What Happened to the Creative in the *Creative Curriculum*?

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Abstract

This empirically-grounded commentary questions the basis for New York City Public Schools' (NYCPS) adoption of the Teaching Strategies products—*the Creative Curriculum* (CC) and *Teaching Strategies GOLD*—as *the* mandated curriculum and assessment systems for early childhood education (ECE) programs administered by the New York City Public Schools. In an analysis shaped by our hybrid positionalities as early childhood educators, parents, policy makers, and researchers, we argue that this decision is a local case of neoliberalism's simultaneous narrowing of educational quality and a transfer of public funding into private hands under the guise of *the free market*. Our commentary, which is augmented by examples from our research and practice, begins with an overview of New York City's (NYC) ECE system, contextualized within national systems issues in ECE. This provides important framing for discussing the evolution of NYC's ECE curricula and assessment as the city expanded its public preschool programs. We end by considering how U.S. ECE was ensnared by the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), sounding a call to action for scholars, advocates, and educators to mobilize against a (seemingly) unassailable GERM through organizing and coalition-building.

Keywords

Early childhood education, curriculum, assessment, policy, neoliberalism

What Happened to the Creative in the *Creative Curriculum*?

> *Elodia:* Personally, I like *Creative Curriculum*. For one, it's all in the title. You are creative in your curriculum. You are able to—it wasn't like how… everything with TS GOLD or MTS or whatever it's called, that it's like everything is almost structured. You click on the study, and then your lesson plans are—
>
> *Accsalia:* Generated.
>
> —A Conversation with Head Start Teachers, 2019

This excerpt comes from a focus group conversation with Head Start teachers in Chicago, which encapsulates some of the key issues we discuss in this empirically-informed commentary on the New York City (NYC) Public Schools' decision to require early childhood education (ECE) programs it runs or funds to use *the Creative Curriculum* and the accompanying *Teaching Strategies GOLD* assessment system, perhaps the most widely used, commercial ECE curriculum and assessment package in the U.S. (Teaching Strategies, 2023). This consequential policy decision by the nation's largest school district is both a case example of the Global Education Reform Movement's (GERM) operations within ECE and a cautionary illustration of the close relationship between GERM and financial interests.

By empirically-informed, we mean that this commentary is shaped by a commitment to evidence and accuracy over ideology and

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opinion. While we have clear points of view, these are rooted in experiences and observations from our respective practice as educators, through informal conversations with students and colleagues in different contexts, by pooling our knowledge of the research on this curriculum, and via formal studies we have conducted with educators who are living the consequences of policy decisions made about them. Put another way, if the evidence base for the NYC Public Schools's decision was stronger, our commentary on it would be unnecessary.

We begin our discussion with an overview of ECE in the U.S. to suggest why the NYC case may have applicability to other areas of the U.S.—and potentially other national contexts. Next, we provide a brief developmental sketch of the *Creative Curriculum* (CC) and what happened to the creative aspects of the curriculum (in brief, Teaching Strategies is owned by a private equity firm). However, our purpose is not just to raise attention to corporatism in ECE, and to question whether profit motives belong in early childhood, but it is also to issue a call to action for educators, scholars, advocates, and families to join together in the complex work of building coalitions advocating for alternatives to education reforms that are cover for transfers of public funds into private hands, with no demonstrable benefit for children, educators, and society.

A Brief Overview of Early Care and Education in the U.S.

In truth, it is a convenience to refer to ECE in the U.S. as if it is uniform, when in fact early childhood education is a hodgepodge of federal, state, and local public funding and regulations resting on a shaky foundation of private, mostly for-profit programs, with the bulk of the sector's funding coming from fees parents pay for child care as a service (the educationally-oriented might call this tuition; Cochran, 2007). To provide a sense of this complexity, a little more explanation is needed. Perhaps the most well-known federal ECE program is Head Start, which has specific eligibility requirements, among these, family income below the federal poverty level, experiencing homelessness, and/or meeting eligibility guidelines for early childhood special education. Head Start is administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), which provides grants that mostly go directly to community-based organizations or local governments. Another major source of national funding comes from the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), which subsidizes childcare costs for families who meet income guidelines. The CCDF is also administered by DHHS but through an entirely different administrative structure that runs through states' health departments, which monitor child care programs' compliance with health and safety regulations.

The U.S. Department of Education is also involved in ECE because of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*'s provisions for Early Intervention (infants and toddlers, birth through 3-years) and Early Childhood Special Education (3-to-5-years). In most states, Early Intervention operates separately from Early Childhood Special Education. Even the U.S. Department of Agriculture has a hand in ECE through its Child and Adult Care Food Program, a key source of funding for programs' nutrition services. Further complicating matters, increasing numbers of states and cities are developing their own ECE systems (Friedman-Kraus, 2024; Karoly et al., 2016). What is key to understand is that what some call a nonsystem has developed with minimal coordination among

administrative agencies, resulting in sometimes competing policy objectives, different regulatory requirements, *cultures*, and resulting fissures within the field (Gallagher et al., 2004; Jones, 2023; Nagasawa, 2020). It may be no surprise that creating more coherent, articulated, and adequately funded ECE systems has been a longstanding dream for early childhood educators in the U.S. (Barnett, 1993; Jones, 2023; the White House, 2002).

