Responsible Eclecticism: Using a Structured Analysis Process to Facilitate Curriculum Discourse with Graduate Pre-Service Early Childhood Students

Candace Jaruszewicz, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, College of Charleston

66 George Street

Charleston, SC 29412

(843) 953-5606

jaruszewiczc@cofc.edu

Abstract

Teaching from an informed and culturally responsive philosophy of education is critical for teaching in the 21st century and engagement in reconceptualizing the field of early childhood. This article describes a process used with graduate pre-service early childhood education students over a two-course sequence, to generate a personal philosophy through structured synthesis of (a) personal beliefs, (b) major schools of Western thought, (c) non-Western educational traditions, and (d) widely known and used early childhood curriculum models. Five key questions, numerous graphic organizers, criterion-referenced rubrics, and examples of student work are provided to illustrate the process used for content analysis and reflective activities.

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Introduction: Philosophy is something we do

The purpose of this article is to discuss and share ideas and practical strategies for engaging graduate pre-service early childhood teacher candidates in curriculum discourse (Elbaz, 1991; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995) from a culturally responsive (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001; Gutek, 1993; 2001) perspective. They do so to consciously articulate a *responsibly eclectic* (Ozmond & Craver, 2002.; Pinar etal., 1995) personal philosophy. Most of our students come to us understanding curriculum from a transmission paradigm (Schubert, 1989;), based on the Tyler Rationale (1949) as "what to teach" selectively and purposefully to their students. They quickly learn about ideas, theories, and events that have influenced early childhood education tradition. They are introduced to selected individuals whose contributions to Western thought about schooling young children are widely accepted as significant, such as Luther, Locke, Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Owen, Froebel, Montessori, and Dewey (Brewer, 2004; Driscoll & Nagel, 2005; Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik, 2006; Gonzalez-Mena, 2001). They study intently the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Maslow, Bronfenbrenner, Erikson, Gardner, and Kohlberg, among others. They begin to see that curriculum can be acted out in many different ways, as they learn about well-known models or approaches such as Bank Street, High Scope, Creative Curriculum, and Reggio Emilia (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). They observe teachers and students in action, and try to make sense of it all as they begin to become educators themselves.

Despite our best intentions, critics claim teacher education programs are "intellectually shallow, lacking a sense of historical and cultural perspective," and focus mainly on "presentism" (Gutek, 2001, p.4). In my twelve years as an early childhood teacher educator, I have indeed found this to be so. There seems to be a cavernous gap between my efforts to assist students in acquiring knowledge and teaching skills consistent with our current view of early childhood education, and my desire to develop enthusiasm and a disposition (Beyer, 1977; Luckowski, 1997) to engage in critical discourse about the origins and rationale for our ideas about education, and how we could think about and "do" education in the future.

Obviously, it is naïve to assume our students can participate in *reconceptualizing* early childhood education (DeSoto & Swadener, 2002; Hatch etal., 2002; Goldstein, 2001; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Swadener & Kessler, 1991, Wishon, 2003;) without a firm *conceptualization* of what it is now, and there is certainly much to do to in that regard - I have observed in my work with early childhood undergraduate and graduate students that most of them do not undertake serious contemplation of theory and philosophical ideas willingly. They usually don't understand the relationship between theory and philosophy when they enter my class. They are rarely aware of alternate world views about education that might be more familiar to students and families who increasingly come to our classrooms from cultures with non-Western roots and traditions. Nor do they yet have a well-developed or articulated philosophy from which they consciously want to teach and make curriculum decisions. What they do come in with, as Master of Arts students, is a bachelor degree and a burning desire to become an early childhood professional, often delayed by an undergraduate program undertaken to please someone other than themselves. More and more of what teachers are asked to do today is politically or legislatively imposed and they often comment to the effect that it serves no useful purpose to spend a lot of time and energy thinking about something over which they have no autonomy or power – they just want to

get right down to it and learn how to be a teacher fast, so they can graduate and finally get to do what they want to do with their lives.

