

# Reconsidering early childhood curriculum leadership in light of reconceptualization: Moving beyond DAP technologies

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## Abstract

Curriculum practice is an important way early childhood educators attend to the ethical and political responsibilities inherent to their work. Unfortunately, early childhood curriculum is perennially undertheorized. Analyzing decades of trends in early childhood curriculum, this article argues that notions of developmental appropriateness have subtly, and perhaps inadvertently, perpetuated restrictive technical-scientific conceptions of curriculum. Then, historical, philosophical, and political alternatives to technical-scientific instrumentality, which were identified by Shirley Kessler in the early 1990s, are revisited. Recognizing the persistence of technocratic conceptions of early childhood curriculum in spite of decades of reconceptualization and the multi-faceted crises of our contemporary situation, practical eclecticism is advanced to envision a powerful future for early childhood curriculum leadership.

Key Terms: Curriculum, curriculum theory, leadership, developmentally appropriate practice, early childhood education

## Reconsidering early childhood curriculum leadership in light of reconceptualization: Moving beyond DAP technologies

In the midst of growing economic disparities, systemic racism, toxic and divisive political turmoil, and a deeply concerning ecological crisis, it is an extraordinarily challenging time to be an early childhood educator. In this special issue, esteemed scholars have drawn upon their conceptual and empirical work to complicate how we understand early childhood professionals' responsibilities during multi-faceted crises. From the perspective of the great political theorist Hannah Arendt (2006), educators are representatives of our troubled world. According to Arendt (2006), the educators' fundamental task is to "stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is" (p. 186). Putting the relational and ethical responsibilities of educators into a curriculum context, James Macdonald (1975) elaborated that as educators "we will *do* something *with, for, or to* the person- and any human action is a resolution of thought and feeling into doing by way of a value commitment" (p.191).

As early childhood educators, we assume responsibility for putting ourselves and young children in a curricular context, curriculum being a fundamental feature of the educational experience. Hence, exercising sound curricular judgment is at the heart of what it means to educate young children. The way the world is represented and presented to young children are manifestations of curricular decisions. Considering the significance of curriculum in the lives of children, one would expect an extensive body of literature would address the key elements and operating procedures of early childhood professionals' curriculum practices. Even though curriculum is a central feature of the educational experience, dialogue between early childhood educators and curriculum theorists has been surprisingly sparse (Goffin, 2001; Tanner & Tanner, 2007). Curriculum theorists address such questions as: What is the essence and

substance of curriculum? Whose values are reflected in the formal and enacted curriculum? What world view is implied or specifically stated in prescriptions for practice? What tacit learnings are acquired because of the way schools are structured? What is a child's experience of the curriculum? Because early childhood professionals seldom address these questions, the field of the early childhood curriculum remains perennially undertheorized (Wood & Hedges, 2016).

Such decisions are ethically and political complicated value judgments, and they are fraught with ambiguity, uncertainty, and controversy. However, research on early childhood curriculum has been limited in scope and tends to narrowly focus on questions of if and how curriculum "works" in early childhood classroom (File, 2019; Stremmel 2020). These instrumental questions are important; however instrumentality avoids the complexity of curriculum discourse and practice, presuming the status quo of prevailing policies and practices are unproblematic. Assuming responsibility for young children and the troubled world instantiates curriculum contexts extending far beyond instrumental decision making.

This article critically reexamines established discourses informing early childhood curriculum and considers possibilities for advancing early childhood education through curriculum leadership. While leadership is often conceived as authority figures' responsibility, the conception of curriculum leadership advanced in this paper refers to anyone who is working to improve the content and/or mediation of early childhood curriculum. It can be and often is carried out by individuals with or without positional authority. The next section briefly overviews theories of traditional curriculum development and design that shaped the first 50 years of curriculum studies in the USA, and many other places, and that, at least in the USA, continue to influence early childhood programs and prescription for practice. The overview draws from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in its recent publication, entitled, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)* (NAEYC, 2020).

