenge what they have learned and experienced with children, and about pedagogy. Additionally, I explain the purpose of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation in collaborative critical reflective dialogues (CCRD), an approach for understanding and interpreting documentation of children and teachers' practices that I have

used with educators, and one that I have come to understand more profoundly by studying Gadamerian hermeneutics.

## **PART ONE**

### **The Competent Image of the Child Is a Promising Beginning**

In this section, I recall and expand on the conceptualization of the child that best aligns with the overall study and the one that I consider the most fruitful in ECE, namely, the image of a child who is intelligent, curious, explorative, able to learn autonomously, and capable of engaging with the environment and in social, ethical, and political relationships with individuals and groups. In exploring this view, I explain how it is beneficial for children and educators and how it has impacted communities in the world. This perspective proposes an ongoing search for meaning and a reflective and collaborative dynamic of negotiation that do not stand as fixed explanations or diagnoses of the child. I should emphasize that the image of the child as intelligent and capable of learning autonomously does not aim to educate an individualistic child who does not relate with others. Rather, the child interacts with people, other beings and things within a context in mutual interdependence, but is not merely subject to them. The view of the child I suggest resists, troubles, and revises historical evidence that confirmed that conceptions of children are reflections of what adults have decided to see and to value in children. It also claims that children's conceptions of their childhood have been minimally considered and not widely known (Synnott, 1983, as cited in Zhao, 2011). Cannella (1997) affirms that "there are voices that have not been heard, knowledge that has not been part of our history or the decisions that we as professionals have made for others" (p. 10). Acknowledging this absence of considering children's perspectives in education, Soto's inquiry, "Why has it been so difficult for

the [ECE] field to examine its own presuppositions” (Hatch, Bowman, Jor’Dan, Lopez Morgan, Hart, Soto, Lubeck, & Hyson, 2002, p. 451) strikes me as pertinent. In addition, Marilou Hyson’s (Hatch, Bowman, Jor’Dan, Lopez Morgan, Hart, Soto, Lubeck, & Hyson, 2002) question about why educators have considered DAP as a bible, rather than a tool, in ECE is relevant.

Opting for the image of a competent child offers scholars and educators an ongoing discussion about perspectives on childhood and children’s capability, as well as the opportunity to actively resist the unequal and imperialist power that is present in adult-child relationships. Cannella (1997), in *Why Critique the [ECE] Field?* notes the importance of recognizing that “our attempts to improve the lives of others through education and care may be modernist constructions through which we have unknowingly further colonized them” (p. 17); therefore, she encourages educators to examine their “beliefs, actions and the contexts from which they have emerged” (p. 17).

Philosophical and empirical work included as part of this conceptualization of the child, previously explained in Chapter 2, demonstrates how children, educators, and communities have formed and experienced relationships that promote mutual competence or capability. Usually, these relationships have developed in environments in which trust, respect, collaboration, and critical and reflective dialogue are part of the ordinary way to live and interact. Soto (Hatch, Bowman, Jor’Dan, Lopez Morgan, Hart, Soto, Lubeck, & Hyson, 2002) proposes:

Newly emerging and evolving postmodern philosophies, epistemologies, research, scholarship, policies, and practices may mean that we will travel in areas that may deconstruct and decenter scientific traditions, push the boundaries of our existing knowledge base, and begin to critically analyze and question the taken-for-granted knowledge of the genetic, biological, and scientific. (p. 451)



I believe that research and practices that systematically consider children's voices, expressions of feeling, and actions might produce perspectives of childhood and images of children that adults have not ever thought or imagined, since adults' voices, choices, and power have dominated. Lopez Morgan (Hatch, Bowman, Jor'Dan, Lopez Morgan, Hart, Soto, Lubeck, & Hyson, 2002) asserts that "what the field needs now is intense dialogue about the complexity of teaching in today's world of multiple perspectives and diversity of values" (p. 446). As I previously noted, it is important to consider children's voices systematically; however, this does not mean that educators will expect or force children to *speak up*. Children may, but do not necessarily choose to speak up using verbal language. This pedagogy of listening does not dictate how children express themselves (e.g. their ideas, actions, and silences), but embraces and fosters educational practices that are rooted in respect for multiple forms of expression.

In 1997, Cannella asked, "Are we creating early childhood education in which social injustices and inequities are diminished?" (p. 1). Without multiple forms of critique, she contended—that is, without deconstruction, reconstruction, and reconceptualization—the field of early childhood education "can only foster dominant perspectives; the field thus functions to silence the voices of diverse others" (p. 17). She argued that

unless we problematize (Foucault, 1980) the beliefs and practices that have guided the field of early childhood education to uncover hidden histories, biases, and illusions, we risk supporting a restrictive and narrow perspective. We risk excluding human beings whose lives do not mirror our dominant view of early childhood; and we place limits on ourselves and the children with whom we interact. (p. 2)

I agree with Cannella's proposal that children and adults continuously and collaboratively interrogate and problematize theories and practices that do *not* proclaim the image of children as capable individuals. Also, I support her in the urgency for children and adults in interactions to confront, challenge, and enrich their perspectives of self and of their local and worldwide communities.

### **Illustration of Tensions and Possibilities in Conceptualizing the Child**

Here, I include a dialogue that, from my view, illustrates a possibly unconscious or unintentional adult conceptualization of a child who might have been seen as incompetent, or immature, or fragile, or innocent, or ignorant, or inexperienced, or in need of protection, or colonized—in contrast to the child's intent to act as an intelligent and capable individual. In this example, the dialogue between a girl and her parents might offer interpretative possibilities to (1) interrogate and challenge the image of the child conceptualized by the adults/educators (the girl's parents), and (2) become conscious of the risk of silencing children who are communicative beings and capable individuals.

This dialogue is part of the film *Goodbye Bafana/Colour of Freedom* (Wicht & August, 2007), which depicts the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1968. In this scene, a white girl named Natasha discusses with her parents an incident that they experienced in town. Natasha had watched a policeman try to capture a black woman who was running away with her baby in her arms trying to escape being arrested. The woman fell down and the baby rolled onto the ground. Both the woman and her baby were crying desperately. The policeman arrested the woman, who cried for her baby to be helped. Finally, the woman's mother rushed to rescue the baby from the ground. Once Natasha arrived home, she isolated herself and expressed her sadness about the

dramatic incident she had witnessed in town. Her parents approached her, and they had this conversation:

*Dad:* Feeling better?

*Natasha:* Why didn't you stop that policeman?

*Dad:* 'Cause that's his job.

*Natasha:* To take the mommy away from the baby?

*Dad:* No. But if the mommy doesn't have a pass, then she is not allowed to be there, so they have to arrest her.

*Natasha:* Do we have a pass?

*Dad:* We do not need one.

*Natasha:* Why not?

*Dad:* 'Cause we're white.

*Natasha:* But is that fair, Pa?

*Dad:* That's apartheid. That's the way we live, Natasha. Black on one side, whites on the other.

*Mom:* It's God's way, darling. Just like he doesn't put the sparrow with the swallow, or a goose with a duck or a cow with a buck. It's just not natural. And we don't question God, hmm.

In my view, the image of the child as competent is the perspective most consistent with hermeneutic enquiry, with which educators could choose to conceptualize and practice ideas in ECE. This example shows that contrasting views of the child might be manifested in a singular situation that causes tensions, but also possibilities. In this scene, my interpretation refers to an intelligent and capable child, performed by Natasha, in contrast to the image of an innocent child

in need of protection, assumed by her parents. It may be that generally, adults/parents are eager to “protect” children, thus not answering their questions to shield them from difficult “truths.” Therefore, Natasha’s parents might have acted from an understanding that their daughter was an innocent, or inexperienced, or needy child. Contrarily, Natasha showed herself as a sharp observer who listened and expressed that something was not fair or right. She might have also expected that her parents would honour her capability and listen to her questions and thinking.

Further readings of this dialogue helped me to excavate contrasting reactions (i.e., from Natasha and her parents) and conceptualizations of the child. For example, Natasha’s parents strictly oriented or indoctrinated their daughter’s understanding of the event they unexpectedly witnessed in town. The parents’ explanations seemed unilateral, logical, and inevitable, such as, the baby’s mom must be arrested because she was in town, which was prohibited if she did not have a pass. Also, they acted as if Natasha was incapable of understanding what apartheid meant. In their view, apartheid existed and operated as it did because it was government policy and just as they would never question God’s will, they did not question apartheid. They declared divine omnipotence and expected their daughter to accept it. Also, “the mother’s analogy of racial segregation with the segregation of animal species suggests that black people are of a different species and thus not human. By referring to God, she presents as an unquestionable ‘truth’ a view that is as ignorant in its biological understanding as it is offensive in its politics” (Claudia Ruitenber, personal communication, February 2018). In contrast, Natasha’s questions, such as “Do we have a pass?” suggest that she resisted the assumed self-evidence of her parents’ beliefs. And, ““But is that fair, Pa?” sounds like a rhetorical question, a guise for the more forceful statement, ‘But that’s not fair!’” (Claudia Ruitenber, personal communication, February 2018).

If Natasha's parents assumed their daughter was innocent and ignorant, they might have felt challenged by her questions that contested the white adults' discourse of apartheid, which seemed to Natasha to be unjust nonsense. Possibly they, consciously or unconsciously, chose not to discuss the wrongness and unfairness of apartheid. It seems that for them, it was easier and simpler to conform with the world as it was, which might also be part of the racial indoctrination they experienced when they were children and adolescents. If these adults refused to question the political practices in their town, they might have also resisted the image of a capable child (in this case their daughter). Instead, they modelled conformity and obedience with what had been politically determined in the place in which they lived and belonged.

Even though hermeneutic enquiry functions better if interpreters assume a competent image of the child; what is important here is to point out that contrasting frameworks to conceptualize the child might be an opportunity that educators embrace to learn opposite angles of children's and adults' ideas and actions that would enable them to understand themselves, children, and the world more precisely or truthfully.

### **Understandings and Illustration of the Competent Child**

Let me try to summarize what it means to refer to the child as "competent." According to Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford University Press, 2018), *competent* means "having the necessary ability, knowledge, or skill to do something successfully" (n.p.). Even though, in 322 BC, Aristotle proposed to refer to people as individuals with talents and abilities (Cannella, 1997), this view has not been a steady assumption about the child throughout the centuries.

My understanding of the competent or capable child has been strongly inspired and validated by the empirical pedagogical work in the internationally known preschools and infant

and toddler centres of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and in preschools in Jönköping, Kalmar, and Stockholm in Sweden. The pedagogy in these centres demonstrates an image of an intelligent, curious, and explorative child who is not fixed (or pathologized) according to stages of development that seek to universalize and normalize subjects in reference to white, Western parameters. Rather, the child is considered a subject whose desire to actively engage in making meaning of the world is manifested by establishing partnered (not authoritative) relationships with people, objects, and spaces in a leisurely process of continuous exchange, learning, and transformation. Månsson (2008) explains:

The pedagogical attitude, the interaction between the adults and the children and the choice of materials used can all be viewed as indicators of a competent, learning child; that early on can be active and investigative, be listened to and make its own decisions. (p. 22)

Previous beliefs of a competent child claim a respectful, alternative, and hopeful discourse of the relationships and learning between children and educators/adults; however, meanings of *how* children are competent vary enormously according to the perspective used to explain children's subjectivities, development, and education. Certain perspectives of the competent child are contradictory, since competence is related to the nature of the child, its potential to be awakened, or its ability to be attained and measured to validate that the child possesses it.

In ECE, Malaguzzi's (1994) question *What is your image of the child?* is considered a starting point of "good" pedagogy. Malaguzzi explains that there are "hundreds of different images of the child" (p. 52). The theory an educator accepts reveals the image of the child they have constructed and the one that operates within the educator and in their interactions with children when they talk to, listen to, and observe the child. Malaguzzi contends that "it is very

difficult for [educators] to act contrary to this internal image” (p. 52). No matter what precise and ambitious discourse about the competent child educators preach, their practice reveals their more deeply held philosophical and theoretical understanding of their image of the child.

Patricia Tarr (2003) explains that paradoxical images of the child circulate and function in everyday life. This assumption builds on Malaguzzi’s idea of the multiple images of children that educators believe in and that influence their interactions with children. Tarr claims that adults tend to characterize children in a limited number of ways: as cute, “wiseass” (p. 7), needy, deficient, or innocent, or as consumers, or as *tabula rasa* (blank slates). Each of these images of the child implies actions that affect the child’s trajectory in life. If adults believe in a needy or fragile child, they will try to fix or normalize children by directing them to remedial programs. If they believe in an innocent child, they may prevent the child from being exposed to sex or violence and present the child with an idealized world, such as the one promoted in Disney films, that will normalize and limit children’s experiences and behaviours (Zhao, 2011). If adults view children as *tabula rasa*, they will try to fill the child with skills and knowledge that satisfy adults’ expectations about how to succeed in life (Tarr, 2003).

In educational philosophy, Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta’s (2010) discussion of the figure of the child in the work of Jacques Rancière and Paulo Freire presents a relevant distinction to help educators gain additional perspectives of the conceptualization of the child and to understand Rancière’s (1987/1991) claim of the “equality of intelligences.” Bingham and Biesta (2010) explain that Freire’s figure of the child is a psychological form that implies an individual who is oppressed and someone who is the oppressor. From this perspective of a pedagogy of the oppressed, the child does not speak freely because it has already been decided how and when the child will speak. The child has to be rescued from oppression and oriented

into a problem-posing education with the aid of a method. In contrast, Rancière's figure of the child is political, which Bingham and Biesta (2010) consider an enhanced understanding of the child, because the child is conceptualized as an individual who speaks politics from the beginning. In other words, the child, by acquiring their mother tongue naturally and with no support from a master or a method, is presupposed as an equal being in the world. Therefore, Rancière's (1987/1991) contention that "all people are equally intelligent" (p. xix) emphasizes the assumption of the political capability of the child to start with. It seems that Rancière's proposal might also function as a philosophical foundation for Malaguzzi's conception of the image of the competent child that I have previously explained.

Referring to the complexities of conceptualizing images of the competent or capable child, Chris Jenks (2005) explains that children "are placed in the powerless and strangely disadvantageous situation of always being required to submit to the violence [ongoing attacks or violations] of the existing socio-historical order" (p. 122); however, they consistently explore and exceed the "norms, rules and conventions of their adults' society" (p. 122). Jenks calls this phenomenon "childhood and transgression" (p. 122), which I interpret as children's capability or willingness to resist limitations and arbitrariness imposed by adults and society. Jenks's (2005) explanation of childhood and transgression reminded me of the story of a preschool girl named Isabella. In this example (see Figure 1), the teacher provided precut parts of a model of *The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1985) that she had previously prepared. Apparently, the teacher hoped that her production would help the children to reproduce the model (image on right) she presented to the class; therefore, they would have satisfactorily completed the artwork planned for the day. However, instead of replicating *The Cat in the Hat*, Isabella created a different character (image on left) by using the hat upside down, which made it look like a striped dress with sleeves. Also,



Isabella used the whisker strips from the model to create hair, arms, and legs for this new character. While the girl's artwork could be interpreted as evidence that she did not understand the instructions or failed to replicate the model correctly, according to Jenks's explanation of transgression, Isabella's production could also be seen as a creative form of resistance to the instructions/rules given by the teacher, which might limit Isabella (and other children) to reproduce only what was expressed in the teacher's model. When I revisited this artwork with Isabella and she expressed her deliberate intent to produce a girl character, I inferred that children's capability is always evident, whether encouraged or not.



**Figure 1: Child's artwork and teacher's model.**

## **PART TWO**

### **Listening, Thinking, Dialoguing, and Creating Pedagogical Documentation Are Strategies Implied in Hermeneutic Enquiry**

My study of Gadamerian hermeneutics has sent me in search of more helpful conceptions of education and educational purposes. I follow Biesta's (2010a) explanation that three

interdependent purposes should be part of any program considered *good* (p. 5). *Qualification* refers to the skills and knowledge that the student acquires; *socialization* emphasizes the student's understanding of how she relates to the dominant values, culture, and social practices while she is gaining specific qualifications; and *subjectification* signifies the student's process of becoming an autonomous subject in local and extended contexts. This process of becoming at once autonomous and interdependent also implies the person's understanding of the interrelations of herself and others in the world. Thus, I have intended to work with educators in identifying these purposes of education and their paradoxical interconnections in any documentation of children that we examine. In addition to Biesta's (2010a) purposes to be promoted in educational programs and, in the examples of children, I claim that systematic listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation may help educators to interpret more precisely children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices. In the review of literature in Chapter 3, I explained listening in education and the creation of pedagogical documentation. Here, I summarize and expand on the conceptualization and use of these four strategies, particularly my understanding of thinking and dialoguing with educators.

## **Listening**

As discussed earlier in this study, since the origin in 1950 of the preschools and toddler centres in Reggio Emilia, Italy, the practice of listening to children and adults does not refer to a simply aural task or the hearing of other voices. Instead, listening has a broader meaning. Rinaldi (2006) refers to "listening not just with our ears, but with all our senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, orientation)" (p. 65). Listening is explained as a "pedagogy of listening" (Rinaldi, 2001c, 2006), which implies an attentive, respectful, and ethical practice of observation that considers and engages with the beliefs and actions of the other. This listening is also defined as "internal

listening” (Rinaldi, 2001c, p. 4), because when children communicate their mental ideas to others, they also gain clarity about them. Pedagogy of listening offers individuals a means to gain a “more conscious vision” (p. 4) of what they intend to communicate. In other words, this practice helps the individual to understand what she and the other(s) says and aims to communicate. It is an effort to understand the obvious and hidden aspects of what individuals have imagined, said, and done. Therefore, this pedagogy makes listening visible, and this practice is known as the creation of pedagogical documentation (Rinaldi, 2001c, p. 4).

### **Thinking**

Thinking for understanding implies self-dialogue, which offers the educator the possibility to become aware of and make up her mind in reference to actions that might be undertaken. I also refer to thinking for understanding as a dangerous activity when it is practiced, but even more dangerous when it is omitted and not practiced. Thinking is dangerous because it confronts and challenges taken-for-granted ideas and ways of doing things that have been understood and have functioned as dominant and fixed discourses (Arendt, 1978, 1996/2003, 1961/2006a, 1963/2006b). Aligned with Arendt, I explore the idea that thinking, if it is actually thinking, must be a critical practice or exercise. Also, I examine thinking when it happens “through practice, through exercises” (Arendt, 1961/2006a, p. 13), and I aim “to gain experience in *how* to think [not in giving any] prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold” (p. 14, emphasis in original).

### **Dialoguing**

Dialogue with others that aims to broaden the individual’s views is a deliberate oral communication and exchange of perspectives. In ECE, this dialogue might nurture understanding

and interpretation while educators are purposely exposed to embracing and making meaning of multiple views about a story or situation and its connections with a wider world scenario.

Dialogue is also an experience that implies a commitment to consider and exchange perspectives within a frame of various views and voices, as well as the determination to understand and practice *resistance* (Biesta, 2012b), a personal disposition to embrace the unfamiliar and unexpected views of others and a deliberate commitment to promote dialogue. Aligned with Biesta (2012b), dialogue implies the space in which education happens, and through the experience of being in dialogue, individuals will inevitably encounter resistance and frustration.

### **Creating Pedagogical Documentation**

To create pedagogical documentation is to produce meaning by writing down an interpretive story. Also, it is the deliberate use of language to express meaning about our inquiries and understandings (ideas, thoughts, or reflections), which are not fixed but always revisable. This creation of pedagogical documentation is the result of individual thinking and the intent to integrate multiple perspectives about the same situation. Early childhood researchers worldwide have explained numerous ways to conceptualize and practice pedagogical documentation. As part of the review of literature in Chapter 3, I explained a few scholarly proposals and practices of pedagogical documentation that relate to my study. In this chapter, I add the use of collaborative critical reflective dialogues (CCRD) as the strategy I have engaged in with educators to listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation to examine children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices.

## Thinking and Dialoguing

In this section, I explain further the strategies of thinking and dialoguing to be used in circles of understanding when educators examine documentation of children and teachers' pedagogy.

### **Thinking Is Self-Dialogue, and Is Essential for Individual and Collective Understanding**

In my educational practice, I have experienced the potential of thinking, particularly when it is both an individual and collective responsibility that implies dialogue with oneself and with the other (see also Vintimilla, 2012). While teaching educators, I have regularly inquired regarding what to think, how to think, what to think for, and whom to think with. Also, I have questioned whether thinking *always* benefits oneself and the other(s). Thinking alone might not be sufficient for understanding, because it does not require other-directedness or other-intentionality. Instead, thinking is helpful when it is practiced individually and collectively, and along with listening, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation.

Arendt's (1963/2006b, 1978, 1996/2003) explanation of thinking has enhanced my understanding of this strategy. For example, thinking might help educators to resist the dangers of "thoughtlessness" (Arendt, 1978, p. 4) with themselves and the others with whom they interact. She explained that, ever since Socrates and Plato, thinking has meant being engaged in a silent dialogue with oneself, and the continual search for reconciliation between the individual and her reality is necessary to seek peace with the world. When reflecting on Eichmann's war crimes trial in Jerusalem in the early 1960s, Arendt (1963/2006b) expressed her profound concern that ordinary people might refuse to be persons by denying their capability to think, a mental activity that it is considered a defining quality of being human. In other words, Arendt strongly criticized individuals who act in the world as thoughtless beings by deliberately

deciding to follow orders or what has been dictated without questioning or resisting the activities that are undertaken. By denying their ability to think, people manifest their refusal to make moral judgments, thus becoming vulnerable themselves to committing evil acts which, throughout history, have been materialized as stories of exclusion and unfairness, authoritarian and totalitarian styles of governing others, and even the extermination of human beings (Arendt, 1963/2006b). Arendt called the phenomenon in which human beings renounce their personhood “the banality of evil” (p. xiv). “The banality of evil” (p. xiv) is associated with individuals that have shown themselves to be “neither equipped nor prepared for [the] activity of thinking” (p. 13). As a counterforce to the banality of evil, Arendt argued in favour of the promising activity of thinking with oneself and other beings as a means to develop the strength to prevent catastrophes and destruction. In other words, thought is the result of the individuals’ worldly experiences; it is the regular activity of thinking about past experiences and future possibilities that helps individuals to appreciate the significance of what they encounter in the world (Arendt, 1961/2006a). It is the exercise of thinking that engages individuals in experimentation and criticism (Arendt, 1963/2006b). In ECE, Moss (2014), in alignment with Arendt, suggests that educators should engage with the practice of provoking thought, which “contributes to reflection, dialogue, and deliberation” (p. 35). He exhorts educators to “think in context and think the complex” (p. 35).

