

# CURRICULAR ETHICS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMMING: A CHALLENGE TO THE ONTARIO KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

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**ABSTRACT.** Through a case study of a key Canadian early childhood education program, The Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998a), we explore the relationship between curricular paradigms and early childhood education (ECE) models, and the opportunities that each creates for enacting ethical teaching and learning relationships. We position the “cult of efficiency” (Stein, 2001) as the antithesis of ethical ECE, and we forward suggestions for enabling teachers to consider the kind of person they must become in order to develop a nonviolative relationship with young children (Cornell, 1992).

**ÉTHIQUE PÉDAGOGIQUE DANS LE PROGRAMME D'ÉDUCATION DES JEUNES ENFANTS : UN DÉFI POUR LE PROGRAMME DES ÉCOLES MATERNELLES DE L'ONTARIO**

**RÉSUMÉ.** À travers l'étude de cas d'un programme clé canadien d'éducation des jeunes enfants, le Programme de maternelle (Ministère de l'Éducation et de la Formation de l'Ontario (1998a), les auteures explorent la relation entre les paradigmes pédagogiques et les modèles d'éducation des jeunes enfants (EJE), ainsi que les possibilités que tous deux créent pour la promulgation de l'enseignement éthique et de relations d'apprentissage. Les auteures y suggèrent que le « culte de l'efficacité » (Stein, 2001) est l'antithèse d'une EJE éthique et formulent des suggestions pour permettre aux professeurs de découvrir quel genre de personne elles doivent devenir en vue d'établir une relation non-violatrice avec les jeunes enfants (Cornell, 1992).

## INTRODUCTION

Like education in many other countries in the “Minority World” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 6) (i.e., developed world) during this globalized period, curriculum in Ontario, Canada has become increasingly standardized, developed from outside the classroom, and monitored. While accountability is important in public endeavours, the educational system in Ontario has been hit by a “cult of efficiency” (Stein, 2001) where bureaucracy, standardization, and surveillance, the soldiers of cost-effectiveness, fight for efficiency as an end in its own right. When efficiency is the value of a society rather than *the vehicle to* social values, it may become harmful to the society that heralds

it. In an educational context there is risk for harm, because curricula that are built mainly on efficiency offer scant opportunity for educators to consider questions of ethics, that is, the person they need to become in order to develop a nonviolative relationship with the other (Cornell, 1992).

As Canadian early childhood education (ECE) gains notice, efforts to achieve efficiency while formalizing learning is happening earlier in children's lives. Consistent with this trend, in 1998 the Ontario government published its first policy document for kindergarten in over fifty years, and the Ministry of Education and Training is already entertaining consultations on the program with the aim of revising it soon. *The Kindergarten Program* (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998a) (hereafter, *The Program*) regulates programming for junior kindergarten and kindergarten. Given that during the school year of 1999-2000, 81 percent of 4-year-olds in the province enrolled in junior kindergarten and 95 percent of 5-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten (Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2003), the importance of *The Program* cannot be underestimated. Consequently, the time is ripe for considering where kindergartens in the province have been and where they are going.

This paper is an attempt to understand the implications of *The Program* for young children and their teachers in Ontario. This endeavour is a contribution to theorizing in ECE in general, not just in the province. Through a document analysis, we hope to provide insight into some of the ways that various forms of curricula configure children and teachers, and we hope to provide talking points to promote responsive, ethical curricula for young children that improve their quality of life and that allow teachers to be professional decision-makers.

## METHODOLOGY

The document analysis that informs this paper follows a critical postmodern literacy methodology. We looked to literacy methodology because a document analysis is a form of reading. Our interest in critical theory within this methodology stems from our desire to labour towards the theoretical goal of "emancipation," meaning to "free human-kind of what presents itself as 'natural' or given by making apparent the points of view from which such a version of 'reality' are constructed" (Habermas, 1972, p. 311). We have adapted a synthesized version of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & Sluys, 2002) to be used as a means of interrogating various forms of text (including policy documents) and educational phenomena (Heydon, 2004). We have infused this methodology with the postmodern goal of deconstruction (Lather, 1991) since we appreciate that truths can be situational. We are aware that employing a critical postmodern methodology in this case is akin to an "intellectual version of the hokey-[p]okey" (Stronach & MacLure,

1997, p. 19), where we acknowledge the material world while calling attention to its shifting nature. Even so, we find that this mixed approach is best in keeping with our beliefs outlined in the section below. Thus in the examination of *The Program* we seek to:

1. Disrupt the commonplace (What is taken for granted in the program? What are its norms and values?);
2. interrogate the situation from multiple viewpoints (What are other ways of approaching the education and care of young children?);
3. focus on socio-political issues (What are the dynamics of power at play in the program? Who benefits and at whose expense?); and
4. take action and promote social justice (What now can be done in the name of equity and social justice for young children's education and care and how do we honour the alterity of children and their families?).