As a teacher educator in challenging times, this attitude bothers me a lot; although I can empathize with their frustrations, two of the most closely held beliefs of teacher educators and curriculum theorizers are that theory and practice should be philosophically grounded, inextricably linked and symbiotic, and that a positive disposition to think about teaching from a theoretical/philosophical perspective is essential to good teaching (Henderson, 1996). Any teacher, when asked, should be able to clearly explain why they do what they do, and intend to do, from a deeply held and known philosophical perspective, rather than merely provide automated responses dictated by external mandates or surface knowledge (Kasten, Wright & Kasten, 1996). In addition, while they may indeed be *acquainted* with theoretical and philosophical traditions, my students usually have not had the opportunity, mentoring, or incentive to apply what philosophical leanings they have identified, to early childhood curriculum decision-making in a structured, thoughtful manner.

Moreover, the typical resources at our disposal for introducing students to early childhood contain condensed information, selected and interpreted for the student in the name of efficiency. Thus, while perhaps not explicitly stated by the author, the student comes to curriculum studies in early childhood education from the biases of those who write the textbooks we use and the professors with whom they interact, myself included. The *reflective practictioner* (Schon, 1983) is an epistemologically complex concept, but in teacher education today, steps to becoming one are often reduced to simple steps in the materials and reflective experiences we provide our students. The focus is on how they can do what they are learning to do better, rather than consideration of entirely reinventing the wheel - imagining an entirely different way of thinking about early childhood. In initial teacher preparation programs, our students are expected

to infer a personal approach from all their coursework, not necessarily engaged for extended periods in focused contemplation and exploration of fundamental philosophical questions that influence curriculum decision-making: (a) what is education, (b) who is the learner, (c) who should participate in the process, (d) what is worth knowing (e) and how should education be acted out?

Responsible Eclecticism

Any culture with an enduring history has a complex philosophical genealogy, and ours is no exception. There is certainly much to study, as our philosophical roots and historical narrative is long and interesting. The very scope of the *ism-menu* is certainly mind-boggling for any student–idealism, realism, humanism, romanticism, Neo-Marxism, existentialism, pragmatism, structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, etc. (Noddings, 1995). Complicating matters is the fact that history is on-going and most of the educational ideas and practices in use today are eclectic in and of themselves, the result of multiple philosophical and/or theoretical influences.

This is particularly true in early childhood education. Most of the widely known and used curricular approaches are eclectic to at least some degree. Even the teacher who strictly adheres to the classic *Montessori Method* (1968) is, in fact, acting out Dr. Montessori's deliberate and thoughtful synthesis of both known and personally generated notions about how and why young children should be educated. One of the reasons the Montessori approach is so interesting is that after more than a hundred years, purists practice the approach almost exactly in the same manner as originally described. When our students encounter the many curricular choices available to them, and learn about the ideas on which they are based, they often take that as license to claim an 'eclectic' philosophy. What they often fail to realize is that if they don't choose and synthesize their ideas carefully from the *ism-menu*, the result can be a "hodge-podge" that (a)

doesn't necessarily reflect their world-view or that of their students, (b) includes ideas or practices that are actually contradictory, confusing, and thus ineffective, or (c) can be impossible to explain, defend, or justify within the context in which they are working.

As I see it, there are two compelling reasons to engage students in philosophical curriculum discourse with a goal in mind for developing a responsibly eclectic view. First is an issue of timing. Education philosophy evolves within a particular context in response to major societal challenges (Gutek, 2001; Noddings, 1995). In this country, for example, continued and worsening racial discrimination after the end of reconstruction efforts in 1877 finally produced the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and consequently, dramatic judicial and governmental actions that will continue to impact our schools well into the future. Jane Addams' work with the Hull House in Chicago providing educational, social, emotional, economic, and political support for immigrants, challenged prevailing notions about the purpose of schooling, a debate raging again today (Gutek, 2001). After- the-fact philosophizing occurs especially if changes or events have produced turmoil or wreaked violence and havoc (Ozmon & Craver, 2002). We are in one of those periods now; after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the talking heads in our media-saturated society wasted no time explaining, rationalizing, and contextualizing the actions of the nineteen Saudis identified as the culprits. Subsequent American foreign policy and military decisions have been spun continuously since 9/11 from an evolving administrative philosophical perspective that may never have crystallized so clearly had not this country been attacked that September morning.

