



The Good that's Within You: A Case Study of Early Childhood Curriculum Practice

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Abstract

Few matters are of greater importance to high quality early childhood education than the content and mediation of curriculum. In spite of this, early childhood curriculum practices are rarely examined through the lens of curriculum theory. This research employs educational connoisseurship and criticism as a methodology to shed light upon the curriculum discourse and practices at one public elementary school in relation to one preschool classroom. The findings indicate multiple curriculum orientations subtly coexist at the school. We argue that identifying stakeholders' curriculum orientations and understanding how they operate in the context of a particular school provides a basis for more generative curriculum deliberations that make use of the strengths and recognize the limitations of disparate curricular traditions.

Keywords Early childhood education · Curriculum · Professional development · Public schools · Rural schools

Kathy Andrews looked out at the seventeen children seated in front of her on the carpet in her preschool classroom at Jefferson Elementary. She leaned over and patted the back of a little boy seated at her feet and noted that he was still sobbing softly, although he looked up and smiled at her when he felt her hand. Kathy whispered to him, "You're here with friends." Then, holding up the book, she spoke to the class, "We're going to read this book today about these animal friends. What animals do you see on the cover?" Some of the children shouted out responses to Kathy's questions but others raised their hands. Kathy called on several children who identified a bear, an elephant, a rabbit, and a frog. Pointing to each animal in turn, Kathy acknowledged the children's contribution and then proceeded to read the story, stopping several times to show the book's pictures to the children and ask them to predict what was going to happen next.

Introduction

Kathy Andrews' colleagues often recognize her as an outstanding teacher of young children. Two notable characteristics of Kathy Andrews's everyday practices are revealed in this short vignette. The first is an asset. Being a caring and compassionate early childhood teacher comes naturally to Kathy. Her warm disposition is a consistent quality of Kathy's interactions with children. She has a positive rapport with the children, and she manages the busy morning schedule with a reliably pleasant tone. The second characteristic is a practical limitation. Effective pedagogical techniques are much less intuitive. Kathy reads stories to her young students every day, and her classroom library is impressive. However, her teaching during storybook reading lacks evidenced-based strategies for encouraging language development and intellectual engagement during a read aloud. For instance, as illustrated in the vignette, she routinely asked closed rather than open-ended questions during story time. She answered children's questions about the story but she seldom engaged in extended dialogue with the children about what was happening in the story. And in an effort to keep children orderly and engaged during her reading, many of her comments to the children were related more to classroom management than to any aspect of the story.

As is often the case for teachers of young children in the United States, much is expected of Kathy's every day

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curriculum practice and storybook reading is sometime viewed by Kathy as a part of the day when “the pressure” on children and teachers is off. She explains that she wants the children to enjoy the story. By no stretch of the imagination does Kathy have an easy job. Jefferson Elementary is similar to many other publicly funded rural schools scattered across many parts of the United States. The school covers a large geographic area and the children often travel some distance from home to school, made more complicated by weather in the winter. Among the other challenges, educators at Jefferson are well-aware that improving dismal scores on state achievement tests is frequently mentioned as a necessary top priority at the building and district level. Nevertheless, over the past year, some of the emphasis on academic achievement goals has taken a backseat to a collective commitment at Jefferson Elementary to intentionally nurture the social and emotional well-being of every child in pre-k to 6th grade. The teachers report that many of the children at Jefferson have experienced traumas associated with the high incidences of poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues, and incarceration in the community. Teaching young children at Jefferson Elementary School calls for the implementation of curricula that carefully balances considerations of academic content and socio-emotional needs.

Fortunately, Kathy works in a supportive environment. Her principal sings her praises: “We are so lucky to have her,” she said of Kathy, “She provides exactly what the little ones need in preschool!” Yet whether Kathy does indeed provide exactly what is needed for the four year olds in her classroom is not always clear. Few factors are more consequential to children’s experience in Kathy’s classroom than the content of the curriculum and how it is designed and implemented. Nonetheless, careful examination of early childhood curriculum practice is seldom undertaken much less discussed in schools. Such was the case at Jefferson Elementary. Although open lines of communication and respectful collegial relations were readily observable in the daily operations of the school, curriculum was not a salient feature of the talk between faculty colleagues. For this reason, it is difficult to know whether the principal’s reference to “what the little ones need in preschool” coincides with the goals of other professionals in the school much less Kathy’s actual enacted curriculum. Indeed, as Kathy earnestly works to be the best preschool teacher she can be, it would be presumptuous to assume that she and her various colleagues share a coherent curricular vision that consistently defines “what the little ones need in preschool”.

In this article we utilize educational connoisseurship and criticism (Eisner, 1991) as a method to illuminate early childhood curriculum practices as they are carried out by Kathy Andrews at Jefferson Elementary. Two research questions provide focus for the inquiry. First, how do the particular curriculum orientations expressed by educators

at Jefferson Elementary collectively illustrate the purposes of their intended curriculum? And, second, how do daily practices enacted in Kathy’s preschool classroom coincide with those purposes? These questions will be addressed with rich descriptions of educators’ reflective comments and observations of daily practices. The intended curriculum at Jefferson Elementary will be described from the vantage point of several adults in the building. Perspectives on the intended curriculum were garnered from interviews with the superintendent, principal, resource officer, and administrative assistant, as well as from Kathy. Descriptions of enacted curriculum will exclusively focus on observations of Kathy’s preschool classroom.

In the next section, we review literature from the fields of curriculum studies that has relevance to early childhood education. Then, we describe the methodology we used to describe, interpret, and evaluate curriculum work at Jefferson Elementary. The article concludes highlighting key themes for fostering more generative curriculum deliberations at Jefferson Elementary and considering how such deliberations may support the refinement of early childhood curriculum in public schools.