In going through these steps, we treat *The Program* as a curriculum which responds to one or more of the questions, What (should be taught)? To whom (should it be taught)? How (should it be taught)? When (should it be taught)? By whom (should it be taught) and Why (should it be taught)? Many of these questions are consistent with Schwab's (1973) notion of curricular "common places" (p. 513) and Egan's (1978) answer to "What is Curriculum?"

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Ethics*

We believe that what constitutes childhood is situational, and we acknowledge that definitions of childhood and what adults ask of children (e.g., through curricula) directly affect their identity and life-course options, as well as quality of life. Consequently, we find that the configuration of ECE curricula is not self-evident and that no single approach can fulfill the requirements of all children in all situations. We do concede, however, that ethics needs to be at the heart of curricula and that various forms of curricula offer more or less "room" for ethical considerations.

Legal scholar Drucilla Cornell (1992) finds that ethics are not the same as morality. Morality is a codified way to behave where there are absolute rights and wrongs. Like being efficient, being moral is something that exists outside of individuals. Transferred to education, moral educators need only identify the "type" of situation at play and then apply the "correct" response. In contrast, ethics doesn't offer a "paint-by-numbers" approach. It asks educators to identify what kind of person they need to become in order to have a relationship with others that does not violate them. In being ethical, educators have to think of themselves *in relation* to others and to consider the totality of the situation-at-hand. In sum, ethics in education

requires that educators recognize that they affect the lives of children and that they strive insofar as possible to discern within the unique circumstance what is required.

Presently, there are a number of challenges to responding ethically in education. In their discussion of ethics in educational administration, Kumar and Mitchell (2004) identify three “managerial strategies” (p. 130) that forward efficiency over ethics. First is “denial of proximity” (p. 130), where persons in power keep a distance between themselves and those whom they administrate. Second is “effacement of face” (p. 132), where relationships are rendered asymmetrical through the creation and maintenance of hierarchy, and third is “reduction to traits,” where as a result of the first two strategies, persons in an organization are reduced “to a collection of traits or attributes that define the expected and accepted location of the individual within the organization” (p. 133). Each of these strategies can be considered in relation to curricular models with their corollaries suggesting some pre-conditions for building ethical curricula.

In our analysis of *The Program*, we use the following three corollaries – drawn from Kumar and Mitchell (2004) – to understand the potential effects of the program on children and teachers:

1. “Proximity serves as a precondition of [ethics]”<sup>1</sup> as “distance eliminates or reduces the [ethical] impulse because it is easier to dismiss, discount, or discard people when they are out of sight” (p. 130). Therefore, persons who are in direct contact with children (e.g., classroom teachers and parents) are perhaps in the best position to make ethical curricular decisions.
2. Reciprocal, symmetrical relationships where both parties give and receive are humanizing relationships. Perceiving the other’s humanity helps one to respond ethically. This in turn can create a climate where reciprocity is expected and fostered. To enact reciprocal relationships in classrooms means that teachers *and* children must be curricular-informants.
3. All members of an organization need to be seen in their “totality” (p. 133) as ethical human beings not just in terms of their “roles” (e.g., the role of the student or teacher) (p. 134). Curricula should therefore support teachers and children to exercise their individual responsibilities to others. This may mean that “compliance” of orders “from above” (p. 134) needs to be replaced with cooperation and sometimes even dissent.