### **Dialogue Promotes Education and the Experience of Resistance and Frustration**

When educators interpret children’s ideas and actions and teachers’ pedagogy, they might encounter perspectives that contradict their familiar and accepted beliefs. If they aim for consensus, they might find it difficult to fully understand and accept all interpreters’ views. On one hand, contrasting perspectives that are discussed among educators may cause disagreement,

distrust, controversy, discomfort, and resistance. On the other hand, opposing views might also help individuals to think expansively and truthfully (Berkowitz, 2017) if they engage in critical examination of the plurality of perspectives.

By provoking me to consider a troublesome interpretive conversation among educators, Biesta's (2012b) explanation of "dialogue between child and world" (p. 92) enhances my understanding of dialoguing in education and in our existence in the world. Biesta (2012b) notes that dialogue is the activity and the "space" in which education actually happens. In other words, engaging in dialogue is indispensable to what he claims is good education (Biesta 2010a), and it also makes possible a "worldly existence of the child [and the educator]" (Biesta, 2012b, p. 92) that does not focus only on acquiring disciplinary knowledge (subject-centred education) or on satisfying children's or adults' desires; rather, the purpose of dialogue is to promote education that nurtures the individual's will and offers a medium with which to put the child, the adult, and the world into ongoing conversation.

Biesta (2012b) adds the inevitable experience of resistance and frustration in dialogue. From my view, it would be beneficial for educators to seek and think about "the educational significance of the experience of resistance" (p. 92), which I believe is usual and troublesome in the professional development of educators. Resistance and frustration manifest when educators seek to truly understand children's ideas and actions from a plurality of perspectives, which requires educators to engage in self-study and become familiar with concepts and practices that may initially be unknown and unfamiliar. Educators might also experience resistance and frustration in the process of gaining mastery while dialoguing with others. Biesta (2012b) affirms that education of the will, which helps individuals to deal with resistance and frustration in dialogue, takes place in a middle ground between two extreme experiences, which he described

as self-destruction and world-destruction. On one extreme, *world-destruction* will take us to the destruction of

what resists or what offers us resistance . . . the risk is that we end up doing violence to the very “thing” that resists. . . . this response leads to a destruction of the object of resistance—either literally or in the form of a denial of the otherness and strangeness of what we encounter. (p. 95)

On the opposite extreme, *self-destruction* will lead us to withdraw from the world. Self-destruction

is to shy away from what resists or offers us resistance. It is to withdraw ourselves from what is strange and other; it is not to engage with it, not to connect. . . . [it] results in a destruction of the self. . . . the self will not come into the world, will not be able to exist in a worldly way. (p. 95)

When I first learned Biesta’s (2012b) ideas about education taking place in the middle ground between two extreme and destructive experiences against self and world, I felt troubled by this new understanding. Then, this perspective enhanced my understanding of dialogue in education. Continuous thinking about how dialogue might work helped me to visualize that almost any phenomenon in the world that implies the involvement of human beings might be explained by Biesta’s formulation.

Biesta (2012b) explains that if individuals choose to act toward the extremes of self-destruction or world-destruction, education becomes a third—and the most constructive—alternative. In other words, education might be visualized as the constructive alternative that exists in the middle ground between these two destructive extremes of existence. Moreover, in any experiences of existence, individuals deal with resistance as part of their process of



understanding their being in the world. Biesta adds that if individuals choose world-destruction or self-destruction, resistance functions destructively, in opposition to the constructive resistance that occurs when individuals engage in dialogue and education. The middle ground between these two extremes is where dialogue happens. In dialogue, the experiences of resistance, frustration, and the education of the will take place. Also, in dialogue, individuals experience a worldly existence in which “we need to engage with what resists” (p. 95) in order to exist in the world, “rather than destroy it or withdraw ourselves from it” (p. 95).

I find it beneficial to relate Biesta’s (2012b) explanation of dialogue and education with the hermeneutical practice of reading and rereading documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy. The educators’ interpretations of documentation of children might express arbitrary and isolated views or prejudices based on dominant discourses and historical and traditional practices that restrict and diminish children’s ideas and actions. For example, in the following excerpt of a dialogue I discussed earlier in this chapter, which depicts the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1968 (Wicht & August, 2007), the sentences in bold show how Natasha’s parents chose to respond toward both self-destruction and world-destruction, because they shied away from dialoguing about multiple views of the situation.

*Dad:* No. But if the mommy doesn’t have a pass, then she is not allowed to be there, so they have to arrest her.

*Natasha:* Do we have a pass?

*Dad:* **We do not need one.**

*Natasha:* Why not?

*Dad:* **’Cause we’re white.**

*Natasha:* But is that fair, Pa?

*Dad: That's apartheid. That's the way we live, Natasha. Black on one side, whites on the other.*

*Mom: It's God's way, darling...*

In this exchange, neither parent engaged in an in-depth dialogue with Natasha about the violent and unfair actions and traditions of apartheid. In ECE, this resistance to engage with children might come from educators who, in their interactions with children, choose to dictate ideas to believe in and actions to be followed. This style of interacting reflects normalization and uniformity, which might restrict children's imagination, inventiveness, and willingness to engage with the world. Furthermore, educators' beliefs and actions might represent subtly controlled actions or domination of children. In the exchange, responses from both parents illustrate this choice when they assert in effect that "it is what it is and we do not ask questions about it!"

*Dad: That's apartheid. That's the way we live, Natasha. Black on one side, whites on the other.*

*Mom: It's God's way, darling...*

These responses might be interpreted as instruction that dictates "truth" for the child to believe in, thereby socializing her into the status quo.

The middle ground between the two extreme and destructive experiences, where education happens, might relate to the dialogue that takes place between the educator(s) and the child's ideas and actions. For example, in this dialogue, Natasha's parents might have taken the opportunity to discuss aspects of the history and foundations of apartheid in South Africa and, possibly, the relationship of this regime with their religion (i.e., the belief of God's governance of human existence). Certainly, conversation about these topics is complicated and unresolvable when they are discussed among adults and consequently with children. However, this dialogue

might become an opportunity to welcome, acknowledge, and verify children's enquiries, imagination, and capability to dialogue with themselves and with others. And, very importantly, this dialogue might nurture the individuals' will and offer a medium with which to put the child, the adult, and the world into ongoing conversation.

In summary, it is in this dialogue that educators might engage in using hermeneutics, such as circles of understanding, to interpret children's ideas and actions, as well as teachers' practices. These circles of understanding will start with initial questions and assumptions that would be revised and enhanced in the circular and continuous process of interpreting the text or object of study that is examined. Neither the initial nor the consecutive questions and assumptions would seek definitive "truths." In contrast, the educators' encounters with disagreement and contrasting views might force them to reinterpret the story by dialoguing about multiple perspectives that might require a deliberate effort to negotiate and integrate meanings that would enhance the educators' initial conceptions of the child and the educators' pedagogy.

In my view, the dialogue that Biesta (2012b) depicts is very much aligned with Gadamer's (1975/2013b) circles of understanding. Dialogue should both be continuous and circular, and the use of language (oral and written) might help educators to conceptualize—and revise repeatedly, but not vaguely and unnecessarily—the children's ideas and actions. Additionally, Biesta's (2012b) account of dialogue as a back-and-forth exchange between self and the world is similar to Gadamer's (1975/2013b) hermeneutics in reference to the back-and-forth exchange between the parts and the whole when a text or object of study is interpreted.

This dialogue with oneself or with others is usually challenging, yet constructive and meaningful. Also, dialogue might be seen as an educational space that engages individuals in the experience of resistance and frustration and helps them to enhance their existence in the world

(Biesta, 2012b), particularly their growing conceptualizations of the child, educators' practices, and themselves. Biesta (2012b) and Gadamer (1975/2013b) agree that being-in-dialogue is not an easy space to stay in and maintain ourselves while we learn to deal with resistance and frustration. Biesta (2012b) proposes that individuals stay in the middle ground in which education takes place, in contrast to acting toward either self-destruction or world-destruction, which might be the result of a deficient use of dialogue and a limited conception of doing good education—that is, education that is overly reliant on qualification and socialization, and is inattentive to the subjectification of the individual (Biesta, 2010a). In Gadamer's (1975/2013b) terms, dialogue is implicit in the use of circles of understanding that aim to promote constructive conversation and language use among individuals who seek to engage and make meaning of multiple perspectives to interpret a text or object of study.

### **Collaborative Critical Reflective Dialogue**

#### **Influences from Theory and Practice**

My interest in studying philosophical hermeneutics in relation to ECE stemmed from several years of using *collaborative critical reflective dialogue* (CCRD). CCRD is a procedure or strategy that I proposed and practiced with EC students at Douglas College from 2005 to 2017, as well as with teachers in BC who participated in the Investigating Quality (IQ) Project and the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (BCELF) Implementation Project (2007–2011). Following my doctoral supervisor's advice, I studied Gadamerian hermeneutics and circles of understanding, which helped me to identify similarities between CCRD practices and hermeneutics, and to appreciate the strengths and limitations of both. Also, I broadened my understanding of how to interpret documentation of children and educators' practices

systematically and in alignment with hermeneutic enquiry, which became the focus of my doctoral dissertation. Here, I narrate the theory and practice that inspired the origins of the conceptualization and use of CCRD.

In CCRD, educators examine documentation, including artifacts produced by children (e.g., drawings, models, photographs) as well as those generated by adults (e.g., photographs and/or videotapes of children). Originally, both *Rounds for Teachers* or *Collaborative Assessment Conference* (CAC), developed by Steve Seidel (1988) and colleagues at Harvard Project Zero, and Lenz Taguchi's work (2006, 2007, 2008) on deconstructive talks inspired the design and practice of CCRD. Rounds for Teachers, or CAC, consists of three-hour monthly gatherings with school teachers and administrators, as well as researchers from Harvard Project Zero, to examine students' work. CAC was rooted in (1) the assumption that students' interests and initiatives might or might not be related to the teacher's plans and expectations; (2) the teachers' commitment to focus on understanding the students' work by suspending judgment in order to find out what was expressed in their productions, rather than looking for what the teacher would like to see in it; and (3) the systematic effort to consider multiple perspectives from different participants while dialoguing about and interpreting the students' work (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999).

Another influence for CCRD was Lenz Taguchi's deconstructive talks, which imply the activity of embracing differences as a desirable and useful force when examining documentation of children and teachers' practices, in contrast to identifying "truth" or rightness. The practice of deconstructive talks disrupts our taken-for-granted ideas, beliefs, and values (Lenz Taguchi, 2006, 2007, 2008).

Liselotte Olsson's (2009) idea about how children construct problems was another inspiration to orient the educators' interpretations. I asked educators to examine children's ideas and actions with the deliberate intention of identifying how children construct a "problem" (p. 5) in the situations they gathered, such as children's productions, photos, and videotapes. According to Olsson, children can work for a long time on a problem, and even though they might know the given solution, they may choose not to accept it straightaway. She explains that children tend to focus on the construction of a problem by approaching the content of knowledge from different points of view that help them to deepen their understanding of what they investigate (p. 18).

### **CCRD: What It Is and How It Is Practiced**

In CCRD, participants examine and discuss documentation of children together. This strategy encourages educators to read and reflect on literature about the philosophy of education and early childhood studies as an essential requirement to examine, critically and collaboratively, children's ideas and actions and teachers' pedagogy. Participants are requested to formulate readings or interpretations in the form of questions and assumptions, with minimal information about the children's background/histories and the contexts in which the situation or story happened. On one hand, educators' interpretations focus on making children's capabilities visible by reflecting on their individual and collaborative initiatives, explorations, interactions, and productions. On the other hand, educators practice displacing their taken-for-granted readings by obliging themselves to explain a given educational aspect through more than one theoretical lens that relates to the documentation of children. This process helps to problematize and enhance their perspective on teaching, learning, and using documentation of children as a strategy for understanding curriculum. Additionally, the educators revisit the same documentation with other audiences (e.g., the children themselves, and teachers who may or may

not have been participants in the documentation, as well as parents and community members), which brings about new readings that educators integrate as part of creating pedagogical documentation—a process that, from my view, constitutes collaborative educational research. Moreover, by including children themselves in the conversation, they can speak back to how their actions are being interpreted. This positions them as co-constructors of the interpretation. The collaborative and critical examination of documentation of children and the creation of pedagogical documentation promote an in-depth understanding of educational traditions and practices and open up possibilities for ethical, political, and social ways to conceptualize and act in education.

### ***Procedure and Components***

In reliable exemplars of pedagogical documentation, digital materials have facilitated participants in CCRD, and additional audiences, to create meaning. In these cases, pedagogical documentation has functioned “as something that is *alive* and from which we can produce a multiplicity of differentiated knowledge from a specific event [situation]” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010b, p. 67, emphasis in original).

In CCRD, educators collect visual materials in the form of productions, photographs, and/or videotapes of children’s ideas and actions, and teachers’ practices, that are valued as meaningful for further interpretation. Typically, the visual and textual documentation gathered by the documenters involves spontaneous moments that are captured, with parents’ consent and children’s assent, while participants interact within the educational context. In other words, this documentation is usually not planned, it is not edited, and it is considered “raw” digital material for examination. Also, it is possible that children acted as documenters.

Transcripts of the videotaped dialogues, and description of actions when there is no verbal communication (e.g., in infants' and toddlers' situations), are used to prompt audiences' responses during the revisiting of the documentation with the participants. The documenters welcome *all* the audiences' responses, which are expressed in questions or assumptions and which demonstrate theoretical understandings of what the participants interpret. Everyone's readings inform participants about (1) the children's interests and initiatives when they interact with others; (2) the taken-for-granted teachers' practices that could be contested and displaced; and (3) the educational, cultural, social, political, and ethical aspects in the contexts of the documented "realities."

Participants listen, think, and dialogue about the audience's interpretations, and they consider them in creating pedagogical documentation. The revisiting of the same documentation with additional audiences, such as the children, teachers, and parents, who are related or not with what is examined, becomes essential information to be discussed. Finally, the gathering of new readings from the additional audiences is usually videotaped as a strategy for documenters to carefully examine the new interpretations, particularly the children's views, which contribute significantly to the process of meaning making that educators experience in CCRD.

### **Framing the Child and Early Childhood Pedagogies for the Use of Circles of Understanding**

In this chapter I discussed that conceptualizing the child as competent or capable and appreciating the educational possibilities of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation are significant conditions for being and acting as hermeneutical individuals in our interactions with children and other adults/educators. Additionally, I depicted



collaborative critical reflective dialogue as a strategy that could be enhanced by educators' understandings of hermeneutic enquiry or circles of understanding. I argued that the systematic use of these circles helps educators to understand and interpret children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices.

In the following two chapters, I illustrate the use of circles of understanding in stories about children and examine the perspectives of EC students when they practiced listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation with the intent of broadening their conceptualizations of the child, the teacher, and themselves. I hope to nurture the reader's understanding that being and acting hermeneutically is possible and desirable because it helps educators to engage critically and passionately in interactions with young children and their communities.

## CHAPTER 6: THE USE OF CIRCLES OF UNDERSTANDING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

*For adults and children alike, understanding means being able to develop an interpretative “theory,” a narration that gives meaning to events and objects of the world. Our theories are provisional, offering a satisfactory explanation that can be continuously reworked; but they represent something more than simply an idea or a group of ideas. They must please us and convince us, be useful, and satisfy our intellectual, affective, and aesthetic needs (the aesthetics of knowledge). In representing the world, our theories represent us. Moreover, if possible, our theories must please and be attractive to others. Our theories need to be listened to by others. Expressing our theories to others makes it possible to transform a world not intrinsically ours into something shared. Sharing theories is a response to uncertainty.*

*~ Carla Rinaldi, 2006*

In making sense of children’s ideas and actions, educators create, as Rinaldi writes, “provisional theories” about children and about teachers’ pedagogy. The use of hermeneutic circles of understanding serves to keep these provisional theories open to critical questioning. As Gadamer (1975/2013) emphasizes, such hermeneutic interpretation and reinterpretation is not a “method” in the sense of a technique, or steps to be followed. Nonetheless, in practicing these circles of understanding in the documentation of children, and in recommending that other early childhood educators use this approach, I want to be as thorough and systematic as possible.

In this chapter, I use circles of understanding by engaging in a systematic and circular activity of elaborating previously generated insights about children’s ideas and actions and teachers’ practices, which I deliberately selected for this study. My interpretation of stories

intends to resemble the collective activity that I have practiced with educators over the years. In the process of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation, I show how my responses, or readings, might be truthful, but also how my bias towards documentation of children and teachers' practices sometimes led to mistaken interpretations even when I aimed to be and act hermeneutically. In my intent to practice hermeneutic enquiry, I reflect, in an ongoing, circular way, on readings that might be mistaken, and I revise those mistaken readings to get closer to truthful interpretations of what children's ideas and actions might mean. These same intents challenge my initial understandings of teachers' practices and help me to propose new possibilities for teaching young children.

In this chapter and the next, I respond to the research questions that guided this study: How might hermeneutics be a valuable pedagogical approach, or story (Moss, 2014), for early childhood educators? How might hermeneutic enquiry be practiced in ECE? And, what are educators' stories (reflections) of being and acting hermeneutically that have broadened their understandings of children, their educational practices, and themselves?

The EC students' reflections and the documentation of children, including photos, video clips, productions, and narrations, included in this study were approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) at UBC. For this study, the BREB process was limited, because I did not conduct a qualitative study of the children, of the child care centres, or of the EC students. In other words, I did not systematically observe or interview anyone, and the stories are not "data" or "evidence"; they are examples, as I explained in Chapter 1. For pedagogical purposes, I had previously gathered the examples included in this study. All participants who are named in the dissertation signed a letter of consent. In some cases, I went back to EC students and children years later to ask for their permission (if they were now adults) or their parents'

consent. The participants were asked if they would like to be referred to by their real names or pseudonyms. If participants chose their real names, I used them. If not, I included pseudonyms (in quotation marks) that the participants chose for themselves and/or the characters in the stories they narrated. In examples where I refer to boy, girl, teacher, or mom, I did not approach the participant to obtain permission. These examples were gathered from sources such as the Internet, published literature, or memories from my teaching experiences, as I have indicated in each case.

### **Past Experiences and the Study of Gadamerian Hermeneutics**

My explanation of the use of circles of understanding in the professional development of educators is influenced by multiple experiences of interpreting children's ideas and actions, and teachers' practices, both with EC students from 2005 to 2017 and with teachers in the field who participated in the IQ Project (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2011; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010) and the implementation of the BCELF (Government of British Columbia, 2008). Past experiences of interpreting documentation of children with educators happened within a collective context in which the logistics of the room, such as the physical arrangement of the participants' seats (U-shape), were important considerations to afford an open and "safe" dialogue among the interpreters. Also, I regularly videotaped (with the participants' consent) the CCRD in the courses I taught in postsecondary education. In the videotaped conversations, questions and assumptions were shared and discussed by (1) the documenters of the documentation of children, (2) the audience formed by the rest of the EC students in the class and myself as the instructor, and, (3) sporadically, voluntary guests who actively participated in these sessions. The guests were former and current instructors in the Faculty of Child, Family,

and Community Studies, educators from other institutions, and parents and children who were directly related to the text or object of study. The guests joined our dialogues because they wanted to be part of these discussions. The purpose of a large audience was to encourage and become aware of a plurality of views that made evident our self-education (Cleary & Hogan, 2001) or self-understanding and horizons of knowledge (Kennedy, 1996) and to be exposed to perspectives that we would not have thought of and that enhanced our conceptualizations of children, teachers' practices, and ourselves. I videotaped these dialogues to encourage EC students (particularly the documenters) to revisit our conversations, along with the audience's written responses and the transcripts (dialogue and/or descriptions of actions) of the documentation of children. Revisiting the written responses and the transcripts challenged us to think in more depth about the participants' interpretations. These logistics of CCRD offered me valuable information and experience to propose a systematic use of circles of understanding.

What I explain and illustrate in this chapter is also the result of my study of Gadamerian hermeneutics and my desire that my ten years of engaging in CCRD with EC students would contribute to the systematic implementation of CCRD in the future. My study aims to build a more precise way for educators to engage critically in conversations about our common understandings than the one initiated in BC in 2005, as described by Pacini-Ketchabaw (2010b) in the introduction to *Re-situating Canadian Early Childhood Education*. Pacini-Ketchabaw (2010b) explains that in June 2008 at the "Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education" conference held at the University of Victoria, she and Larry Prochner sparked an ongoing dialogue with Canadian ECE scholars about reconceptualist ideas (revised and new views) in the field. I was part of the group who benefitted from this vision of bringing new ideas into dialogue and exposing scholars and educators to a wider spectrum of educational work that was happening

in other places in the world, such as Sweden, Norway, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, and the US, among other places. At that time, Pacini-Ketchabaw's (2010b) project, in keeping with her colleagues' interests, was to engage Canadian ECE scholars in examining the theory-practice divide and to disrupt the normalizing discourses that have created and maintained social inequities and a lack of respect for differences and diversity. Introducing reconceptualist ideas as part of our dialogue in BC was not "a linear and simple task" (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010b, p. 241). Many scholars and educators resisted this movement in their everyday practices (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010b). However, other scholars and educators were excited and committed to reconceptualizing theory and practices through activities that have taken place from 2005 to the present.