Another example of reacting to current events can be drawn from an early childhood education perspective. The intense and sustained dialogue that occurred to codify the profession in the form of the position statements on developmentally appropriate practices (Bredekamp, 1987) was initiated largely in response to the *back to basics* movement of the early 1980's. The

revisions to that document (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) included a greater emphasis on new knowledge about child development and more sensitivity to diversity among children and their families.

Reconceptualizing the field continues today as the *No Child Left Behind* legislation of 2001 and conservative political initiatives in support of vouchers and charter schools have produced a furious and increasingly polarized debate over the philosophical and theoretical merits of each. The potential effects of these reforms are having an enormous impact on the ways in which early childhood educators attempt to visualize how our youngest citizens will be educated (Fromberg, 2003; Hyun, 2003)

Secondly, all societies enact education as what they do to prepare the next generation to survive, thrive, and preserve cultural traditions (Reagan, 2000). However, most of our pre-service and graduate students study exclusively the Western, Judeo-Christian educational tradition. Therefore, any efforts on their part to develop an approach to teaching without drawing from as many original perspectives as possible are only eclectic in a within-paradigm or ethnocentric sense.

Interestingly, across non-Western societies, regardless of their philosophical and theological differences and vastly differing cultural traditions and histories, similar themes exist about how education is conceived and enacted (Reagan, 2000). These shared ideas differ in great measure from those that form the bases for American schools, and are hardly known in the life-experience or curriculum and educational philosophy studies of our students, that are, as previously stated, primarily ethnocentric (Goldstein, 2001). For example, ours is the only society/civilization whose tradition views formal schooling as the way in which education occurs, conducted by specially prepared teachers, as opposed to a round-the-clock effort in which the entire community participates, with the family expected to shoulder ultimate

responsibility for the proper preparation of its children. While the shared goal of all societies is for their children to become *good persons*, in non-Western societies, what could be called *civic education* and vocational training are high priorities and essential to maintaining and advancing the cultural, economic, and religious traditions of the community. In most non-Western societies, developing a satisfactory inner-world and spirituality as experienced and lived are integral parts, if not the driving force behind education. While our students clearly need to study and reflect on the historical roots of their profession from a *within-culture* perspective, it also seems imperative that they study *our* traditions in context of how the *rest* of the world views its role in the rearing and education of its children.

Embedded in both of these points is the changing American demographic, very different from cycles we have experienced in the past. As a culture composed almost entirely of immigrants, we like to consider America a melting-pot; however, we have historically encouraged or forced our immigrants and indigenous peoples to socialize and acculturate to the decidedly Western European, English-speaking paradigm that achieved dominance – and school was the place we did that. Because most of our previous immigration waves came from diverse, but primarily still Western cultures, with high motivation to Americanize, this approach provided the path of least resistance…. Although it may be difficult these days to find a culture whose education process has not been influenced to some, or a great degree by Western colonization or modern international and cultural relations, an increasing number of students in our schools today bring cultural and philosophical traditions with them of non-Western origins. A very large number of the Spanish-speaking children in our schools have Mesoamerican, rather than Spanish roots and by the year 2010, Islam is projected to be the second largest religious tradition in America (Reagan, 2000). African-American children will very soon no longer represent the "majority-minority." In addition, all of our children will become adults in a future that is certain

to encounter 21st century challenges affecting all of human civilization - economic and industrial globalization, international political re-structuring, and environmental and world health concerns. These and other, more local and temporal issues create conditions that historically, have invited and resulted in, re-visitation of theoretical and philosophical ideas that ground educational decision-making.