Traditional curriculum theories are salient features that are not prominently cited within discourses of early childhood policy and practice—unless there is a proponent of one theory/theorist or another (e.g., the curriculum proponents suggests the theory draws from the work of Patty Smith Hill, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, or even "Reggio Emilia," using four examples.) Due to this lack of explicit scholarly reference, I will briefly highlight how curriculum theorizing is a tacit feature of the early childhood landscape. Examining past and present conceptions of curriculum endorsed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as well as current policy trends related to curriculum, I argue that many prominent advancements of what is known as *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (or *DAP*) curriculum, and others that highlight developmental appropriateness, have implicitly conceived of curriculum as a technology. I also argue here and illustrate briefly that curricular technologies are purely instrumental, reductionist, and allege value neutrality.

Then, Kessler's (1991) *alternative perspectives* informed by curriculum reconceptualization are revisited to highlight the historical, philosophical, and political alternatives to the instrumental orientation of traditional theories of curriculum development. Considering how problems associated with technocratic conceptions of early childhood curriculum have endured over the course of decades of reconceptualization, I advance practical eclecticism as a supplement to envision an empowering future of early childhood curriculum leadership.

### **Theorizing Early Childhood Curriculum**

Traditional curriculum development is subtly infused in contemporary educational enterprises. Key contributions from two professors at the University of Chicago define

the contours of the technical-scientific curriculum orientation, also known as traditional curriculum development that still dominates contemporary schooling. The first major curriculum textbook, *The Curriculum*, marked the origins of traditional curriculum development. It was written by a school administrator named Franklin Bobbitt in 1918 (Bobbitt, 2017). This seminal book marks the origins of traditional curriculum development. To summarize, Bobbitt's curricular aims were grounded in social efficiency ideology, and he utilized methods of scientific management. In an effort to address the social and more specifically the economic demands of his day, he endeavored to design curriculum content that would efficiently and effectively produce a capable workforce (Null, 2016). In effect, Bobbitt envisioned a factory model of schooling, theorizing what has been called a *production model* for curriculum development. As Kessler and Swadener (1992) put it, "From this perspective the student is seen as raw material that is transformed into some kind of product by the skilled technician (the teacher). Plans for the end product are carefully predetermined, and the subject is carefully shaped to meet design specifications" (p. xix). Arguably, this ideological approach to curriculum practice is reified through contemporary neoliberal reform policies that promote standardized testing and systems for teacher accountability (Au, 2011).

The era of traditional curriculum development culminated intellectually with the publication of Ralph Tyler's (1949) *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, which was a short but incredibly influential book. Often considered the father of educational evaluation in the USA, Tyler broadened traditional curriculum development, repositioning methods of scientific management within the scope of technocratic ideological aims. Technocratic rationality alleges value neutrality and focusses instead on the instrumental decisions – the "how to" rather than "what" and "why?" Or as Kessler put it, in the technical-rational approach, "Curriculum deliberation focuses on the means for achieving educational goals, not on the examination of the ends themselves" (Kessler and Swadener, 1992, xviii). Tyler (1949/2013) identified four instrumental aspects of curriculum development: purpose, experience, organization, and evaluation.

In the process of developing curriculum as a technology, the clarification of objectives in behavioral terms to define the purpose of educational endeavors is the first and foundational instrumental decision. Alignment to a coherent philosophical screen justifies these objectives, which then inform the design, organization, and evaluation of educational courses of action under the guise of neutrality. According to Tyler, the three sources of educational objective are recommendations from subject-matter experts, the needs and interests of children, and societal aims and values. In theory Tyler's (2013/1949) rationale can operationalize conservative or progressive interests, depending upon the philosophical screen to which it adheres. Moving forward with pragmatic neutrality, a technocratic curriculum orientation yields to dominant socio-political aims and values. In effect, hegemonic perspectives author the philosophical screen.