Literature Review

Early childhood education and curriculum studies have maintained a precarious relationship for over a century. Whereas curriculum studies emerged in the United States during the progressive era of educational reform (Walker, 2003), early childhood education has deeper historical roots that are commonly traced back to the European enlightenment (Morgan, 2007). Furthermore, curriculum studies originated as a practical field in response to the operational needs of professional working in a rapidly expanding school system. Early childhood education, by contrast, developed in large measure outside of the parameters of public schooling (Goffin, 2001). Recently, influential scholars of early education have argued that curriculum is undertheorized in early childhood settings (File, 2020; Wood & Hedges, 2016). Hence, a reconsideration of the relationship between early childhood education and curriculum theory is warranted.

This review of literature introduces key concepts from the broad field of curriculum studies, because they are relevant but underutilized tools for analyzing the education of young children. The literature review has two parts. The first part overviews practical matters such as curriculum design, basic elements of curriculum, and commonplace participants in curriculum construction. Then, the second part focuses on Wesley Null’s (2016) map of four curriculum orientations. These key curriculum concepts will theoretically frame

examinations of curricular discourse and practices at Jefferson Elementary.

What is Curriculum Practice?

Curriculum is a basic element of any educational endeavor. Curriculum has been defined in innumerable and often very abstract ways within the curriculum studies literature. For the purposes of this study we focus on practical conceptions of curriculum. According to Walker (2003), curriculum is the organization of educational content and purposes. This conceptual definition of curriculum emphasizes the importance of curriculum design. Elliot Eisner (2002) also emphasized practical elements of curriculum, defining it as, “a series of planned events intended to have educational consequence for one or more students” (p. 31). In addition to matters of design, this definition attends to how curriculum is operationalized, and its effects. Curriculum development and design are often tacitly carried out in elementary schools and are rarely addressed in the early childhood literature. Nonetheless, curricular plans are enacted and curricular materials are used, affecting what children experience in classrooms. This makes early childhood curriculum design worthy of careful examination.

There are three main functions of curriculum design (Hlebowitsh, 2005). First, curriculum design sets boundaries on what educational experiences are included. Because time and resources are finite, some content will inevitably be excluded. Content not included in the plan can be referred to as the null curriculum, which Eisner (2002) argues is also a significant feature of educational experiences. Second, curriculum design identifies the nature of intended educational experience. To be deemed educational, an experience ought to be responsive to the “nature of the learner, to the values of society, and to some framework of useful and empowering knowledge” (Hlebowitsh, 2005, p. 7–8). Third, curriculum is designed through activities that transpire at two levels (Castner, 2020; Hlebowitsh, 2005). The macro-curriculum involves school-wide decisions. Policies, mandates, and organizational structures within a school or district are part of the macro-curricular context. The micro-curriculum, by contrast, encompasses classroom level decisions and individual’s professional judgments.

Eisner’s (1991) broad definition of curriculum is clarified in greater detail by his conception of the instructional arc. The instructional arc consists of three aspects of curriculum practice. The arc begins with the intended curriculum, which is what educators aim and/or plan to teach their students. The intended curriculum is shaped by matters of curriculum design. The second part is the operationalized or enacted curriculum. This aspect of curriculum practices focuses attention on what educators actually do. The educational activities teachers carry out in their classrooms as well as

other adults’ educative interactions with children are all part of the enacted curriculum. The third part of the instructional arc is the received curriculum, which directs attention to the effects of curriculum practices. The received curriculum is what students have learned or experienced in the classroom.

In addition, Eisner (2002) noted that there are always two enacted curricula. The explicit curriculum is the content that educators publically identify as their primary educational goals. The implicit, on the other hand, involves the content of learning that is not part of the officially curricular plan or publically stated educational goals. The implicit curriculum may be purposefully or unconsciously carried out. Moreover, curriculum is constructed with varying degrees of input from five bodies of experience, Joseph Schwab called curriculum commonplaces: the teacher, the subject matter content, the learner, milieu, and the curriculum specialist.

Curriculum Orientations

The design, operation, and effect of curriculum practice are perceptible in schools and classrooms. Curriculum theory, however, is a much more intangible, but no less important, feature of educational situations. Various and sometimes contrasting conceptual orientations can potentially underlie curriculum practices. Joseph (2011) refers to these orientations as cultures of curriculum, because “they are revealed in belief systems, everyday behaviors and interactions, the artifacts that participants create, the use that people make of time and space, and the allocation of decision-making power” (Joseph, 2011, p. 20). Particular goals and assumptions are propagated by each curriculum orientation. Often, disparate orientations coexist within the broad perspectives of macro- and micro-curriculum deliberations. Long ago, curriculum theorists Eisner and Vallance (1974) observed.