Therefore, it seems extremely important that pre-service teachers are taught and regularly engage in active and rigorous application of a wide, representative range of philosophical ideas to educational challenges if they are to be prepared to enact, and react to change. As true *reflective practitioners* they need to develop and refine their practices not just in terms of the Western philosophical tradition, but from a broader world paradigm more representative of the changing population and future life-worlds of the children they will teach. While school is not the place, necessarily from which societal change has historically been driven, it can be a place where an ideal is modeled. This can only occur, however, if our teachers retreat from focusing on the present and begin to see themselves as the ones who inspire a better future. Obviously, this requires a bold, activist disposition, but that is a topic for another article – teachers can't act on beliefs until they know what they are, and that is the focus of this effort.

Creating a structural framework for discourse

I was fortunate during my own master's program, to have a gifted philosophy professor. He was able to make philosophy come alive as the source from which all of our practical ideas about what it meant to be a teacher should evolve. Coming to early childhood teacher education by a rather circuitous route, I learned with his gentle but persistent urging, how my emerging and very eclectic approach to curriculum could be explained from both theoretical and philosophical perspectives. Turning *gut feelings* into an organized, structured curriculum model that I could

share with others was a liberating, confidence-building experience for me and one that I resolved as a teacher educator, to provide to students in my courses.

This experience provided the incentive for the straightforward, structured process I am using with graduate pre-service students to (a) nurture contemplation about the origins and assumptions formative to their thinking about education, (b) identify and describe elements and inspirations for a personal philosophy, (c) analyze structural and conceptual elements of the major early childhood curriculum models in use today, and (d) create an *ideal curriculum* model consistent with the explicitly identified philosophical and theoretical traditions grounding their personal philosophy. Finally, the goal of this process is to create enthusiasm and a positive attitude towards philosophy as an integral part of what we do as educators.

While I do not want to tell my students what to think, I have tried to face the dilemma of how to provide a structure for discourse not culturally or philosophically biased in and of itself, and that is very hard to do. Philosophy by its very nature does not necessarily provide us with answers, but does indeed provoke and require posing many questions. My goal is to provide a context in which they can ponder the essence of philosophical questions as well as imagine potential answers from multiple personal, philosophical, and cultural perspectives to provide a base from which clear thinking, inspiration, and insights can emerge as they become more familiar with the unfamiliar.

Therefore, rather than taking a *schools of thought* approach, I use the following five organizing questions that seem to be universal across cultures (Gutek, 2001; Noddings, 1995; Ozmond & Craver, 2002; Reardon, 2000) to structure thinking about educational traditions.

1. What is education?
2. What are learners like?
3. Who participates in the process?

4. What is worth knowing?
5. How should education be acted out?

The process we use to explore the questions follows these steps

1. Exploration of personal beliefs
2. Analysis of Western philosophical traditions
3. Exploration of "otherness" – analysis of non-Western educational traditions
4. Analysis of well known early childhood curriculum models
5. Synthesis: creation of personal curriculum approach

This process takes place over the course of two early childhood classes in our M.A.T. program, *Introduction to Early Childhood Education,* and *Curriculum and Development in Early Childhood Education.* In the introduction course, our focus is philosophical, theoretical, and cultural traditions and initial exploration of personal beliefs. The second course emphasis is early childhood curriculum approaches (Goffin & Wilson, 2001) and development of an idealized approach.

During the course of our exploration, I satisfy my own concerns about instructor bias by engaging them in activities from varying (Western) philosophical traditions (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995) and providing them with resources from non-Western cultures. For example, they explore their personal beliefs existentially, using a phenomenological/hermaneutic approach through autobiographical narratives (Carter & Doyle, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Conle, 1999), drawing (Eisner, 1985), or acting out (Grumet, 1991). From the analytical philosophy tradition, they use *linguistic analysis* (Wittgenstein, 1969) to explore the essence and meaning of terminology used in the five organizing questions. They read from cultural and ethnographic sources such as the Qu'ran, Confucius, Native American authors (Medicine, 1987; Yellow Bird, 1990), Buddhist literature (Hanh, 1991), Aztec and Mayan accounts (Townsend,

1992; Sharer, 1996), first-person African narrative (Achebe, 1966; 1974) and childrens' African folktales (Aina, 2001; in-press).