Various forms of curricula can expand or limit educators’ ability to respond ethically to students. Schwab (1971) indicates that there are three eclectic arts for solving practical (i.e., teaching and learning) problems by using theories. One is the ability to match prescribed theories with problems, which often do not match well. The other is to tailor or adapt theories to fit a situation, but there may be no appropriate theories for many situational

problems. The third is to invent new solutions that fit situations. We see each of these approaches as a particular curricular paradigm which we call the *prescriptive*, *adaptable*, and *emergent* paradigms. Each of these paradigms is a “loosely connected set of ideas, values, and rules that governs the conduct of inquiry, the ways in which data are interpreted, and the way the world may be viewed” (Schubert, 1986, p. 170). Together these paradigms create a continuum of opportunities for efficiency through to ethics (Figure 1). No paradigm is devoid of opportunities for efficiency or ethics, yet the ways in which the paradigms configure teachers, children, and the teaching and learning environment can limit or expand the possibilities for each. Though efficiency may be important, curricula that are on the far end of the efficiency side are more likely to be cult-like in Stein’s (2001) sense, because they don’t ask critical, ethical questions about the purpose(s) of efficiency.

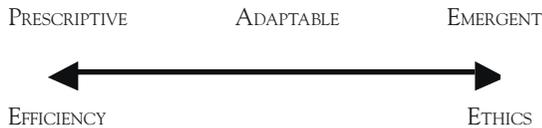


FIGURE 1. Continuum of Curricular Paradigms and Opportunities for Efficiency and Ethics

### Forms of curricula

#### • THE PRESCRIPTIVE PARADIGM

The prescriptive paradigm takes a static and mechanical view of curriculum. In this paradigm, curriculum designers work outside of the classroom. Designers perceive theory as preceding practice and thus able to direct practice. The environment and the behaviour of teachers and children tend to be highly controlled. Prakash and Waks (1985) describe this paradigm as the “technical conception” which is “the image of education as rational production, as the efficient adjustment of productive means to determinate, measurable ends” (p. 81). The direct instruction (DI) ECE model from the United States is a case in point. Built on instrumental theories whose goals are to offer a degree of prediction and control (Habermas, 1972), DI is influenced by theories from behavioural psychology. Specifically, DI emphasizes that behavioural changes and individual differences in children are due to learning rather than development, with learning being understood as the associations among stimuli, responses, and reinforcements (White, 1970). DI emphasizes scripted teaching (Engelmann & Osborn, 1976), grouping children according to “type” but not individualizing curricula (Gersten, Car-nine, Zoref, & Cronin, 1986), sterilizing the environment to prevent children from becoming distracted (Beretier & Engelmann, 1966), and focusing on what children cannot do or are missing (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). As the

DI example demonstrates, curricula within the prescriptive paradigm limit ethical discussions, because they are out of line with all three corollaries. Specifically, this paradigm places curriculum development away from those with proximity to the children it will affect, it denies the contributions that children and families can make to the curriculum, and it configures teachers as technicians. The “teacher role” then becomes a stand-in for teachers as whole ethical beings.

• THE ADAPTABLE PARADIGM

The adaptable paradigm takes an interactive and constructive view of curricula. Curriculum is still a document conceived from outside the classroom, but teachers are given more discretion than in the prescriptive paradigm. This kind of curriculum emphasizes the active interaction between children, teachers, and the environment, reflects the importance of this interaction, and is carefully designed to enhance it. The High/Scope curriculum which was designed for the Perry Preschool Project in the United States falls within the adaptable paradigm. The High/Scope is partially based on Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, in particular his notion that children develop intellectual abilities in predictable sequences. Curricular expectations are therefore set according to Piaget’s descriptions of age-related cognitive changes (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). In more recent iterations of the High/Scope curriculum, there is a shift in focus from children’s academic to social and emotional development (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). What persists is a curriculum built around ten “key experiences” that range from “language and literature” to “number, space, and time” (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995, p. 23). The environment supports these experiences through fairly consistent classroom areas (e.g., sand and water and music and movement areas), and a “plan-do-review” sequence frames the children’s experiences (p. 167). The key experiences give both teachers and children discretion to initiate activities according to children’s interests and background; however, teachers are still constrained by a curriculum that is exported to their classrooms. Teachers are not, for example, at liberty to make changes to the curriculum if they feel that some of its requirements are in conflict with children’s needs. In addition, teachers have complained about the rigidity of the key experiences and the plan-do-review sequence (Walsh, Smith, Alexander, & Ellwein, 1993). In terms of the first ethical corollary, the adaptable paradigm creates a moderate climate of flexibility for teachers to respond to children, and there is some room for reciprocal relationships to inform the curriculum and for teachers and children to be seen outside of their roles.

