Reflections from a RECE "Elder"

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Abstract

Kessler describes her educational background in revisionist history and critical curriculum studies both of which situate her research. Her role in the origination of RECE is also presented. Suggestions for ways in which RECE might influence change in education are offered, including the need to examine the identity of this organization and possible research methods that have the potential to influence change. The suggested methods include adopting a different paradigm, such as critical theory, that includes notions of praxis and relational analysis. In addition, case study methodology and action research are suggested as having the potential to effect change.

Key Words: reflections, RECE, Research methods

The year is 1981. I'm a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, taking a course called "Curriculum Planning" taught by the late Herbert Kliebard. As I sat listening to his lectures, I began to realize that topics related to the early childhood curriculum presented at the national conferences of the National Association for Young Children (NAEYC), the largest organization for early childhood educators in the US, as well as articles published in its journal, *Young Children*, highlighting "developmentally appropriate practices" (DAP), were grossly undertheorized. Kliebard pointed out that, "The problem with basing curriculum planning on developmental theory is this approach did not address the important questions – "What do we want children to become?" and "What kind of society is envisioned or promoted when this question is answered?" (personal communication, 1981).

At that time, I approached these questions from the perspective of revisionist history that I had studied earlier with Clarence Karier (1975) at the University of Illinois. This orientation claims that "the central purpose of public education was not designed to equalize wealth and opportunity…but …designed to help fit people into the social system" (p. xx). For example, in preparing students for the world of work, "What schools must emphasize…are those dispositions, and mannerisms, and personality traits consistent with efficient, predictable, and productive work habits" (Beyer & Liston, 1996, p. 45). Further study in critical theory and its relationship to curriculum studies reinforced this perspective (Apple, 1979).

As I wrote in 1991, "…critical theorists argue that going to school does not provide equality of opportunity for all children to succeed if they put forth the effort, but the process of schooling itself contributes to the achievement gap which exists between various social, economic, and cultural groups in the US" (Kessler, 1991 p. 127). Unequal results are achieved by the knowledge selected for inclusion in the curriculum that is tied to political interests and is distributed unequally based on class, race, and gender. This point of view framed all research on early childhood education I later undertook.

I addressed the questions posed by Kliebard in 1981 with regard to the publication, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth to Age 8* (Bredekamp, 1987). I pointed out the political and philosophical

underpinnings of all prescriptions for practice and the need to articulate a vision of the future and/or the "good life" envisioned in curriculum recommendations (Kessler, 1991). Sue Bredekamp, editor of the 1987 DAP publication, responded to this article She recognized the politics of curriculum discourse, but failed to address the issues I articulated regarding the values underlying "developmentally appropriate practice" as well as the need to address the goals of implementing a curriculum based on children's development and their relationship to a social vision (Bredekamp, 1991).

At about the same time, I shared these thoughts with Jan Jipson, Mimi Bloch and Beth Blue Swadener, who likewise found NAEYC and DAP wanting, though for different reasons. We four decided to hold a conference to bring together scholars who were likewise disaffected with the topics included in NAEYC's annual conference and its recent publications. Since I was familiar with a collection of papers edited by William Pinar (1975) called *Curriculum Theory: The Reconceptualists*, I suggested we adopt the concept of "reconceptualization" to frame our work. And so RECE and the label *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education* was born. Approximately 15 early childhood educators met in Chicago in Spring 1991 to plan the first conference in the Fall in Madison WI. With myself as facilitator, we brainstormed topics that might be addressed at the conference based on the interests of individuals present. I remember we wanted the conference to be affordable and accessible to students, which is why many RECE conferences now are held at university campuses. One of the first sessions at the 1991 conference found us sitting in a large circle where contributors to a recent publication edited by myself and Beth Swadener spoke (Kessler & Swadener, 1992). Bill Ayers suggested we contributors not sit together, as in a panel discussion, but disperse ourselves around the circle to de-emphasize our status as "experts." For the first 10 years of RECE conferences, all business meetings were comprised of attendees who were able to stay on, sitting in a circle sharing ideas for the next conference.

Efforts were made to promote nonhierarchical relationships and conference structures that would support social equality and inclusivity. Further, we wanted to reject the traditional conference format that included keynote speakers and concurrent sessions. At that time, we did not envision leadership in the form of a steering committee, or international contexts, or awards to honor members for exceptional accomplishments or outstanding dissertations.

Much later, at the 2018 RECE conference in New Mexico I remember feeling dismayed when I realized that despite a 30-year history of promoting innovative research, RECE and I had had little if any influence on the field of early childhood education and care. Other researchers have come to the same conclusion (Mueller & File, 2020). Furthermore, four years later NAEYC published the 4th edition of DAP, where problems I pointed out 30 years ago remained (NAEYC, 2022). Earlier, when a draft of this edition was circulated, I suggested changes to the definition of curriculum in this publication. However, I did not receive a response, and when I read the 2022 edition, I noticed my suggested changes were not included.