### **Literature for Enhancing Hermeneutic Enquiry**

According to Gadamer (1975/2013b), the way we seek to understand ourselves in the world matters, and it is a philosophical and political endeavour. In light of Gadamer's statement, what exactly we do and how exactly we engage in listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation when we interpret children's ideas and actions, and teachers' practices, function as strategies to understand ourselves and our educational purposes. In our intents of understanding ourselves, EC students and I (as their instructor) made visible our discourses, beliefs, and values. In Gadamerian (1975/2013b) terms, our horizons opened up, thus creating possibilities to revise and expand our prejudices and come up with new inquiries. In reference to opening up our horizons of understanding, David Kennedy (1996) adds that individuals engage in hermeneutic self-understanding when they encounter a "situation of a break [or] division" (Kennedy, 1996, p. 195) which becomes *strange* when they contrast it with

what they previously understood or accepted without questioning. Thus, interpreters “seek to re-establish . . . a ‘fusion of horizons’ with the object [of interpretation]” (p. 195). From my view, Kennedy’s explanation might be applied to situations in which educators examine documentation of children and teachers’ practices. In Chapter 7, I illustrate how course literature functioned as the “strange” object that provoked the “situation of a break [or] division” (p. 195) in EC students’ reflections, and how this literature helped them to “seek to re-establish . . . a *fusion of horizons* with the object [of interpretation]” (p. 195), or, in other words, to be and act hermeneutically by expanding their self-understanding and elaborating new interpretations of what they examine.

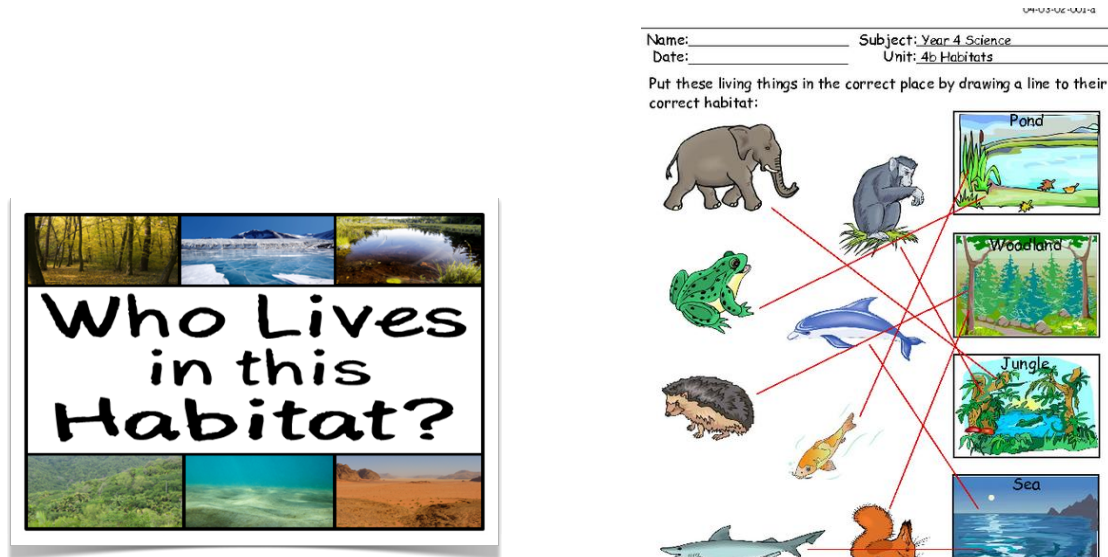
In addition to the voices of the children and teachers discussed among educators, there is also educational and philosophical literature, or scholarly voices, that influence and shape their questions and prejudices. An example of this literature is the significance of project work (Rinaldi, 2006) in relation to children’s interests. Particularly, ideas learned from scholarly literature might inform educators’ pedagogy in two ways: first, as a source to inform activities and actions that are meaningful because they influence children’s education beyond the programmatic structure of the curriculum (Vintimilla, 2016), and second, as a way to teach educators strategies to question and challenge practices that might otherwise have remained unquestioned and taken for granted.

### **Illustration of Circles of Understanding**

#### **“Where Does a Whale Live?”**

A preschool teacher asked her class to complete a worksheet by matching animals with their habitats (Figure 2 shows an activity similar to the actual one). The teacher aimed to assess

whether the children had learned in which environments different animals live. In this activity, pictures of animals, such as fish, elephant, monkey, frog, raccoon, shark, whale, ant, scorpion, and squirrel, are to be matched with pictures of habitats, such as ocean, lake, river, pond, sky, rainforest, prairie, jungle, underground, and desert.



**Figure 2. Worksheet: Animals and habitats.**  
**Source: PrimaryLeap online printable primary resources.**

A girl in the class matched the whale with the sky, among other responses. The teacher used a red X to mark this matching as incorrect. Later on, the girl brought the worksheet home. Curious, her mom asked why she had matched the whale with the sky. The girl responded, “Because the whale has just died.” The mom was not expecting this reply; however, her daughter’s response made sense according to the family’s beliefs and conversations about what happens when someone dies. If the girl had been thinking the whale had died, a logical consequence might have been that it would go to heaven; therefore, the sky was a possible and “correct” answer. However, the mom guessed that this response from the girl’s point of view had not been considered by the teacher who marked this matching with a red X.



### ***The Story's Background and Purpose***

In 1995, one of my students in the Bachelor of Education program at a local university in Monterrey, Mexico, told our class the story above. The ideas and actions of the story's main characters (a preschool teacher, a young girl, and her mom) made me encounter a *strangeness* that I have repeatedly experienced in education. This encounter with strangeness provoked in me, as Kennedy (1996) explains, a break from my philosophical and practical understanding of ECE. Since then, I have discussed and interpreted this story with others. In these dialogues, we have examined the possibilities of meaning and educational decisions that might be drawn from interpreting this situation. This time, in my intent to use circles of understanding with this story, I aimed to make my prejudices and inquiries visible when I interpreted the girl's, the mom's, and the teacher's ideas and initiatives, because both—my prejudices and inquiries—might help me and others to become conscious of our current limits or horizons of understanding. Additionally, in interpreting and reinterpreting this story circularly, I referred to ideas from the literature that helped me to expand my understanding of children and of teachers' practices and to plan for further educational opportunities that might offer children and educators (and possibly others) more insightful experiences to build on what they have learned individually and collectively.

On one hand, the continuous and circular interpretations of this story at different times and with different groups of educators made me feel confused and uncertain about the intentions and actions of the participants in this story. On the other hand, I gained in-depth understanding of the interpreters' experiences, as well as alternative ideas about teaching and about myself. I claim that the continuous and circular process of interpreting documentation, along with the use of ideas from the literature, makes visible *the educator we have turned out to be* and offers us opportunities to confirm or redefine *the educator we would like to become*. Aligned with

Gadamer's (1975/2013b) idea of being transformed when we reach understanding in dialogue, my intention with using hermeneutic enquiry to interpret this story is not to convince anyone or put forward "correct" or fixed views about this preschool situation. Rather, through dialogue with myself and in reference to previous conversations with others, my intention is to become conscious and to make visible how the interpreter might transform her understanding of children and education in such a way that "we do not remain what we were" (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, p. 387).

### ***The Interpretative Cycles***

The EC student shared this story with the class because she found it relevant to be discussed with other students. Here, in using circles of understanding with this example, I initially focused on the girl's answer, her mom's curiosity, and the teacher's response. I organized my continuous and circular readings in terms of an interpretive dialogue between the story and myself (Alejandra) within the context of this example. In this interpretive dialogue, I aimed to elaborate meaning through continuous circular readings, as if the voices in the story were responding to and inquiring about each other's interpretations. The readings expressed back and forth by Alejandra and the story considered the parts (specific actions) in relation to the whole (generalities) of this situation, as is proposed in circles of understanding.

### ***The Practice of Continuous and Circular Interpretations***

The first time I heard this story, this is what I interpreted:

*Once again . . . an example of a teacher who unfairly assessed (judged) the unexpected answer in a class assignment of one of the girls in the class. It seems that the teacher did not question why the girl matched the whale with the sky. Also, the teacher might have assumed that the girl had not learned (i.e.,*

*memorized and repeated) what she should have known by this time in the school year. The teacher might have concluded that this girl had not paid attention to the lesson about animals and habitats she had taught to the class. From the teacher's perspective, the girl's answer was clearly wrong because her response was not one of the predefined matches the teacher had planned for this worksheet. Simply, the teacher assigned a red X to an incorrect answer. It is a pity that the teacher dismissed the girl's initiative and assessed her answer as wrong.*

When I interpreted the story this way, I felt disappointed, because this situation reminded me of situations that I had previously encountered in education. Also, I expected that the students in my class would point out that the teacher's failure to carefully consider the girl's answer was a missed opportunity to learn about a child's view, as well as an unfair way to assess the girl's answer on the worksheet. Possibly, for the teacher it was only a silly unattended issue, with little relevance in the children's preschool experience. From my perspective, what I noticed was obvious. Therefore, I expected that, although using similar or different words, most of the students in the class would agree with my interpretation.

At different points in time when I shared this story, various interpretations were expressed and discussed. Definitely, not all participants in dialogues aligned with my initial reading. Their alternative views helped me to question my initial assumptions and inquiries about this story and to imagine possible meanings that could be applied in future situations.

Here, I engaged in an interpretive dialogue in which a plurality of readings about the story were expressed and therefore were possible. *Story* is an invented voice to challenge my (*Alejandra's*) readings. I intended to present the interplay of two voices that I (*Alejandra*) formulated about the same story to problematize the interpretations elaborated that might unveil

aspects of this situation that I (as the interpreter) was not conscious of before. Generally, in the examples examined in this chapter, the voices of *Story* and *Alejandra* offer readings that sometimes refer to self-dialogue and other times refer to my response to others' views.

*Story*: Whales do not actually live in the sky! To complete this worksheet, the instruction was to match animals with their habitats. The girl's answer showed that she did not know where whales live. Also, it might have been possible that she did not understand the instruction; therefore, her response was incorrect and marked with a red X, as wrong answers are usually marked in school.

*Alejandra*: I agree that whales live in the ocean; however, I believe the teacher is ignoring or dismissing the child's initiative and capability to choose an unconventional, unexpected, and unplanned answer. By missing the girl's initiative, I assume that the teacher usually teaches based on a conception of the child who does not know and who has to be taught the right answer/information.

*Story*: The teacher might have to assess the children's worksheets according to what she has taught her class (curriculum) and the expected answers that she and possibly other teachers might have agreed on as the right responses.

*Alejandra*: It worries me that the teacher used a red X (judgment) on the matching of the whale and the sky when she actually overlooked and did not search about the girl's choice. It seems that the teacher was not curious about the child's choice for this matching. I wonder if the teacher actually thought that this girl did not know whales live in the ocean. Apparently, the teacher did not come up with possible ideas or provisional theories of why the girl matched the whale with the sky. Possibly, the teacher simply assessed how each child's answer aligned to the expected and right responses.

*Story:* It seems the girl did not understand the activity of matching animals with their habitats. Or, possibly the girl was intending to be careless, silly, or playful when she chose the sky for the whale.

*Alejandra:* The girl might have not understood the activity; however, I do not think that she was acting naively. Instead, she might have used this opportunity to show an unconventional or sophisticated way of thinking about life and death that she had learned from past conversations and experiences.

*Story:* A common-sense and true answer for the whale's habitat was the ocean, but the girl did not choose this picture for this match. Consequently, the red X on this response seems to be right and fair.

*Alejandra:* An aspect to be discussed further might be that the teacher did not enquire why the girl matched the whale with the sky. In other words, the teacher did not use a pedagogy of listening to find out about the girl's unexpected thinking when she matched the whale with the sky. Consequently, the teacher overlooked a child's unconventional or innovative way of thinking. From my point of view, the girl's answer was an intention to move beyond the simplicity of the worksheet planned by the teacher because she understood that animals' habitats might change depending on whether they were alive or dead.

*Story:* It seems that this dialogue suggests that the teacher should discuss with her preschool class any topic the children express an interest in, such as life and death. Possibly, not all parents would agree with this plan. Also, the teacher might not be qualified to address and follow up with children's interests and experiences.

*Alejandra:* On one hand, life (being alive) and death (dying) might not be topics which are discussed with preschoolers, even though it is not uncommon that children bring these topics

into their play and conversation with other people (children and adults). On the other hand, this might unfold as a complicated issue because it involves parents' diverse beliefs and values in regard to who the child is—particularly who their daughters and sons are—and what they are capable of learning and discussing. Also, the teacher may or may not feel qualified or capable to address all types of children's interests and experiences. Definitely, the parents' views should be considered prior to making decisions that might influence their children's educational experience in preschool.

*Story:* Possibly, the girl's mom felt gladly surprised with the girl's explanation that the whale was in the sky because it had just died, or maybe she would have expected her daughter to choose a common or expected response, such as matching the whale and the ocean, as the right and only possible answer for this matching.

*Alejandra:* I do not know how the mom felt in this case. However, in educational situations similar to this one, there might be moms who would like their children to conform with the common or expected answer, rather than becoming the child who is pointed out or gets in "trouble" because of her unconventional or unexpected responses. In contrast, there might be moms who, when listening to an unexpected response, would validate the child's intelligence and capability. Some mothers might value a child who does not conform but expresses herself based on her own interests and previous experiences—in other words, a child whose subjectivity is manifested by her self-expression of ideas and interests, rather than a child who reproduces as knowledge what she has been instructed to memorize.

As part of the use of circles of understanding, I claim that it is relevant to bring into the educators' self-study and discussion with others additional children's conversations about life and death that have been part of children's spontaneous interactions and play in different places

in the world. New stories about similar topics might help us to expand our understanding of children's interests that have not been part of the conventional curriculum. Later, in my readings of this story, I expand on this aspect by referring to additional examples in which children's understanding of life and death is manifested.

### ***The Use of Literature to Broaden Interpretations, and the Risk of Repetitive and Vague***

#### ***Circles***

In exploring the use of circles of understanding to interpret the story "Where does a whale live?" I intended to broaden my interpretations by referring to ideas from the literature that might help me to see beyond my initial assumptions. When I revisited my initial and later assumptions, I noticed with surprise that they were prejudices that expressed declarations of "truths," rather than inquiries that might help me to imagine new ways to expand my understanding and make educational decisions. I wanted the additional readings to be ongoing and circular and not repetitive and vague. That is, I did not want the readings to only support my preferred views, resulting in a rigid interpretation that might have prevented me (as interpreter) from engaging in dialogue with the story, such as conversation with my imaginative self-voice and other characters' voices. Also, I wanted to be open to perspectives that might otherwise not be imagined or formulated about this situation. Here, I include a few of my declarative readings that referred to insights from the literature that challenged my understanding and helped me broaden my perspectives about teachers' pedagogy and myself. Contradictorily, these readings were also limited in terms of only explaining my preferred conceptions of the child and the teacher and my preferred beliefs regarding pedagogical practices.

In this story, the teacher's self-concept seems to take for granted (Lenz Taguchi, 2010a) the role of the educator as the person who knows, the one with authority and power to assess the

children's responses as right or wrong, correct or incorrect. From my view, this teacher's self-image prevented her from looking beyond the *only* true or right answer of matching the whale with the ocean; consequently, for her, anything else would be false or wrong.

The preschool activity that the teacher asked the children to complete did not consider Biesta's (2010a) purposes or functions of education, such as qualification, socialization, and subjectification. The teacher seemed to focus on assessing the girl's qualification about matching animals with their habitats correctly, or as people have seen them in reality. The teacher was not looking at ways in which the children's responses might show their learning in socialization and subjectification skills and the interconnections among the three functions. For example, the girl's idea of imagining the whale in the sky manifested her capability of being autonomous or an individual who thinks beyond the true or common answer. Also, the girl's response expressed unexpected understanding for a preschool student about animals' lives after death, which they might transcend, and it is why she matched the whale with the sky.

This teacher missed the girl's understanding of the whale in the sky because she did not expect unconventional answers that children might explore, invent, or recreate to show their understanding of life's situations. Children might use a *differentiated* frame of mind (Davis, 2009) to express their ideas (in this case, the girl's understanding of what happens with an animal that dies). The girl's frame of mind might be seen as unconventional and sophisticated because it reveals certain understandings of beings that transcend life. In other terms, the girl's answer might be read that when animals die, they go somewhere else. Certainly, if preschool children have gained knowledge about beings that transcend life, it complicates enormously what teachers usually teach in preschool. The teachers' consciousness of the children's interests and



understanding might obligate them to reformulate their curriculum and practices, as Lenz Taguchi (2006) explains:

Once I revisit and revise what I “know” about how children think and learn, or about what approach I should use to help them grow, then I may be ethically obliged to change what I actually do with them. Based on my new understandings, I cannot ethically continue with my old practices. And neither can I stop with my new understandings. I am ethically obligated to continue to examine my practices always looking for better ways to “do good” for these particular children with whom I am working. (p. 260)

This teacher missed enquiring about the interest or motive that made the girl match the whale with the sky. Teachers’ practices of seeking expected or common answers in preschool activities may lead educators to stay in a superficial understanding of children’s thinking and actions. This assumption makes me wonder how the ECE field is conceptualized and operationalized under limited and fixed theoretical perspectives, or “regimes of truth” (Foucault (1977a, 1977b, 1980a, as cited in MacNaughton, 2005, pp. 19, 21), which draw from milestones explained by developmental psychology and behaviourism. Viewed through a developmental lens, the girl’s answer might be considered abnormal, since it would not be expected that a preschool child would manifest an abstract understanding of what happens when someone or something dies.

The girl’s answer might also be interpreted as weird or inappropriate because it shows an understanding of life and death. These thoughts might be seen as unconventional and overly sophisticated for a young child who was asked to complete a simple “developmentally appropriate” preschool activity (as it seems was planned by the teacher). I assume that

encounters with children's unconventional responses, or ones that might be considered silly, should challenge educators to question their taken-for-granted conceptions of who the child is and what her responses might look like. Also, this girl's answer might remind educators to listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation with children to expand the ways they interact with and understand each other.

The dominance of developmental psychology as a regime of truth to interpret children's ideas and actions might show teaching as a unilateral and authoritative practice. It might also speak of a poor understanding of the ethical and political agency of the child and the teacher. In this situation, the educator's ethical and political agency, which might have influenced and welcomed the child's political agency, was absent. It also might suggest that the girl's insight about life and death was invisible or ignored by the teacher.

When I first revisited the readings shared in this section, I noticed that they manifested my prejudices about the story of the girl who matched the whale with the sky. My prejudices were listed as declarative statements of truth that outlined the story I chose to believe in. On one hand, in this story I visualized a capable girl who showed an unconventional and sophisticated way of thinking. I highlighted this child's answer as desirable and helpful in preschool education. On the other hand, I realized that I had not examined the further context of this story that might also be relevant in broadening my conceptualizations of children and my educational decisions. For example, did any other child offer innovative or unconventional responses? Did I consider that the rest of the children in the class were capable, too? How would it benefit preschool education if I focused on a single response? In addition, I did not know what the girl had said or done when she learned the teacher's response to her answer on the worksheet. Did the girl care about the red X on her matching of the whale with the sky? What did a red X on this matching

mean for the girl? I became aware that readings from the child's perspective might add information to expand interpretive possibilities in circles of understanding. Additionally, the girl's and the other children's views could have expanded the possibilities of dialogue (with myself and others) and the creation of pedagogical documentation of this event. If I had considered the girl's and other children's ideas, I should have been cautious that "an adult can never become a 'native' in children's worlds" (Spyrou, 2011, p. 156). In other terms, we can never grasp the child (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007), and we are always "on the periphery of the child's world" (Paley, 2004, p. 25). Spyros Spyrou (2011) alerts us to "how children's voices are constantly constrained and shaped by multiple factors such as our own assumptions about children, our particular use of language, the institutional contexts in which we operate and the overall ideological and discursive climates which prevail" (p. 152), which refers to the research context and the power imbalances between children and adults. I wonder, then: If educators (adults) understand and represent children's voices informally on a daily basis in the classroom and other contexts, how would it be different and beneficial if educators consciously engaged with children's voices systematically and interpreted them circularly, as explained in hermeneutic enquiry? Spyrou claims, and I agree, that children's voices show us that they are "messy, multi-layered and non-normative" (p. 151). This understanding of children's voices reinforces a conceptualization of children who are neither lineal, nor naïve, nor simplistic subjects; rather, children's voices express irrelevance, inconsistency, and nonverbal actions and noises that help them to express who they are, beyond the actual words they can use. Spyrou encourages researchers to "avoid reifying [children's] identities as something stable and unchanging" (p. 158). From my view, children's ideas and actions are often unpredictable and sophisticated, and ideally, should cause adults to think deeply about and interpret them.

### ***The Practice of Revisiting Interpretations Systematically***

My interest in engaging in continuous and circular readings based on new inquiries helped me to elaborate an imaginative interpretive dialogue that expanded my understanding of children and of pedagogical practices. In the dialogue included below, the girl's readings are identified with *Girl* and mine with *Alejandra*, as the two interpreters. Here, I explore the use of a red letter X to assess children's work or performance.

*Alejandra:* A red X on the girl's worksheet might be a harsh and intrusive way to assess her response, particularly if the teacher did not explore why the girl made this choice.

*Girl:* Hey! I got a red X in the matching of the whale with the sky. I believe my teacher did not know that the whale had just died and it went to heaven.

*Alejandra:* The red X on the girl's answer might impact her self-understanding of what she knows and her desire to respond according to what she has learned about someone or something that has died.

*Girl:* I see that if I had chosen the ocean for the whale, the teacher might have checked this answer as correct. If the whale had been alive, I would have matched the whale with the ocean. Also, I might have matched the whale with the ocean if the whale had died. Possibly, the whale's body went to the very deep water in the ocean and the whale also went to heaven.

*Alejandra:* If I had listened to this girl's ideas, I might have thought that she, and possibly other children, are flexible and creative in their thinking, and that their ideas of what happens could be diverse and actual possibilities, at least in their imagination. Moreover, it seems that there are children who try to understand their teachers' judgments when they assess their work; however, these children do not regularly engage in an interpretive dialogue with their teachers to argue about assessment. The use of Xs (red or any colour) to assess children's performance at

school might be a relevant topic to be discussed among educators, particularly when we encounter events that speak to us about children's understanding of teachers' strategies to evaluate children. For example, a few years after I heard the story of the girl who matched the whale with the sky, I encountered another situation in which my twin daughters in grade 3 (different divisions) in a BC school received their primary interim report (see Figure 3).