• THE EMERGENT PARADIGM

The emergent paradigm takes a dynamic and critical view of curriculum. In this paradigm, practice is inseparable from theory; they inform and promote

each other. The emergent curriculum envisions children as contributing participants of a community and society-at-large (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). Therefore, children are viewed as an important source of the curriculum. Teachers are viewed as both practitioners and researchers, thus the curriculum supports teachers to exercise their professional judgment. In this paradigm, the curriculum is more a culture than a model or an approach. Empowering children and teachers and harmonious collaborations in schools and communities are dominant values and norms. From another perspective, the emergent paradigm is an ecological system in which every curricular commonplace connects with and supports every other (Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

The Reggio Emilia form of ECE founded in the Emilia region of Italy best represents a curriculum under the emergent paradigm. There is no formal curriculum document; teachers co-construct curriculum with other teachers, children, and parents. Rather than being consumers of curricula, children are considered “creator(s) and producer(s) of values and culture” (Rodari, 1996, p. 116). They are encouraged to use many symbolic languages, such as music, drawing, painting, clay, block construction, dramatic play, dance, writing, and so on, to represent their thoughts and feelings, and the environment is seen as a third teacher to children. We locate the Reggio Emilia approach under the ethical end of the curricular continuum, as it meets the terms of all three ethical corollaries.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF KINDERGARTEN IN ONTARIO

Before determining where *The Program* falls within the efficiency/ethics continuum, unearthing the history of kindergarten in Ontario is essential. A critical postmodern reading of *The Program* says that exploring the document’s history helps to demystify some of the assumptions and contradictions within it.

Kindergartens in Ontario were built and changed under the theoretical, socio-political, and economic influences of various eras. Based on Corbett’s (1989) work, we have divided the development of kindergarten into five periods (see Table 1). Important for understanding the current thrust of kindergarten in the province is that, especially in the first time period, Ontario tended to favour child-centred approaches more consistent with the emergent and adaptable paradigms. Gradually, however, tensions grew between this type of curricula and more prescriptive forms. Often, these curricula simultaneously pulled the educational system (and the children and teachers within it) in different directions.

In 1998, the paradoxical *The Program* was published. Inherent in this 22-page document’s three sections (program content and teaching/learning approaches, program planning and delivery, and learning expectations) are contradictory views of the child, the teacher, the family, and the curriculum.

TABLE 1. *Main influences on Ontario kindergarten*

TIME / PERIOD	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
1883-1913 / Froebelian Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kindergarten was built primarily according to Froebelian theory</li> <li>• Maturationist view of children</li> <li>• Concept of unity and connectedness between child, community, and God (Froebel, 1887, p. 56)</li> <li>• Instruction structured to be “passive” (p.7)</li> <li>• Guided play as central to curriculum for release of children’s “inner powers” (Weber, 1984, p. 37)</li> <li>• ECE believed by Froebel to be a unit of child development for children aged three to seven</li> <li>• Ontario kindergarten differed by being for children just before grade one (i.e., usually 5-years-old) (Corbett, 1989)</li> </ul>
1914-1939 / Transition Years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Froebelian theory’s dominant status destabilized by other theories but still present</li> <li>• Kindergarten-Primary Movement: Agreed with Froebel that there should be closer harmony between kindergarten and first two primary grades; establishment of kindergarten-primary classes; ironically, while the intention of the classes was to promote Froebelian-type kindergarten curriculum in the primary grades, the result was that primary curriculum with its emphasis on the three Rs entered kindergarten</li> <li>• Montessori Method: Ontario adopted Mary Montessori’s didactic materials and showed interest in her flexible timetable and focus on individualized activities (Corbett, 1989)</li> <li>• Child Study Movement: The heart of psychology and its emphasis on scientific method to study human beings; saw nature as more important than nurture (Mayfield, 2001, p. 216); promoted a normative view of child development</li> <li>• Free Play Movement: Advocated free play as per John Dewey; saw curriculum as needing to be derived from the “child’s experiences and interests” (Howe, Jacobs, &amp; Fiorentino, 2000, p. 214)</li> </ul>
1940-1967 / Expansion Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influenced by child’s rights movement, progressive pedagogies entered through calls for closer connections between kindergarten and primary and between kindergarten and families</li> <li>• Expansion of kindergarten program for younger children and rural areas</li> </ul>
1968-1997 / Changing Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child-centered program: Education for personal fulfilment (Gidney, 1999); calls for abolition of the graded school system, documents advocating junior kindergarten to Grade 3 to be treated as a unit (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1985a)</li> <li>• Preparation program for grade one: Cry for accountability through direct instruction of basic skills (Gidney, 1999); kindergarten influenced by rigid and fragmented requirements for Grade 1; kindergarten seen as preparation for Grade 1; downpour of academic skills into kindergarten; deficit view of children</li> </ul>
1998 to the Present / Time of Paradox	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child-centered teaching/learning principles espoused, yet</li> <li>• Rigid, outcome-based learning expectations</li> </ul>

*A Time of Paradox: The Kindergarten Program, 1998 (1883 to the present)*

We shall describe each section in turn, beginning with the expectations section as it is the most substantial.

