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What Can We Learn from Early Childhood Theory and Practice?

Leveraging Early Childhood Models to Prepare Antiracist EdD Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Education doctoral programs have an essential role to play in this moment of American history, as we train, teach, guide, and prepare education professionals to learn, unlearn, and lead as antiracist education activists. EdD program faculty and administrators sit in critical roles and must examine our own antiracist beliefs, while also facilitating anti-racist learning for our doctoral learners, who, in turn, must create anti-racist learning communities where they teach and lead.

KEYWORDS

anti-racism, EdD, early childhood, humanity, humanagogy

Early childhood education, spanning infancy through second grade, typically and uniquely focus on social emotional learning, creativity, trust building, and community. Child-focused programming for young learners often creates spaces for exploration, whether it is through finger painting or outdoor free play. Within these early education structures and spaces, room for individuation and community naturally co-exist, along with experiences to support and teach relationship building and listening abound. Early childhood educators look deeply to understand the strengths and interests of their young students, while teaching foundational skills like communication, compassion, and civility. These baseline skills serve as a necessary toolkit for empowering antiracist leaders and activists.

While some higher education spaces, and namely, education doctoral programs (EdDs), aspire toward incorporating individuation, community, strengths-based learning, and compassion into their programming, EdD program faculty, staff, and administrators ought to borrow from early childhood theory and practice. This could help catapult EdD programs to more deeply center humanity and antiracism in their teaching, learning, and practice—supporting doctoral learners with transformative experiences, personally and professionally. Dei (2005) states that antiracism requires us “to identify, challenge, and change the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppression” (p. 3). To be skilled at challenging and changing values, structures, and behaviors and creating a socially just education paradigm, education doctoral scholar practitioners must sharpen their tools and skills, with their early childhood fundamentals–listening, communication, and relationship building, while simultaneously focusing on systemic change.

Knowledge, theory, and practice from the early childhood arena can shed light on what higher education learning spaces could look like, what pedagogy or andragogy could entail, and what authentic creative play and community could include, so that we can support adult doctoral scholar practitioner learners, with their continued learning journeys. By intentionally building upon early childhood approaches, we can set in place foundations for creating antiracist, humanizing education doctoral programs. While much of this can be applied to higher education broadly, within this essay, we prioritize education doctorates, given their focus on practice, transformation, and creating socially just leaders for the present and future. Through this essay, we set the stage by sharing the current opportunities and challenges within EdD programs, ground our argument in learning theory, explore what higher education can learn from Early Childhood Education (ECE) spaces regarding humanity, space, and play, and we conclude with some questions and prompts for action for the EdD community.

EdD PROGRAMS–OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE

Our existing education system, across PK-12 and higher education, has been designed to sort students, uphold classism and racism, and create compliance-oriented hierarchy. To understand and deconstruct these practices, doctoral students must deepen their knowledge of education’s history and reconceptualize what learning

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can be. They must do this simultaneously for the students they serve and those teaching and serving within the programs. EdD programs, which train, teach, and value doctoral learners, must support their EdD leaders and learners to be in positions to re-imagine and deconstruct the remote and physical schools and classrooms that PK-12 students sit in today.

The existence of educational doctoral programs and education at all levels, according to Jon Wergin (2011), is this de-construction and re-imagining, as it should be “emancipating, rather than indoctrinating” and serving as a “powerful tool for social change” (p. 121). Wergin’s (2011) ideas build upon those of Jean Jacque Rousseau, Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Eduard Lindeman, and progressive educators, who all professed that education’s purpose was to transform our society and augment every individual within society. Their call was for a third space, namely reconstructing one’s experience, mitigated through environment and dialogue, with the aims of education and democratization (Vales & Daneher, 2024). EdD programs ought to exist to transform society, creating a more just, more democratic, and anti-racist society, not simply to uphold the white supremacist status quo. Finding this new way, the third way, is paramount at this moment in history. EdD programs must seize their raison d’etre: to prepare “practitioners—from principals to curriculum specialists, to teacher-educators, to evaluators—who can use existing knowledge to solve educational problems'' (Shulman et al., 2006, p. 26).