PRIMARY INTERIM REPORT

This report is intended to give you a general overview of your child's effort in the core intellectual areas at this time, as well as his/her personal development. A formal report with achievement levels will follow in March.

<u>Personal Development</u>	Consistently	Frequently	Occasionally
Accepts responsibility for appropriate behaviour	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Takes responsibility for assignments	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Utilizes class time effectively	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Demonstrates a good attitude towards learning	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>Academic Subjects</u> - student puts forth a <u>good effort</u>			
Language Arts	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mathematics	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socials	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Science	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P.E.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fine Arts	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teacher's Signature: _____		Dated: January 2009	

PRIMARY INTERIM REPORT

This report is intended to give you a general overview of your child's effort in the core intellectual areas at this time, as well as his/her personal development. A formal report with achievement levels will follow in March.

<u>Personal Development</u>	Consistently	Frequently	Occasional
Accepts responsibility for appropriate behaviour	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Takes responsibility for assignments	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Utilizes class time effectively	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Demonstrates a good attitude towards learning	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>Academic Subjects</u> - student puts forth a <u>good effort</u>			
Language Arts	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mathematics	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socials	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Science	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
P.E.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fine Arts	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teacher's Signature: _____		Dated: January 2009	

**Figure 3. Checks (left) and Xs (right) on primary interim reports.**

The girls brought home the one-page report in which they were evaluated with checks (Natalia's) and crosses (Regina's). Regina told me that "she did not know why she did everything wrong." Similar to the story of the girl who matched the whale with the sky, this story taught me that it might be common that teachers inadvertently miss opportunities to learn about children's views, in direct relation to their actions of assessing children's performance at school. Also, this example might be evidence of what children learn by getting confused and engaging in interpretive dialogue about their teacher's actions and pedagogy at school. Aligned with this explanation, Ann Åberg's (2005, as cited in Moss, 2014) insights about her participation in the

Crow Project in a Swedish preschool suggests activities that might lead to successful interactions among children and educators. Åberg says:

By listening to both the children's ideas and our own, we, as pedagogues, continuously discover new ways of understanding and relating to the subject [topic] we are working on. The children's diverse ways of understanding and thinking constitute a very important and powerful driving force in our teaching process. (as cited in Moss, 2014, p. 163)

Referring back to the revisiting of my readings about the girl's matching of the whale with the sky, I unilaterally pointed out the conceptualization of a poor image of the teacher whose evaluative practice was not attentive to understand the girl's answer. Specifically, I declared that the teacher did not realize the girl's view that the whale had died; therefore, she did not follow up with the girl's interest, which might have influenced the curriculum. If the teacher had realized the girl's interest, she might have promoted further discussion in which the girl and the rest of the class shared their experiences and views (provisional theories) about living and dead animals. Revisiting my readings reoriented the elaboration of new interpretations in a dialogue with the story (Alejandra's imaginative and contesting voice) within its context. For example, the story might have responded to my prejudices about who the teacher was and why she assessed the girl's answer in this way.

*Story:* In the actual experience, the self-image of the teacher might have been opposite to the self-image you (Alejandra) proposed. She might have considered herself a good teacher who was teaching the true and right information about animals and their habitats. She might have also thought that she assessed the children's answers according to the worksheet's expected responses

that she had agreed on with other teachers in the preschool. It might be meaningful to enquire about and discuss further perspectives about the image of the teacher in reference to this story.

In a continuous and circular dialogue, the story's voice might illustrate the prejudices expressed by both Alejandra and her imaginative and contesting voice, which are concrete, real perspectives of how we approach the participants and issues in education. Alejandra and the story, which engage in an interpretive dialogue, bring new interpretations to be discussed within a context of resistance and frustration (Biesta, 2012b), but the participants in dialogue might also open up possibilities for thinking and creating pedagogical documentation collectively. The purpose would not be to find the truthful or correct reading(s), but to engage in self- and collective dialogue to expand and possibly fuse our horizons of knowledge and understanding, as is proposed in circles of understanding (Gadamer, 1975/2013b).

### ***Further Cycle of Interpretations with the Characters' Voices in the Story***

In my intent to continue elaborating additional and circular readings of this story, I reflected repeatedly on my previous readings. In doing so, I reconfirmed that a few of my interpretations, even though informative and relevant, were primarily *declarations* of truth rather than *inquiries* about "truth" within the story's context. Also, they pointed to the teacher's style of assessing the girl's answer, which consequently left unmentioned other aspects that might be questioned and interpreted.

In moving forward into an additional round of readings, I aimed to elaborate interpretations that expressed new possibilities to engage in another circular dialogue. These assumptions and inquiries referred to ideas that the story's characters might have expressed. The assumptions and questions I formulated did not seek fixed or final "truths," but were approximations of what characters might have thought or done. Also, I opened myself up to

imagining and proposing diverse and contrasting perspectives, in comparison to my preferred ones, by engaging in an interpretive dialogue between Alejandra and the voices of others in this story. Overall, my individual intent of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation, as well as attending to the voices in the story, turned into a systematic and more accurate way to use circles of understanding. Certainly, this practice broadened my conceptualization of the girl, and of children in general, informed me about potential teaching practices, and taught me about my biases and strengths in interacting with children and educators, which consequently promoted transformation of the educator I have been into the one I am continuously becoming.

Below, I include a last round of inquiry which I organized in an interpretive dialogue between Alejandra and the characters in the story: the girl, the teacher, and the mom. As interpreter, I formulated, in reference to the narration of the story and my imagining of what could have happened, the assumptions and inquiries that other characters might have had. Of course, the assumptions or inquiries that I attributed to the story's characters are still my own prejudices, which I challenged as I examined the ideas and actions of the story's characters. In this round of circular readings, I did not want my prejudices to be judgments of the characters in the story, but opportunities to think deeply and generate alternative understandings about children, teachers' pedagogy, and myself. Again, in this interpretive dialogue, I encountered resistance and frustration, but I intended to keep dialoguing and building up educational ideas and experiences (Biesta, 2012b) as I recognized my prejudices in the voices of others, and when I tried to contest them. I did not aim to reach consensus among the new interpretations of the story's voices. Instead I aimed for expansion and, when possible, a fusion of horizons that might broaden my understanding of the child, the teacher's pedagogy, and myself.



*Alejandra:* I still wonder about the teacher's sense of obligation to align to standards or normalized answers when she assesses children's worksheets, particularly if she noticed that the girl, and possibly other children, chose answers that were not expected.

*Teacher:* I marked the girl's answer of the whale in the sky as wrong, or with a red X, because this response was not expected as per the whale's habitat. In preschool, as it also happens at school, teachers have been taught to assess children's answers in in-class activities according to true or right responses and standards. I wonder if the assessment protocol might be unfair and a practice to be questioned.

*Girl:* If the teacher had asked me about my answer of the whale in the sky, I would have shared with her and my friends at preschool that my mommy and I read children's stories in which a dog and a bird died. These children, who loved their pets very much, drew pictures as if they were in the sky so that they would remember them being somewhere and they could still keep in touch with them.

*Mom:* Smart girl! I believe she chose to match the whale with the sky because she remembered that we talked about people and animals that die. I think she likes to believe she could keep in touch with them somehow. I wonder if her teacher should know about my conversations with her about this topic.

*Girl:* Also, when Grandma Ely died, Mommy and Daddy told me that she had a spirit which is still alive and in heaven, so we could keep remembering her. I wonder what my friend Annie thinks about her cat that just died? I will ask her.

*Alejandra:* In the case of the whale, it really only lives in one habitat, but the girl did not choose the sea for this matching. Had her "wrong" answer confused and aroused the teacher's curiosity? Moreover, what if a child had matched the frog with the grassland, instead of with the

pond, would it also be a wrong answer? What if the child had seen a frog jumping in the garden and recalled that there are tree frogs whose ecosystem would be different from pond frogs? In this case, the grassland might be a true and right response, even though the teacher might have expected the matching of the frog with the pond, which would also have been true and right. Also, if prey fish (e.g., herring or sardine) and predator fish (e.g., tuna or salmon) had been matched with the sea, would this answer have been marked as a true and right answer? On the assignment in Figure 2, it was expected that the picture of the herring or sardine should have been matched with the pond, not with the sea; however, prey fish live in the sea, too. As with the frog, I also wonder about other animals that move around to different habitats that might be variously factually correct. How would children's knowledge (i.e., qualification) and life experience (i.e., socialization and subjectification) be constructively considered in preschool to promote the purposes of good education (Biesta, 2010a)?

*Girl:* Now, I remember that I matched the whale in the sky because I was thinking about my friend's pets who died, and also Grandma Ely. I think the whale that died is also in heaven, but it could also be swimming in the ocean or dead in the deep water in the ocean, because a whale is heavy and it would sink.

*Mom:* Would my daughter like the teacher to address her answer on the worksheet with her preschool class? Should I tell the teacher what my daughter explained to me—that the whale is in the sky because it has just died?

*Teacher:* What if the girl actually had an argument for her response that I neither thought about nor imagined? If I think and do something about children's unconventional responses, such as the one given by this girl, how would it be beneficial in my teaching?

*Mom:* My daughter did not seem to care about the red X on this answer, but I care! I believe she had a smart reason that explained her choice. If I approached the teacher, would it encourage her to revisit and rethink my daughter's and other children's answers on their worksheets?

*Alejandra:* Would the teacher be interested in questioning her style of assessing children's initiatives and work? If so, would children's education and teachers' pedagogy be impacted? Would a "weird" or unexpected answer from a child be considered an opportunity for dialogue with her and other children to learn about their ideas and actions or their provisional theories (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 64)? How might this ongoing dialogue with children compel the teacher to reconsider or reconceptualize the curriculum? What would teaching that commonly engaged in dialogue with children look like?

An important insight about using circles of understanding in the documentation of children is that it is not about the story itself, but the *infinite* possibilities of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation with oneself and others within contexts. The self- and collective interpretive dialogue helps us to relate with multiple educational topics (content) and new questions that broaden our conceptualizations of children, teachers' practices, and ourselves. In other words, the interpretive dialogue does not focus on the story itself; rather, the systematic use of hermeneutic enquiry promises to impact profoundly the education of young children and the projection of the early years curriculum, and consequently, the capability of educators to be and act hermeneutically.

### ***Additional Stories for Broadening Our Understanding and Interpretation***

In reference to the interpretation of the story "Where does a whale live?" I explored additional examples to further explain the importance of dialoguing with children and educators about

topics children have raised, such as life and death. Initially, these topics might be seen as unconventional and possibly “inappropriate” in the education of young children. However, discussing more stories that manifest children’s interests might help educators to further understand children’s ideas and actions and to support ongoing and circular readings.

In this case, in which a story raised the topics of life and death (i.e., the whale had died), I recalled three examples that happened in different places in the world that illustrate children’s interest in discussing these issues. Perhaps, if educators become conscious of children’s interests, we will be less likely to overlook the reasons behind children’s responses, such as the one expressed by the girl who matched the whale with the sky. Certainly, there might be a reason(s) why children dialogue about life and death. As capable educators, we might embrace children’s interests as part of the curriculum we teach. Otherwise, we could judge their initiatives by ignoring the children’s provisional theories and their elaboration of meaning about the world.

**What does death mean to you?** This is an excerpt from a conversation between Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and a boy named Keith who was diagnosed with terminal cancer (videotaped by Haupt, 2003).

*Elisabeth:* What does death mean to you, Keith?

*Keith:* Like death? What does death mean to me? Well, it just feels to me that going out of one stage into another better stage. And oh, I knew if I will die I’ll go up to heaven, but I was thinking to myself, I’ll miss my mom, miss my dad, miss all my friends, my brother.

*Elisabeth:* Did you learn anything out of this experience of having cancer?

*Keith:* Oh, one thing I learned is that I could go through life; life is pretty tough.

**Does everyone die?** An EC student (Sharon Lacey) who was completing her practicum at a local child care centre video-documented twenty minutes of play between a girl (“Yesica”) and a boy (“Kevin”). Here is a short excerpt that I drew from Sharon’s narration and the children’s conversation that she documented. All of the children’s names Sharon provided are pseudonyms. Kevin explained to Sharon,

I am covering Yesica because she is dead. I do not want her blood to come out. . . . I know she is dead because she is still and not talking and not moving. . . . She died in a fire.

A few days later, Sharon revisited the video clip with a group of children (“Gabriela”, “Isaac,” “Mia,” “Yesica,” and “Kevin”) to follow up with an exploration of three questions she drew from the initial play between Kevin and Yesica. The questions discussed were: (1) What is death? (2) Does everyone die? and (3) How can we be certain that someone is dead? An excerpt of their dialogue is presented below.

What is death?

*Gabriela:* If a bumblebee has no wings, then it’s dead.

*Isaac:* If you are dead, then you can never wake up ever again, and if you are sleeping, you can wake up. You die forever. It doesn’t feel good. Just ask [a person] a few questions, and if they don’t answer, you ask them again and again, and if they don’t answer those times, then, they’re dead.

What does it mean to be dead?

*Yesica:* Animals don’t die. Everything grows and dies.

*Kevin:* Animals die, too. Some people die someday, and some people die in the olden days. Some people don’t die, and I’m a kid, so I’m not dying.

*Isaac:* Toys can't die!

Sharon documented Isaac and Kevin discussing the difference between being dead and asleep, and while Isaac insisted that someone who repeatedly didn't respond to questions was dead, Kevin wondered about this issue.

How can we be certain that someone is dead?

*Kevin:* What if they're not talking because they're sleeping so hard?

Sharon added that during outdoor play, Gabriela found a bumblebee she determined must be dead because it had no wings. However, Yesica and Mia were not sure.

*Mia:* Maybe the bumblebee isn't dead and its wings are just inside its shell.

**What do children know about mummies?** This example is the introductory story I narrated in Chapter 1. In this situation, I asked "Mauri," a preschool boy, if he knew what would have happened if he had fallen down to the ground from the highest part of the railing. He quickly responded: "I would have become a mummy, wouldn't I?"

In reference to the above three examples, I would like to emphasize that systematically listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation exposes educators—and ideally children, too—to a plurality of views about topics that are commonly addressed by children in their play, explorations, and conversations. In this case, the three examples were related in quite different ways to understand life and death, which are actual topics discussed among children and educators, but ones that might also be unconventional in the curriculum for young children.

To conclude this chapter, I did further analysis using circles of understanding in the story of Mauri. I aimed to illustrate that circles of understanding might be practiced for interpreting any example that educators gather, because it might help them to think deeply

about children's ideas and actions, teachers' pedagogy, and themselves, and because creating pedagogical documentation might become an essential strategy for making thoughtful and better decisions in early years education.

### **“I Would Have Become a Mummy, Wouldn't I?”**

One day in a school in Monterrey, Mexico, a preschool teacher, “Liz,” found one of the four-year-old children, “Mauri,” hanging by his hands from a railing on the outside of a ramp five metres above the ground. Liz was alarmed to see Mauri in such a dangerous situation. She helped him to safety, felt profoundly grateful that he had not fallen down, and asked him to come with her to meet with me, the academic principal. Liz seemed fearful and worried when she and Mauri approached me, and she asked me if the three of us could talk right away. Calmly, Liz asked Mauri to tell us *how* he had just climbed up the ramp. As I listened to Mauri's narration, I also felt fearful and worried, and I shared Liz's concern that we were the adults responsible for Mauri's safety at school. As part of our chat, I nervously asked Mauri if he knew what would have happened if he had fallen down to the ground from the highest part of the railing. He quickly responded: “I would have become a mummy, wouldn't I?” His response was unexpected and surprised Liz and me. It made me think that Mauri was aware of the possible consequences of his action, which could have been dramatic. Since 2000 when this incident happened, I have been curious about how Mauri understood this “adventure,” and his explanation of the possibility of becoming a mummy. Was he actually aware of the dramatic result of being a mummy or a different being? Did he understand about living or dying as a consequence of his action? As the adults responsible for the safety of children at school, what would have been right and truthful to do about Mauri's action and his response in our dialogue?

### *The Interpretative Cycles*

My initial and further readings of this story made me interpret Mauri's idea and action, not in one single way, but in multiple ways. For example, I interpreted Mauri's action as a demonstration of minimal concern with keeping himself safe. Also, Mauri appeared to understand that from being alive, he might suddenly be dead, and that he would be transformed into something (a mummy) that he knew was different from being alive. I noticed that when Mauri spoke about the possibility of turning into a mummy, he did not appear to be bothered or fearful of what it might mean; rather, his response was quite precise about the consequence of a dramatic accident that might have happened, and he seemed to look at it quite naturally. It might be that Mauri did not clearly understand what would have happened to him and the effects of this dramatic accident on others who look after him (e.g., parents, teachers, relatives, and friends) if he had fallen down from five metres above the ground. Later on, when Liz and I talked about our conversation with him, we felt troubled by Mauri's response and insights (elaboration of meaning and understanding) and the way he embraced a quite dangerous and serious situation with little awareness of children's safety at school.

To help educators and children broaden their perspectives by encouraging educators to act hermeneutically and, in doing so, model to children how hermeneutical enquiry might be practiced in their lives, I used circles of understanding to dig into ongoing and circular interpretations of this story. In other words, I argue that acting hermeneutically in interpreting educational situations might not only benefit educators' style of teaching and interacting with children by using pedagogy of listening and acting on the assumption that children are intelligent and capable individuals, but also enhance how children are influenced or taught by educators to



enquire and think collectively and respectfully, in this specific instance about handling unsafe and problematic situations they get involved in, deliberately or not.

### *A Further Cycle of Interpretation with the Characters' Voices in the Story*

While interpreting this situation, the teacher (Liz) and I confirmed the importance of being in conversation with Mauri and other children in order to build and continuously revise our conceptualization of children and to be attentive to and reflective about our practice. Here, I illustrate an interpretive dialogue that considers initial assumptions, the revisiting of readings within the context, and the educational possibilities of what the story's characters (i.e., Mauri, Liz, and Alejandra) might have said or done.

*Alejandra:* I have been wondering about a few questions: Was the boy's young age the reason he was careless about his personal safety? If young age and short life experience influenced the boy's action, why did he come up with the unconventional and "sophisticated" response that he would have transformed into a mummy if he had fallen down from five metres above the ground? Did he understand that becoming a mummy would mean being dead?

*Liz:* I am still feeling fearful and anxious about what would have happened to you [Mauri] if you had fallen down from such a high place above the ground. Maybe the teachers, the staff, and your parents would have thought that I did not take good care of you and other children at school.

*Mauri:* I held tight on to the railing by my hands . . . when I walked up the outside of the ramp. I did not want to do something unsafe. . . . Now, I see I had a pretty bad idea.

*Alejandra:* Do you think that we need a few rules at school which tell us how to safely walk up the ramp? Would these rules be a reminder for you and other children to never walk up

the outside of the ramp by holding on to the railing? I would like that you write down these rules and help us to post them in a visible place for all children.

*Mauri:* Yes, I can draw pictures and write down rules that remind me and my friends that if we walk up the outside of the ramp by holding on to the railing it is very dangerous. We could injure ourselves very badly, and we could even die forever. Our teachers, staff, and friends would be very sad and angry at the children who do it. And my mommy and daddy, my brother and family would cry very loud if I had fallen down from the outside of the ramp to the ground and had become a mummy. I would not have spoken to them ever again, and . . . this story would be very sad!

*Liz:* I would like that you and I talk to our class about the unsafe idea you had. Then, we should plan to draw pictures and write down rules about how to be safe at school, particularly when we walk up the ramp. Would you agree that we discuss what happened in our morning assembly tomorrow and in the school's assembly on Monday morning? What would you tell our class?

*Mauri:* I will tell the children at school that nobody should ever walk up the outside of the ramp by holding on to the railing because if you fall down from five metres above the ground you can be badly injured and you might also become a mummy . . . and I believe a mummy will not speak with anybody ever again.

*Alejandra:* It is a good plan to discuss further what happened and to think with other children about what is safe to do at school, particularly what is safe to do when children walk up the ramp. Also, it might be important that you explain to your class what you know about mummies. If the children think this topic is interesting, your class could study a project on

mummies. This way, you will explore in more depth what you know and what you wonder about them. Are you interested in such a project?

*Mauri:* Yes, I would like to learn if mummies are sleeping or actually dead. When I saw pictures of mummies they seemed to be sleeping tight, but not dead. Also, I would like to know if mummies ever speak with their parents and close friends . . . and if they would speak to other mummies. And, I also wonder if mummies remain as real people or if they decompose into soil, as animals and food do?

*Alejandra:* These are relevant questions! I hope your class gets interested in working in such a project and finds out new information to answer what you are curious about this topic. One more request . . . please discuss with your class what places would be safe to go climbing. It seems that you and possibly other children in your class like to do this activity. Where would you go climbing?

*Mauri:* Yes, I like to go climbing very much! I enjoy climbing trees and big rocks when I go to the mountains with my family!

*Liz:* We could go climbing in a field trip. Would you like that we plan this activity?

In this cycle of interpretation, I intended to show *how* Liz and Alejandra used the conversation with Mauri, not only to “solve” the immediate danger, but also *to listen carefully to Mauri’s interests and take them seriously*. They treated Mauri’s interests in mummies and climbing as legitimate interests worthy of attention, and suggested ways to give him safe opportunities to pursue them.