Controversy in educational discourse most often reflects a basic conflict in priorities concerning the form and content of curriculum and the goals toward which schools should strive; the intensity of the conflict and the apparent difficulty in resolving it can most often be traced to a failure to recognize conflicting conceptions of curriculum. Public educational discourse frequently does not bother to examine its conceptual underpinnings. (pp. 1–2)

For Null (2016), curriculum deliberations are practical processes that enable educators’ diverse interests and perspectives to be considered, while avoiding the limitations of various extreme ideological prejudices. Therefore, when creating a comprehensive map of practical curriculum theories, Null positions deliberation in the center of the map, surrounded by four historically influential curricular traditions (see Fig. 1). The four curriculum traditions are situated on two axes. The vertical axis represents a spectrum of

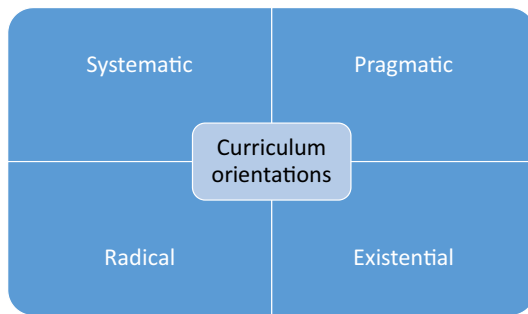


Fig. 1 Null's (2016) map of curriculum traditions

institutional character. The top of vertical axis signifies the highest level of institutional trust, while the bottom signifies skepticism or even distrust in institutional norms and obligations. The horizontal axis represents relationships between theory and practice. Curricular traditions on the left side of the map rely exclusively upon theoretical generalization, while the right side signifies attention to contextualizing specificities.

Null identifies four curriculum traditions. Each tradition has a rich intellectual history and enduring relevance in contemporary curriculum work. The systematic tradition is reinforced by policy initiatives that promote standardized learning outcomes and are currently dominant in much of k-12 schooling. The existential tradition is supported by longstanding initiatives in early childhood education that emphasize developmental appropriateness. As opposite quadrants on the map these two approaches contrast in institutional character and theoretical structure. In early childhood contexts, these contrasting curriculum orientations are represented by the incompatibilities of well-established foundations of early childhood education and neoliberal reform policies (Brown & Berry, 2020; Graue et al., 2017).

The other two curriculum traditions contrast in similar ways. The pragmatic tradition adopts a value neutral approach to curriculum. Focused on “what works,” the pragmatic tradition emphasizes technical problem solving to clarify and effectively achieve locally defined aims. For many early childhood educators, the pragmatic tradition provides a means to mediate between contrasting aims and do the necessary work. Positioned in an opposite quadrant, the radical tradition rejects notions that curriculum can be practiced with ethical and/or political neutrality. Inclusive to numerous variations of critical perspectives, the radical tradition sheds light upon problematic assumptions and oppressive structures perpetuated by systematic approaches to curriculum. Within the reconceptualization of early childhood education, developmentally appropriate practices have likewise been brought into question.

Methodology

To examine the curriculum practices at Jefferson Elementary, this study utilized a form of qualitative inquiry called educational connoisseurship and criticism. First conceptualized and advanced by Elliot Eisner, educational connoisseurship and criticism is an interpretive methodology for educational research that is primarily derived from the arts and humanities (Urmacher et al., 2017). As its name indicates, this method has two components. The first, connoisseurship, is “the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities” (Eisner, 1991, p. 63). Curriculum connoisseurship is an appropriate method for discerning the subtle ways aspects of curriculum design and various curriculum orientations operate in everyday discourses and practices. The second component of this methodology is criticism. Although in everyday parlance the word criticism implies disparagement, Eisner (1991) had a more generative conception of criticism in mind. Thus, Urmacher et al. (2017) define criticism as, “the disclosure of what we learned through our connoisseurship” (p. 2). Hence, in this case, educational criticism is an expression of the subtle qualities of early childhood curriculum discerned in the everyday discourse and practices at Jefferson Elementary with appreciation for the unique context within which discourse and practice are situated.

Site Selection

Kathy Andrews's preschool classroom was purposefully selected to participate in this qualitative study. Purposeful sampling allows for the selection of “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125) Initially, we were motivated by the need to find a school willing to work with us to design and pilot a curriculum for storybook reading. We were especially interested in working with a rural school because much of the research in early literacy has been conducted in urban or suburban schools and we hoped to fill in the gap through our site selection. We invited Jefferson Elementary to participate in our study because we knew Sarah Lundstrom, the principal who had completed graduate studies at our institution.

In turn, Sarah Lundstrom introduced us to Kathy, proudly identifying her as an exemplary preschool teacher. To establish a broad macro-curricular view of the curriculum discourse that contextualizes Kathy's daily practice, the researchers interviewed Sarah and three other adult stakeholders who were identified during Kathy and Sarah's interviews as individuals at Jefferson Elementary who

significantly influence what children experience at school. We interviewed district superintendent, Michael, as well as two key staff members at Jefferson Elementary. Miranda was the administrative assistant and Matthew was the school resource officer.

Data Collection

Using an emerging design we began the study by collecting observational data. We considered our interest in Kathy's work at Jefferson Elementary an intrinsic case as described by Stake (2008) and we viewed Kathy's classroom at Jefferson Elementary as a unique group of individuals in a particular context (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Over the course of two months, the researchers visited Kathy's preschool classroom six times one morning each week. The researchers kept detailed field notes during each visit, and met as a team to reflect on their observations on a weekly basis. This observational data provided perspective on the enacted curriculum in Kathy's preschool classroom. The observational data was examined to inform the development of interview protocols used to gather the perspective of key stakeholders about what was observed in Kathy's classroom.

In-depth interviews were conducted with each of the five participants. The interviews were broadly focused with open-ended questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Maintaining a semi-structured format, the researchers raised specific questions to prompt participants' reflections on their professional experiences as well as their current roles and responsibilities at Jefferson Elementary. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) explain that in-depth interviewing "assumes that individuals have unique and important knowledge about the social world that is ascertainable through verbal communication" (p. 119).

From the perspective of educational connoisseurship, the qualities of the intended curriculum at Jefferson Elementary School were accessed by carefully listening to the curriculum aims expressed by key stakeholders, shedding light upon the intended curriculum from multiple vantage points (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 152).