This disruption requires the creation of learning opportunities, spaces, and climates where every learner is valued and simultaneously the community of learners is fortified. This cannot be simply lecturing and teaching about what PK-12 classrooms can look like theoretically; this must be experienced and embodied within the EdD programs themselves, such that learners grow to understand these practices and build their capacity to transfer them from higher education into PK-12. Too often, within higher education and EdD programs, the focus is on traditionally pedagogical, instructor-centered approaches, where the student is seen as deferential to the instructors’ knowledge and style (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014; Pew, 2007). Faculty, students, and staff must all consistently operate as learners and partners, deconstructing traditional roles and titles and conceptualizing together a third space. Often, this can be challenging for adults, who default to traditional hierarchy and expectations. And this is needed, if we want to build a future education paradigm that is not a replication of sorting, classism, and racism. Instead of prioritizing theory development and behaviorist approaches, education doctoral programs must consider learning in more holistic, human-centric ways.

LEARNING THEORY–ADULTS, YOUTH–HOW ARE WE ALIKE?

The vast scholarship on learning spells out the distinctions between youth and adult learners, focusing on age as the critical consideration of how to teach. This dichotomy, while easy to measure, sets the stage for the debate between pedagogy vs andragogy: pedagogy as teaching techniques for youth and andragogy as teaching paradigms for adults. Models for pedagogy are often teacher-centered and focused on transmitting simple skills and knowledge; models for andragogy are typically self-directed, problem-focused, and oriented toward self-actualization (Holmes et al., 2000; Jarvis, 2011; Lee, 1998). While some debates continue about the contrasts between pedagogy and andragogy, others contend that this ageist categorization ought to be replaced with humanagogy, an amalgamation of pedagogy and andragogy, building a more holistic learning view and acknowledging that adults and children, alike, benefit from pedagogy and andragogy (Holmes et al., 2000; Jarvis, 2011; Tisdell & Taylor, 2000). While children may have fewer lived experiences to draw upon, youth and adults both benefit from primary and secondary learning experiences. Primary experiences are those we can sense, through touching, tasting, seeing the meaning and secondary experiences come through interaction, mediation, and sharing (Jarvis, 2011). Those who ascribe to humanagogy claim that adults and children both benefit and learn from primary and secondary experiences.

Another segment of learning scientists considers learning on a continuum, ranging from more individual, autonomous perspectives on learning through more social, relationally directed perspectives. On the autonomy-driven philosophies side of the continuum, the focus is on individuals and their personal attainment of skills and practices. Learning science theorists, Jack Mezirow and Malcolm Knowles, promote the idea of learning as technical and rational, with the aims of personal fulfillment and seeing difference based on personality (Tisdell and Taylor, 2000). On the opposite side of the continuum bell hooks’ feminist emancipatory philosophies, which engage learners through relational dialogue, considering the collective good, and viewing the educator as the one to “encourage students to confront inequity…and to mediate conflict in a relatively supportive environment” (Tisdell & Taylor, 2000, p. 9).

The false dichotomies between pedagogy and andragogy set the context for what is consciously, subconsciously, and unconsciously chosen as the learning paradigm or model within any learning environment. The more nuanced humanagogy is key for both adults in education doctorates and youth in early childhood, and this sets the stage for our analysis of what education doctoral programs can learn and borrow from early childhood. Additionally, education doctoral programs ought to consider when more individual or more relational learning paradigms apply. Given our contention that antiracist doctoral programs are critical for social improvement, we argue that while there is skill building that doctoral learners must do (i.e. communication, listening, etc.), these are skills that necessitate relational and affective learning (Tisdell & Taylor, 2000).

WHAT TO LEARN FROM ECE

Across the multitude of early childhood models and practices, spanning infancy through second grade, there is much to learn. We aim to spark exploration and dialogue, with a specific focus on three early childhood (ages 3-5) education paradigms, the Montessori Method, the Reggio Emilia approach, and the Waldorf model, developed in Europe and implemented internationally today. The models are Euro-centric and typically implemented in high-quality, for-payment preschools, and their learning design centers humanism, honors individual development paces and paths, and focus on relationships. There is also much to continue to learn from indigenous communities, models developed by people of color, and early childhood spaces that have less publication focus.

Through the application of elements of these early learning models while explicitly naming and embedding anti-racism, there is potential to expand these best practices to the adult learning sphere, specifically graduate education, including teacher preparation,

education policy, and doctoral education. The exploration of principles from these three models, specifically within the ages of 3-5, provides a compelling argument for further exploring the connections between best practices for our earliest learners and the most advanced of scholar practitioners. Through the examination of these bookended time periods in our learning journeys, it may be possible to uncover insights that could impact how we re-imagine both doctoral programs in education and PK-12 learning.