The centerpiece of *The Program*, and what cancels out the influences that undergird the first two sections of the program, is the expectations section. This section comprises half of the document. The expectations are divided into five parts mainly according to separate subject matter: language, mathematics, science and technology, personal and social development, and the arts. Each part includes two kinds of expectations: the overall expectations and the expectations in specific areas. The overall expectations “describe in general terms the knowledge and skills that children are expected to achieve by the end of Kindergarten” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998a, p. 12). The expectations in specific areas describe the knowledge and skills in greater detail. For example, expectations for language have four parts: oral communication, reading, writing, and understanding of media material. By the end of kindergarten, children are supposed to be able to communicate with others using appropriate listening and speaking skills, to comprehend written materials that are read to them, to use simple writing strategies, and to understand and use many media materials. The expectations for mathematics are divided into five categories: number sense and numeration, measurement, spatial sense and geometry, patterning, and data management and probability. When leaving kindergarten, children are supposed to be able to count orally to 30 and write to 10, to understand various aspects of measurement, to identify shapes and objects, to differentiate simple patterns, and to be willing to solve problems. Expectations for science and technology include two parts: exploration and experimentation and use of technology. Children should show interest in exploring their environment, become acquainted with the natural world and some common materials, be able to plan and organizing simple activities, and use some forms of technology. Expectations for personal and social development are divided into four areas: self-awareness and self-reliance, health and physical activity, social relationships, and awareness of surroundings. Children are supposed to build self-confidence and independence, to acquire fine and gross motor skills, to be aware of their environment and daily routines, and to interact with others appropriately. Expectations for the arts include creative activity, response to art works, and knowledge and elements of forms. Children should know various forms of art works, and be able to communicate their feelings using some art forms.

The expectations section is clearly inclined towards the prescriptive/efficiency end of the curricular paradigms continuum, yet in the first sections of the document there are influences of multiple theories of ECE. One influence is Piaget’s developmental theory. For instance, the learning expectations for children are based on supposed normalized developmental levels, and the program advises that kindergarten experiences be “concrete” in order to

“prepare” children for later learning “abstract concepts” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998a, p. 4). A normalized view of language and literacy development is also offered. At the same time, the program acknowledges in its description of the program content and teaching/learning approaches that not all children learn in the same way. The program, for instance, recognizes that children who are learning English as a second language (ESL) “exhibit a variety of responses and behaviours” (p. 5). As the document emphasizes what is sometimes referred to as ESL children’s “silent period” (Granger, 2004) in learning a new language, this calls into question the normalized picture of language development that it also presents. Furthermore, normalized development is subverted in phrases that pepper the document such as “each child is unique” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998a, p. 9). Though the program encourages teachers to adjust learning expectations to different children (pp. 12-13), the expectations are standardized and the parents of children who cannot attain these expectations are advised to seek special education assistance through the “Identification, Placement and Review process,” the process that formally identifies and places exceptional learners. Thus, the program that attests to be “for all Ontario children” (p. 2) in kindergarten is in fact only for the children who can “fit” the mold of *The Program*.

A second set of influences, which are again in tension with other theories in the program, involves progressive theories of education that are in keeping with paradigms towards the adaptable/emergent end of the continuum. The program recommends that children’s learning should happen through “inquiry”: “as children pursue their inquiries, teachers need to help them make connections between what they already know and what they are discovering and learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998a, p. 6). This notion of active, inquiry learning is reinforced in the program’s sections on “learning through play” and “integrated learning” (p. 6). Yet with 124 specific learning expectations that range from “recognize that words often consist of beginning, middle, and final sounds” (p. 15) to “place some specific types of objects (e.g., shoes, favorite foods) on concrete graphs and pictographs” (p. 17), inquiry, integration and exploration are called into question. How can true inquiry and exploration happen if the question of What? has already been determined? Furthermore, how can integration happen when the expectations are divided into discrete “areas” (e.g., language, mathematics, science and technology, personal and social development, and the arts) then further subdivided into “specific areas” (p. 12) (e.g., language is divided into oral communication, reading, writing, and understanding of media materials)?