Consequently, early childhood curriculum has not been immune to the broad impact of neoliberal educational reform (Brown, Weber, & Yoon, 2015; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Trends of "curriculum shove-down" (Hatch, 2002) seem to be intensifying in early childhood classrooms. Children are expected to know more and be able to do more academically at earlier ages (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016). Often to the dismay of key stakeholders, children's experiences in kindergarten are rapidly changing (Brown, Ku, & Barry, 2021). With recent investments in publicly funded prekindergarten, discourses of accountability are pressuring early childhood educators to align curricula to early learning standards, rather than longstanding commitments to child-centeredness (Graue, Ryan, Nocera, Northy, & Wilinski, 2017). Human capital theory has become a prominent referent for justifying public investments in early

childhood education, justifying the expenses of what is called *high quality* early childhood education and care as demonstrating “a good return on investment.” As Au (2011) convincingly argued, scientifically managed curriculum orientations and ideologically rigid neoliberal educational reform policies often fit hand in glove.

Key concepts of traditional curriculum development also explain some important distinctions between early childhood curriculum and elementary school curriculum. While the acquisition of academic knowledge and skills have been emphasized in school curricula in the United States, the primary foundation of early childhood curricula has been the needs and interest of children. As Hatch (2019) explained, child-centered early childhood curricula have focused extensively on how young children grow and develop but have given much less consideration to what they should learn in early childhood classrooms. Recognizing the ubiquity of traditional theories of curriculum development highlights the importance of considering both the content and process of educational experiences. The *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 through 8: A Position Statement of the NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education* made note of this key principle of traditional curriculum development (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991). However, the authors of these guidelines were apparently unaware of the limitations of traditional curriculum theory: the technical-scientific neutrality of early learning standards and notions of developmental appropriateness obfuscate implicit set of societal aims and values used to determine conceptions of appropriateness as well as what knowledge and skills are deemed worth learning. Early iterations of DAP, such as the NAEYC & NAECS/SDE (1991) curriculum guidelines said little about social aims, instead focusing on what was deemed the best child development available at the time. From the vantage point of traditional curriculum development, an allegedly neutral and scientifically derived conception of developmental appropriateness now struggles to coexist with the scientific management of standardized academic content.

Therefore, I argue that many contemporary policy trends employ tenets of scientifically managed curriculum and established professional discourses subtly orient curriculum as technology. Advancements of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (DAP) have been an extraordinarily influential force shaping mainstream professional discourses of early childhood curriculum for decades in the US, but also elsewhere. Ironically from the standpoint of traditional curriculum development, DAP was in part initiated in response to concerns that early childhood education would be pressured to conform to the norms of elementary schooling (Bredenkamp, 1991). As a professional organization, NAEYC is often considered a voice articulating “best practices” in early childhood education. For instance, three decades ago the NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (1991) published the following statement in the popular journal *Young Children*:

Curriculum is an organized framework that delineates the content children are to learn, the processes through which children achieve the identified curricular goals, what teachers do to help children achieve these goals, and the context in which teaching and learning occur. The early childhood profession defines curriculum in its broadest sense, encompassing prevailing theories, approaches, and models. (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991, pp. 21)

Traditional curriculum development is prescriptive and its essential elements are educational objectives and experiences (Walker, 1971). The NAEYC & NAECS/SDE (1991) definition of curriculum clarifies educational objectives by focusing on the delineation of the content children are to learn. Remaining consistent to the traditional model for curriculum development, the NAEYC & NAECS/SDE (1991) definition then translates objectives into the organization of educational experiences by delineating “the processes through which children achieve the identified curricular goals, what

teachers do to help children achieve these goals, and the context in which teaching and learning occur” (p. 21). The last sentence of this definition of curriculum unambiguously embraces technical rationality. Using Tyler’s (1949) language, the delineation of educational objectives and experiences rely upon a unified philosophical screen. Ensuring that early childhood curriculum is “encompassing prevailing theories, approaches, and models” engages in the complicated task of determining what knowledge is of most worth to children without ample consideration of whose knowledge is represented in such decisions and whose is not. The issue of whose knowledge makes its way into the curriculum is fundamentally political.

### Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Curriculum

In a seminal article published in the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* thirty years ago, Shirley Kessler (1991) pinpointed many of the shortcomings of traditional curriculum development in early childhood contexts. Developmental appropriateness, she argued, was an insufficient basis for justifying cherished tenets of “child centered” early childhood education. Drawing heavily on the work of the curriculum theorist and historian Herbert Kliebard, Kessler called early childhood educators’ attention to the philosophical, historical, and political dimensions of curriculum. Generally speaking, this commitment encouraged more complex understandings of early childhood curriculum. In more specific terms, she shed light upon how rival interest groups have and continue to compete for control of the curriculum.

Each interest group has a unique way of addressing the central curricular question—What knowledge is of most worth? Recognizing developmentalists as one of many competing interest groups, Kessler accurately critiqued a major shortcoming of endeavors to design a developmentally appropriate curriculum. As Hatch (2002) would later concur, notions of DAP tend to have had little to say about the content of early childhood curriculum. Consequently, other sources have controlled the content of early childhood curricula. For example, policy mandates have specified early learning standards and academic benchmarks. The latest NAEYC (2020) position statement expresses an appreciation for the value of content knowledge across academic disciplines with particular regard for early learning experiences that are interdisciplinary. From a curricular perspective, Graue et al.’s (2017) findings that discourses of accountability seem to be outweighing notions of DAP is perhaps a sign that early childhood curriculum is not immune to social efficiency ideology—nor human capital theory (Lightfoot-Rueda & Peach, (2015).

In many ways Kessler’s advancement of alternative curricular perspectives for early childhood educators was a great success. Situated within the reconceptualization of early childhood education movement, her notion of *alternative perspectives* broadened conceptions of curriculum in ECE, bringing new levels of complexity and criticality. Following Kliebard’s lead, Kessler repudiated Tyler’s technocratic rationale for curriculum development. Kliebard (1970) criticized the vacuous aims implicit to Tyler’s ethically and politically sterile rationale, and argued that rival interest groups have historically vied for curricular control. Appreciating the contentious political dimensions of curriculum, Kliebard called for new models for curriculum practice.

Renunciations of Tyler’s rationale have been commonplace among curriculum theorists for 50 years. Though when reflecting on the impact of her work she has expressed frustrations about what can appear to be an unchanging status quo (S. Kessler, personal communication, November 3, 2019), the enduring value of Kessler’s curriculum reconceptualization is evident in contemporary Reconceptualization of Early Childhood Education (RECE) scholarship. The few contemporary scholars of early childhood education who reference curriculum theorizing also reject Tyler’s technical rationality (i.e., Mueller & Whyte, 2019; Stremmel, Burns, Ngaga, & Bertolini, 2020). Despite

these strong examples of critical curriculum reconceptualization, technical rationality continues to dominate early childhood curriculum practices.

### **Developmentally appropriate curriculum today**

In some ways, mainstream conceptions of early childhood curriculum have remained consistent over the past three decades. However, conceptions of developmental appropriateness have evolved over time and definitional revisions have occurred to emphasize building upon children's funds of knowledge, designing curricula "that celebrate the diversity in the experiences and social identities of each group of children and counter the biases in society" (NAEYC, 2020, p.22). Consider the following conception of curriculum advanced within the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (2020) most recent position statement.