### **Being and Acting Hermeneutically Is Intentional**

The elaboration of cycles of readings of a story or situation constitutes hermeneutic enquiry. If educators opt to be and act hermeneutically, this choice will imply listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation with ourselves, other educators, children, and possibly other people. In reference to Mauri's story, a quick and direct way to interpret this situation might have been to talk to him firmly about the activities that are permitted and prohibited at school, particularly in regard to children's safety (e.g., "*No* child should ever walk up the outside of the ramp by hanging with his hands from the railing"). If a child breaks a rule, the teacher and staff would point out the mistake. Possibly, the child would also be punished somehow. The child's parents would be notified about their child's bad behaviour, and possibly a few consequences would be listed should there be a repeat occurrence. Such an approach threatens children and tries to control their initiatives, in this case, an unsafe action. In contrast, the circular readings I formulated were an exchange of imagined perspectives about Mauri's unsafe action. They showed that he, other children, and educators could be conceptualized as capable individuals who listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation collectively about the situations they encounter. The ways in which educators understand and interpret documentation of children might express a plurality of views that, consciously or unconsciously, make visible our conceptualizations of children and our familiar and preferred pedagogical practices. The dialogue about this story intended to illustrate that hermeneutic enquiry might be an insightful alternative to co-construct "truth" and educational possibilities for young children, rather than imposing limits or restrictions on children who want to speak up and reflect about their ideas and actions in the ongoing process of shaping themselves as capable beings.

Overall, my aim in this chapter has been to illustrate that educators can actually engage in dialogue with children. Also, they can prevent ignoring or dismissing children's interests and initiatives by examining these situations closely along with the children. And, they can formulate continuous and circular readings to become conscious of further assumptions and questions. I intended that the use of these cycles of interpretation teach me, and possibly others, about our prejudices and the importance of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation. These strategies are part of what it means to live hermeneutically in the world of early childhood education.

In Chapter 7, I focus on EC students' reflections on their experiences of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation—of engaging in hermeneutic enquiry—and on the impact of the inquiries on their conceptualizations of children, teachers' practices, and themselves.

## **CHAPTER 7: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' INTENTS OF BEING AND ACTING HERMENEUTICALLY**

*We do not remain what we were. ~ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1975/2013b*

In this study and particularly in this chapter, the interpretation of EC students' reflections seeks to augment Gadamer's hermeneutics by referring to two practices: (1) reading and reflecting on selected academic literature, and (2) engaging in self- and collective dialogue to enhance one's educational understandings. In other terms, I argue that the use of hermeneutic enquiry might be enriched in two ways: first, when interpreters are asked to deliberately try out ideas or concepts drawn from educational philosophy and early childhood studies, and second, when interpreters are confronted, not only with the text or object of study, but also with others' interpretations of the same documentation of children. In this chapter, every time that I refer to "students," I mean my former students in the early childhood education diploma program at Douglas College.

For the first practice, students were asked to read, study, and interpret selected course literature, individually and then collectively. The purpose of studying and making meaning of literature was to expose the students to unfamiliar and alternative approaches in ECE that might cause them to experience resistance and frustration and might challenge them to move beyond discourses of developmental psychology and behaviourism, with the purpose of imagining and proposing new ways to understand children, teachers' pedagogy, and themselves.

The second practice refers to self-dialoguing, and dialoguing with others, about the stories that the instructor and students chose to interpret, because those examples might offer opportunities to enhance our understanding of education. As part of the self- and collective dialogue, the instructor and the students were encouraged to identify assumptions and questions

about theoretical insights that expressed how we conceptualized children and teachers' practices. Where Gadamer emphasized the dialogical interplay among individual interpreters who seek recognition of their own horizons of knowledge, agreement, or consensus about an object of interpretation, I argue that study of and familiarity with theoretical insights, and further dialogical interplay with others who engage in interpreting the same object of study, add important pedagogical possibilities.

For this study, several former students who had completed written reflections as part of their assignments in two courses that I taught between 2005 and 2017 at Douglas College (ECED2300 Growth & Development and ECED2401 Advanced Growth & Development) consented to have their reflections discussed. In discussing their reflections, I interpreted and pointed out evidence of their engagement with theoretical insights when they made meaning of new and unfamiliar ideas or terms. From my view, the students' narrations demonstrated the difficult, complex, and frustrating activity of thinking about these ideas when they were exposed to studying and interpreting academic literature to broaden and elaborate more truthful interpretations. Second, in discussing the students' reflections, I pointed to how listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation nurtured the students' understandings about children, teachers' pedagogy, and themselves. I believe these reflections showed the students' intents to understand the other by reflecting on ideas that may be either familiar or "alien" (at least initially). Also, these reflections indicated rich possibilities of what could be learned by being and acting hermeneutically in ECE. Based on the experience I have gained over time by reflecting on the students' written work, I am persuaded that the use of circles of understanding has even more potential than we have experienced so far.

## Studying and Thinking

When I interpreted the students' reflections for this study, I noticed that *studying* seemed to be implied in the students' intents of being and acting hermeneutically, because these intents offered them the possibility of second thoughts (Phelan, 2017). According to Anne Phelan (2017), people who study and embrace the possibility of second thoughts are choosing, not only "to *stop and think*" (Arendt, 1971, p. 4, italics in original, as cited in Phelan, 2017, p. 24), but to *unlearn* prejudices that have become predominant and taken for granted in people's thinking, while they intend to come up with new assumptions and understandings. In Phelan's terms, the meaning of second thoughts "conjures images of revisiting taken for granted assumptions and disentangling oneself from memories that have become confused with 'reality' so that they can be reconsidered and argued about" (p. 23). From my view, second thoughts that students elaborated in studying, which imply pausing, reflecting, remembering, imagining, and reformulating one's prejudices, align with the systematic practice of Gadamer's circles of understanding, which aim to be continuous and circular to prevent falling into repetitive and unimaginative ideas (or vicious/vague circles) about children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices.

Phelan (2017) asks, "What will combat immunization to the fact and sustain the unlearning? . . . Could it be the activity of study" (p. 23)? If study is an activity that happens in circles of understanding, then study might be helpful in unlearning prejudices that might entrap one's thinking. I want to emphasize Phelan's explanation of *study* in relation to the ability to *think*, which she draws from Arendt's work, as it enhances the understanding of thinking that I have previously explained in this study. Arendt (1971/1978) explains,

While thinking I am not where I actually am; I am surrounded not by sense-objects but by images that are invisible to everyone else. It is as though I had



withdrawn into some never-never-land, the land of invisibles, of which I would know nothing had I not this faculty of remembering and imagining. (p. 85)

From my view, aligned with Arendt, thinking was an indispensable activity that students encountered when they studied academic literature and engaged in self-dialogue and dialogue with others while they were interpreting a text or object of study, and in the process of acknowledging how they were influenced and transformed by being and acting hermeneutically. The students' reflections demonstrated how they experienced being in the "never-never-land" in which they had to re-present and reimagine (Arendt, 1971, p. 85) the new ideas or approaches they read and intended to make sense of. From Arendt's view, Phelan (2017) explains, the capability of appropriating moments of the past selectively, including "moments of rupture and dislocation" (p. 25), and using their imagination to elaborate the meaning of what they were examining might appear to be invisible in the students' reflections; however, both of these thinking faculties were expressed as sites of tension and possibility in their narrations. Phelan explains, "Thinking via imagination initiates a break with the everyday and makes way for fresh meanings that have the power to renew and refashion the world" (pp. 24–25).

Arendt (1971/2003) explains that the faculties of thinking and judging are interrelated, but they are different. "Thinking deals with invisibles," she writes, "with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand" (p. 189). In reference to Arendt's explanation, Phelan (2017) notes that *conscience* is "a side effect of the silent, two-in-one dialogue between me and myself . . . [and] the very *manifestation of thought* [refers to] the capacity to make good judgments when the occasion require[s]" (p. 26, italics added). From my point of view, the students' reflections showed that they were capable of being conscious of their beliefs and practices, their limitations and possibilities, and of imagining and

reformulating their prior conceptions of children, teachers' practices, and themselves. The students' interpretations might have helped them to become conscious that they did not remain what they were (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, p. 387). In other words, they were affected and transformed by listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation when they systematically practiced these strategies individually and collectively.

### **Students' Interpretation of Theory**

In exposing students to literature in the areas of educational philosophy and early childhood studies and assisting them to understand and interpret it, I have repeatedly thought about Barbara Weber's (2011) inquiry: "How can we reanimate the ideas and questions of past philosophers [and educational scholars] and make them speak to us in a way that is relevant and meaningful for the existential [and pedagogical] questions that face us today?" (p. 127). This inquiry, in relation to reading plenty of students' reflections, made me conscious of two situations. First, I realized that the students' and my interpretations of this literature had sometimes been inaccurate, and that we had possibly misunderstood concepts, for instance, the philosophical meaning of Derridean "deconstruction" (see the two students' reflections below). In Weber's (2011) terms, we had experienced the danger of "weakly reasoned, pseudo-philosophical or superficial discussions which do not really reach down into this groundless abyss and are more of pedagogical value than of philosophical relevance" (p. 127). If I considered this statement as true, what students and I understood from reading and reflecting about this literature did not always make us accurate interpreters of the content of the study; however, this practice opened us up to possibilities for further studying and thinking that might have helped us to unlearn prejudices (Phelan, 2017) that we formulated during the course's term and afterwards. Second,

our studying of this literature might have helped us to acquire an “ongoing dialogical *attitude*” (Weber, 2011, p. 127, my emphasis) of how to approach a text and interpret it according to our relationships and the context in which we lived. In regard to using Gadamerian hermeneutics, my purpose for exposing students and myself to think about and interpret educational philosophy and early childhood studies was to help us to engage in circles of understandings with ourselves and others. Certainly, I foresaw that the students and I would likely arrive at imprecise and vague interpretations of theory, but I anticipated that continuous circular study and dialogue about it, with ourselves and others, might lead us to truthful approximations of the concepts, and to their application to the educational situations we chose to examine and to which we wanted to respond.

A few questions remain in regard to the imprecise and sometimes incorrect readings of theory when educators interpret documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy. For example, how do we decide what are the means (tools) and ends (purposes) of hermeneutic inquiry? Is it acceptable to use theory simply as a tool to interpret something else, or should we also commit ourselves to the effort of interpreting the tool itself? In reference to my experiences with EC students, the most desirable action is to commit ourselves to use theory as precisely as possible in every cycle of interpretation with which we engage. However, in this intent, time and willingness to systematically and responsibly study and interpret theory in relation to the text or object of study become indispensable conditions. In this regard, Kerdeman (1998b) asks, “can one be educated to be awake, responsive, and wise? (p. 252). From my view, students’ interpretation of theory (sometimes incorrect) in relation to documentation of children demonstrated our involvement “within a framework of ambiguity and tension” (Kerdeman, 1998b, p. 255) that guided our study and interpretation to elaborate meanings, including those

quite different from what I had envisaged. Kerdeman adds that “teaching students to examine their assumptions in the face of uncertainty and challenge represents an important task for education” (p. 256) if we have chosen to teach hermeneutically, as was my intention.

## **The Idea of “Deconstruction”**

### ***Margaret’s Reflection***

This example is from a reflection prepared by Margaret Davey as part of the course Advanced Growth and Development (ECED2401) in Winter 2008 (January 17, 2008). This type of personal reflection (PR) was requested on a weekly basis to be discussed with the class in relation to the session agenda that I (the instructor) had previously planned and in which I asked students to relate theory with a specific situation. As I previously explained, the purpose of reading and dialoguing about academic literature was to challenge our assumptions or prejudices in order to think and practice education beyond our familiar beliefs and taken-for-granted ideas, a process with potential to take us (as educators) into approximations of “truth(s)” within a context.

Referring to the article “Deconstructing and Transgressing the Theory–Practice Dichotomy in Early Childhood Education” by Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2007), Margaret wrote:

What is deconstruction and how does it relate to my experience in this class so far? I found the article on Deconstructing and Transgressing the Theory . . . fascinating as it helped me gain understanding regarding my current experience in this class. I have found myself feeling very overwhelmed so far as I am encountering terminology and phrases that are unfamiliar to me. Pedagogical documentation, collective biography, meaning centered discourses are a few of the phrases that I found daunting. Page 4 of this article [of the 2004 draft, which is

page 279 in the version published in 2007] revealed that students come with “a tool-box *already filled* (italics in original) . . . with tools needing to be unpacked, investigated and reformulated. Teacher education then will be about practicing a continuous process of unpacking and repacking what is already in this tool-box.” Part of the discomfort that I felt was that these terms did not fit with the previous knowledge that I had attained, the “tools in my box” so to speak.

On page 8 [of the 2004 draft, which is page 284 in the version published in 2007], I read that “Deconstruction is about disruptions, destabilizations, undermining and challenging taken-for-granted notions, values practices and pedagogy ‘as usual.’” I found this to be reassuring because I realized that I was feeling uncomfortable because I was beginning the process of deconstruction. Instead of building on previously attained knowledge, I was being forced to take apart that old knowledge and I am assuming that I will re-formulate it in a different way. I could identify that I was engaging the process of “‘resistance’, affirmation and becoming” as referred to on page 9 [of the 2004 draft, which is page 285 in the version published in 2007].

“Using various deconstructive practices in the context of teacher education is about seeking ‘that intersection of material transformation through theory’s practice and practice’s theory’ (Lather, 2003, p. 7)” [on page 10 of the 2004 draft, which is page 287 in the version published in 2007]. This idea was a “light-bulb” moment for me during the reading. My interpretation of this was that rather than trying to grasp concepts and definitions, I should relax and experience the process of learning. As I perform pedagogical practices, I will unconsciously theorize

them into existence, and concepts that are foreign to me now will become familiar. During my previous class, I had felt so intimidated by the unfamiliar concepts and my understanding that I had seriously considered withdrawing, now I feel open to the process of learning and I am anticipating the journey.

My interpretation of Margaret's text focused on the selection of theory she found relevant to explain. Initially, Margaret stated a question that she wanted to examine and respond to in her reflection: "What is deconstruction and how does it relate to my experience in this class [course] so far?" Margaret's explanations seem to confirm her initial experience of resistance and frustration (Biesta, 2012b) that helped her to engage in self-dialogue with the text of study (the article's content and the course's conditions, which refer to the written reflection and class discussion) and to acknowledge the ideas she found alien or unfamiliar among the ones the students were exposed to in the process of creating pedagogical documentation.

Margaret expressed, "I have found myself feeling very overwhelmed so far as I am encountering terminology and phrases that are unfamiliar to me. Pedagogical documentation, collective biography, meaning centered discourses are a few of the phrases that I found daunting." Margaret chose specific ideas from the article to construct meaning while she studied the text that was offered as the medium to persevere and to keep open to the transformation of her perspective about education and herself. For example, she quoted that students come with "a tool-box already filled . . . with tools needing to be unpacked, investigated and reformulated." From my perspective, Margaret found Lenz Taguchi's explanation of what "a tool-box" meant in teacher education promising in terms of guiding her process of understanding new ideas and practices in education.

Margaret explained further how this “sophisticated” literature confronted what she had previously learned and believed as “truths,” in comparison with the new ideas that seemed to be unclear and possibly contrasting. This feeling provoked discomfort in her. Kerdeman (1998a) explains that when an individual is provoked by people or events (in this case, the engagement with the text/literature) to examine her assumptions, her self-understanding is criticized, distrusted, or dismissed; therefore, this hermeneutics consciousness is painful because “being awake calls up our fallibility . . . and remind us that we are finite” (p. 274). In Gadamer’s (1993) terms, the individual is like “being pulled up short” (p. 268, as cited in Kerdeman, 1998a, p. 274).

Margaret wrote:

Part of the discomfort that I felt was that these terms did not fit with the previous knowledge that I had attained, the “tools in my box” so to speak. Instead of building on previously attained knowledge, I was being forced to take apart that old knowledge and I am assuming that I will re-formulate it in a different way.

It seems that Margaret’s thinking or self-dialoguing with the text opened up possibilities for new understandings. Then, her new understandings awakened her or made her conscious of an ongoing negotiation between *familiarity* (being at home) and *strangeness* (being exiled or disoriented), which, from a Gadamerian perspective, are “ways of being oriented in the world, modes of existing within interpretative situations we cannot help but inhabit” (Kerdeman, 1998a, p. 276). Margaret wrote: “I found this [exposure to the text and opportunity to think about it] to be reassuring because I realized that I was feeling uncomfortable because I was beginning the process of deconstruction.” Margaret associated the meaning of “deconstruction” explained in the article with the process she actually experienced as part of this course.

The last part of Margaret's reflection informed me about the benefits of being exposed to "difficult" or challenging literature, which promoted in this student (and possibly others) the creation of meaning about a theory that she associated with what she was actually experiencing. Particularly, Margaret explained that her main concern should not be to grasp the meaning of each concept, but to let the process of learning flow and to welcome the transformation that new ideas and understandings might provoke in her by choosing to engage, interpret the text of study, and do something about it. Margaret wrote, "this idea was a 'light-bulb' moment for me during the reading. My interpretation of this was that rather than trying to grasp concepts and definitions, I should relax and experience the process of learning."

Margaret was capable of anticipating how and why to study and interpret the text, which I understood as her choice to stay in *dialogue* (in the middle ground in which education actually happens), rather than opting for the alternative of self-destruction (Biesta, 2012b, refer to Chapter 5), which might have meant withdrawing from this course or experience. Margaret concluded her reflection by stating,

As I perform pedagogical practices, I will unconsciously theorize them into existence and concepts that are foreign to me now will become familiar. During my previous class, I had felt so intimidated by the unfamiliar concepts and my understanding that I had seriously considered withdrawing, now I feel open to the process of learning and I am anticipating the journey.

### ***Sue Ellen's Reflection***

This example refers to the reflection of Sue Ellen S. Elman, who was part of the same class as Margaret. Sue Ellen wrote this reflection, which focused on the same Lenz Taguchi article, on January 17, 2008:



I am once again faced with an overwhelming task of trying to understand the meaning of “deconstruction” as a practice that all educators should undertake. . . . I wondered about how one can constructively maintain a mind frame of “uncertainty, undecidability” (p. 276).

How does one do so when you are an educator expected to impart knowledge? What can come about from not knowing “concrete” information, truths, and answers? How does the feeling of not knowing redefine what teaching/educating means, and in that sense, imply reassurance that it is alright to be in this mind frame?

In reading Lenz Taguchi’s (2007) article, I once again feel really overwhelmed and uncomfortable at her discussion of the meaning of “deconstruction” and what mind frame you have to uphold in learning, understanding, and practicing it. The post-structural theory of “deconstruction” is addressed as the process of “being in a state of inexhaustible uncertainty and undecidability, while actively scrutinizing and resisting the normalizing effects of meanings” (p. 276). This very idea of being unsure in the general sense is difficult to sustain because it is human nature to want to know about everything and have the answers, and that if an idea confuses us, we strive to learn more about it until we have a concrete definition that appeases our minds regarding the idea(s) we wonder about. As a student and future educator, I am uncomfortable because of this state of “not knowing, uncertainty, indeterminacy; being always a bit lost to one another” (Derrida, 2003, n.p., cited in Lenz Taguchi, 2007, p. 277) and

therefore, I feel that as I cannot define in concrete terms what the meaning of “deconstruction” is, I also do not know how to go about practicing it.

The practice of “deconstruction” is a very hard thing to do, especially when we as creatures of knowledge and meaning, or rephrased as, creatures who *want* knowledge and meaning, want established facts and information to answer any or all questions we may have. We seem to need something that is set in stone to prove or disprove those facts and information. However, in essence, this is why the “deconstruction” process is significant, because there are no answers which are ‘set in stone’ and unchangeable; rather, there are “multiple ways to understand” (Lenz Taguchi, 2007, p. 284). In understanding these ways, we have to be open to anything and everything. We as educators are no longer expected to know everything to “teach” others; rather, we become a part of the process where we are the ones learning as well. As Lenz Taguchi (2004) quotes, [According to Derrida] “[t]his is what makes possible a space for another kind of communication, learning, and change” (Lather, 2003, cited in Lenz Taguchi, 2007, p. 277).

This idea of a possibility for a new way of thinking is important when teaching. It introduces and encourages the notions of multiple readings and multiple understandings—which everyone can question and think about anything (and everything), and that they are developing their own ideas and opinions. It actually redefines education (the learning and teaching process) and provides a more holistic idea which involves both as equal entities, and possibly provides more ways *to teach* and *to learn*.

The idea of “deconstruction” paves the way for pedagogy of listening and relationships in that both learners and teachers have a greater awareness of the different ways of doing (thinking, acting, etc.) and existing when they are ‘listening’ (observing) and interacting with one another.

All in all, I realized that I am truly within the deconstructive practice as I am at a state of “uncertainty” and as I continually question and wonder about the post-modern (post-structural) ideas and practices. It’s still a little difficult for me to sit here and think that I can’t find one true definition of post-modernism (with its ‘sub-ideas’ of meaning-making, pedagogy of listening, ethics of encounter with the Other, and ethics of resistance, and so on); however, I do realize that because our education was about filling our heads with what we think are concrete information or truths and answers, I will never be content. It is reassuring, (still) in the oddest sense, that being *uncertain* is what is required of us when thinking in the post-modernist perspective.

From my perspective, Sue Ellen was also confronted with a “difficult” and unfamiliar text of study, which made her feel uncomfortable, overwhelmed, and confused. Early in her reflection, she inquired about the significance of creating meaning that she encountered by interpreting this text with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of theory and practice. She wondered:

How does one do so when you are an educator expected to impart knowledge?

What can come about from not knowing “concrete” information, truths, and answers? How does the feeling of not knowing redefine what teaching/educating

means, and in that sense, imply reassurance that it is alright to be in this mind frame?

These inquiries might be evidence of a hermeneutical encounter with the text of study. It seems that Sue Ellen's knowledge, or what she has learned, is not helping her to understand deconstruction in accordance with Lenz Taguchi's (2007) proposal. Also, Sue Ellen offered a well-known or normalized assumption about human nature in search of answers and being certain in contrast to choosing and living with uncertainty and undecidability when teaching children.

It seems relevant that Sue Ellen expressed her understanding of being encouraged to learn and incorporate this new approach in her practice, even though she did not know how to do it. Sue Ellen wrote, "I feel that as I cannot define in concrete terms what the meaning of 'deconstruction' is, I also do not know how to go about practicing it." Sue Ellen's intent to understand "deconstruction" as explained by Lenz Taguchi (2007) might seem ironic, given that Derrida insists deconstruction is not something that can be practiced. In her reflection, Sue Ellen's affirmation that she didn't know how to practice it is thus (perhaps inadvertently) appropriate.