HUMANITY: FOCUSING ON INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITY

An essential tenet of some early learning practice and research, across multiple theorists and school models, is the focus on humanity: relationships, community, and the individual needs and development of each learner. Successful early childhood educators consciously attend to the learning styles and personalities of each unique human while simultaneously building and strengthening community (Benavides et al., 2020; Murray, 2015; Stehlik, 2019). Many early learning education programs intentionally teach social awareness, interpersonal awareness, and self-awareness through structure, play, creativity, and curriculum (NAEYC, n.d.). These models by design center humanagogy, the bridge between pedagogy and andragogy, and the synergy between individual and social ways of learning.

Within the Waldorf model, developed by Rudolf Steiner in 1919 in Germany and with applicability to both early childhood, primary, and secondary education, educators focus on the development of the whole person, an emphasis on morality for the whole community, and creating deep knowledge and value of other humans, cultures, and perspectives (Stehlik, 2019). The Reggio Emilia approach, a constructivist, child-focused early childhood and primary model focuses on creativity and the arts, for expression and relationships (Hewett, 2001). Reggio Emilia draws upon the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, and others and prioritizes self-directed and facilitated learning, emphasizes the essential nature of relationships between learners, their families, their educators, and their community, highlights that learning unfolds through social construction and human relationships, values communication, conflict, and debate, and prioritizes the instructor as guide and facilitator (Hewett, 2001).

These early childhood models intentionally build relationships among and between learners and instructors. Within these early childhood classrooms, relationships are seen as a valued end in and of themselves, rather than a bridge to some other learning objective. And relationships are built through deliberate communication and a focus on building social emotional learning (SEL). SEL focuses on empathy, social and relationship skills, and self-awareness across lines of difference (Wood, 2020), and within antiracist learning settings, SEL must be culturally and community oriented, to ensure that it is not white-washed, race neutral, nor avoiding conflicts and their roots in race, class, gender, and difference (Simmons, 2019).

Doctoral programs must also intentionally focus on humanity, individualization, community, and relational thinking. Within the American University (AU) Education Policy & Leadership doctoral program, these are integrally woven throughout. In semester one, students begin with a course on systems thinking, building their diagnostic and analytical skills and sharpening their abilities to see the interconnectedness of decision making, the patterns of organizational and global decisions, and expanding their own vantage points. Within the course, learners analyze various external cases to build their systems skills first before turning to explore their own adaptive leadership challenges (Heifetz, 2002). Doctoral learners work in small teams to see the broader system and work through dialogue, pushing forth conflicting opinions and working through disagreement. Additionally, this course creates a learning container and space to build trust, dialogue, and to begin to function as mini-learning organizations-enabling sub-teams, cohorts, and the entire program to each be concentric learning organizations. In semester two, students look even deeper at the self, through a course on exercising conscious leadership, where learners consider their own leadership strengths, challenges, and immunities to change (Fisher, 2020; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). This course is personalized for each student, through coaching sessions, self-reflexive writing, and peer support through the self-discovery processes. These are just beginning points and even more time, space, and faculty and staff capacity must be spent on the humanizing, relational elements of community building. If we spent an hour or a day in an early childhood classroom, ample time would be spent on deliberately teaching conflict strategies, sharing techniques, cooperation exercises, and interpersonal relationship building. This time is well spent in these classrooms, and it needs to continue across primary and secondary schooling and also be central within doctoral programs.

Adult learners also need ample time and space to build community, to be comfortable being wrong, to have tools for healthy conflict, and to center humanity. This is essential and is the aspiration of the AU EdD program. Additionally, it is hard work for busy professionals and faculty who have decades of unlearning to do, so they can be their most authentic, relational, and introspective selves. Grappling with biases, critically analyzing the educational system at national and local levels, consciously analyzing one's own beliefs about leadership and learning, and building a community of scholarly activists all require practice. The AU program aspires to create these spaces in weekend residencies, team projects, and coursework and content on teaming, adult learning, and culture building. In addition, this is complex work and challenging to do virtually in a part-time program, particularly for adults who have built their experiences, convictions, and beliefs over their lifetimes in contrast to learners in their earliest stages of development. This also presents challenges within the PK-12 system for adult educators who do not prioritize the types of coherent learning experiences for adult learners, requiring us to move away from professional development hours and sessions and moving toward humanagogic, antiracist learning experiences.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

In the world of early childhood learning, many long-standing, broadly accepted theories unequivocally establish the environment as an integral part of programs and learning. The environment is seen as the physical space, the explicit and implicit norms and roles of participants, and the conceptual space or learning container that exists for community to flourish.

