Early Childhood Curriculum in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

In this opening commentary, the editors of this special issue introduce the eight articles of this special issue entitled, Early Childhood Curriculum in Times of Crisis. Kessler and Castner focus on early childhood curriculum theory and practice. They argue that critically understanding the cultural, political, and historical context of early childhood curriculum is imperative for the apprehending many of the challenges educators of young children have faced in the past. Then, they suggest the contributions of the eight articles that will follow implicitly or explicitly present alternative curricular visions. These alternative curricular visions are vital affirmations of early childhood education amid the multi-faceted crises that characterize the contemporary moment.

Key Terms: Curriculum, curriculum theory, covid, educational inequality, narrative, environmental justice

Introduction
Early Childhood Curriculum in Times of Crisis.

"It is not an overstatement to say that we cannot understand the construction and reconstruction of public school and college curricula if we do not understand how they are intimately tied to …larger currents and crosscurrents." (Beyer & Liston, 1996)

Along with Beyer and Liston, we maintain that all curriculum is developed and implemented within a cultural, political, and historical context. Curriculum practices are especially contentious when any event is seen as a crisis of historical proportions for a nation's prosperity or survival. For example, the Russian's launch of Sputnik in 1957 ushered in a decade of curriculum reform in the US that focused on the perceived need to improve the teaching and learning of mathematics and science, so as to strengthen the nation's ability to compete with its major combatant in the Cold War, Russia.

At about the same time early childhood education came into focus when the research of Swiss psychologists Piaget and Inhelder was translated into English. They found that children, including infants, constructed knowledge through social interaction with adults and objects and perceived the world in accordance with universal stages of development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969/2000). In a similar vein, the cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner, described the "structures of disciplines" approach to curriculum planning the aim of which, according to Kliebard, was to develop in the mind of the students the same structures that are inherent in the disciplines, such as mathematics and science (Bruner, 1966; Kliebard, 1980). This approach led Eisner to articulate the "development of cognitive processes" orientation to curriculum that differed from other orientations he described, such as a "personal relevance" orientation (Eisner, 1995).

These theories strengthened the view that early childhood curricula can and should programmatically prescribe important concepts for early learning that would lead to the development of cognition and later academic success strengthening the nation's ability to compete economically on the world stage. This conceptual backdrop prompted Bernard Spodek to articulate, advance and demonstrate at the University of Illinois in the late 1960's a curriculum based on constructivist learning theory and the structure of the disciplines approach, where Shirley Kessler taught as a young graduate student (Robinson & Spodek, 1965).

Numerous other examples could be cited, including the educational initiative, the "No Child Left Behind" act of 2002 (NCLB), revised in 2015 as the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA) (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2002; US Department of Education, 2015). NCLB and ESSA were to make graduates of public-school programs competitive job seekers and workers, that likewise would strengthen the ability of the US to compete economically with other "advanced" nations. These federal policies obligate State-level systems of educational accountability that adhere to the key elements and operating procedures for curriculum development, factors that were conceptualized in the early decades of the 20th century and referred to today as the "technical-rational" or "means/end" approach to curriculum, a topic addressed by Dan Castner in the last chapter of this issue. Following the technical-rational approach, the focus is on studying the means for attaining specific academic objectives, without questioning if the stated "ends" are worthwhile or desirable, thus obfuscating the fact that values underlie all educational decisions.

Requiring States to set forth content standards and procedures for standardized testing constrained curricular decisions. Current policy trends are leading teachers to narrowly focus on standardized academic outcomes, often at the expense of nurturing children's creativity, independence, and pleasure (Brown, 2021). Further, it could be argued that this approach to curriculum fails to leave room for the teacher to teach culturally relevant content or to address the current crises related to the destruction of the environment that could destroy the earth (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Ritchie, Dunn, Rau, & Crow, 2010).

Along with Beyer and Liston we believe the study of curriculum is vital to the study of schooling since the curriculum is at the heart of any educational endeavor and thus should be the centerpiece of all studies of schooling (Beyer & Liston, 1996). However, this argument to center curriculum in studies of early childhood education assumes a broad conception of what curriculum is. Eisner argues schools actually teach three curricula: the "intended curriculum" (goals and objectives), the "operational curriculum" (what teachers teach), and the "hidden curriculum" (unintended learnings) best described by Jackson (1968).

Further, early childhood educators understand and consider the "emergent curriculum," described by Dana Bentley and Sara Michael Luna in this volume, which arises out of children's and teachers' reaction to the intended or operational curriculum that often leads to changes in what was planned. Further, representatives of the reconceptualization of curriculum movement have commonly conceived of curriculum as an extraordinarily "complicated conversation" [among classroom participants and others] that is "intensely historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological, and international" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995)

In addition, as stated earlier, curriculum is never ethically or politically neutral. Educational programs either implicitly or explicitly describe and/or advocate a particular world view (Kessler, 1991). Further, as I (Shirley) wrote years ago, "…adherents to various beliefs [of what should be taught] can be viewed as a kind of political interest group, or a lobby for a particular set of values" (Kessler & Swadener, 1992, p. xx-xxi).