Data Analysis

An educational criticism involves four steps of analysis: description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics (Urmacher et al., 2018). Data analysis began after all data was collected, and the process of analysis proceeded in four phases. The first phase consisted of descriptive coding procedures. Descriptive coding focuses on *what is*, and therefore highlighted verbatim comments and observed behaviors. All data was coded by hand. The interview transcripts, field notes, and notes from the research team's reflective journals were used to construct rich descriptions of the micro-curriculum observed in Kathy's preschool classroom as well as the macro-curricular contributions of the four other participants in the study. These descriptions include the participants' expressions of beliefs and values as well as accounts of their activities that potentially influence curriculum.

The second phase consisted of interpretive coding procedures. Interpretive coding "allows for the building and clarifying of concepts" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 352). In effect, the descriptions of intended and enacted curricula were interpreted with reference to important aspects of curriculum design (see Table 1) and Null's (2016) map of four practical curriculum orientations (see Fig. 1). Subsequently, a third evaluative phase of analysis ensued after descriptive and interpretive coding. In this educational criticism, the evaluative step appraised the early curriculum deliberations that occur at Jefferson Elementary. As Eisner (2002)

Table 1 Key facets of curriculum design

Curriculum practice topic	Key concepts
Functions of curriculum design (Hlebowitsh, 2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries of the officially planned curriculum • Identification of the nature of educational experiences • Levels of curricular activities
Instructional arc (Eisner, 1991)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intended curriculum (What is planned?) • Enacted curriculum (What is done?) • Received curriculum (What is learned?)
Types of curriculum (Eisner, 2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit curriculum (stated intentions) • Implicit curriculum (also hidden curriculum) • Null curriculum (what is not taught)
Curriculum commonplaces: five bodies of experience (Schwab, 1973)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject matter • Learners • Milieus (context) • Teachers • Curriculum specialist (overseeing processes of curriculum construction)

explained, evaluation can function in many ways. In this educational criticism, the significance of participants' disparate curriculum orientations was assessed in relationship to Schwab's (1973) notion of commonplaces that define healthy curriculum deliberations. Lastly, the final phase of analysis was thematic. The thematic phase of analysis "articulates the patterns, big ideas, and anticipatory frameworks for other educational situations" (Urmacher et al., 2017, p. 54). Highlighting key themes of intended and enacted curriculum at Jefferson Elementary, the article concludes with reflections on the benefits of fostering more generative curriculum deliberations at this school and other similar preschool classrooms like Kathy's in rural school districts.

Findings

Working in a public school, the planned and enacted curriculum in Kathy's preschool classroom are not developed in isolation. Rather, Kathy's curriculum practices are contextualized by a network of macro-curricular collegial relationships. Kathy explains that she frequently talks with her teacher colleagues about her classroom activities and she "steals their good ideas." She also is well-enmeshed in the school community. Jefferson Elementary serves a tight-knit community. According to those we interviewed, it is a place "where everyone knows everyone else". Nonetheless, Kathy's classroom-level micro-curriculum was not micro-managed. Although an abundant supply of curricular materials filled her large classroom, she was not expect to follow a specific program. In fact, Kathy exercised professional discretion in making many curriculum decisions.

This educational criticism examines the complexities of curriculum practices at Jefferson Elementary in four steps. First, we describe the five participants, and their contributions to the macro- and micro-curricular activities. Second, we interpret the underlying curriculum orientations expressed in through collegial discourses and practice. Third, appreciating the strengths and limitations of various curriculum orientations, we evaluate the extant curricular discourse-practices at Jefferson Elementary. Last, we conclude with a thematic discussion about possibilities for employing curriculum criticism as a tool for enhancing early childhood education.

Describing Curriculum Perspectives

This case study included examinations of the macro-level and micro-level curriculum practices that shaped what is experienced in Kathy's preschool classroom. This section first introduces the five stakeholders participating the case study. Two administrative leaders, Michael and Sarah, and two members of the support staff, Matthew and Miranda, shed light on features of the macro-curriculum. These four

individuals were identified as being knowledgeable of the cultural milieu at Jefferson Elementary. Cultural milieu, or context, is an important facet of curriculum practice. In reference to curriculum deliberations, Schwab (1973) defined cultural milieu as "the conditions, dominant preoccupations, and cultural climate of the whole polity and its social classes, insofar as they may affect the careers, the probable fate, and ego identity of the children whom we want to teach" (p. 504). Albeit indirectly, Michael, Sarah, Matthew, and Miranda's expressions of beliefs, values are potentially quite influential to curriculum aims and operations. The fifth and central participant in the case study is Kathy. As the preschool teacher, she shed light upon the micro-curriculum of her classroom.

Macro-curriculum Contributions

Matt is often the first person you meet when you visit Jefferson Elementary School. Dressed in police officer's uniform, he has a desk situated near the front door of the school, although he seldom sits there for long. Matt is beloved by both the students and faculty at Jefferson. The affection students have for him is quite evident as he is continuously greeted by children who sometimes find a way to attach themselves to his desk or his body! He explains that, after working in the state police force for several years, when he learned about the school resource officer position being open, he felt drawn to it because it would allow him to be "proactive" in the community instead of responding to situations that became problematic.

Matt's speaks openly about his faith, and he believes in instilling traditional, faith-based values in the next generation. He is a trained pastor, and serves part-time at several local congregations, officiating weddings and funerals. After raising four children of their own, he and his wife are currently fostering three adolescent foster children. They got started doing this, he explained, when foster homes were unavailable for older foster children in the community. Matt's multi-faceted role in the community makes him keenly aware that many of the children at Jefferson Elementary are living in very challenging situations. His empathy is extremely evident.