Early childhood educators, schools, centers, and parents all take great care to create environments that provide structure, encourage safe exploration, and adapt as children learn, create, and construct meaning. Maria Montessori called this the prepared environment stating that children need an enriched environment that is not overloaded but includes the unique and appropriate stimuli for

each child to encourage their next learning steps (Catherine et al., 2020). Reggio Emilia explicitly names the environment as the third teacher that morphs and adapts to each child's learning both informing and informed by the process of learning itself. In the Reggio Emilia approach, care for the environment and co-creation of learning change the space bringing even more opportunities to continue to construct new meanings (Edwards, 1993; The Scots College, 2017). Bronfenbrenner (1977) centered these ideas emphasizing that learning context is impacted by micro and macro elements and cannot be isolated from the impact of a child's family, school, or neighborhood. Effective educators of young learners create physical and metaphysical spaces for community, and our youngest learners recognize the impact of their surroundings for exploring, learning, and interacting with each other and with their space.

Just as young children ought to grow and learn inside environments intentionally designed for their safe exploration of themselves and the world around them, so must adult learners. Yet, as adults and educators, we often neglect to thoughtfully design learning environments that optimize interactions and exploration of new spaces. In education doctoral programs, and for adults generally, the spaces where learning occurs must be viewed as individually and collectively beneficial, with a focus on anti-racist and learner-driven strategies. We must be attentive to physical and virtual collective and individual learning spaces, and regardless of type of space, more attention must be paid by the learners and the instructors about these physical and virtual spaces. For example, the content, community, and types of expectations needed for learning that content ought to be tended to in the creation of Zoom breakout room, in person spaces, and the overall dedication to a physical space that affords getting to know each other.

Continued advancement of technology and the challenges of the pandemic necessitate new learning options with greatly expanded virtual opportunities, with this new flexibility comes an even greater need to understand the impact of the learning context on learners' experiences. In programs, such as AU's virtual doctoral program, boundaries blur between the classroom, home, and work creating a new third space (Bhabha, 1994; Schuck et al., 2017; Soja, 1996). In this space, educators and learners come together to jointly create an environment where learning can happen–on Zoom, in the cloud, synchronously and asynchronously. The constraints of walls, classrooms, and opportunity to easily form student cliques are removed. New possibilities provide learners with more agency over where they choose to work, and adaptivity for content to align with students' interests and needs. One theory, the Mobile Pedagogical Framework, states that collaboration, personalization, and authenticity, a new set of teacher behaviors, and an emphasis on ethics are all necessary for virtual learning (Schuck et al., 2017). Existing in this third space provides students with more independence requiring greater responsibility and self-initiated learning, just as illustrated in the works of Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf.

Instructors must shift their views of their roles—within the design of the space and beyond. We need to borrow from Reggio Emilia and Waldorf, seeing instructors as guides. We also need to remember, just as we do when children are three, four, and five, that students show up with unique personalities, talents, and gifts and are uniquely impacted by the larger context of circumstances. In the early childhood sphere, educators are often far more adept with personalization, community circles, restorative practices, and morning meetings. Often in early childhood settings, restorative circles are both dedicated and organic time and space for discussing conflict, addressing hurtful statements, and exploring emotions. Within our adult EdD learning community, we need similar spaces. The learners and instructors need spaces for co-construction, time for deliberate space construction, and a recognition that our physical and virtual spaces impact and contribute to our learning. The contention is not that we should treat adult learners as though they are preschoolers; instead, we argue we need to return to the basics of human relationships and be aware that physical and virtual spaces can contribute or dismantle these. We also must recognize the unlearning needed for many adults, who traversed through less learner-centered educational journeys and the scaffolded support to embrace their own learning.

Another critical reality is that existing virtually can limit some of the unstructured interactions that occur in hallways and in passing during breaks during in-person classes, and the virtual space may need more attention by instructors, learners, and co-constructors. The current ecology including COVID-19, the political climate, police brutality, and ongoing racism all infiltrate the learning context. The pandemic and social justice factors continually impact discussions during class and place a significant strain on the energy educators (students and professors) can bring to learning. During such an intense, emotionally draining season of life, the tendency can be to find ways to retreat rather than pushing forward to imagine and to create a new learning space. Boundaries between public and private spaces are blurred creating the potential for greater authenticity; however, authenticity requires honesty which can be hampered by our positionalities and the political environment.