Lastly, to a very minor extent, the program mentions elements that suggest theories of developmentally and culturally appropriate practice (Hyun, 1998). For instance, the program encourages teachers to pay attention to

children's linguistic and cultural diversity and to cooperate more closely with their parents. The introduction says "Teachers, early childhood educators, members of the community and families must work together" (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998a, p. 3), and in the description of the teacher's role, the program says that they should consult with parents. Unfortunately, in the "parent's role" (p. 8) section, after the document extols the importance of parents, they aren't given any more of a role than to simply read *The Program* so that they know what their children are supposed to be learning. The document says, "Parents therefore have an important role to play in supporting their child's learning. By reading this document, parents can see what their children are learning and why they are learning it" (p. 8). In this way, the program tends towards the prescriptive paradigm-side of the continuum.

While *The Program* purports to adopt a child-centred approach and an integrated view of learning in its program content, teaching/learning approaches and program planning and delivery sections, once it provides lists of learning expectations that children are supposed to acquire by the end of kindergarten, the vision of children as active learners is subverted. The image of the child instead becomes one of a passive "receptacle for storing what has been learned" (Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998, p. 408). Relatedly, the vision of teachers as curriculum planners is reduced to "technicians carrying out instruction determined by someone else" (p. 410), and the notion that parents can be curricular-informants is reduced to parents being recipients of pre-ordained information.

Compared to the ethical corollaries, we find that overall *The Program* falls towards the prescriptive/efficiency side of the continuum. For the first corollary, which includes the importance of proximity in curricular construction, the program acknowledges the discretion teachers should have and reserves decisions regarding pedagogical strategies and classroom set-up to them, but the possibilities for answering questions of How? (i.e., pedagogical strategies) are constrained when every aspect of What? (i.e., what is to be learned/achieved) is already decided. For instance, teachers who decide that it is best to carry out pedagogies commensurate with theories that are not in line with a prescriptive paradigm (including those theories that are referred to in *The Kindergarten Program*, 1998), may have difficulty implementing them because of the expectations portion of the program. Wien (2002), for example, points out that the fragmented expectation lists and the emphasis on piecemeal assessment of the program "shapes teachers' response to the documents" (p. 15) and distracts them from carrying out the child-centered and thematic learning/teaching approaches. This impedes teachers from exercising authentic decision-making as responsive human-beings rather than being efficient workers who simply carry out predetermined roles. Moreover, the prescribed roles that the program sets out for teachers and students ask for

compliance. This also interferes with teachers and children being viewed as individuals who bear the responsibility of developing nonviolative relationships with others, which is contrary to the third ethical corollary.

In relation to the second ethical corollary, which asks that children be considered curricular-informants so that a reciprocal relationship can be established between teachers and children, *The Program* falls on the extreme prescriptive/efficiency end of the curricular paradigm continuum. Although the program cautions teachers to adjust expectations for children considering their home, language, or developmental backgrounds, children are never allowed input into the curriculum. Any flexibility the curriculum may hint at is limited by the fact that teachers will unavoidably have to evaluate children for report cards based on their performance *vis à vis* the expectations. Moreover, elements of children's lives that may be important to them (e.g., friendship) are not included in the expectations lists (Wien, 2002). Children are never invited into curricular conversations about key issues such as Why? What? When? or even By Whom?

In all, *The Program* is in keeping with the cult of efficiency and even fuels aspects of it. The program centres on the idea of preparing children for the Ontario curriculum for grades one to eight, and therefore, takes a linear view of curriculum that treats kindergarten as a step in an assembly line. The focus on kindergarten as the lynchpin for a schooling model built on curricula from the prescriptive paradigm (complete with its 3,993 discrete learning expectations [Cummins, 2005]) is evident in the Ontario Ministry of Education's language. The program introduction says that its goal is to provide the "basis" for study in later grades (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998a, p. 3), the expectations section says that "all of [its] expectations . . . are designed to prepare children for the new Ontario curriculum for Grades 1 to 8" (p. 13), and in the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training's News Release for the program, the Education and Training Minister alleged, "We need to ensure that children are prepared for the expectations of the new Ontario curriculum for Grade 1" (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998b). Thus like a dog chasing its own tail (or the value of efficiency being efficiency), the purpose of the kindergarten curriculum is to fuel another curriculum.

