

Learning from a pioneer in visual pedagogies for ECE

E. Jayne White is an associated professor II at Faculty of Education, Arts and Sports at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. She is a Professor ECE plus Associate Dean ECE and Director PoPLab at [RMIT School of Education in Melbourne](#). She is also President of Association for [Visual Pedagogies](#) and Editor-in-Chief of [Video Journal of Education and Pedagogy](#). We have had the honor of getting to know her better through a feature interview.



Jayne is a pioneer in visual pedagogies and leads a team of academics that work with early childhood education students and teachers all over the world to better understand and engage with our youngest learners. Her work brings dialogic philosophy, pedagogies, and methodologies together to explore new ways of seeing very young learners. She invokes a series of provocations and possibilities concerning the work of the plural 'I' and 'eye' through innovative visual methodologies, pedagogies and broader examination of educational thought. Her scholarship has opened up new pathways for empirical and methodological engagement with young learners through visual practices with video, virtual realities, observation and engagement with alternative perspectives and visual lenses for seeing and thinking anew.

So, what made Jayne interested in early childhood education? And what does she think about the challenges of today? Learn more about this in her elaborations on these topics.

What is your background and what made you interested in early childhood education?

Education has been my life! My parents were both teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, where I grew up – my father a primary school Principal and my mother a kindergarten teacher. I spent many of my early childhood years in and around teachers, and their pedagogical networks that highlighted for me the important point that teaching is more than a job, but a way of life. My father was terribly disappointed when I chose to undertake kindergarten training at age 18, as opposed to what he considered to be a superior position in primary schools, but I was determined to take this route. I was particularly drawn to play as a central means of learning, and the combination of education and care as the basis for pedagogy. I remember being fascinated by the diverse public and private worlds of children and took on nannying duties whenever I could. My earliest experiences of advocacy for ECE were in dialogues with my father who, though he never admitted it, eventually came to see that his views were informed by pay scales, not experiences. Were he alive today I think he would be amazed to see that the status of ECE is much improved in many parts of the world, based on a much richer appreciation of the complex pedagogical work that takes place to deliver high quality ECE as a new normality and entitlement.



Jayne aged 19 in her first teaching position at Otago University Nursery, 1985

I started my adult life as an early childhood teacher working with infants and toddlers at the Otago University Nursery in Dunedin, New Zealand. It was here I learnt the importance of earliest relationships for learning and how to engage in loving encounters with young learners. Way back then (1985) we were videoing infants as a central means of assessment! How well I recall the trips around campus with those old fashioned prams full of infants – in snow, sun or sleet – with picnics on the campus lawn so that our infants could run freely in wild spaces! Excursions to the library on the bus with 8 infants and 2 staff were approached without question, and I recall wistfully many trips to farms or bush to explore landscapes in fresh clean air. I went on to teach in kindergartens and other early years learning contexts over several years – taking these joyful learning experiences with me and expecting the best for all. These experiences stay with me as an academic and a teacher educator but every now and again, when I visit students in ECE centres, I become quite nostalgic about those days and the privilege of working closely with young learners and their families that is afforded to ECE teachers in very special and unique ways.

Working as a part time research assistant and tutor at University, as well as studying, teaching young children, and bringing up my own three wonderful offspring was to become my new normality throughout this time, with the support of good colleagues and a wonderful partner, who has since passed away. Looking back over these years I can see how the scales gradually tipped from mostly teaching young children, to mostly teaching others how to teach young children – in both my research and tertiary teaching. However, I have never lost focus on the infants, toddlers and young children for whom it is all about, and seek every opportunity to return to ECE spaces whenever I can – either in research or in professional development experiences with teachers. Looking back over these (now) almost forty years of teaching, I realise how fortunate I have been to have chosen this wonderful life, and the many opportunities it has brought for me to make a difference in the simplest, yet most meaningful, ways.

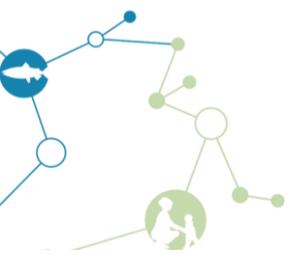
What is the funniest thing you have done in your career?

Working in early childhood education is full of fun. I can think of many many stories to tell – some of which I have written about elsewhere. Being a good teacher is at least partially concerned with recognizing the tremendous wit of young children, and being prepared to ride with it. This can be evidenced in the most subtle manoeuvres – such as when a group of toddlers realized I did not like the book “Fox in Socks” and would bring it to me every day to read because they knew I would say “I do not like this book, please do not make me read it!”, sigh and then read on – which would make them laugh raucously. There are also many opportunities to become the butt of the joke as an ECE teacher – which children absolutely adore – and to make oneself vulnerable in doing so. Many times I have been the clown at the local fundraiser, the occasional fairy, a Queen on Queens birthday, and even Max out of the book “Where the Wild Things Are”, as pictured below:



Jayne [centre] with colleagues at a performance at Dunedin Teachers College 1980's

Taking on these fantasy roles has also been a great way to support children into theorisations about what ‘should be’ – one of the most important aspects of our work in my view. I recall on one occasion working with a male kindergarten teacher when we set out to disrupt some of the gender binaries that were evident in the community at that time. The children were utterly convinced that we were married and lived together in the family corner so one morning, in preparation for a pyjama party, we squeezed ourselves into beds there.



You can imagine the surprise of the children as they arrived, and the wonderful dialogues that emerged as a consequence once they realized we simply could not fit! Their discoveries based on this provocation led to a full-blown inquiry – led by them – concerning gender roles, families and ways of living.

Which topics have you personally found the most interesting to work with?