The curriculum consists of the plans for the learning experiences through which children acquire knowledge, skills, abilities, and understanding. Implementing a curriculum always yields outcomes of some kind—but which outcomes those are and how a program achieves them are critical. In developmentally appropriate practice, the curriculum helps young children achieve goals that are meaningful because they are culturally and linguistically responsive and developmentally and educationally significant. The curriculum does this through learning experiences that reflect what is known about young children in general and about each child in particular. (NAEYC, 2020, p. 25)

The key elements of traditional curriculum development- educational objectives and experiences- are emphasized in this recent definition of developmentally appropriate curriculum. This conception of developmentally appropriate curriculum is outcomes-oriented and stipulates "plans for learning experiences." Using the technocratic language of traditional curriculum development, the clarification of purposeful outcomes as well as planning, organization, and evaluation of corresponding experiences are guided by a coherent philosophical screen. From a curricular standpoint, DAP is operating as a popular screen for the development of early childhood curriculum. DAP has evolved over time and there are many noteworthy improvements in the most recent NAEYC position statement. This evolution, which now includes cultural and linguistic responsiveness, as well as a serious focus on equity, is evidence of the subtle ways RECE scholarship has influenced mainstream conceptions of early childhood curriculum. Nonetheless, entrenchment in technocratic curriculum orientation continues to limit advancements in early childhood practices. As is evident in this special issue, developmentally appropriate curriculum technologies inadequately address the current crises facing the education of young children. The push for academic curriculum, standards, and assessments, as well as continuing reliance on neoliberal and human capital perspectives or theories maintain practices that require a broader vision as well as serious interrogation and reconceptualization.

The content of curriculum and how it is mediated constitutes a complex and incredibly important series of educational decisions. Conceptions of DAP have provided a prominent theoretical basis for curriculum construction in early childhood settings. Although this theoretical basis is different from subject-centered curriculum technologies, broad lenses of curriculum theorizing reveal that developmentally appropriate curriculum has been and still is uncritically advanced through traditional models for curriculum development. The prevalence of technocratic conceptions of curriculum construction is not unique to the education of young children. However, early childhood educators are beleaguered by a unique blind spot, which is the common belief that DAP is an alternative to traditional technical rationale curriculum development procedures. A more accurate description of the curriculum state of

mainstream discourses of early childhood curriculum is that evolving notions of developmental appropriateness have been a dominant theoretical foundation for technocratic early childhood curriculum development, but now the foundation is shifting even more to account for the subject-centered obligations of accountability-based educational reform policies (Brown, et al., 2015; Graue et al., 2017; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of technologies of developmentally appropriate curriculum are the implicit presumptions of value neutrality. Curriculum reconceptualization and the reconceptualization of early childhood education have shed light upon the inherent ethical and political dimensions of education and provided more nuanced perspectives on the circumstances contextualizing early childhood education. Yet, in spite of the proliferation of reconceptualists' invaluable critical perspectives, technologies of developmentally appropriate curriculum continue to dominate policy and practice. For this reason, this article concludes with a proposal for early childhood curriculum leadership in light of reconceptualization.

### **Deliberative early childhood curriculum leadership**

Contrasting the prescriptive qualities of traditional curriculum development, reflective inquiry and deliberation is at the heart of *practical eclecticism*. Joseph Schwab (2013/1970) advanced practical eclecticism as an alternative to traditional, technocratic models for curriculum in a series of seminal essays often referred to as the practical papers. Schwab's expressed an alternative conception of curriculum with the following lengthy sentence.

Curriculum is what is successfully conveyed to differing degrees to different students, by committed teachers using appropriate materials and actions, of legitimated bodies of knowledge, skill, taste, and propensity to act and react, which are chosen for instruction after serious reflection and communal decision by representatives of those involved in the teaching of a specified group of students who are known to the decision makers. (Schwab, 1983, pp. 240)