Sue Ellen also demonstrated her understanding of being-in-question, putting others into question (Vintimilla, 2016; i.e., in students' in-class discussions), and expanding her horizons of "what is there" (Gadamer, 1975/2013b), as well as becoming conscious of desirable new ways of teaching. It might be that Sue Ellen encountered the opportunity to resist her previous knowledge and practices while, simultaneously, she desired and embraced the challenge of keeping an uncertain and undecided frame of mind. She expressed that there might be "more ways *to teach*

and *to learn*” (her emphasis) and therefore “to redefine education.” Sue Ellen expressed the significance of a possible new story (Moss, 2014) in ECE. She wrote:

This idea of a possibility for a new way of thinking is important when teaching. It introduces and encourages the notions of multiple readings and multiple understandings—which everyone can question and think about anything (and everything), and that they are developing their own ideas and opinions.

Sue Ellen’s explanation aligns with what Gadamer (1975/2013b) notes about the importance of using circles of understanding continuously and circularly when interpreting a text or object of study because this hermeneutical enquiry helps to approximate “truths” within the context in which the person is living and relating with others.

Sue Ellen concluded her reflection by expressing her discontent with what she had realized about her past understanding and practice, which, at this point, appeared to her to be limited or narrow. From a Gadamerian perspective, her assumption of acquiring knowledge and answers as part of her certified education was definitely challenged, and she seemed to resist holding on to this prejudice. In addition, she expressed her puzzlement that this new approach, and particularly the understanding of deconstruction in education, required her to “be uncertain” while she listened, thought, dialogued, and created pedagogical documentation of children’s ideas and actions and of teachers’ pedagogy. Sue Ellen wrote:

I do realize that because our education was about filling our heads with what we think are concrete information or truths and answers, I will never be content. It is reassuring, (still) in the oddest sense, that being *uncertain* is what is required of us.

## **The Idea of “Pedagogical Documentation”**

The examples in this next section refer to the idea of “pedagogical documentation” as explained by five students who were asked to read literature about this topic in the ECED 2300 course. As their instructor, my intention was to expose them to academic texts that might challenge and help them to expand their conceptualization and use of pedagogical documentation. In this case, one of the students completed an individual reflection in Fall 2007, and the other four people completed their reflections in pairs in Fall 2015. Below, I’ve included excerpts of the students’ reflections to interpret what they explained in their assignments.

### ***Sue Ellen’s Reflection***

Sue Ellen S. Elman completed her reflection on October 9, 2007. In it, she explained that her studies during the semester had

definitely re-enlightened my opinions regarding documentation [of children]. In the beginning of this semester, I remember saying that I have this love-hate relationship in doing documentation, and now I realize it’s because of my lack of knowledge of what true pedagogical documentation is really all about.

Sue Ellen also explained that her understanding of documentation of children changed, from seeing it as a “contrived and forced” activity which mainly consisted of “simply re-stating a story of what has happened, captured in a documentation panel” into an activity that revealed the “child’s interests, but more importantly . . . how they think—the process and methods they take and use to learn and acquire knowledge.” In other words, she commented that her understanding had shifted, from not seeing how documentation of children benefitted them, to acknowledging “documentation [of children] as a tool with so many purposes.” Finally, Sue Ellen expressed that documentation of children “is definitely a very important teaching tool” because, according to

Sergio Spaggiari (1997), it offers students the possibility to revisit and reexamine their interactions and work with children. As part of her reflection, Sue Ellen wrote that she is “definitely still in the process of learning more about this significant idea and so I won’t boast about knowing a lot about it, but I will say that practicing and including pedagogical documentation just truly makes sense.” In this last statement, Sue Ellen seems to gain consciousness of her hermeneutical understanding, which should prevail in the performance of any educator, in terms of being-in-question and putting others into-question (Vintimilla, 2016) when educators engage in a continuous and circular interpretation of pedagogy (in this case, the conceptualization and use of documentation of children and pedagogical documentation).

### ***“Stephanie’s” and Jonathan’s Reflection***

In a collective reflection written on October 13, 2015, “Stephanie Fraser” (a pseudonym) and Jonathan Friesen wrote that their current understanding about pedagogical documentation and subjectivity had been challenged. From their view, documentation of children could not ever be interpreted *objectively*, because whoever interpreted it would make sense of it from their own perspective. They added that interpreters should also try to interpret it from the children’s perspectives. It seems that “Stephanie” and Jonathan realized that interpreting is subjective because it always produces more than a single, true meaning. By stating this assumption, they still questioned: “Considering these lenses [the educator’s own view and the educator’s interpretation of the child’s perspective] is it possible to achieve *true objectivity* [emphasis added] while respecting the magnitude and importance of pedagogical documentation?”

My response to their reflection, which I intended to be a systematic exchange of ideas, as if we were in actual dialogue, questioned their definition of and assumed importance of objectivity. By questioning the students’ ideas instead of giving them answers (my own beliefs

or prejudices), I aimed to influence their thinking and encourage them to revise their initial wondering about objectivity and subjectivity in their interpretations of children's ideas and actions or teachers' practices. From Gadamer's (1975/2013b) view, questioning ourselves and others relates to the ongoing circular dialogue of our prejudices, which might help us to reconceptualize and reformulate the meaning of our pedagogy, and of ourselves.

Also, "Stephanie" and Jonathan explained that it was the literature that helped them to enrich the meaning and use of pedagogical documentation from what they had previously assumed. They wrote:

When we were first introduced to pedagogical documentation it seemed as though it was limited to the documentation itself and the theories we associate with it; there was nothing else expected and achieved from this process. However, upon completion of the readings throughout this course, we now have come to the understanding that this view of pedagogical documentation is very limited in its purpose and potential. Pedagogical documentation is, as we now see it, and according to Lenz Taguchi (2010a), "something that is *alive* [emphasis in original] and from which we can produce a multiplicity of differentiated knowledge from a specific event" (as cited in Sánchez, 2013, p. 23).

"Stephanie's" and Jonathan's new conceptualization of pedagogical documentation referred to the idea of "resistance," which they had learned from reading Lenz Taguchi (2008). They explained that resistance does not simply mean to oppose or replace; rather, resistance implies engaging in "a continuous process of displacement and transformation from *within* what we already think and do" (Lenz Taguchi, 2008, p. 272, emphasis in original). From my view, "Stephanie's" and Jonathan's new understanding of resistance made them conscious of being and



acting hermeneutically, because they learned that resistance refers to a process of displacing former assumptions and being transformed from within in relation to what they had previously thought and done. Also, I associated their understanding of resistance with Biesta's (2012b) explanation of the necessary conditions—resistance and frustration—that are present in educational dialogue, and should be embraced as conditions both to be in and to remain in.

Recurrently in “Stephanie’s” and Jonathan’s reflection, they wondered about how objective their interpretation becomes when they actually consider more than the single voice of the educator, such as the educator’s voicing of the children’s perspective. They wrote: “We believe that we are taking a step further into objectivity by considering the subjects of the documentation as equal contributors to the process and outcomes.” I asked them once again, “What does objectivity mean? And why would it be important to be objective when you interpret documentation of children?” Proposing these questions, I intended to repeatedly challenge them to rethink, and possibly reformulate, their understanding of being objective when they interpret documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy.

“Stephanie’s” and Jonathan’s enquiry about attaining objectivity while they interpret documentation of children reminded me about the risk of misunderstanding ideas from the literature (e.g., philosophy of education), and the potential to engage in repetitive and vague circles (Gadamer 1975/2013b). Aiming to support the revisiting of ideas from literature, I intended, by including my feedback, that we would engage in an ongoing circular dialogue that would provoke second thoughts (Phelan, 2017). In so doing, I hoped that they (and I) might stop, think, and unlearn prejudices as we engaged in an exchange of ideas expressed through the students’ reflections and in-class dialogue.

In their reflection, “Stephanie” and Jonathan further explained what they meant by truly considering the children’s voices as part of their intent of interpreting the object of study, not only from their own (educators’) perspective, but also from their view of the children’s perspective. They drew from Lenz Taguchi (2008) what might be possible about dialoguing and creating meaning about the object of study. They quoted the author as follows:

This pedagogical discussion now took on a decidedly ethical dimension as we began to recognize our obligation to help children see the worth of each child’s work in future assignments, rather than evaluating them in some hierarchical way, from clever and skillful to lacking and inartistic, as the deconstructive talks had made visible to us. (p. 279)

By referring to Lenz Taguchi’s (2008) quote, it seems that “Stephanie” and Jonathan pointed out a pedagogical practice, that is, educators’ obligation to promote appreciation of each other’s work which might become the foundation for further learning. This pedagogy might be unfamiliar to “Stephanie” and Jonathan due to their prejudices and past experiences; however, it had made sense to them when it was contrasted with developmental practices, which they might have experienced in their early years or observed at ECE centres, in which children are often classified (e.g., who is or is not an intelligent and skillful individual) according to their results in in-class activities. In contrast to what “Stephanie” and Jonathan might have experienced in regard to classifying children, they emphasized the importance of what children might take from their peers: “a new, positive, and respectful interest” (Lenz Taguchi, 2008, p. 280).

“Stephanie’s” and Jonathan’s final thoughts in their written reflection were as follows:

Throughout this course we have learned that true pedagogical documentation can be used to achieve new understanding and perspectives that will enable us to view

subjectivity in an objective way—thus bringing new knowledge and understanding to both educators and the children. It has opened us up to a new way of thinking and interpreting documentation which has forced us to realize how integral this process really is, while also understanding how everything is subject to what everyone involved holds to be true.

In summary, “Stephanie’s” and Jonathan’s final ideas showed their continuous interest in understanding subjectivity versus objectivity as part of creating pedagogical documentation. Also, they referred to the process of ongoing study and reformulation of meaning that seems to be supported by academic literature and the dialogue with others, in this case, among “Stephanie,” Jonathan, and myself, as the respondent of their reflection. “Stephanie’s” and Jonathan’s reconceptualization of pedagogical documentation highlighted the condition of looking for different interpreters’ views, such as the educator(s)’ and children’s. Also, they explained that their understanding of creating pedagogical documentation had changed. They had acquired an understanding of an integral process in which the interpretation of any text or object of study “is subject to what everyone involved holds to be true,” and that “truth” within a particular context might vary in relation to the other individuals’ context. They pointed out that “we should not stop at one interpretation as a goal to be achieved,” which, from my view, affirms and promotes the importance of being and acting hermeneutically by using circles of understanding that compel us to elaborate ongoing and circular readings of what is there.

### ***Sumia’s and Jonathan’s Reflection***

The following example, which was written by Sumia Mohamed and Jonathan Friesen on October 6, 2015, also discusses pedagogical documentation. Students in this class studied and reflected on educational literature, such as “Wondering To Be Done: The Collaborative Assessment

Conference” by Seidel (1988) and “The Educational Significance of the Experience of Resistance: Schooling and the Dialogue Between Child and World” by Biesta (2012b).

Sumia’s and Jonathan’s reflection posed an initial question: “Whose meaning matters? The writer’s [the author of the text or object of study] or the reader’s [the student/interpreter]?” (Seidel, 1988, p. 28). Their exploration of this question demonstrated the value in acknowledging that both the writer’s and reader’s perspectives about a text or object of study are worth consideration. Sumia and Jonathan drew from Seidel’s (1988) work two activities that might nurture the education of children: first, dialoguing with other teachers about the children’s work [educators’ perspective]; and second, approaching children’s work to find multiple meanings of what the children might have said about their productions [educators’ interpretation of the children’s perspective]. I responded to Sumia’s and Jonathan’s ideas with these questions: Why do we look for multiple perspectives? How do these perspectives enhance our understanding of children’s ideas and actions, teachers’ pedagogy, and ourselves?

In their reflection, Sumia and Jonathan explained the collaborative assessment conference proposed by Seidel (1988). This approach refers to collaborative interpretation of a child’s text in which, initially, no context is provided. This interpretive strategy intends to challenge the individual’s imagination to make meaning of what is examined. Sumia and Jonathan also referred to the collaborative critical reflective dialogue (CCRD) approach we used to conceptualize and create pedagogical documentation in this course, which they defined as a similar interpretive strategy to Seidel’s. Sumia and Jonathan explained that in the process of creating meaning with others, the writer(s) [students who were the documenters in CCRD] and the reader(s) [students who were the respondent audience in CCRD] brought up individual and collective meanings that might have nurtured everyone’s understanding as we engaged in

interpretive dialogue. They also referred to the experience of resistance [which refers to the effect on us of what disagrees, confronts, contradicts, or was unknown in CCRD], which was expected to be part of any truly educational dialogue (Biesta, 2012b). They explained that resistance might have functioned as a positive [desirable but complicated] force to remain in dialogue; however, our experience of resistance might have made difficult to stay in it, or in the space in which dialogue happened. Sumia and Jonathan added that dialogue requires from us “to engage *with* and exist *in* the world” (Biesta, 2012b, p. 96, emphasis in original), by which they may have understood that resistance is part of the individuals’ (students’ and instructor’s) existence if they actually had chosen to relate with others and live in the world. To end their reflection, Sumia and Jonathan referred to Biesta’s (2012b) proposal of slow education. In slowing down education, participants who engage in conversation learn to deal with the resistance that is part of any educational dialogue in which multiple perspectives are brought up and examined. From my view, Sumia and Jonathan recalled in their reflection the experience of creating pedagogical documentation that they encountered in studying the literature and in their involvement in CCRD.

## **The Idea of Understanding Beyond Developmental Psychology**

### ***Jasmine’s and Cole’s Reflection***

On September 23, 2010, in the course titled Growth and Development (ECED2300), Jasmine Burnet and Cole Kannegiesser wrote a reflection in response to literature by Dahlberg (2000) and Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007), whose alternative views challenge ideas and practices of child development and developmental psychology. It was my intention that the literature enhance the students’ conceptualizations of the child and of teachers’ practices. As part of their reflection,

Jasmine and Cole addressed the idea that evaluation of the “quality of childcare and education tends to be based on predetermined outcomes and standard achievements and goals for all children to accomplish” (their words). Jasmine and Cole characterized this trend as managerial. “Much like a factory,” they wrote, “early childhood institutions tend to serve consumers (parents) and stakeholders (government agencies and the economy) and not the children (the ‘raw material’) with which they are entrusted. ECE institutions focus on producing ‘quality products’ (children).” Jasmine and Cole inquired: “Where do these predetermined outcomes and standardized goals come from?” Referring to Dahlberg (2000), they explained that society produces “standardized truths” which are drawn “through the application of objective scientific methods” (p. 12). When Jasmine and Cole reflected about ages and stages in children’s development, they realized that this categorization of knowledge and skills by age brings about “the creation of developmental norms.” They asked: “How can we apply objective, scientific tests to the unique, dynamic, and ever-evolving creatures who our children are?” They added:

We cannot be objective when assessing children, or any human being. When making judgments or assumptions of the strengths and challenges of children we must appreciate each child for who he or she is—a unique individual who writes their own laws of development.

To illustrate these explanations, Jasmine and Cole referred to a situation that one of them had experienced at a local childcare centre. There was a child who was diagnosed with autism and received help from a support worker. This support worker observed the child when he was engaged in “mechanical processes like pouring sand through a small hole and powering a spinning wheel.” The student said it seemed that “it was society’s right to have this child *fixed* by any means necessary.” Jasmine and Cole assumed that the support worker intended to control

and repair the child's behaviour "because it was 'not normal' and 'not acceptable.'" From their view, the child might have stared longer than other children and he might have focused on what he was interested in and wanted to understand. Contrary to the support worker's intent to fix this child, Jasmine and Cole questioned whether this issue actually needed to be fixed and whether the child's behaviours required direct intervention. Jasmine and Cole explained that when the student approached the child to engage with him, the child usually walked away. This child's reaction made Jasmine and Cole assume that the child had "learnt that adult interaction was unpleasant" because it frequently resulted in interrupting, restraining, and controlling the child's explorations.

Jasmine and Cole ended their reflection by posing a question that might have helped them and their fellows in the class to further the discussion in ongoing and circular interpretations. They asked: "Does 'quality' in childcare, the need to conform to 'universal truths' and developmental 'norms,' assist or inhibit children from developing their own 'truths' and learning and growing to reach their potential?" From my view, this question showed interest in, and possibly concern with, persistently contesting universal "truths" and developmental norms that might *assist* or *inhibit* children's self-understanding and their interactions with others and the world. I responded to Jasmine's and Cole's enquiry by posing a few more questions which were intended to create ongoing circular readings, or second thoughts (Phelan, 2017), in further interpretative dialogue among themselves and other students: How do children resist universal "truths" and standards that they encounter in their interactions with institutions, such as family, school, society, and media? What are examples of universal "truths" and standards that social institutions might impose on children's ideas and actions? What are educators' practices that promote the image of a capable child? This doubled movement of being-in-question and putting

others into-question (Vintimilla, 2016) was not intended to find the appropriate developmental practice, to follow up norms, or to learn final “truths,” but to promote among students, in their individual and collective work, how to think, unlearn prejudices, and act hermeneutically when they interpret the literature and documentation of children.

### **Students’ Interpretations of the Collaborative Critical Reflective Dialogue (CCRD)**

As previously explained, CCRD is an interpretive strategy that I introduced and used with educators in BC in 2005. Over time, the CCRD helped us to practice listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation, which, during my doctoral studies, I associated with Gadamer’s hermeneutics and circles of understanding. Even though the use of CCRD with students may not have promoted the overall advantages of being and acting hermeneutically, particularly when students and I interpreted documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy, I believe the CCRD oriented the individual and collective use of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation.

The ideas I chose to include in this section were drawn from reflections written by eight students whom I taught in Growth and Development (ECED2300): Sue Ellen S. Elman (2007), Jasmine Burnet (2010), Sharon Lacey (2012), “Stephanie Fraser” (2015), and Cara Manky, Larisa Bodnariuc, Sam Henry, and Giselle Denum (2016). The students’ individual reflections were written at the end of the course once they had experienced CCRD. All students were involved in teamwork (4 or 5 people in each team) when they performed as documenters who led the CCRD with the class; I (the instructor) engaged as an additional member of the audience. Everyone in the audience (the rest of the students in the class, about 25) was encouraged to



contribute actively (with written and oral insights) in the interpretation of the documentation of children and of teachers' practices.

In regard to this study, my interpretation of the students' reflections was intended to respond to two questions: (1) What were the course and the CCRD we engaged in about? and (2) What did the students explain about their experience of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation, and about the hermeneutical character of these strategies to learn about themselves?

### **The Course and the CCRD**

In Fall 2007, Sue Ellen referred to CCRD as a “whole process of deconstructive analysis” that helps educators to understand how children make meaning and how educators construct their image of a capable child. She added that the CCRD exposed the educator to “the value of understanding [documentation of children] with multiple perspectives [or] different scopes . . . which . . . is different from just simply having an open mind and being receptive to the different ideas.”

In Fall 2010, Jasmine explained that her exposure to the experience of engaging in CCRD, along with reading and discussing the literature, helped her to explain CCRD as “a valuable tool that allows educators to enrich their own reflection of children's work with the perspective and insights of others.” She described the process we followed in the class, saying that CCRD

begins with the sharing of an example of a child(ren)'s work (a picture, a piece of writing, or another artefact) or other form of documentation of children's work (video clip, sound recording, or a script). The audience deconstructs [examines] the piece with no background information about it. They [students' audience]

write down and share their assumptions, perceptions, inferences, and queries about the piece. Ideally, these writings [documenters' and audience's insights] would refer to and be accompanied [supported] by a variety of theories and philosophies.

In Fall 2012, Sharon explained CCRD “as an analytical response to documentation, an exchange of ideas, whereby the audience takes on an active role and, in collaboration with the documenters themselves, attempts to extract deeper meaning from ordinary moments in a child’s life.” She added that CCRD was “a valuable tool for reflecting on our own practice as educators and in moving forward professional growth.”

In regard to Gadamerian hermeneutics, the above reflections highlight that students sought multiple perspectives in their experiences of interpreting children, teachers’ pedagogy, and themselves. Their comments also suggest that being open or receptive to ideas might not have been sufficient; instead, doing “something” with the plurality of views, such as engaging in a systematic and circular dialogue, was what might influence the way educators understand and interpret themselves and others.

In Fall 2015, “Stephanie” referred to the course experience as a whole. She wrote:

I found this course to be VERY intriguing and challenging. It forced me to think outside of and go out of my comfort zones. . . . During my first year in the ECE program, it seemed as though it was geared towards one way of thinking. This course showed me how to contest norms and dominant discourses. . . . Almost every single reading [literature] that was assigned left me wanting to look more into the source it came from. . . . I have come into the ECE/teaching field to advocate and find the better ways to educate and push for the world to see that

children are not blank slates and cannot be pushed to produce. I knew that PN's [pedagogical narrations or pedagogical documentation] and documentation [of children and teachers' pedagogy] would be a way in which I could do this, but I did not understand the depth and breadth to which this tool could be utilized in regards of citizenship of children, identifying and challenging dominant discourses, etc. I did not find the process [CCRD] "difficult" per se. I did however find it extremely time consuming, internally challenging (my own ideas/concepts being challenged/recognized) and eye opening.

In Fall 2016, Cara, Giselle, Larisa, and Sam, who were part of the same team, narrated ideas about the course and their experience in the CCRD. Cara wrote that among the students in her team there were "similar viewpoints"; however, she "was amazed at the variety of interpretations that came from the audience" when they showed the class the documentation of children [a boy's drawing].

Larisa pointed out that this experience was "not about answering questions but rather asking more questions." She added that this activity of asking questions contrasted with what adults usually do in seeking "specific answers to all of life's questions, but we have to come to terms with the fact that maybe not everything has a specific answer."

Sam wrote:

This course has completely changed the way I have viewed documentation in the past. Before taking this course, I looked at documentation as a way to prove my worth in society as an early childhood educator. I thought by documenting I could show parents just how important my job was by capturing moments that proved how competent their children are. After going through this course and project [the

CCRD], it has confirmed this, as well as broaden my perspectives on so many different aspects of childcare.