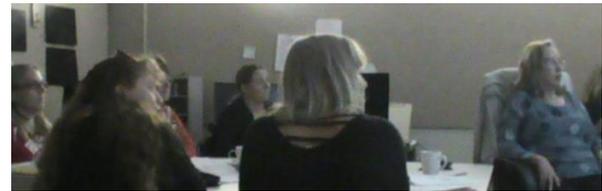
Perhaps unsurprisingly I have been drawn most keenly to dialogic philosophy as a source of theorisation and provocation for my work. Dialogism is fundamentally concerned with the problem of representation and pays attention to spaces for dialogue in its broadest sense – both of which have characterized my work with children over the years in a variety of ways. I have been especially interested in these concerns in the interests of very young children – infants and toddlers – as I believe they are the least researched and most misunderstood population we teach. To this day I am amazed at the levels of ignorance expressed in extant binaries between care and learning – which I seek to demolish in and for the field.

My route to deeper understanding has been through the work of the eye, which I believe is not confined to the organ we use to see but, instead, to our co-constituted 'I' and the 'we' that comprises the work of an ECE teacher. I have worked with many teachers over the years to understand more of the complexities young children present to us – and to appreciate these as a source of learning within, between and across different age groups and contexts – for us all.



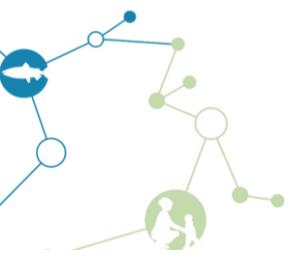
Jayne filming in a NZ kindergarten

A tremendous source of insight for my work has been in the ongoing use of video, and, more recently, immersive technologies, to understand more about young learners and their becomings. Through such exploration I have developed the notion of polyphonic footage which provides a glimpse into the visual fields of multiple players – not least of all infants themselves. Much of my work is now involved in developing insights through technologies at my disposal, across diverse groupings and with the additional insights of cross-disciplinary partners. I believe that we owe children our best efforts to try to understand, while knowing all along that each of our viewings are merely partial. Through dialogues with others about what we 'see' and how others 'see' we can begin to see with fresh eyes and with a greater appreciation for our youngest – one that far surpasses the developmental legacies we have inherited in the field and which seeks to expand potentialities concerning what could or might be 'seen'.



Working with teachers to interpret video of pedagogical practice

I have started developing visual resources that bring my research discoveries into the wider world. As President of Association for Visual Pedagogies I work with an international team of like-minded colleagues to bring teaching and learning under the spotlight for all to see through Open Access Publishing and, now, in the development of Virtual Pedagogical Dialogues for teachers. In my current workplace at RMIT, I lead the Pedagogies of Possibilities Research Lab (PoPLab) where we are exploring potential ways of seeing anew through reading, thinking, researching and writing. I have increasingly turned my attention towards effective routes for translation of our research so that it benefits those who we intend to reach. For me this is primarily the early childhood community and policy – ultimately for the benefit of infants, toddlers, young children, families and communities. I am also looking at how teachers see, as well as what



they see, and the modes at their disposal, as well as maintaining a critical eye on what is produced as a consequence. I am consequently expanding the ‘work of the eye/I’ in ways I never imagined all those years ago when I worked at the University Nursery videoing infants as a means of assessment. It’s exciting work because it holds potential whilst holding us all accountable for what we see, what we say about our seeing, and what this means for our expanded understandings of early childhood worlds.

For more information about my work please see www.ejaynewwhite.com

What do you think are the current most important issues regarding early childhood education?

“The big question that faces us all right now is how to live in and with this new normality. Many of us are asking questions concerned with ‘what is worth preserving?’ and ‘what opportunities arise in contemplating a different future?’”

I am writing this contribution into a COVID era of global pandemic, at a time when humanity is made vulnerable for us all. The big question that faces us all right now is how to live in and with this new normality. Many of us are asking questions concerned with ‘what is worth preserving?’ and ‘what opportunities arise in contemplating a different future?’. Children born in 2020 do not know of any other experience, yet they turn to adults who look backwards with nostalgia and must also try to look forwards with hope. How we teach in early childhood education, indeed the ways we conceive of it in the first place, must be mindful of these unknown futures that our youngest face. We may even be provoked to think anew about our youngest and the qualities they will need for the post-COVID world ahead. I am therefore of the opinion that the most important issue for early childhood education lies in our capacity to think forward with uncertainty. We may have to abandon dearly held beliefs in deference to new possibilities; and we may need to be prepared to defend others that are worth

preserving. As advocates for young learners, it behoves us to continue to ‘see’ beyond ourselves and in relationship with the cosmos (including viruses) – upholding the best of what was, in conjunction with the potential of what is, what is still to be known, and what we can only imagine. There may be a need, and indeed an opportunity, to collapse some existing empires that harness our thinking, and to contemplate strange and hitherto unheard of couplings that can assist us in taking steps into unknowable futures. I see that we will need to engage with new and old philosophies to inform us, and to be vigilant to the opportunities and insights around us – in nature, in science, in art, and, most importantly, in the children who we serve.

There is a need to dialogue across these silos more than ever before. We in ECE need to advocate, as we have always done, and support young children to do the same, on their terms, not ours. We will require a good sense of humour which we can learn best through our youngest and playful, open, encounters with their insights. Indeed, there are increased provocations to reconceptualise learning itself, let alone provision – perhaps even laying our own dearly held and most serious truths bare - for scrutiny. This is a tremendous challenge for us all – scholars, policy makers, teachers alike. But it is also a responsibility we share with children who will ultimately call us to account for what we do, or do not do, in the days ahead. I look forward to working with colleagues at KINDknow to navigate this untrodden terrain. We have a lot to do and ‘see’ together!

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