Matt directs visitors to the office, where they are introduced to Miranda and Sarah. Miranda is the school secretary at Jefferson. Miranda seems a bit embarrassed to be interviewed but she is forthright in her response to our questions. She enjoys her work and like many school secretaries, she has a wide variety of tasks to perform in her role. She serves as the school nurse when the "regular" school nurse is not in the building. (This is fairly frequent as Jefferson's nurse is assigned to another elementary school as well as Jefferson.) Miranda also serves as an unofficial counselor to students, teachers, and parents, who frequently share their troubles

with her as they wait in the outer office to see the principal. We see evidence of this when she greets and speaks briefly to parents who arrive at school while we are talking with her. Miranda explains that she knows almost all of the families at the school. Like Matt, Miranda is well-connected to the community and is well able to access resources for the benefit of children and families in need.

Sarah is the principal at Jefferson Elementary School. She has a ready smile and speaks with enthusiasm about her work as an educator. The first in her family to attend college, Sarah has previously worked as a librarian in several secondary schools around the state. Sarah has a master's in special education and has teaching experience in both general and special education. To say that building leadership keeps her busy is an understatement. Sarah is always on the go; managing the logistics of the daily operations of the school, engaging in instructional leadership, and working to build community partnerships. Although Sarah seems quite aware of the expectations of her as well as her responsibilities to the larger school community, she says that she is not always completely comfortable in her role. She explains that she is considered an outsider in the community and she reports that being a principal at Jefferson Elementary has unique challenges for these reasons. Nonetheless, Sarah is passionate about her work and she feels highly supported by district level leadership. In particular, she expressed great appreciation for the superintendent's leadership.

Michael is the superintendent of Clethridge School District in Washington County where Jefferson Elementary is located. Michael himself is from the area and had his first teaching position in the school district several decades previously. While teaching, Michael pursued coursework at the extension campus of the state university in order to qualify for his administrator's license. Coming back to lead Clethridge School District as the superintendent was in effect "coming home" for Michael and he described the events that led to his return to Clethridge as "blessings." Referencing John Belushi and Saturday Night Live, he explains that he was "bringing the band back together" and he brought "his people" back with him. Michael says he is anticipating retirement in the not too distant future but he remains very active not only in providing educational leadership for the schools in Clethridge School District but also serving in leadership positions in several educational leadership associations across the state. Although Michael is well-connected to the community, he is sometimes concerned about how isolated the community can become. He explains that "looking outward" is critical to understanding how to prepare students for the future, exposing them to a variety of perspectives and ideas and not "just your focus." Michael talks about using technology to stay connected with new initiatives that may or may not "work for us." He meets weekly with Clethridge

administrators to "keep in touch with all that's going on" and make sure "progress is being made."

The Micro-curriculum

Kathy's curriculum aims were revealed through both interviews and observations. During interviews Kathy referenced early learning standards and getting the children ready for kindergarten as part of what she did in planning her curriculum. In some respects, Kathy's focus on these topics appear similar to Michaels and Sarah's in that she wanted children to acquire the skills needed for future success. However, an intentional use of standards was not obvious in the enacted curriculum we observed in her classroom. Kathy did not utilize a curriculum program. Rather, activities were frequently justified as "a cute idea" or "something that the kids will probably like". She often found ideas online communicating with other preschool teachers and visiting teachers' websites. She explained that much of what she does in her classroom emulates her predecessor, for whom Kathy was an assistant teacher. She considered her role as an assistant teacher and her experiences as a parent the foundations of her preparation to be a preschool teacher.

During our weekly visits, we observed the enacted curriculum in Kathy's classroom. Although she was not using a packaged program, her classroom operated in a very intentional fashion. She relied upon well-organized supply of materials and a consistent schedule to engage the children throughout the day, which she did very successfully. The scheduled clearly divided times allocated for work and play. While maintaining a positive rapport and warm demeanor with the children, Kathy had strict behavioral expectations. During worktimes the children sat quietly at the carpet with their hands in their laps. They were expected to listen during these teacher-directed learning times. The experiences during work time were discrete learning activities disconnected from other learning experiences. They usually had clear academic goals, such as learning to name and write numbers or letters. When reflecting on her teacher, Kathy would often comment on "how much they got done," presuming more is better. For instance, after reading two stories to the children during worktime time, Kathy remarked "up to five book have been read on more productive mornings."

Interpreting Curriculum Orientations

Null's (2016) curriculum map identifies four commonly employed curriculum traditions. Three, the systematic, pragmatic, and existential traditions, were apparent in the curricular discourse and practices at Jefferson Elementary. The systematic and existential traditions were more prominently observed than the pragmatic tradition; and radical

curriculum orientations were not evident in the curriculum discourse or practices we observed at Jefferson. Although collegial relations were consistently affable, we observed a sense of disconnectedness among curriculum commonplaces. These disconnections were especially noticeable regarding a general disjointedness between the macro-curriculum discourses and practices and the micro-curriculum enacted in Kathy's classroom.

Systematic Curriculum

The administrators at Jefferson Elementary predominantly expressed educational aims connected to the "systematic tradition of curriculum" (Null, 2016). In addition to goals to bolster academic achievement measured on state mandated standardized tests, they also emphasized the importance of vocational training. Both Michael and Sarah, concentrated on measurable goals and pre-planned programs. Largely because of their macro-level roles, they looked for common problems and solutions that could be applied systematically throughout a building or district. They were knowledgeable professionals, were up to date on educational theories, and they relied upon this theoretical knowledge to direct practices. This applications of theory were often communicated as a form of logistical leadership.