The main limitation of traditional curriculum development, according to Schwab (2013/1970), is its reliance on theory. Over-reliance on theory is apparent any time curriculum development and implementation are deemed mutually exclusive processes. In the case of early childhood education, defining developmentally appropriateness, as well as the construction, packaging, and dissemination of curricular programs, have become reliant upon theory that has also been deemed the domain of "experts." As a curriculum technology, expert's theoretic prescriptions and explanations are disseminated to inform early childhood professionals' everyday practice. In effect, this high view of theory subordinates practice. Moreover, the political interests and value judgments involved in theory-driven curriculum design are often subtle and use vacuous terminology. Developmentally appropriate curriculum is one such example. Terms like *cultural and linguistic responsiveness* as well as *developmental and educational significance* are interpreted differently by competing interest groups. Stipulating that learning experiences ought to "reflect what is known about young children in general and about each child in particular" glosses over the contested nature of how children and childhood are and should be understood.

Schwab (2013/1970) identified this sort of over-reliance on theory as a major limitation of traditional curriculum development. The utilization of inductive or deductive reasoning to provide general prescriptions and explanations of educational practice, he explained, were characteristic methods and outcomes of theoretic inquiry. While standardized goals and best practice frameworks may appeal to policy makers and professional organizations, curriculum is not like the natural sciences. General or

universalized ideas and ideals do not endow professionals with definitive directives for “what works” across time and context. Appreciating that no one theory can fully address the complex demands of educational practice, Schwab called for theoretical eclecticism in curriculum deliberations. Leading curriculum theorists credited Schwab’s essays for being a provocation to the complicated conversations of curriculum reconceptualization (Pinar, Taubman, Slattery, & Reynolds, 1995).

The reconceptualization of curriculum as well as the reconceptualization of early childhood education has been extraordinarily successful in the advancement of theoretical eclecticism. In many ways, the reconceptualization of early childhood education constitutes an intellectual renaissance that diversified how children and childhood are understood in relation to the social world as well as processes of education. In the context of the multi-faceted crises of our contemporary situation representatives of the reconceptualization, including those in this special issue, contribute to curriculum conceived of as an extraordinarily complicated conversation (Pinar, 2012). After decades of productive scholarship, Pinar (2013) suggested that curriculum reconceptualization has generated two key concepts: first, systems of education tend to reproduce social inequalities; and secondly, alternative perspectives can be advanced to resist structures of oppression and suppression. However, he also contends that notions of social reproduction and political resistance have become theoretical abstractions, removed from the public sphere and lacking influence in the realities of daily practice (Pinar, 2013).

In the past decade, some curriculum theorists have posited that curriculum studies were entering a new era of post-reconceptualization (Malewski, 2009). However, the distinctions between the topics and theoretical perspectives of curriculum reconceptualization and post-reconceptualization have been quite ambiguous. Alternatively, Zongyi Deng (2018) argues that Schwab alluded to a generative path forward for curriculum theorists in his practical essays. In addition to embracing eclectic theory formation, Schwab (2013/1970) insisted that curriculum is a practical art. Practical artistry attends to the complex inner workings of schooling and other educational contexts. Additionally, the art of practical eclecticism constitutes distinctive problems, subject matter, methods, and outcomes. Practical problems arise out of a state of affairs and attend to the contextual specificities of the given situation. The arts of the practical do not generate universal prescriptions or abstract ideas. Rather, from the perspective of practical eclecticism, pedagogical artistry is the culminating outcome of generative curriculum deliberations.

Focusing on practice, J.T. Dillon (2009) identified three important types of curriculum questions. The first type of question is definitional. Traditional curriculum development specialists generally defined curriculum as a systematically planned course of study to be operationalized in classrooms. For example, in the ninth edition of his textbook *Curriculum Improvement* Ronald Doll (1996), conceives of curriculum as “the formal and informal content and processes by which learners gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills and alter attitudes, appreciations, and values under the auspices of that school” (p.15). Representatives of the reconceptualizing curriculum theoretical frameworks conceived of curriculum more abstractly as an *extraordinarily complicated conversation* (e.g., Pinar, 2012). While the former is practical but not eclectic, the latter is eclectic but not practical. From a more balanced perspective of practical eclecticism, Schwab (1983) suggested “curriculum is what is successfully conveyed to differing degrees to different students” (p. 240). Emphasizing key elements of curriculum practice, he highlighted the centrality of teachers’ deliberative activities. Curricular actions, he specified, are carried out “by committed teachers using appropriate materials and actions, of legitimated bodies of knowledge, skill, taste, and propensity to act and react” (Schwab, 1983, p. 240). Here, in an open-ended way, Schwab acknowledged the use of “appropriate materials and actions” and selection of