Sam added that her new understanding of documentation “still confirms my original beliefs of documentation but layer in complexity that I never thought possible.” Particularly, she explained that the course’s structure “seemed to be designed to introduce topics and layer complexity (much like documentation).” When Sam referred to her experience of engaging in CCRD, she explained,

You had to do the readings [literature] and participate in CRs [collaborative reflections in regular classes]. I also appreciated the content within the reading [literature]. It challenged the way that I had previously thought about certain subjects (example: power and gender [perspectives]). Without these readings, the content of the presentation would be very one dimensional (example: just looking at a developmental lens).

### **The Hermeneutical Character of CCRD**

The students’ experiences of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation were hermeneutical in character, even though we didn’t name them as such at the time. These strategies helped the students to learn about themselves.

In Fall 2007, Sue Ellen explained that interpreting documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy using CCRD initially led to questions and assumptions expressed by the documenters and the class-audience. Also, all participants’ interpretations offered multiple perspectives about what was examined. Sue Ellen wrote that in the practice of CCRD, playing both roles, as documenters and audience, helped the students to “work together in two

collaborative ways—it really reinforced the idea of co-construction [with children and among educators].”

In Fall 2010, Jasmine expressed her “greater appreciation” of valuing multiple perspectives. She wrote: “Not only does it enrich my understanding and appreciation of children’s work and meaning making, it reminds me to be aware of the fact that my reality is MY reality and not necessarily ‘right’ or ‘true’ universally.” Jasmine also explained that she became aware that students and teachers always interpret children’s ideas, actions, and educators’ pedagogy through a filter of their own assumptions or prejudgments. She wrote:

I have learned that it is difficult for us to adhere to an agreement to share statements and assumptions *without judgement* (emphasis added) . . . the process and value of the CCRD is compromised when we focus on judging aspects of what is shared with us as good or bad, right or wrong.

From my view, Jasmine explained that our assumptions and prejudgments interfere in how we interpret the text or object of study; however, it seems that she aimed to listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation without judgment. As an area of further learning, I propose that in-depth hermeneutic enquiry among students might help them to engage in circles of understanding. Such a practice inevitably begins with examination of our prejudices, but helps us to enhance our interpretations and understandings by engaging in ongoing and circular readings that we do individually and collaboratively with others.

Jasmine also expressed that it was a challenge to work with others collectively “who did not seem to have an understanding or appreciation of the process, boundaries, and guidelines of the CCRD.” Jasmine’s idea taught me, and possibly her, too, about the complexities of engaging in interpreting documentation of children among educators when these individuals, in their

intents of being and acting hermeneutically, join the dialogue with quite different educational interests, backgrounds, and aspirations. To illustrate this idea, Jasmine recalled an example that she experienced in the field, which I previously introduced in this chapter. She wrote:

I see a child repeating an act over and over, like pouring water through a funnel. If my discourses [prejudices] in regard to caring for and educating children revolve around a phenomenological perspective, I may see the child as experimenting with the intention of further understanding the phenomenon he is witnessing and I will allow the child to continue. [In contrast] if my discourse is based on developmental psychology [and behaviourism], I may see the child as behaving abnormally, and perhaps assume [this child is] “self-stimulating” and should be stopped so [he] can learn “appropriate” ways to behave, therefore, “stamping out” the child’s attempt to construct knowledge.

In summary, Jasmine explained that “our discourses, our own personal biases and perspectives [prejudices], can nurture [the educators’ understanding of] a child’s construction of knowledge or it can stamp it out.”

In Fall 2012, Sharon also explained the value of multiple perspectives as part of experiencing CCRD. She narrated:

By focusing on multiple perspectives and interpretations of a single situation, we can better learn to recognize and understand our own biases and ways of seeing the world, and, in doing so, challenge ourselves to think about these events in a manner we might not have considered before.

From my view, Sharon pointed out the possibilities that circles of understanding might offer to students if they engage in continuous and circular readings of a single situation, particularly

when interpretations are discussed collectively and help individuals to see and become conscious of what they have not seen before.

Additionally, Sharon referred to the fact that students' interpretations reveal their prejudices. She added that usually we are not aware of our limited ways to create meaning; however, her experience of engaging in CCRD had made her aware of more possibilities to interpret children's ideas and actions, teachers' pedagogy, and what "truth" might mean. Sharon wrote:

Often our beliefs and perspectives of the world are so firmly entrenched in us that we cannot see beyond our own frame of thinking, and CCRD is about opening our minds to *see* in new and sometimes contradictory ways. It is not that we necessarily discount our own perspectives, but rather that we learn to identify them as such, so that we can use that as a foundation for making conscious and intentional choices in our work with children.

When Sharon explained her new understanding of "truth," she narrated,

[One aspect] that I found the most impactful in relation to CCRD is the idea that the only real truth is that there is no truth—everything else is subjective and open to interpretation. There can be any number of "readings" of a given situation, and no one interpretation is necessarily more valid than another. Even what I myself might consider to be the most obvious and incontestable action is actually just my perspective and the regimes of truth that shape my way of thinking. It has caused me to question what, in fact, is objectivity, and whether it is simply another perspective that we justify as truth in accordance with our own beliefs and whatever serves as the dominant discourse of the day.

Further study and use of hermeneutic enquiry might help Sharon and other students to acknowledge that ongoing and circular readings that are elaborated individually *and* collectively about documentation of children and educators' pedagogy might help them to understand what approximations to "truth" means in hermeneutics. Even though I believe Gadamerian hermeneutics aligns with the impossibility of being objective while educators interpret children's ideas and actions and teachers' pedagogy, this philosophical approach explains that interpreters approximate "truth(s)" within context(s), and they should refrain from engaging in repetitive and vague circles when they elaborate meaning of the text or object of study. The intersubjectivity experienced while producing meaning collaboratively will protect them from falling into either objectivism or relativism. In other words, what educators, as subjects in interdependency, interpret and how they interpret it matters.

In Fall 2015, "Stephanie" also referred to the benefits of elaborating and using multiple perspectives systematically when a group of students (documenters) presented their documentation of children to an audience (the rest of students in the class) and both groups—documenters and audience—elaborated readings to expand their understanding of it. When "Stephanie" narrated what she had learned about the child her team documented, she wrote: "I realized a lot about [the child] from other people that I would never have learned through my eyes alone, and I also learned a lot about how the other people [students] in my group view children." This way, "Stephanie" emphasized the collective practice of interpreting children's ideas and actions.

"Stephanie" described the two roles she had played in the CCRD in the class. First, she and her team were documenters who led the CCRD. Second, she was part of the audience and responded to other teams' documentation of children and of teachers' pedagogy. "Stephanie's"



and other students' prejudices made visible "their views and statements" in the class dialogue. Also, "Stephanie" narrated, "I was able to view the documentation in ways I would have never thought of, then to build my own concepts and assumptions from what others said. It was a great way to go deeper than the surface of the documentation." From my view, "Stephanie" described what circles of understanding might offer in regard to expanding the individuals' understandings from a plurality of views, which orients the interpreters' practice away from a single explanation that is drawn from a familiar discourse or fixed "truth." This hermeneutical practice of learning about children and teachers' pedagogy might also enhance the educators' understandings of curriculum and possible responses to the question of what education is for (Biesta, 2010a). "Stephanie's" experience might have been an initial intent of circles of understanding; however, the possibility of expanding the students' views about children and about teachers' pedagogy depended on their active involvement in studying and elaborating meaning of the course literature and in expressing initial and further prejudices, which would be expected to be more accurate intents of approximating "truth" within the context. When "Stephanie" reflected on how the CCRD had benefitted her, she wrote, "[Currently] I have a deeper understanding and personal relation to the importance of documentation and PN's [pedagogical narrations or pedagogical documentation] and in the importance of gaining outside perspectives."

As I said earlier, in Fall 2016, Cara, Giselle, Larisa, and Sam were part of the same team to complete the CCRD course assignment. When these students led the CCRD with the class, they presented a boy's drawing as the documentation of children to be interpreted collectively, first within their team and later on with the class, and also with a few additional audiences, such as the boy who was documented and his guardian/stepmother. The four students narrated their individual thoughts about their experiences of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating

pedagogical documentation and what they had learned about themselves through their involvement in the CCRD. For example, Cara wrote:

Hearing the thoughts and questions from everyone else in the class had allowed us to further our own thoughts and ideas for future explorations. I learned that there is richness in the ambiguity and multiple meaning of children's art and know now that there is not always one right answer or interpretation—there can be multiple meanings taken from a child's artwork and we can, as colleagues, continually discuss them all and their relevance to our practice.

Larisa highlighted how the collective work within her team and with the rest of the class and additional audiences contributed to enhancing her understanding of children and education. She explained:

The benefits to working collaboratively with a group of peers are that you are able to hear the ideas and interpretations of those around you. Many times, it is difficult to expand on your own ideas as you are constrained to your own biases, but when you listen to others around you, you are exposed to interpretations that you never even considered.

Giselle narrated how this new way to interpret documentation of children had helped her to transform her conceptualizations of children, educators' practices, and herself. She narrated:

As I reflect on my practice when analyzing pieces of documentation prior to this course, I typically viewed everything solely with the developmental lens because that's what I knew. . . . CCRD has given me [the opportunity] of expanding my knowledge and challenging me to question and examine with the use of multiple lenses.

When Giselle referred to what she had learned about herself, she wrote: “My thoughts and views have been challenged and my way of thinking has broadened. I was able to gain a new and valuable learning experience, which I will continue to exercise throughout my practice as an educator.”

Sam also emphasized the importance of the process followed in CCRD and the collection and consideration of multiple perspectives when students interpret documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy. She said that “the process of CCRD and multiple perspectives has given me incredible insight into the potential of early childhood. It is amazing how many different questions, assumptions and dialogues can come out of one drawing from a child.”

When Sam explained the benefits of CCRD, she wrote, “It [CCRD] has also showed me how important it is to include children [as an audience] in the process of [interpreting] documentation.” Particularly, Sam expressed how the boy they documented was excited for his production to be looked at and his view to be listened to and considered by a group of students. She narrated,

[He] was so excited to be able to contribute his thoughts and insights into his pictures. He also seemed very proud and special that I chose his drawing to present. Every time I go over to his house, he hands me a pile of drawings to show the class.

Sam also highlighted how the course’s literature had taught her about ways to interact and co-construct *with* children. Particularly, when Sam referred to documenting children, she explained: “The purpose . . . is not to find the truth in a child’s/children’s problem but to document their journey into becoming the people they will be in society.” Sam also explained that being a documenter is an important activity in the field. She expressed: “By opening

yourself up to the possibility of different lenses, you are able to learn more about yourself and children.”

After the experience of studying the child’s drawing in the CCRD, Sam wrote: “I am able to see all these different layers of complexity such as the developmental lenses of ages and stages, as well as post-modern thoughts of power relationships.” When Sam referred to the role she played as part of the audience when she interpreted documentation presented by other teams, she added: “It makes me very excited for my future career in hopes that I will be partaking in these types of dialogues with my colleagues. It is amazing how many different interpretations you can get from one piece of documentation.” Finally, Sam explained that the interpretation of children’s ideas and actions and teachers’ practices when CCRD is followed seems to be promising to show “the local and global [ECE] community . . . how capable children are in communicating through hundreds of languages [Malaguzzi’s claim].” From my view, Sam emphasized the possibility that listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation systematically might contribute to the field.

### **Students’ Post-Program Reflections**

I conclude this chapter by referring to the reflections of two students, Melissa and “Stephanie,” who completed the ECE diploma program at Douglas College. At the time of writing their reflections, both were registered in the bachelor’s degree program in child and youth care and counselling at this same institution. From my view, these students’ thoughts illustrate how the study of philosophical and educational literature and the strategies of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation, or being and acting hermeneutically as part

of their program's education, profoundly impacted their conceptualizations of children, teachers' practices, and themselves.

### **Melissa's Reflection**

On January 21, 2015, Melissa sent me an email:

I wanted to email you and let you know how grateful I am for having taken your classes in Fall 2013 and Winter 2014. It was really the first time I examined post-modern theories and was asked to participate in the deconstruction of developmental psychology. I learned so much in your classes and from you and I continue to use what I learned every day . . . really! I am nearly done my Bachelor's degree. . . . I love Child and Youth Care and have encountered many new ideas and challenges but I feel like I was set for success when I took your classes. Let me be more specific. When I am asked to dive into discussions about post-modern ideas, I can. I am ready, and I have a LOT to say in class discussions. I am referring my professors to Gert Biesta's work. I am bringing out the course packs from your courses and using some of the literature to help me write my papers. When we talk about taking a strengths-based perspective, I am bringing up Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and introducing classmates and teachers to his ideas. When we are asked to read challenging literature and write responses each week, I am very used to it and feel confident and capable. I feel like your courses really prepared me for all of this.

Additionally, I went to Uganda [10 weeks for her completion of her post-basic practicum ECED2482 & ECED2483, Spring/Summer 2014] with a more open mind and an understanding that Western ideas are not the best way, but it is one

perspective. I also have a great respect for the way you honored what the students brought to the class in terms of ideas and contributions. You set out guidelines, and let us be creative and unique. You really value that. I can see so much more by looking back and reflecting on my experiences in your classes. While it was challenging . . . it was some of the best and deepest learning I've ever encountered. You really got me thinking! Thank you.

### **“Stephanie’s” Reflection**

On June 27, 2016, “Stephanie” had just completed the ECE diploma and was admitted into the CYCC program at Douglas College when she sent me an email:

I am not sure if I have already told you. . . . You have inspired me and caused me to think more deeply and critically in regard to my own actions and reasoning in teaching children, as well as the information I take in in that regard. Thank you for showing me many ways of thinking and learning. You challenged me . . . and taught me that the most important accomplishment in being a successful teacher is in being better than and challenging my former self; just because it is the way it has always been done, does not mean it is the way it should always be done. Thank you . . . for giving me the confidence in my own skills, instincts and competence as a teacher. . . .

### **The Hermeneutical Experience of Teaching and Understanding**

I included Melissa’s and “Stephanie’s” emails regarding ideas explored in this study because they referred to being and acting hermeneutically when they studied the course literature and interpreted children’s ideas and actions and teachers’ pedagogy. Also, the emails explained

these students' insights about what teaching meant in their experience of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation when they practiced these strategies individually and collaboratively.

Both students sent me their reflections by their own initiative, by which I mean that their narrations were not a required assignment. I was gladly surprised to learn that their experience in the courses I taught them encouraged them to think and revisit the literature (e.g., Biesta, Gardner) and to continue questioning themselves and provoking other instructors and classmates to think about and discuss new educational issues or situations. Particularly, it seems that Melissa and "Stephanie" wanted to share with me (their instructor) their experience of being taught, which I relate to Biesta's (2012a) explanation of the *gift of teaching*. Biesta (2012a) explains

what it means for teachers to teach, which is to acknowledge that teaching is not about the repetition of what is already there but about bringing something new—and perhaps it is important to say: something radically new—to the situation. . . .

In this way teaching can, and in my view should, thus be understood as a gift. (p. 41)

From my view, these students and I (and possibly other students in the class) engaged in an individual and collaborative experience by bringing into dialogue prejudices that we had built over time and which had shaped the individuals we had become. Our prejudices functioned as the platform from which to challenge and expand our horizons of knowledge and understanding. The interplay of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation among students and instructor helped us to learn from and be taught (Biesta, 2012a), not only by the text or object of study, but also by individuals, such as the instructor, classmates, and additional audiences. Biesta (2012a) inquires:

Is there a difference between “learning from” and “being taught by”? I think there is, and to appreciate this difference, in my view, is crucial. . . . When we *learn from* our teachers, we could say that we ultimately approach and use our teachers as a resource . . . . When we learn from our teachers we are in a very fundamental sense ‘in control’ of our learning and our engagement with our resources more generally. . . . When we are being taught by someone, something enters our field of experience in a way that is fundamentally *beyond* our control. . . . Such “lessons” are often far more difficult to receive than the things we learn from others, because they enter us radically from the outside—they “hit us”, we might say—and in a sense it is hard work to give such “lessons” a place, to accommodate them. . . . While we could say, therefore, that to “learn from” put the student in a position of mastery, to be “taught by” positions the student more humbly vis-à-vis what comes to him or her; it appeals to a capacity for receptivity and perhaps gratitude, rather than mastery. (p. 42, emphasis in original)

From my view, our intents of being and acting hermeneutically in the courses I taught to Melissa and “Stephanie” offered us opportunities to learn from and to be taught by; in other words, it seems that the students and I gained mastery by learning to study and interpret documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy, but we also were taught, and therefore, gained and expanded our capacity for receptivity and gratitude.

Possibly the most significant idea that I was taught by Biesta’s (2012a) perspective about the gift of teaching refers to the condition of teaching as a hermeneutical activity, or, in other words, to understand that



it is not within the power of the teacher to give this gift, but depends on the fragile interplay between the teacher and the student. Teachers can at most try and hope, but they cannot force the gift upon their students. Similarly, students can be open to the gift but they cannot force the teacher to give them this gift. A gift is, after all, (a) *given*. . . . It cannot be demanded, predicted, calculated or produced, but comes when it arrives. (p. 42, emphasis in original)

My intent to promote a hermeneutical experience to understand documentation of children and educators' pedagogy in the courses I taught to students at Douglas College was undoubtedly diverse and complex, and surely not a *gift of teaching* for everyone involved in the educational experience. This reality might reinforce that teaching hermeneutically implies the willingness and decidability of each participant in the situation to listen, think, dialogue, and create pedagogical documentation individually and collaboratively.

In the next and final chapter, I present final thoughts about Gadamerian hermeneutics and its uses in early childhood education. Particularly, I revisit the central argument and the main questions that oriented this study. I address limitations and challenges, as well as implications and recommendations of further questions that could be researched based on my findings and propositions. Finally, I comment about how my advocating for the use of hermeneutic enquiry or circles of understanding in the education of early childhood students and in the professional development of teachers might be sustained within the institution, or in other words, what would need to be in place to sustain such practice.

## CHAPTER 8: FINAL THOUGHTS

*Every dialogue with the thinking of a thinker—which we seek to conduct because we strive to understand—is in itself an unending conversation. ~ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1977/1985*

In this chapter, I present final thoughts of my dissertation by reviewing the research questions and claims that guided this study, hoping that responses to this work will materialize in *dialogue* with educators and others. I refer here to a dialogue that seeks a hermeneutical *understanding*—of children’s ideas and actions and teachers’ practices—that *matters* because this text or object of study “is not a dead historical corpse [i.e., an outdated though cute image of children], but a living Thou that can be understood” (Weber, 2011, p. 136). Possibly, this dialogue may provoke an *unending conversation* that helps us, systematically and continually, to broaden our conceptualizations of the child and of teachers’ pedagogy, and also teaches us something about ourselves. As part of this chapter, I also address limitations and challenges that I identified as I completed this study, as well as new insights and further inquiries to build on my argument.

Overall, the central claim of this study was that hermeneutic enquiry, or circles of understanding, might help educators and EC instructors to improve their ways of interpreting and understanding documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy, because it encourages them to “read” and “reread” continuously and circularly the children’s and educators’ ideas and actions. In the process of interpreting, or creating meaning, the interpreters (i.e., educators) go back and forth between the parts and the whole. These circular readings start with the interpreters’ prejudices—which is not meant in the word’s negative, everyday sense, but in the sense of the inevitable preunderstandings they bring to the situation—with the aim of bringing them to consciousness while educators engage in these circles.

Moreover, these circular readings might help the interpreters to modify their initial interpretations by orienting them to look at and make meaning of the same text or object of study from different angles, and by referring to specific (parts) and general (whole) characteristics that are part of the context in which the documentation of children and educators' pedagogy belong. In addition, the initial prejudices might be modified when the interpreters refer to theoretical ideas and relate them to practical experiences in their effort to make multiple meanings of what they are interpreting.

Throughout this dissertation, I have explained the Gadamerian notion that becoming conscious of our prejudices opens possibilities for thinking or engaging in self-dialogue about the text or object of study, as well as for dialogue and exchange of perspectives with others. The continuous and circular revisions of our prejudices might evolve into revisions and expansions of our views or horizons of how we conceptualize children, teachers' pedagogy, and what we gain personally and professionally by doing this type of work. Using hermeneutic enquiry into examples or stories, as illustrated in the foregoing pages, implies that students, teachers, and early years instructors listened, thought, dialogued, and created pedagogical documentation *systematically*. These strategies were previously valued in the ECE field; however, in this study, I discussed them as *hermeneutical* strategies to be used among educators.

### **Revisiting the Study's Research Questions**

The questions that framed the central claims of this study were as follows: How might hermeneutics be a valuable pedagogical approach, or story (Moss, 2014), for early childhood educators? How might hermeneutic enquiry be practiced in ECE? And, what are educators' stories of being and acting hermeneutically that have broadened their understandings of children,

their educational practices, and themselves? Below, I summarize the study's response to these questions.

### **How Might Hermeneutics Be a Valuable “Story” for Early Childhood Educators?**

Moss (2014) emphasizes that in early childhood education “we need . . . to tell and hear more stories, old and new” (p. 75). He affirms that there are actually many more stories that could explain ECE which do not claim “a monopoly of the truth” (p. 75). This study introduced *a* story (not *the* story) of being and acting hermeneutically to perform as beings-in-question who also put others into-question (Vintimilla, 2016) in the process of becoming conscious of our prejudices, which helps us to enhance and refine our understanding of our own and others' ideas and actions. In Chapter 1, I explained that if we do not want to perpetuate dominant stories, ECE scholars and educators are ethically and politically obligated to propose and implement alternative stories that might help us to think in diverse ways about childhood and the images of children, teachers' pedagogy, and ourselves.