Logistical leadership is a top-down approach to implementation, where administrators determine the goals and protocol of practice. Michael and Sarah's logistical leadership of systematic curriculum initiatives were attentive to a range of learning needs. Michael spoke about how imperative it is to identify and address the wide ranging educational needs of students. Focused on high schools, he said: "We need to address the learning needs of students who have the potential to attend college, and while they mostly go to state universities, some of them have a chance to get into elite universities. Then we also need to meet the needs of the 'good old boys who don't have interest in academics and just want to go to work.'" At the district level, very little consideration was given to early childhood education.

At the building level, both Sarah and Kathy were particularly concerned with children's social-emotional needs. At Jefferson, Sarah developed a systematic plan for "emotional check-ins." Throughout the school day, children were periodically asked to report how they were feeling with reference to a color-coded chart. Their responses were recorded and treated as important data. Teachers and other adult mentors in the building followed up with children who reported feelings of distress. In addition, when a child indicated continual or significant feelings of distress Sarah ensured counseling services were made available.

Systematically oriented macro-curriculum aims had influence on the micro-curriculum in Kathy's classroom. Although Michael's focus on students' vocational outcomes

seemed detached from preschool curriculum, these curriculum aims were part of the school milieu. As such, Michael's curriculum vision seemed to affect Kathy's curriculum in subtle and indirect ways. Kathy expressed her own interpretation of the academic aims systematically advanced by school leaders. Ostensibly, she translated career readiness to kindergarten readiness. Rationalizing a coherent intended curriculum, Kathy mentioned the state department's early learning standards as a guiding force in developing and designing preschool curriculum. However, standards-based planning was not evident in her enacted curriculum. Rather, topics, themes, and materials perceived to be of interest to the children were the most common sources for determining the aims and objectives of her enacted micro-curriculum.

Nonetheless, in other ways, the systematic curriculum orientation explicitly influenced Kathy's daily practices. She enthusiastically supported Sarah's "emotional check-ins". Kathy was already attuned to the importance of nurturing the social and emotional development of the children in her class. However, Kathy perceived Sarah's systematic approach to provide structure that supported her efforts. It helped keep track of who was struggling. In addition, it fostered communication throughout the building, which encouraged teachers, administrators, and support staff to care for children experiencing emotional distress as a unified team. Kathy expressed unambiguous appreciation for this systematic approach to reinforcing the importance of social and emotional learning.

Pragmatic Curriculum

Supplementing the clarification of ultimate goals and aspirational ideals, there is a clear pragmatic orientation to curriculum practices at Jefferson Elementary. The pragmatic curriculum tradition is a-theoretical, "solution-oriented" and focuses "on immediate needs of an individual or community" (Null, 2016, p. 117). Conscious of the significant needs of many Jefferson Elementary children and their families, Michael, Sarah, and others aimed to facilitate a well-organized team effort to address the needs of children they served. Meanwhile, Miranda coordinated important organizational operations for distributing resources while Matt routinely made home visits to "check-in" on potentially unstable family situations. He was quite adept at discerning families' needs. Then, in collaboration with Michael, Sarah, and Miranda and others, he would ensure that proper resources were allocated. Based upon Matt's recommendation, Michael and Sarah were able to connect families with mental health and other community services. On other occasions, Matt delivered groceries to families that lacked reliable transportation. A pragmatic curriculum orientation mainly involves logistical problem-solving.

A pragmatic curriculum orientation was particularly evident in Miranda's logistical contributions to the macro-curriculum. While Sarah spoke with some degree of reticence about the active involvement and unequivocal influence local church congregations had on their public school, Miranda was at ease with the arrangements. For her, church affiliations were a customary relationship within their community. The churches functioned as a network of resources, and Miranda was a natural liaison for the school. Her children had attended school at Jefferson Elementary as did her husband and his parents. As a church member, active member of the community, an administrative assistant at the school, Miranda had an extensive network of relationship in the community. This network was invaluable, because in addition to donations from food pantries and clothing drives, Miranda's church network provided a team of volunteers. She explained.

We have a lot of affiliation with several churches, we have one group that came every Friday and they've been doing that probably the last 5 years. And there's, I mean, they were so faithful. They never missed a Friday. They come to read with them students mainly the third grade and the kindergarten during their lunch. And they would read with them in their classrooms just one-on-one and I think it started to try to boost the I-LEARN or the I-READ scores in third grade is what kind of prompted it. But they come every Friday to read with, and the kids look so forward to it because there's a lot of them, a lot of those students probably don't have grandparents probably never had grandparents that they were lucky enough to be around.

There was also evidence of the pragmatic orientation within Kathy's intended and enacted curriculum. In effect, Kathy's practices were not theory-driven. She did not enact a standards-based approach to curriculum planning. However, even though her daily practices often appeared "child-centered," she was not guided by notions of developmental appropriateness either. Pragmatically, she based the design of her classroom environment, routines, and activities upon precedent and habit, mirroring many of the practices and utilizing the materials given to her by the previous preschool teacher. Adjustments were only initiated when problems surfaced.