#### RECONCEPTUALIZING ECE CURRICULA

As Heydon has written elsewhere (2005), contemporary approaches to ECE and care in the Minority World position children as valuable because of their perceived potential for a country's economic survival. Rather than being viewed as important in its own right, childhood is valued for what it can produce in the future. Children are therefore defined through adults' terms which, in the case of *The Program*, is in efficiency terms. What now

can be done to help promote ethical approaches to ECE curriculum? This question becomes increasingly pressing as the demographics in provinces like Ontario change. The 2001 Census found that more than 1 million immigrants who arrived in Canada during the 1990s were living in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2003) and 14.5% of the province spoke a non-official language at home (Statistics Canada, 2002). Moreover, child poverty is a major issue. Ontario “reports rates of poverty at 20.3% of the child population” (Leschied, Chiodo, Whitehead, & Hurley, 2003). The diversity of the Ontario population alone suggests that the current standardized curriculum needs to make way for emergent forms of curricula.

Ontario has many places to look from which to draw inspiration for emergent curricula. Wien and Dudley-Marling (1998) offer the Reggio Emilia approach from the emergent paradigm as an “alternative vision” (p. 414) of curriculum for Ontario. They suggest that the province learn from Reggio Emilia’s “pedagogy of listening” (Rinaldi cited in Wien & Marling, 1998, p. 415) where teachers are encouraged to be attuned to children’s thinking and interests so that they can plan curricula from the children themselves. They also suggest that educators recognize Reggio Emilia’s “coil”-like curricular construction, which demonstrates “an ecological awareness and recognition of multiple perspectives” (p. 416). This they starkly compare with the lock-step approach of Ontario curricula.<sup>2</sup> Reggio Emilia’s approach to community-based ECE, while not formulaic or evaluated against specific outcomes or predetermined criteria, does nonetheless provide “thinking and practice of the greatest rigour” of curricula in the field (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 13). This is achieved, in part, through the strict practice of documentation, which records what happens in the program and informs the next stage of the curriculum. Through this process, educators are professional decision-makers who consider the ethical question of whom they need to become for the children and the communities with whom they work.

New Zealand’s approach to ECE, *Te Whariki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996), is another example of a curriculum that offers vision and support to ECE but allows for teacher, child, and community discretion in the co-creation of their enacted curricula. *Te Whariki* explicates the principles, strands, and goals for ECE on one hand and encourages teachers to develop local programs on the other hand. In *Te Whariki*, principles and strands are woven together (see Figure 2), constituting the skeleton of the curriculum. The strands arise from the principles and then are connected with goals and learning outcomes. These goals and learning outcomes, however, are not specific knowledge or skills that children are supposed to obtain at the end of a certain age; they are “soft outcomes” such as healthy and safe development, self-confidence, active exploration, and critical thinking, which allow children’s holistic development. Such outcomes are sufficiently clear so as to provide a frame for public education but flexible enough to ensure that

they can accommodate a diversity of children and situations. Moreover, the curriculum provides continuity between ECE and school and so respects children's individual development.

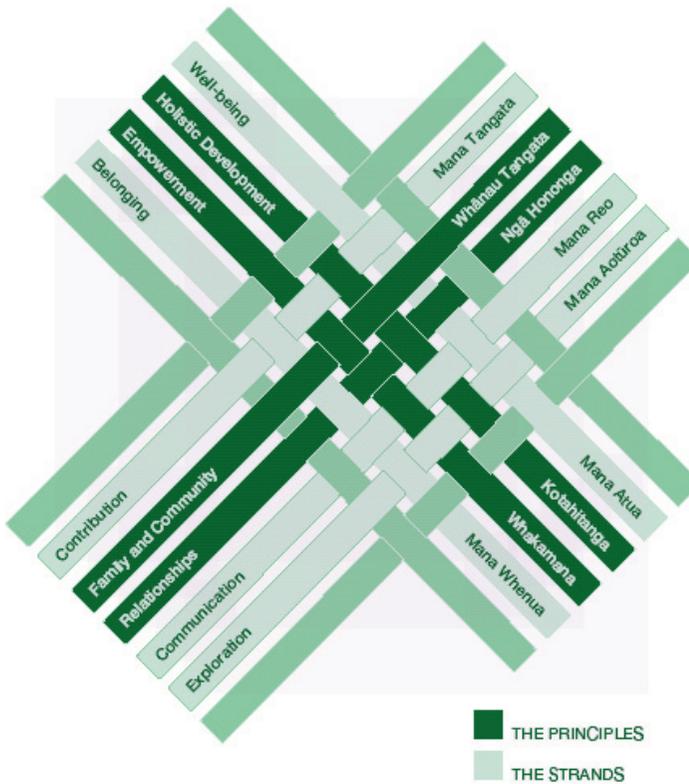


FIGURE 2. *Te Whariki*  
(New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996)