My work has had no influence on the content of this 4th edition. It is important to note, however, that, as a result of numerous critiques relative to anti-bias education, this edition does include an emphasis on diversity, recommending that the curriculum promote understandings of racial disparities and sexual identities, a huge difference to be sure.

These important changes resulted in a strong backlash, or pushback, from political actors at the State level. Several governors and State legislators are now using education to accomplish a particular political agenda, especially to strengthen White hegemony by erasing content in textbooks that would inform students of our history of slavery and the extermination of Native Americans. As of this writing Florida

lawmakers have prohibited the teaching of critical race theory and references to LBGTQ+ in school syllabi and have banned books that contain these topics (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2023).

Across the country similar actions are taking place. The American Library Association reported that 40% more books were challenged in 2022 compared to 2021; the majority were about issues such as, LGBTQ rights, gender identity and racial inequality (Alter & Harris, 2023). Furthermore, the governor of Alabama fired the state-level official overseeing ECEC because she distributed the 2022 edition of DAP to early childhood teachers in the State. This edition refers to the systematic racism in the country as well as affirms the need to honor the rights of the LGBTQ+ community (Chandler, 2023).

How should members of RECE respond to these shocking developments? How can we actively influence political actors and promote change?Perhaps we should ask ourselves, who we are as an organization and what we want RECE to become? One problem I and others have articulated is that RECE conferences have become so expensive that only scholars who have some university support or a grant can afford to attend. As one colleague recently commented, "RECE has become an elitist organization."

Critical theorists would ask, "Whose knowledge is legitimated and validated at RECE, and whose knowledge is excluded? One possibility for changing this situation would be to hold conferences in our home countries or regions every-other-year. This structure would enable RECE to reach out to nearby teachers and researchers and address problems and issues relevant to local contexts.

Further, perhaps we need to consider using different research methods or use a different paradigm in our work. Years ago, I worked as a consultant in two Title I classrooms in an inner-city school in Chicago (Kessler, 1998). I used a case study approach using qualitative research methods to conduct the study. When I read this piece today, I feel a profound sense of regret and shame. I now believe that I used this school and my work there to further my career goals. I did little to respond to the questions teachers posed or the problems identified. I wonder, if the research published today by RECE members is helpful in any way in addressing the problems in education, or does it serve to only enhance researchers' careers?

I have long argued that researchers should spend time in schools and classrooms, recording the curriculum that is enacted, and identifying issues and problems that could be addressed with teachers and administrators. Case study methodology is probably the best way to examine the enacted curriculum or the curriculum-in-use and its local, state, and national contexts (Kessler 1989; Stake, 1995).

Further, I believe we must employ what Apple (1999) calls "relational analyses," where "…the institutions and events of our daily lives need to be understood not in an isolated way …but in ways that stress their interconnections …" (p. 10). That is, "We need to see it [education] as being integrally connected to the cultural, political, and economic institutions of the larger society, institutions that may be strikingly unequal by race, gender, and class" (Beyer & Apple, 1998, p.9). Thus, we should study not only the local context when examining the enacted curriculum, but its relationship to federal and state policies that influence what is taught and experienced by children.

For example, in the Chicago study I examined the enacted curriculum in two classrooms, where I sat at the back of one room, and recorded what teachers said and how children responded. I then situated this enacted curriculum in the local, state, and national contexts. Locally, the school was considered a closed campus, where children were not allowed to go outside for recess because there was much gun violence in the

neighborhood. Further, many children in both classrooms were deemed "drug babies" by the principal because they were born to drug addicted mothers, a fact that affected their ability to focus on lessons and remain on task, a situation that I personally experienced directly when I read the class a story. I found them "antsy" and inattentive.

At the State level Illinois required schools to take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, which was given at the end of the school year. Second graders in the study were reading at the first-grade level but were given the test for second graders, a policy likely to lead to difficulty in establishing validity (Gullo, 2005).

At the federal level, Title I was part of the Elementally and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (US Department of Education, 1965) that sought to provide assistance to low-income children to help them succeed in school. Part of Johnson's war on poverty, ESEA aimed to help poor children compete with their middle-class peers for good grades that later would result in benefits to themselves and society. Thus, this legislation sought to change students' behavior rather than address one of the main causes of poverty – an economic system that guaranteed many would work at low-paying jobs and maintain a low standard of living.

Further, we might consider adopting the concept, "praxis," meaning "to understand and to act," as part of our work. In the Chicago study, I tried to influence the curriculum by demonstrating to the teachers and principal how to implement learning centers and student choice regarding a particular activity. What resulted was chaos. I needed then and now much training as to how to act as a consultant and a change agent.

In relation to education it [praxis] "…involves not only the justifiable concern with reflective action, but thought and action combined and enlivened by a sense of power and politics" (Beyer & Apple, 1998, p.4). Action research is one approach we educators could implement along with students, teachers and administrators to actualize praxis, including a relational analysis that studies power and influence (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995).

This article is an important "first step." Self-study can illuminate deeply held beliefs that might lead to changed behavior. I want to thank the editors of this special issue for providing me the opportunity to promote reflection and illuminate personal understandings. Now, on to learning how to effect change in early childhood education and care.

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