PLAY AND IMAGINATION

The majority of early childhood learning paradigms situate play and creativity as central. Within many ECE spaces play-as learning is the method by which young children explore, make meaning, and learn. Within this paradigm, abstract thinking is developed, and imagination has the freedom to enable learners to visualize emancipation from constraints (Nilsson et. al, 2018). While there are debates about whether play is in itself learning or learning is an outcome of play, there is wide recognition that play and exploration are natural for young learners (Gibson, 2024). Within the Reggio Emilia approach, natural objects become the basis of play and exploration and units of study (Edwards, 1993). Within Waldorf, play-based learning is the only goal until children are 6, and play happens in groups, with natural materials, and in a learner-driven manner. In early childhood settings, painting, drawing, sculpting, and imaginative play are routine.

Play and creativity, where imagination and new possibilities can unfold, are also important for adults and doctoral scholar practitioners. Piantanida et al. (2019) explicate that aesthetic knowing and aesthetic imagination invite a tapping into the intuitive, while encouraging us to allow creativity in language, ideas, and representation to unfold. Play allows us to tap into our humanity, our youthfulness, and our sense of possibility. However, play is often limited within higher education and doctoral settings, and it is stifled by grades and systems of accountability and power, which prioritize compliance over creativity, exploration, and growth (Stommel, 2023).

If we endeavor to construct an antiracist education enterprise within PK-12 and higher education, creativity and innovation are

essential. Creativity can include new ways of thinking and new ways of scholarship, and creativity ought to include new ways to demonstrate knowledge, publish a dissertation in practice, acquire knowledge, and play in community with adults. Play can look like curating musical playlists, having dance breaks during Zoom sessions, and coming together for interactive, somatic ways of engaging. Creativity and play must be further explored and elevated within education doctoral settings; we ought not to expect our doctoral scholar practitioners to foster imagination and play for their young learners and adult teams outside of the academy, while not fostering these within the academy.

CONCLUSION

Reconsidering the best practices implemented for our earliest learners can uncover ways to create a distinctly iterative learning environment that centers humanity and embeds social emotional learning alongside the academic content of the courses. Fulghum's (1998) title continues to ring true…. "All I really need to know I learned in in kindergarten" (p. 2). There are many nuggets to draw from the early childhood space discussed in this article, namely the prioritization of the humanity of the individual and the community simultaneously, intentionality about the learning space, and centering play. We also must consider why EdD programs exist and respond to this moment in America where racism is overshadowing democracy (again).

It is our responsibility to build EdD programs that support EdD learners with the repertoire of skills they need as individuals and as a community to lead our current and future education and community contexts. To do this, we need to grow our activist education community as EdD programs and faculty. EdD programs must reflexively consider some essential questions, and we would benefit from creating, learning, unlearning, and doing this together. We invite our community to collectively re-imagine our humanity, our learning space, and our need for play. How might we center and model this so that this ripples out amongst our programs and practices? Perhaps, we can consider a few critical questions:

- How does a program dedicated to anti-racism and equity design scaffolded support so that collective and individual success multiply?
- What qualities or experiences do faculty members need to best create playful, humanizing learning spaces?
- How can a program design an experience for educators that encourages exploration and play while centering learning, transformation, and antiracism?

We believe that this work necessitates significant unlearning. Some could call this unlearning imagination and others might call it individual, cultural and structural transformation. This unlearning process and re-orchestration of roles is a challenge for all learners- the doctoral scholar practitioners, staff, and faculty. Chris Argyris (2003) argues that human beings are "skillful at non-learning," avoiding double loop learning, which "requires that new routines be created that are based on a different conception of the universe", and he claims that this is exceedingly true in research, where the focus on scientific and humanistic research both focus on generalizable propositions and seeking "complete knowledge" rather than focusing on individual cases, incomplete knowledge, or action (p. 1178-1179). Our unlearning must force us to grapple with questions around program design and purpose, truly engaging in double loop learning. How should doctoral programs be intentionally staffed so that cohorts of educational practitioners who represent and serve people of color are seen, taught, and valued by faculty, especially in predominantly white institutions? How can faculty create learning environments where they truly show up as facilitators—at times with content expertise and sometimes as members of the learning group? How can students and faculty shed their decades-in-the-making constructs of faculty, student, and power? How do we uphold and lean into this discomfort and ambiguity when things are trickiest and most needed for our education community—in the midst of a needed racial reckoning and a continued opportunity to transform post-COVID? We invite our collective unlearning agenda and a co-construction of what a re-design might even look like.

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