content derived from “legitimated bodies of knowledge, skill, taste, and propensity” were important value laden curricular decisions (p. 240). Such decisions can be deliberated with varying degrees of nuance and made with varying degrees of practical wisdom.

Schwab was also particularly helpful in clarifying the methods of practical eclecticism. He explained the arts of the practical constitute organizing problems, methods, and outcomes that differ from theoretical prescriptions and explanations. Admonishing the curriculum specialists in the United States of his day for becoming too theoretical, Schwab decried the limitations of educational theorists’ reliance on abstract ideas and ideals to *frame* educational problems and on inductive and deductive methods to *study* these problems. He argued for a practical language for curriculum as a constructive alternative to over-reliance on theory. The arts of the practical address the specific problems of a particular state of affairs. Practical wisdom is most likely achieved when curricular content, materials, and activities “are chosen for instruction after serious reflection and communal decision by representatives of those involved in the teaching of a specified group of students who are known to the decision makers” (Schwab, 1983, p240). Put differently, for curriculum decisions to be developmentally meaningful, educationally significant as well as culturally and linguistically responsive case-by-case deliberation are a preferable method.

Proposing practical and eclectic deliberation as a method for early childhood curriculum leadership is not without immense challenges. It involves multiple types of curriculum inquiries. First, this vision for early childhood curriculum leadership involves rethinking how early childhood curriculum is conceptually defined. Trying to avoid both instrumental reductionism as well as esoteric abstraction, a deliberative approach first defines early childhood curriculum in terms of what is “being conveyed to differing degrees to different students” amidst the multi-layered crises of our present circumstances. Based upon this broad conception of curriculum, each of the articles within this special issue can be interpreted as important contributions to the advancement of early childhood curriculum leadership, providing nuanced perspectives on what is being conveyed to children in the early educational experiences.

Secondly, deliberatively oriented early childhood curriculum leadership involves carefully considering the key elements and operating procedures associated with processes of curriculum construction. While conceiving of curriculum as a technology is limiting, the four key concepts of the Tyler rationale- purpose, experience, organization, and evaluation- have relevance to any carefully planned educational experience. Technical processes do not have aims and interests, but the people who carry them out do. Therefore, from a deliberative point of view, early childhood curriculum leadership is a value laden enterprise. For this reason alone, conceptions of fidelity in teaching need to expand beyond the implementation of sanctioned prescriptions and consider the value commitments of early childhood curriculum leaders (Castner, 2021; Kessler, 1991).

Lastly, from the vantage point of practical eclecticism, teachers of young children have important roles in carrying out early childhood curriculum leadership. Teachers of young children enact curriculum leadership in various ways (Castner, 2020). However, early childhood teachers often find it very difficult to enact practices that challenge the status quo of educational institutions, even when they are equipped with ample theoretical understanding (Brown et al., 2021). Appreciating the troubled world that contextualizes the education of young children as well as the vexing reductionism of dominant technocratic approaches to curriculum practice, and empowering early childhood teachers to the exercise of deliberative judgment may seem like an astonishingly challenging proposal. It is not a novel proposal, yet its urgency is as pressing as ever. It is my hope that early childhood curriculum leadership will break

free of the constraints of technocratic reductionism, and vitalize a greater appreciation of the complexity and dignity of practice enacted in early childhood classrooms. The crises of our day necessitate it.

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