In South Carolina where I teach, four early childhood curriculum approaches/models are approved for use in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs: Creative Curriculum, High Scope, Montessori, and the Project Approach. These provide the primary focus for our curriculum studies, although we also investigate Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, Direct Instruction, Bank Street, and Kamii-Devries. When possible, field trips and interviews with teachers using the approaches are incorporated into the class activities.

In consideration of their limited knowledge and experiences at this point, I make a major concession to efficiency by providing them with graphic organizers to keep track of their emerging understandings. Venn diagrams are useful for discerning relationships between and among varying schools of thought. Sometimes we do genograms, similar to a family tree, to historically diagram the geneology of an idea or practice. We also repeatedly use a simple, chart-style matrix (Table1) or spread sheet, adapted to specific purposes, for managing information and ideas.

(Note: I have consolidated various forms of this chart that would be used separately and extend well to the right of what is presented here to include additional columns)

Table 1.

Comparison matrix

Philosphical thinking	Idealism	Realism	Marxism	Existentialism	Pragmatism
Cross-cultural ideas	America	African	Native American	Islamic	Hindi
Curricular models & approaches	Montessori	Creative Curriculum	High Scope	Project Approach	Direct Instruction
What is education? (purpose, nature of, etc.)					
What are children like? (image, characteristics					

Who participates? (roles of teachers, families, others,etc.)					
What is worth knowing? (content)					
How should education be enacted? (methods & strategies, context, timing, etc.)					

Students also keep a journal across both of the courses, recording their impressions and thoughts.

Another concession I make to time, intellectual, and experience constraints is division of labor and collaborative group work. Because of the enormous amount of information and personal processing required for this endeavor, students often work in small groups with designated assignments and share information and insights with the rest of the class. As the content analysis process progresses, using blank matrices and an overhead, I record their responses and comments and subsequently, provide them with continually updated handouts of their shared understandings, as recorded. I give them back *their words,* again, in an effort to eliminate instructor bias. While I do answer questions, I try as much as possible to limit them to clarification points and prefer to probe their thinking and redirect them to primary sources. We also use differing approaches to these discussions that represent different philosophical and cultural orientations – Socratic questioning, logical reasoning, debates, oral histories, etc. that they respond to in their journals.

Creating a final product

When all is said and done, practical products are created in each course that represent synthesis of this work. In the introductory course, using their journals and data sources from class discussions, students write a detailed narrative that explains and discusses their personal philosophy and the derivation/origins of their ideas, using the five questions as organizers. In the curriculum course, they focus the paper on their conceptualization of an ideal curriculum

approach for young children. In addition, they create a power-point presentation that condenses their ideas in "portable" form that is shared and used in various ways later in the program.

Assessment of their products is non-judgmental with respect to the content and philosophical orientation(s) of their product. The focus of the rubrics I use is the extent to which their products are *responsibly eclectic.* I look for consistency between their various ideas and the stated origins and rationale. The rubric for the projects in both courses is similar. The rubric for the final curriculum projects is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Assessment rubric for curriculum project

Project Component	Exceeds Target (4)	Target (3)	Acceptable (2)	Unacceptable (1-0)
Part A: What is education: Philosophical/theoretical orientation	Addresses beliefs & world view -image of child; how child learns; long-term goals; Includes referencing of theorists and/or philosophers & cultural perspectives; high level of internal consistency	All areas addressed; one or more areas needs more detail to be fully understood, but internal consistency apparent	Some areas incomplete; Level of internal inconsistency questionable	Section is missing and/or major areas of inconsistency
Part B: Literature support	correct APA style; logical connections between literature and model, external literature cited	APA used; course references included; connections to model could be clearer	Literature or APA errors don't interfere with concept of model	Section is missing and/or major problems with accuracy; numerous APA errors
Part C: Who participates? Identification & discussion of teacher and others' roles	Clearly consistent with part A; described in detail with examples	Appears mostly consistent with part A; could benefit from additional detail or examples	Obvious areas of inconsistency with Part A; needs much more detail and/or examples	Section is missing and/or glaringly incomplete; statements are obviously inconsistent with Part A
Part D: What is worth knowing? Description of curriculum content	Curriculum as described is consistent with Part A and is DAP; details provided clearly communicate framework to be used	Curriculum is consistent with Part A and DAP; could benefit from additional details; questions remain about framework to be used	Curriculum has areas of inconsistency with Part A or DAP; needs much more detail to be understood	Section is missing and/or has major areas of inconsistency with Part A and/or DAP; difficult to understand
Part E: How should education be enacted? Description of curriculum implementation methods & strategies	Methods & strategies provide appropriate support for Parts A & D; clearly consistent with Part C; reflect high level of understanding of young children	Methods & strategies appropriate; could benefit from additional details and/or variety; adequate for implementation of curriculum as described	Some methods and/or strategies inappropriate or inconsistent with Parts A,C.D; needs much more explanation to be understood clearly	Section is missing and/or inconsistent with Parts A,C,D and developmentally inappropriate for young children