*Te Whariki* takes an asset-oriented view of teachers, children, and community in other ways. The curriculum provides “examples of experiences which help to meet these outcomes” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 49) and poses reflective questions for educators. The aim of these supports is not to direct teaching activities, but to stimulate discussion and assist in the development of local curricula. In this way, teachers are trusted to be thoughtful. In addition, *Te Whariki* views children as “competent and confident learners and communicators” who can “make a valued contribu-

tion to society” (p. 9), and the curriculum places importance on “the social context within which children are cared for and learning takes place” (p. 7). *Te Whariki* respects the culture of each child’s community and is the first bicultural curriculum in New Zealand for it contains curriculum for Maori immersion ECE services.

However, the Reggio Emilia approach, *Te Whariki*, or any other approach cannot be transplanted from one locale to another (e.g., Italy or New Zealand to Ontario). An ethical curriculum requires that it be developed *in situ*. A step towards this is through a critical reading of curricula that asks educators to consider diverse ways of addressing problems. In this way, Reggio Emilia and other “foreign” curricula can be placed next to the local curriculum, which helps to make the configurations of each more apparent. When the local curriculum is no longer taken-for-granted as the only way to proceed, new possibilities for curricula can materialize. If curricula are considered as cultural products, then the reason for this becomes apparent. Bhabha (1994) argues that the juxtaposition of different cultures creates gaps at the interstices between cultures. It is here where the novel may emerge. The same process can happen with curriculum.

While the process is productive, it is also destabilizing as more questions than answers might initially emerge. Yet, these questions must be addressed, for ECE in the Minority World has supplied solutions before the problems have been explored (Moss, 2005). One of these solutions is efficiency. In Stein’s (2001) terms, efficiency as an end unto itself obscures the vital questions of social values and diversity. This obfuscation, she posits, is a political tool:

Political leaders often prefer to put the debates that engage our most important and contested values into a supposedly neutral measuring cup. They do so to mask the underlying differences in values and purposes, and to dampen political disagreements. They seek the consensus they need and the political protection they want by transforming conflict over purpose into discussion of measures, and in the process they hide and evade differences about values and goals. (p. 198)

We live in turbulent times. Governments are running scared from changes brought about by globalization, and in the face of unemployment and declining standards of living for the masses, governments are hiding behind the solution of efficiency in ECE (David, Raban, Ure, Gooch, Jago, & Barriere, 2000). Yet truly democratic governments must explore with their constituencies: What is ECE being efficient towards? What should be the aims of ECE? How can ECE accommodate diverse aims? The macro (i.e., social) responses to these questions may produce approaches to ECE that offer support to educators, children and communities, but then these questions need again to be taken up at a micro (i.e., classroom) level, as in the case of Reggio Emilia and *Te Whariki*. If these questions are not explored, if the deconstruction of ECE does not happen within the context of ECE

production, then its foundations are unethical. As such, an ethical productive/deconstructive process must be recursive and without end.

Ethical curricula allow teachers and children to be regarded as full ethical beings who collectively inform the curriculum and who don't shy away from the responsibility of responding to the presence of the other. Prescriptive curricula are limiting, because they "steal the struggle" (Hibbert, 2002) to enact pedagogical practices that are rooted in an ethical relationship between teachers, children, and community. The struggle is inherently ethical, however, for it acknowledges the complexity of teaching, learning, and living, as well as the alterity of the children for whom ECE is built. The struggle must therefore be preserved.

#### NOTES

1. The authors use the term morality, but the way they use it is suggestive of Cornell's (1992) definition of ethics.
2. Wien and Dudley-Marling wrote about the Ontario curricula for grades 1-8. At the time of their writing, *The Kindergarten Program, 1998* had not yet been released. *The Program*, however, is in keeping with the curriculum for grades 1-8.

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