Existential Curriculum and Humanizing Relations

The characteristics of the "existential curriculum tradition" (Null, 2016) were also salient at Jefferson Elementary. As indicated by its position on Null's map, the existential curriculum tradition stands in contrast to the systematic tradition. When operating from the existential tradition, an educator is inclined to

view curriculum as a personal journey. They are not particularly concerned about system and authority but prefer to concentrate on the unique characteristics of individual students and process of personal meaning making, which they believe is the goal of curriculum. (pp. 67)

Even though the existential curriculum tradition is quite different from the dominant discourse of the systematic orientation, existential interests permeated curriculum work at Jefferson Elementary. More precisely, an existential curriculum orientation pervaded the implicit curriculum at the macro-level. This was evident in Michael and Sarah's deep investments in community relations. They are both hands-on administrators, who deeply care about the children and families at Jefferson Elementary. They emphasize children's holistic well-being, considering socio-emotional development a foundational aspect of educating young children. It was not out of the ordinary for Michael to leave his office, come to Jefferson Elementary or one of the other schools in the district, and help attend to the needs of a family in crisis. Many of the children at Jefferson Elementary, Sarah explained, experienced stressors related to living in poverty conditions. Connoting an existential curriculum orientation, she described her overarching motivation to "make sure these children are loved on to the fullest extent during the hours they are at school".

Michael is in the twilight years of his career, and he is well established in the community, having been a teacher and a principal for several years before becoming a superintendent. However, Sarah described herself as an outsider to the community, and as a newcomer she was working hard to earn trust. She respected the community and did not take offense to the skepticism they expressed toward her and other outsiders. Sarah looked to Michael as a mentor and she often found it helpful to have Miranda, a life-long resident of the community, actively involved in communications between home and school. In this way, as the building principle, Sarah is recognizing the importance of the local milieu as a body of experience for informing curriculum practice.

At first glance, as members of the non-instructional support staff, Miranda and Matthew appeared less involved with curricular operations. However, they both were influential representatives of the local milieu and made significant contributions to the implicit curriculum at Jefferson Elementary. They both reinforced the traditional faith-based values subtly infused in the curriculum. Matthew made significant contributions to the implicit curriculum through regular interactions with children and families. His experiences as a police officer and his role as a foster parent inform his work at Jefferson Elementary and he expresses a clear curricular vision that is informed by his faith. Ultimately, he is concerned

with preparing children for life, which he conceptualizes in spiritual terms.

The kids talk too. I always try to remind them of that it's not easy. It won't be, and it doesn't get easier. Yeah, sometimes, sometimes you got to fight back. Yeah. So teach them how to fight in a good way. I don't mean with your muscles. You know?

You know, it is not as if I haven't been in some of the same situations, some of these kids, you know, very easily ... You know, there's a lot of things that could have happened to me. But you learn how to overcome those things. You fight through those things. And, you know, you never, you never let the evil around you overcome the good that's within you. So, as long as they do that, I think they're they can prepare themselves.

Albeit informally, Matt's interactions with children are often intentionally instructive. He regularly counsels one very troubled little boy in the hallway. He recounted:

Got one little guy that has voices. And he and his family has a history of psychosis. And anyway, he told me, I'm hearing voices, and God... and the devil. He talked to me in the hallways today.

I said. I know that's not true. I tried to say as upbeat as I can, as I call him by name. I said, let me tell you a secret. The devil never wins and God always wins. And he just like, you can see his shoulders come up. He stood straighter because yeah, that's right.

There was obvious continuity between these existentially oriented elements of the macro-curriculum and the micro-curriculum enacted in Kathy's preschool classroom. For Kathy, her intuitive way of relating to children and families are a primary basis in her practical decisions. She often mentioned that in addition to being the preschool teacher at Jefferson Elementary, she is herself a parent. "We are in this together, and we are going to be together all the way through the 12th grade," she would say, referring to the children and families she served. Her child-centeredness was especially apparent in her classroom, and her rapport with children was obvious to any observer. These elements were unexamined elements of Kathy's implicit curriculum, even though the child-centered, relational qualities of the existential curriculum orientation were salient features of her personal and professional identity and valued at the macro-curricular level. In effect, at Jefferson Elementary School caring for children and families was appreciated as part of who Kathy is, and her compassionate colleagues exhibited similar qualities. These aspects of their work, however, were not reflected upon as part of children's educational experience and intentional elements of curriculum design.

Evaluating Early Childhood Curriculum Deliberations

Common issues vex efforts to improve early childhood curriculum practice at Jefferson Elementary. Like many public schools, the macro-curriculum is led by school administrators and systematically oriented in response to accountability-based educational reform policies. The school administrators, Michael and Sarah, were accustomed to leading focused conversations about standardized academic outcomes. Students' performance on state achievement tests were a big part of these conversations. Their leadership conceived of preschool in relation to a systematically oriented k-12 curriculum. This perspective is supported by current trends in educational reform policy, and is not new to early childhood education. For decades, advocates for early childhood education have framed high quality preschool as a social intervention, arguing that it improves children's social and academic readiness for kindergarten and has an enduring impact on future school outcomes (Brown & Barry, 2020).

Nonetheless, historically speaking, the education of young children is not deeply rooted in a systematic curricular orientation. For more than a century, the nature and needs of children have been the primary basis for informing early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. Hence, existential curriculum orientations are perhaps more prevalent in early childhood settings, particularly those that focus on developmentally appropriate practices. As early childhood educators' leading professional organization, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) reinforces this more child-centered approach to curriculum (NAEYC, 2020). Through successive iterations of their position statement, the NAEYC has attempted to deal with the dissimilarities between curriculum that aligns to content standards and curriculum that emerges from children. However, as Null (2016) suggests, curriculum deliberations become quite complex when disparate assumptions about institutional character and the relationship between theory and practice are being negotiated.