Presentation	Clearly the product of high quality work and thought; highly professional oral presentation	Done well; some improvements could be made to one or more areas; professional presentation	Adequate, but would benefit from major additional work; informal presentation	Project is clearly done without enough thought and/or care; presentation was awkward or clearly not prepared to present
Mechanics: grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.	No errors	Errors don't interfere or compromise quality of project	Errors detract from quality of presentation	Repeated and/or major errors seriously compromise project

Student learning

Without reproducing here entire power-point presentations and papers, excerpts from student papers and journals provide evidence of the nature and value of this process. An indication of emerging understandings about cross-cultural validation is expressed by these three students:

> I knew that Howard Gardner developed an eighth intelligence focused on the "naturalist," which is something that fits me well. Some of the things I didn't understand very well were how cultures like the various Native American and Zen Buddhists revere nature. I also learned how Rousseau's philosophy influenced early childhood. Now I feel like this is a part of my philosophy that comes from multiple sources.
>
> I always thought we were supposed to be "constructivists." While I got the basic idea of how Piaget describes the way a child's thinking develops, and I mostly agree with it, I realized that many of the cultures we studied rely mainly on either formal or informal "direct instruction," to teach their children what they need to know. This could have a big impact on what I need to know about my future students.
>
> I think how we perceive the world and our experiences is very important. I had no idea that there was a whole philosophy (existentialist phenomenology) devoted to it and that outside of our culture, such a high value is placed on the "inner self."

One student reflected on the use of graphic organizers by saying:

> Using the matrix was very helpful because it provided a framework for understanding the programs which I observed. I remember you saying that a teacher should understand why she is using a certain plan, method or program. While this may seem self-evident, in practice it isn't. You have taught me to at least try to understand why I would use certain methods in early childhood. Another good thing about the matrix is that it gave me a framework within which to create a program. Before that, I felt like a student who knows the material but freezes up on the test….The matrix gives me steps so that the process isn't as overwhelming.

Another student, when asked to provide an update about how her original assumptions were changing, made up her own matrix (Table 3) to present her ideas! (It is very long and detailed, so only a small part of it is reproduced here)

Table 3.

Changes in assumptions

Children		Teacher's Role		Curriculum Content		Teaching Strategies	
Assumption	Change to assumption	Assumption	Change to assumption	Assumption	Change to assumption	Assumption	Change to assumption
- Children learn the same ways.	- They are unique and learn on different levels. - They need hands-on experiences.	- Teacher as coach, observer, evaluator, role model.	- Make children think and become curious learners.	- There are not many curriculums.	- There are many different curriculums, such as Montessori, Bank Street, Reggio Em.	- Children need developmentally appropriate hands-on learning.	- Children also need to explore, communicate, and be able to work together.
-Children benefit from a certain way of teaching. - Children of early childhood ages need constant structure in the classroom.	- Children can be taught in different ways as long as the teacher takes the time to observe the students and figure out the ways in which they will benefit. - Children of early childhood ages need freedom, but that freedom should be limited.	- Teacher as instructor.	- Teacher can play many roles. - Should provide the best setting in which a child can learn. - Should add fuel to the spark of curiousity. - Enables a child to need to know more.	- There are a limited amount of curriculums. - Curriculums follow a general content and lack structure.	- There are so many detailed curriculums. - Curriculums are detailed with their expectations of teacher and student. - Curriculums also have a schedule, tools to use and structured expectations of the teacher.	- Teacher should us one teaching sterategy.	- Teacher may have to employ many strategies to reach all children.
- Children learn in the traditional classrooms.	- They can learn adequately in other curriculum atmospheres	- The teacher's role is to deliver the information. - The child's role is to absorb	- Now feel that the teacher can get down on the child's level and incorporate their own ideas	- All curriculums are perfect.	- All curriculums have merit and have problems. - Must go in search of more	- I knew what I was doing with direct instruction.	- Now I realize that Direct Instruction was not what I wanted to be doing.