The articles in this issue of the *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies* journal address several important curricular issues. Emphasizing the inherent social and political dimensions of education, the authors contributing to this issue stand as advocates for young children and families in the midst of multifaceted crises. They contribute critical understandings to complicated conversations at the center of educating and caring for young children.

The authors recognize a global health pandemic, systematic racism, and environmental justice as key issues defining the contemporary cultural, political, and historical context of early childhood education. Just as the Cold War and the imposition of accountability-based educational reform policies shaped and continue to influence curriculum practices, the crises of today inevitability shape the content of curriculum and how it is mediated in early childhood classrooms.

The first three articles focus upon the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mara Sapon-Shevin sets forth a world view—"The Beloved Community" --based on the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. With this vision of "the good life" in mind, she describes in "Creating Early Childhood Settings as Beloved Communities in the Covid Era Closeness without Touch?" the problems for creating a loving community that emerge when there is an emphasis on children keeping their distance from each other and "not touching." Further, she highlights the devastating effects that lack of touch can have on children's development as fully human beings.

Dana Bentley's article, "Communicating at a Distance?: Critical Early Childhood Communities Amidst a Pandemic" exemplifies the ways in which teachers try to teach children who also are cautioned to "not touch" their classmates, yet still find ways in which to create a community. In an engaging narrative style, Dana describes the opening of the school year, where children's fear of getting the virus overwhelm planned activities and demand further explanation and affectionate coaching. Describing monthly progress and even acts of resistance, this narrative paints a vivid portrait of the "complicated conversation" that occurs in classrooms, as well as the enacted curriculum within a context permeated with fear and trepidation.

Ayesha Rabadi-Raol takes a pro-active stance because of the covid pandemic. In "Teaching a Pandemic Learning Pod with Friendship, Fantasy and Fairness," she describes how she developed a "learning pod" – a small group of children whose activities are facilitated by a parent or teacher who come together to learn and socialize. Another excellent example of the enacted curriculum, this narrative likewise describes children grappling with the fear that they too might get sick. Through class discussions and drawings of the virus, these children find ways to work and play together, to build relationships and a semblance of a community in the making.

The next to three articles address one more serious contextual factor influencing the curriculum: the unequal treatment of Black and Brown children in classrooms across the country. Evandra Catherine and Beth Swadener address the fact that Black children and especially Black boys are removed from their classrooms, supposedly because of rule infractions, at a much higher rate than their White counterparts. In "Promoting Racial Justice with Emotion and Culturally Focused Strategies in Early Childhood Classrooms," the authors focus on educating teachers to be more sensitive through a "practice-based" coaching strategy that emphasizes the teachers' use of emotionally supportive practices with Black boys. The complicated conversation that occurs among these preservice teachers and the focus children exemplifies the ways in which children can themselves influenced the curriculum choices of teachers.

Sara Michael Luna's article, "Challenging Norms in Pre-Kindergarten Curriculum by Listening to Young Children: Pre-Service Teachers Lessons in Phonological

Awareness," presents research on children's "phonological awareness." Four case studies present findings that examine the intersection of state-endorsed curriculum and early childhood pre-service teachers' construction and implementation of phonological awareness lessons during an either-week field placement. Teachers found that honoring children's voices can challenge and reconstruct pedagogic and material norms for pre-service teachers.

Miriam Tager in "Technology Segregation: 'The Great Reckoning' of Racial Divide in Early Childhood Education" highlights the unequal access to technology among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). This inequality was especially pronounced when schools were closed during the pandemic and children were required to engage in remote learning via technology. Serious problems associated with educating remotely include: the lack of access to technology among children, and the availability of necessary support systems, including inadequate training of teachers and the ability of parents to support their child's remote learning. Michael Apple, a critical theorist of curriculum, would find this research supportive of his claim that not all children "receive" the same curriculum. Further, he wrote, "high status knowledge," such as knowledge of the use of technology, "is distributed unequally," leading to the well-documented unequal outcomes of schooling (Apple, 1979).

The final two articles address one more contextual factor: academics' roles and responsibilities in order to find possibilities for affirming the education of young children in the contemporary conditions of crisis. Catherine Hamm, Jeanne Iorio, and Clifton Tanabe advance environmental justice through the lens of Indigenous worldviews in their article, "The Public, Practice of Hope, and the Role of the Academic." Referencing the *Out and About* research project taking place in Australia, the authors urge readers to critically question taken for granted notions of "the public," and put forth practicing hope as a generative way to reframe research embracing more than human relationships, crucial to our survival on this planet.

In the concluding article, Daniel Castner continues the argument of this editorial introduction. In his article, "Reconsidering early childhood curriculum leadership in light of reconceptualization: Moving beyond DAP technologies" he situates historically the current emphasis on the technical-rational approach to curriculum and its current manifestation in the fourth edition of "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8 (DAP) (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2021). He argues that curriculum theorizing is a relatively untapped resource for understanding the mainstream policies and practices of early childhood education. Castner suggests "practical eclecticism" as an alternative to the ethical and political sterility of predominant conceptions of early childhood curriculum and as a way forward for research on early childhood education.

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