The complexity of these two disparate curriculum orientations coexisting at Jefferson Elementary, is further elucidated by appraising additional aspects of curriculum practice. First, it is important to look at how the five participants in the study contributed to curriculum deliberations. Michael and Sarah's professional experiences were more geared toward secondary education, which is not an uncommon characteristic of school administrators. They spoke authoritatively, and focused on measured academic outcomes at the building and district levels. As members of the non-instructional support staff, even though they influentially contributed to the macro-curricular milieu at Jefferson Elementary, Matthew and Miranda did not consider themselves part of curriculum deliberations. In addition,

preschool teachers often have less professional education than other public school teachers, and such is the case with Kathy. Due to these circumstances, curriculum deliberations at Jefferson Elementary did not equally attend to the five bodies of experience Schwab (1973) identified as commonplaces.

In positions of authority and respected as professional leaders, Michael and Sarah acted as *de facto* curriculum specialists. Their priorities overshadowed other bodies of experiences, such as Miranda and Matthew's insights about the cultural milieu, and Kathy's perspective as a classroom teacher. Considering the functions of curriculum design, this means that their conception of curriculum, which emphasized content standards and vocational aims, established clearly defined boundaries for curriculum discourse at Jefferson Elementary. Further, Michael and Sarah's priorities also framed which experiences were deemed educational and which were not. In effect, their systematic curriculum orientation rendered preschool was a macro-curricular afterthought. The explicit features of the macro-curriculum did, however, unequivocally influence Kathy's micro-curricular perspective.

Thematic Discussion

As the case in most schools, multiple curriculum orientations coexist at Jefferson Elementary. Carefully appraising the functions of curriculum design, curriculum commonplaces, and types of curriculum at Jefferson Elementary provides insights into how disparate curriculum orientations can coincide in generative curriculum deliberations. This section considers the potential contributions of the systematic, existential, and radical curriculum orientations, and explains how such contributions could be more fully realized at Jefferson Elementary. Because the concomitance of multiple curriculum orientations commonly occurs in schools, appreciating the unique strengths and limitations of each orientation can foster more generative curriculum deliberations, and ultimately support the refinement of early childhood curriculum practices in schools everywhere.

The dominant, systematic language of curriculum emphasizes the acquisition of standardized knowledge and skill. Kathy agonizes over whether she is teaching her students everything they need to know to be ready for kindergarten. However, these standards are surprisingly ambiguous, as Kathy reports regularly checking-in with the kindergarten teacher in the spring to ensure readiness. From the standpoint of systematic curriculum reform, vertically aligning preschool curriculum and k-12 curriculum would improve curriculum practices at Jefferson Elementary.

Mainstream principles of child-centered early childhood curriculum and pedagogy were not explicitly represented in

curriculum deliberations. In addition, many aspects of the participants' most praiseworthy practices were part of the hidden curriculum. The existential orientation was a tacit but primary basis for Kathy's enacted curriculum and was also part of the collective interests at Jefferson Elementary to holistically nurture the well-being of children and families. In spite of the prevalence of the existential curriculum orientation in their reflections, these relational aspects of their work were often spoken about as if they were extra-curricular. In this way, some of the greatest strengths enacted in Kathy's preschool classroom and indeed some of the finest qualities of the school ethos are routinely diminished to the status of precursors to professional discourse. From the standpoint of the existential curriculum orientation, the explicitly and deliberately recognizing holistic developmental aims as important contributions to everyday curriculum practice fosters a more integrated view of potential intellectual, social, and emotional educational outcomes.

Lastly, radical curriculum orientations are scarcely represented in curriculum discourses and practices at Jefferson Elementary. There are ways that critical traditions of curriculum reform can enhance the discourse and practices at Jefferson Elementary. Ideally, curriculum should be both "a mirror and a window to the world" (Style, 1997). There are multiple implications for reconsidering curriculum as a mirror and a window. While the educators at Jefferson Elementary are very sensitive to the cultural particularities of their rural context and the adverse effects of poverty, there were signs of deficit mindsets within their curriculum discourse. For instance, it was not uncommon for Sarah, Matthew, and Miranda to implicitly associate poverty to poor parenting when discussing their dedication to providing food, clothing, and emotional support. Moreover, they were not very conscientious about the homogeneity of their school and community. In addition, their curriculum is much more thorough in the provision of mirrors than windows. Working to incorporate a radical curriculum orientation in curriculum deliberations would ensure curriculum practices at Jefferson Elementary represent asset-based mirrors of their local community as well as more expansive windows to the broader world.

In conclusion, educational criticism provides a method for illuminating the complexities of curriculum practices at Jefferson Elementary School. Using curriculum theory, we analyzed the curricular discourse and practices at the school from multiple conceptual vantage points. This analysis revealed clandestine strengths and limitations of the early childhood at Jefferson Elementary. As a result, our initial observations about Kathy's read aloud technique and our initial interests in implementing a storybook reading curriculum can be reconsidered as part of a more comprehensive set of curriculum issues. As important as it is to support Kathy's refinement technical skills and knowledge of

evidence-based instructional strategies, such an effort is only a first step toward systematically connecting the preschool curriculum to the academic goals of the k-12 curriculum. Enhancing storybook reading can also build upon Kathy's extant strengths, repositioning her caring relationships with children and families as a critically important part of her reflective professional practice. In addition, designing and implementing a storybook curriculum can broaden the horizon of their curriculum by intentionally incorporating multicultural materials. Shedding light upon early childhood curriculum practice through educational criticism puts forward a useful basis for engendering more generative curriculum deliberations and well balanced practices in Kathy Andrew's preschool classroom, at Jefferson Elementary, and perhaps in other early childhood classrooms as well.

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