	other than what I am personally comfortable teaching. - They can learn and excel in other types of classrooms.	that information.	and questions into the learning and teaching process. - It is possible to work with children rather than teach "at" them.		information regarding curriculums.		-The various teaching strategies allow us to find the one that feels right.

It takes a long while for students to understand the origins, intricacies, characteristics, similarities and differences among early childhood curriculum approaches. The tentative nature of students' thinking about this is reflected in the following journal excerpt. It is long, but would be seriously compromised with editing. The student was comparing Montessori and Bank Street programs and questioning her previously held assumptions about Piaget's theory of cognitive development

> I asked myself how Piaget differed from the Montessori and Bank St. models….Much of the Piaget theory is based on his four stages of development. It describes the psychological, cognitive and motor skills of children at different levels, but it doesn't detail how to get children from one level to another. Piaget's theory is very general and is open to much interpretation in fleshing out the curriculum. I assume that is why the two programs in the chapter [High Scope and Kamii-DeVries] originated from Piaget but developed differently. Montessori and Bank St. take into account the developmental stages of the child, but it seems as if there is a continuous philosophy throughout their programs. For example, in Montessori, individual learning is stressed through all age groups, even though the implementation would change to accommodate different age students. In Bank St. social interaction is stressed even if it is achieved differently for younger and older children. I don't see the common thread in Piaget. He tells us how children develop, and it seems that to go from one stage to the next the teacher would have to switch gears completely. Also, there could be students in the class who are at

different stages of behavioral development. For example in the preoperational stage, the child is self-oriented, but at the concrete operations stage, the child can understand another's point of view. How does the curriculum accommodate the needs of students in both stages and what transitional activities are there in the curriculum to help a child pass from one to the other?

Final thoughts

The second course in this sequence is one of two required for early childhood add-on certification in South Carolina; some of the students in this class are practicing teachers who have not had the first course. While this is not an ideal situation from my perspective, what they lack in the way of philosophical grounding is compensated for, in some measure, by the teaching experiences they bring to the course. We are in the process of redesigning the course so that it can be offered in a separate section for them. In this way, activities focused on philosophy and cultural perspectives can be integrated. Anecdotally, students report that they use the products from this process in various useful ways – most frequently in their professional portfolios, teaching interviews, and grade/school level curriculum decision-making processes.

It is my position from a reconceptualist point of view, that we must be open, tolerant, curious, and imaginative about the various ways in which we conceive early childhood education. If we are to facilitate and sustain a dialogue that can have any significant effect on the way education is conceived and practiced in America in the future, we need to provide our future teachers with both the disposition and resources to begin their own personal consideration of how they want to ground their work with young children. They can't actively participate in the conversation without the intellectual rigor this process requires and the confidence they gain as a result. I reject the argument that high-level thinking about early childhood education should be reserved for post-graduate studies, teacher educators, and policy-makers. Most of our students

will not enter the *ivory tower* - their work will be conducted in the places where early childhood education actually occurs – the classrooms and communities where our children live. In order to become assertive advocates for change to truly re-invent education in America, starting with a responsibly eclectic view derived from what is already known and practiced can provide them a framework from which to think *outside the box.* They also see that education and curriculum discourse is an arduous process, but that engaging in it is a life-long work in progress which provides them with opportunities to develop insight, inspiration, and confidence.

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