### **How Might Hermeneutic Enquiry Be Practiced in ECE?**

As EC educators and I studied and used Gadamerian hermeneutics, it became clear that interpreting in repeated circular readings provided a deeper understanding, not only of the documentation of children and teachers' pedagogy, but also of the interpreters. Additionally, the illustration of circles of understanding provided a philosophical framework and a systematic procedure for educators who aimed to broaden their perspectives. I explained that the strategies of listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation are associated with the use of circles of understanding in Gadamerian hermeneutics. Even though the practice of these strategies as part of collaborative critical reflective dialogue (CCRD) did not give us

(educators and myself) the full advantages of using hermeneutic enquiry, this study contributes to the use of circles of understanding in two ways. First, asking interpreters to study and discuss scholarly literature collectively influenced the reading and rereading of what they examined from different angles. Second, by interpreting the text or object of study collaboratively, the interpreters exposed themselves to a plurality of perspectives that may have challenged and enhanced their horizons of understanding. In this dissertation, I explained that the educators' resulting experiences of resistance and frustration (Biesta, 2012b) were part of interpreting a text or object of study individually and collectively.

### **What Are Educators' Stories of Being and Acting Hermeneutically That Have Broadened Their Understandings of Children, Their Educational Practices, and Themselves?**

Throughout the dissertation, and particularly in Chapters 6 and 7, I illustrated the use of circles of understanding and my insights about the students' reflections in their intents of being and acting hermeneutically when they interpret documentation of children and teachers' pedagogy. In examining various examples, I pointed out that resistance and frustration were difficult experiences that educators inevitably encountered when they read and reread a text or object of study. Commonly, resistance and frustration influenced interpreters either to elaborate readings that referred to unfamiliar and alternative discourses or to elaborate interpretations that were rigid or fixed in considering familiar and dominant discourses about how children and their education must develop. In Gadamerian hermeneutics, tension comes "each time a historically conscious mind [i.e., educator's] encounters tradition" (Weber, 2011, p. 137). Moreover, it is this tension between the present and the past within the context in which we interpret that educators are encouraged to embrace and make fully visible (Weber, 2011, p. 123) instead of concealing it. In this study, the ongoing and repeated attempts and approximations to truthful interpretations

enabled educators to deal with resistance and frustration. My illustration of the use of hermeneutic enquiry in the examples included in the dissertation are intended to emphasize that the art of dialectic is not about arguing (i.e., making a strong case out of a weak one), but engaging in thinking and dialoguing (i.e., strengthening our own and others' claims in reference to the subject matter) that is to be done to find out possibilities of "rightness and truth" (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, p. 376).

### **Limitations and Challenges**

Through completing this study, I identified limitations and challenges that were associated with proposing a new approach or story (i.e., hermeneutic enquiry) to interpret documentation of children and teacher' pedagogy. I have grouped these limitations and challenges under four headings: (1) the unmanageable experience of resistance and frustration while in dialogue; (2) the partial illustration of interpreting collaboratively; (3) the theory/practice divide; and (4) the use of language in a never-ending dialogue.

#### **The Unmanageable Experience of Resistance and Frustration While in Dialogue**

In Chapter 7, I interpreted students' reflections that, from my view, demonstrated ideas and actions of being and acting hermeneutically, as well as ways to deal with resistance and frustration satisfactorily that helped them to remain in dialogue with themselves and others. However, I have also examined students' reflections that showed resistance to and frustration with my request to read and reread documentation of children and teachers' practices systematically. Clearly, the hermeneutic approach I suggested was unfamiliar, and this unfamiliarity was an obstacle to implementing the approach. Based on my understanding of these students' reflections, I would say that throughout the years I taught at Douglas College, there

were students in each class who seemed to choose either self-destruction (Biesta, 2012b), which sometimes materialized as shying away from studying scholarly literature and elaborating meaning in relation to the stories of children, or world-destruction (Biesta, 2012b), which sometimes materialized as complaints about the course's requests. In both extremes of self-destruction and world-destruction, it seemed that these students resisted staying in the middle ground where dialogue and education might have taken place. Also, these reflections might not be considered samples of transformative thinking, and these students might have neither made conscious their initial prejudices nor elaborated further ones. However, from a hermeneutical perspective, their views were valuable and informative in using circles of understanding. I also trusted that what might seem to be a problematic situation "facilitates growth of intelligent judgment and action" (Kerdeman, 1998a, p. 276). Perhaps if my students and I had experienced slow education (Biesta, 2012b), this approach would have promoted more dialogue to support our understanding and practice of hermeneutic enquiry. Here, I quote a few students' anonymous responses on their course evaluations in 2008, 2012, and 2015 which I believe showed frustration, resistance, and/or avoidance of remaining in dialogue (Biesta, 2012b), or their negotiation of the tension between familiarity and strangeness (Kerdeman, 1998a) when they were encouraged to be and act hermeneutically.

- i) At first all the "big words" sounded very strange and confusing. I did not seem to understand anything at all. But [with] the group work and the instructor's help I was able to get something out of everything. . . . I am going out to my practicum with a new vision and a new perspective. (EC student in ECED2300 Fall 2008)

- ii) Do educators over-examine documentation? Do we make too many assumptions about what we document? Do children truly benefit from documentation? CCRD has so much analyzing of the children. I feel this whole take on documentation is a bit much. We are taking these really great learning times the children are experiencing away from us and completely ruining it by taking theories and making assumptions about them. The reason why I don't enjoy doing it is because I feel like we are just taking the joy out of the moment with the child. We are questioning everything the child does as if they need to justify their actions and give us reasoning for why they are doing something. I like the part of documenting the child and having something there to share with the family but I don't like the part of making assumptions and questioning because we will never truly know the answer and we are just creating our own and not just taking the moment for what it is. (EC student in ECED2300 Fall 2012)
- iii) [I have learned to] look more into depth about what a child is doing, how they might be thinking or feeling. How to use theory in our practice, in our documentation and grasp why this could be happening. I also think you [educators] can observe without going into too much depth because there may not always be a reason why a child does or says something a certain way. That too much depth is unnecessary and you can observe without breaking down, making assumptions, and picking apart a child's actions. (EC student in ECED2401 Winter 2015)



In my teaching, I routinely responded to all student inquiries and comments because I assumed that this exchange of thoughts might influence and promote educational dialogue among us, and therefore that it might initiate and enrich a hermeneutical attitude (Weber, 2011). I intended what Fairfield (2011) proposes: that “the insights that arise in conversation do not confirm or solidify what we already know . . . [but participants in conversation] challenge each other’s understanding and do so in ways that typically are disorienting and even painful” (as cited in Kerdeman, 2015, p. 87). Sometimes my responses (oral and written) were directed to a student, a group of students, or the class. For example, when the student cited above in excerpt ii narrated her perspective, I elaborated a response that could be shared with the class as part of ongoing dialogue of what would it mean to use hermeneutic enquiry when we examine documentation of children and teachers’ practices. One day near the end of the course, the students and I discussed (in class) our experiences of participating in CCRD. In this session, I shared these thoughts:

My perspective about CCRD has been as a strategy to engage with the child with amazement and curiosity about his/her initiatives, thoughts, and actions. In the field, I have seen teachers (also parents) suppressing/dismissing children’s initiatives, thoughts, and actions. I have found that experiencing CCRD has helped teachers (also parents) to engage and enjoy with children what they are proposing. Associating these moments with theories has helped me to make visible to others (people in this field and other professions) that children are capable and teachers too when they are able to explain to themselves and to other people that children’s initiatives have clear purposes and relevant logic to understand their relationships with the world. I have seen that before teachers

engage in a practice such as CCRD, they could take for granted that there is only *one* way to understand children's ideas and actions. (Alejandra Sanchez, October 26, 2012)

The student cited in excerpt ii disagreed with using hermeneutic enquiry to interpret children's ideas and actions, because she felt it interfered with and restricted the joy of the moment with the child and "forced" the educator into a practice of justifying and explaining children's every initiative. As the instructor of this class, I welcomed this student's (and everyone else's) perspective, and I felt responsible for promoting conversation about our different ideas on how to understand and interpret the uses of documentation of children. In this case, I shared my perspective with the class, aiming that this exchange of standpoints (our current prejudices) would help us to continue a dialogue, not only about the ideas with which I agreed, but also about the ones that challenge the strategy I assumed would help us to practice hermeneutic enquiry with fruitful results. Also, I hoped that all participants in this dialogue would examine the student's prejudice against pedagogical documentation as a claim that could be discussed, rather than defeated. I believed that listening to and engaging with contrasting views of pedagogical documentation would demonstrate what Kerdeman (1998a) suggests: that "seeing ourselves thus is important, because this is what allows us to see others. Acknowledging others, in turn, help us to acknowledge ourselves. As an intellectual principle, this idea may seem obvious. Living it, however, can be very hard" (p. 274). If this dialogue had continued for various sessions during the term, it might have helped the students and I to engage in circles of understanding systematically. Instead, in this (and other) exchange of thoughts, we engaged in only one or two cycles of expressing our perspectives (or prejudices); therefore, we did not build a deep and lengthy dialogue, or "an unending conversation" (Gadamer, 1977/1985, p. 188), as

hermeneutics recommends. It is my belief that limited course time (i.e., 10 weeks or less) for getting to know each other's thoughts and experiences (history) did not support the systematic use of circles of understanding; however, this limitation might turn into a *new* possibility if we (instructors and students) dialogue about ways in which hermeneutic enquiry could be regularly practiced in the professional development of educators in BC and elsewhere.

### **The Partial Illustration of Interpreting Collaboratively**

In this study, I illustrated circles of understanding to interpret documentation of children and teachers' practices by referring to a few examples and stories. When I interpreted them, I intended to use a hermeneutical approach to elaborate inquiries and readings that were continuous and circular in order to approximate "truth(s)" within the context in which these situations were examined. Even though I proposed that documentation of children and teachers' pedagogy be examined individually and collectively, in this study I only interpreted these examples individually, by elaborating my own perspective and including additional interpretive voices that I imagined and put into play continuously and circularly. This use of circles of understanding helped me to elaborate a plurality of views that enhanced my understanding of children, teachers' practices, and myself. However, this practice was different from my experience in the classroom, where the focus was on collective interpretation. In CCRD, a group of EC students and I expressed and discussed our prejudices about documentation of children and engaged in dialogue. In this study, I did not illustrate how the children's and other audiences' (e.g., parents') perspectives were included in the creation of pedagogical documentation. The revisiting of documentation of children with the children themselves, and sometimes with their parents and other educators, is another opportunity to practice hermeneutic

enquiry. The use of circles of understanding with groups of educators, children and parents could be a topic for further research.

### **The Theory/Practice Divide**

The decisions we make when we interpret or create meaning are not *innocent* narrations; rather, they carry, consciously or unconsciously, specific intentions about what, how, and why we explain cultural differences, children's and teachers' capabilities, and alternative and normalizing pedagogical practices that result in discourses that show our theoretical foundations and beliefs about children, education, and ourselves. Therefore, creating interpretative meaning is a challenging task for educators. Foucault (1970, as cited in Dahlberg et al., 2007) said that "everything is dangerous" (p. 132), an idea that Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007) relate to the construction of meanings that "are always arbitrary [contingent, from my view] and as such never neutral nor innocent" (p. 132). We have to evaluate the risks and possibilities that exist simultaneously (Dahlberg et al., 2007) when we create meaning about documentation of children and teachers' pedagogy. A few scholars (e.g., Foucault, 1977; Lenz Taguchi, 2010b; St. Pierre, 2011; Tobin, 1995) have pointed out the risks of seeing theory separately from practice. For example, Tobin (1995) explains: "Practice is necessarily informed by theory. But too often the theory that informs our teaching and writing is theory we have carried with us more or less untouched, unexamined, and uncritiqued" (p. 223). Additionally, Lenz Taguchi (2010b) explains that

going beyond the theory-practice divide in educational practices can be a complicated process, but for some reason it seems that the rewards are so great that there is no turning back to pedagogy as usual once one has started to engage in displacing one's understanding and thinking differently. (p. 20)

My experience of using CCRD with educators, along with my doctoral research of using Gadamerian circles of understanding continuously, has shown me the importance of thinking and reformulating the theory/practice binary. Doing so introduces us to new discourses and languages that uncover meanings children make that we do not know and perhaps will never know—meanings that are already there, which we might identify instead of “imposing adults’ meanings onto children’s conversations” (Tobin, 1995, p. 234). As explained in this study, I have encouraged educators to read and make meaning of philosophy of education and early childhood studies literature because it challenges our familiar ways of thinking in our repeated attempts to interpret children and pedagogy. This practice of engaging with scholarly literature has also helped us to embrace uncertainty, and has nurtured our imagination to come up with alternative ways to practice pedagogy. In my educational trajectory, I have interacted with educators who resisted my proposal of being and acting hermeneutically, and of using this literature as a deliberate intervention in interpreting documentation, because they find such suggestions “too theoretical” and therefore “too complex and not practical enough.”

Lenz Taguchi (2010b) argues that the ECE field has lacked theory and language to discuss pedagogical documentation. In current times, new concepts, languages, and practices have emerged, and they will continue to do so if we believe, as Elisabeth Adams St. Pierre asserts, that “theory produces people” (2011, p. 620). St. Pierre’s statement aligns with my experiences with CCRD to elaborate pedagogical documentation and with my study’s argument to use circles of understanding to interpret documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy. Just as St. Pierre (2011) described, I noticed that the other educators and I “unfortunately . . . hesitate[d] to read outside our comfort areas and too casually reject[ed] texts that seem[ed] too hard to read” (p. 614). When EC educators and I used circles of understanding, we experienced

that theories and frameworks for analyzing data, not simply more and better methods of collecting it, helped us “to produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 613).

### **The Use of Language in a Never-Ending Dialogue**

In this study, I argue that revisiting documentation of children and teachers’ pedagogy with educators and elaborating circular readings about these situations, implies two challenging tasks: the use of language, and engagement in self- and collective dialogue. The hermeneutical use of language and dialogue asks interpreters to refine their readings and rereadings in their attempts to elaborate interpretations more precisely in order to approximate “truth(s)” within the context in which they examine the text or object of study. Gadamer (1989) explains that language is a “process in which mutual agreement is shaped and reshaped” (p. 56), and “to achieve understanding and total mutual agreement [requires] . . . a never-ending dialogue” (p. 57). He adds that even in a situation of just two people, “understanding and complete mutual agreement” are elusive. However, the impossibility of reaching such mutual understanding and agreement does not mean the hermeneutic practice is futile. On the contrary, the intent of approaching mutual understanding means that the interpreter has learned the other person’s standpoint and horizon; the other’s ideas have been acknowledged, but the interpreter has not necessarily agreed with them. In other terms, the interpreter “stopped trying to reach an agreement” (Gadamer, 1975/2013b, p. 314) as if it was her primary purpose.

From my view, Gadamer considers that the use of language and dialogue in circles of understanding makes this hermeneutical approach a nonlinear, complex, and challenging process in which it is expected that interpreters choose to adopt an attitude, rather than a method to be followed. This attitude “cares deeply about what the other has to say, [it is] an attitude which

doesn't focus solely on the search for potential inconsistencies in the other's argument, but tries to understand the other's opinion in its completeness and uniqueness" (Weber, 2011, p. 148). In Gadamerian hermeneutics, this attitude is the art of dialoguing. Gadamer (1989) expands on why people should continue attempting to dialogue with others for mutual understanding and, possibly, agreement. He notes:

Of course we encounter limits again and again; we speak past each other and are even at cross-purposes with ourselves. . . . We could not do this at all if we had not travelled a long way together, perhaps without even acknowledging it to ourselves. All human solidarity, all social stability, presupposes this. . . . Every reading that seeks understanding is only a step on a path that never ends. Whoever takes up this path knows that he or she will never be completely done with the text: one accepts the blow, the thrust . . . that the text delivers. . . . One must lose oneself in order to find oneself. . . . One never knows in advance what one will find oneself to be. (p. 57)

In ECE, I argue that educators should keep their minds and hearts open to listen to and embrace their own and others' interpretations. Aligned with Gadamer (1975/2013b), I argue that it is the systematic practice of embracing a plurality of views (our own and others' prejudices) in conversation, or the mutual search for thoughts, that determines the horizons to conceptualize and reconceptualize children and teachers' practices, as well as to understand ourselves and the others with whom we interact. Weber (2011) alerts us that "we are always in danger of assimilating the other's meaning into our horizon of understanding or into the question we asked" (p. 136). Therefore, it might not be necessary or even possible for educators to integrate or agree with all perspectives we learn in circles of understanding; however, the attempt to

become conscious of and to dialogue about our own and others' prejudices promises to enhance educators' understandings. And, this practice cultivates an orientation to and a valuing of ongoing, multilayered, nonlinear conversation that exposes the educators to either identify horizons that might fuse for consensus and/or declare differences and contradictions among interpretations. As Gadamer (1975/2013b) affirms, "one understands *in a different way, if we understand at all*" (p. 307, italics in original).

### **New Insights and Further Inquiries**

I conclude my dissertation by addressing new insights and further inquiries that build on my proposed use of Gadamerian hermeneutics and circles of understanding in the education of early childhood students and teachers. I identify and describe the institutional and professional conditions that I believe would have to be in place to sustain such a practice.

#### **Educators' Willingness to Be and Act Hermeneutically**

Throughout many years of interacting with educators, and particularly in the process of completing this study, I have often wondered if being and acting hermeneutically is something *common* to myself and other educators with whom I have worked. If it is not, would such being and acting in the world be desirable, and how could it be fostered among educators? In Kerdeman's (2015) words, might hermeneutical understanding become a pursuit to reimagine education as *Bildung*?

There are educators, but not all, who have engaged in being and acting hermeneutically. While interacting with them, I have noticed that they are driven by an attitude of "questioning, thinking, finding arguments and asking further questions" (Weber, 2011, p. 147) that has kept them curious about who the child is and what early education is for. No doubt it is such curiosity



that has helped them to become conscious of their thinking and practice. Weber (2011) explains that the strategies of “questioning, thinking, finding arguments and asking further questions” (p. 147) help individuals to go “deeper and deeper into the hermeneutic process of understanding and increasingly merges the . . . horizons of understanding” (p. 147). In my study, I argued that if educators would consider using circles of understanding to interpret children’s ideas and actions and teachers’ practices, they might find that listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation would support their being and acting hermeneutically in their interactions with young children, other educators, and themselves. Listening, thinking, dialoguing, and creating pedagogical documentation would not provide educators with a method to be followed; instead, these strategies would require an attitude or disposition to orient their being and acting in the world. To cultivate such a disposition, educators need to establish and remain in communities that are interested in using hermeneutic enquiry. In these communities, it would be expected that they do not act or argue against each other but “raise questions that lead into the openness of new possibilities . . . to seek to understand one another” (Weber, 2011, p. 147). In other words, being and acting hermeneutically as educators requires that we become part of communities of enquiry that persistently seek mutual understanding of our beliefs, particularly when they are different or contrasting, by engaging in hermeneutical dialogue. The purpose is not necessarily to reach agreement, but we may. While trying to be and act hermeneutically in the absence of a community of supportive colleagues/educators can bring short-term benefits to students and teachers in ECE communities, collective attempts to be and act hermeneutically within and across institutions are necessary to sustain this approach and produce a lasting impact.

If ECE scholars look to influence the education of young children extensively in regards to understanding and using new stories (Moss, 2014) about the conceptualization of children,

teachers' pedagogy, and ourselves, we are ethically and politically obligated to widely discuss these new approaches, such as Gadamerian hermeneutics and the use of circles of understanding in ECE. These approaches could be further researched and applied within institutions (i.e., universities, colleges, ministries) that regulate and provide education for new teachers and the centres or agencies whose mandate is to provide professional development for educators in the field. In other words, new approaches, such as the use of circles of understanding or hermeneutic enquiry with educators, should be widely discussed and researched in the process of advocating for this alternative way to conceptualize and practice education.

As explained in this study, in countries such as Italy and Sweden, in which educators have shown to the world that they have performed as hermeneutical beings, the networks and connections they have established among institutions, agencies, and childcare centres have enhanced their possibilities to promote mutual understanding, agreements, and satisfactory ways to embrace and live with differences. I see the creation of networks among educators and institutions as an essential condition to sustain the attitude of being and acting hermeneutically.

### **Further Research for Expanding the Use of Circles of Understanding**

This study could be expanded by researching formally the use of circles of understanding with actual groups of university or college students, as well as with teachers in the field. Generating and analyzing data, such as the interpreters' voices as they engage in these circles, would provide a plurality of perspectives or ways to think about children's ideas and actions and teachers' pedagogy that might enhance not only the researcher's understanding, but that of the participants in these circles, too. Particularly, this research might examine the voices and actions of EC students and teachers when they actually intend to be and act hermeneutically in circles of understanding in which they interpret documentation of children and educators' practices.

Additionally, it might be informative to find out more about what makes educators and EC instructors *resist* being and acting hermeneutically and remaining in dialogue with ourselves and others. Why is the pursuit of mutual understanding (Gadamer, 1989) in ongoing and circular dialogue such a complex and difficult endeavour?

Finally, I wonder if circles of understanding to interpret children's ideas and actions and teachers' practices could also be used as part of teaching children? Could hermeneutic enquiry take place in the emerging and unfolding of project work with children? How might this practice enhance the understanding of educators and children as competent beings in the world, and how might it influence the early years curriculum? Are the "*Philosophy for Children* tradition" (Weber, 2011, p. 127) and the *Philosophy for Teachers* (Orchard, Heilbronn, & Winstanley, 2016) attempts at such a practice?

This study summarizes years of experience and unforgettable memories and dialogue with children (and their families), educators, and scholars. Also, this dissertation is the result of many hours of studying, thinking, and elaborating meaning of literature, texts, and objects of study. I feel profoundly grateful for the multiple opportunities that I have had to interact with others and to challenge each other, consciously or unconsciously. My own attempts to be and act hermeneutically and to promote this practice among others have given meaning to my existence in the world, and hopefully to other individuals, too.

Inspired by Gadamer's ideas, I conclude by saying that, while hermeneutics may offer less surety than the natural sciences, through immersing myself in understanding and interpreting a text or object of study, both with myself and in dialogue with others, I have gained opportunities, not only to encounter uncertainty, resistance, and frustration, but also to expand

my human experience and widen my horizon of being in the world, and per consequence, to be part of an unending conversation.

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