Seeking ECE's Holy Grail in New York City

In 2014, NYC Mayor de Blasio announced Pre-K for All, which promised to "expand pre-k to more than 51,000" children across the city – over twice the number of children who had attended these programs the prior year (NYC Office of the Mayor [Mayor's Office], 2014). While press releases are necessarily vague, the statement alludes to the Mayor's Office working with the NYC Department of Education (DOE) and "other city agencies," such as offices within the NYC Health Department (Mayor's Office, 2014). In 2017 the initiative expanded to include 3K for All, which moved the majority of ECE programs that had been administered by the NYC Administration for Children's Services in what had been called Early Learns – Early Head Start (infants and toddlers), Head Start (ages 3-5), federally-funded contracted child care (including family child care), and NYC-funded preschool (Memorandum of Understanding, 2019).

Curricula and Assessment

As a part of Pre-K for All, the DOE developed *Units of Study*, which were aligned with *NYS Early Learning Standards* and the federal Head Start *Early Learning Outcomes Framework*. With the launch of 3K for All, the DOE developed *Explorations*, a separate curricular framework for three-year-olds, later adding *Connections* (infant/toddler) and *Let's Play!* (family child care) curricula. These resources were translated into the 11 languages most commonly spoken in NYC and were free to all programs. The curricula provided guidance about environment, culturally responsive booklists, routines, interactions and investigations, and scope and sequence, with the intention that each curricula would be used flexibly and responsively in a wide range of settings and communities (Frazier, 2023; New York City Public Schools [NYCPS], 2024a).[1] Following a randomized controlled trial (2013-2015) using *Building Blocks* math curriculum and associated professional learning/coaching, the DOE's curricula were supplemented with *Building Blocks* (Mattera et al., 2018). These curricula were supported with professional learning, led by instructional coaches and social workers, in which teachers and site leaders were encouraged to build relationships with other educators in their communities (NYCPS, 2024a).

As might be expected in this kind of large-scale, politicized curricular implementation, the accompanying question often raised is, *What are children learning?* While an understandable question, assessment in ECE is a fraught topic among educators and researchers about which approaches yield the *best* information, in essence whether teachers'

[1] In 2024 the NYC DOE "rebranded" itself as the NYC Public Schools (Chiusano, 2024).

observations can be trusted or whether *objective*, direct measurements are preferable, arguments that might be understood as a "chimera of validity," complex technical-ideological debates that have no single, simple answer—anathema in the political sphere (Ackerman & Coley, 2012; Baker, 2013; Perry & Meisels, 1996). The compromise in NYC was an assessment detente that allowed programs to choose from among the most commonly used ECE authentic assessments (ones that consider demonstrated development and learning within the context of curricula and classrooms; Leong et al., 2004): *the Work Sampling System*, *Child Observation Record*, and *Teaching Strategies GOLD* (NYCPS, 2024b).

New Mayor, New Priorities

In New York City, as with some other large cities' school districts, the public schools are under "mayoral control." In general, this speaks to direct influence by mayors' offices over schools through appointed chief executive officers and school boards, in contrast with the majority of public schools in the U.S., which are governed by elected school boards who oversee schools' operations (Lipman, 2011; New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2024). Therefore, when new mayors are elected, they bring their priorities with them. Such was the case with Bill de Blasio's successor, Eric Adams, who campaigned on post-pandemic economic recovery, revitalizing social life, policing, and a perspective on schooling from "birth to profession" (Fitsimmons et al., 2022; Zimmer, 2021). One of Mayor Adams's key education initiatives was NYC Reads, a "historic curriculum shift [...] that will bring proven science-of-reading and phonics-based methods to all of our public-school students" (Office of the Mayor, 2023, para. 2). The initiative included the Bright Starts in Early Childhood Programs, which centered on adopting the CC and its accompanying *Teaching Strategies GOLD* (GOLD) assessment system (para. 6).

What is the Creative Curriculum?

The CC's origins are in its primary creator Diane Trister Dodge's experiences as education coordinator with a Head Start program in rural Mississippi in 1966 (Dodge, 2023). In a recent talk given at Yale University she explained images of building the programs from the "ground up,"

> The teachers and community were so excited about Head Start and built their own equipment [...] you can see [referring to a photo of a playground] how creative communities were [...] It really was a Civil Rights program, and it really was an empowering program (Dodge, 2023, 5:50-6:10; 6:15-6:18).

Because of the War on Poverty's ethos of "maximum feasible participation," that is, community members having a say in decisions affecting them, community members were hired as program staff and teachers (Kagan, 2002). This was the impetus for Dodge's creation of a "training program" that provided, "a picture [...] about how young children learn and how you set up an environment [...] every aspect of teaching [preschoolers]" (Dodge, 2023, 7:40-7:50).

In 1970 Dodge moved to Washington, DC and, in her work with Head Start teachers there, noticed how often she was helping them reorganize their classrooms to reduce "behavior problems [...] the next day teachers would say, 'Oh my gosh, the children's behavior changed overnight, just by how we had set up, reorganized'" (Dodge, 2023, 10:49-11:14). Dodge took before and after photographs of this work and presented these in slide shows to other educators. Based upon audience interest, she developed a film strip called, "Room

Arrangement as a Teaching Strategy" (Dodge, 2023).

Unable to get interest from educational publishers, she directly marketed it "pretending" that there was a company called Teaching Strategies (Dodge, 2023). Ultimately Teaching Strategies developed CC texts for supervisors, professional developers, and teachers (Dodge & Godhammer, 1988; Dodge et al., 1988; Dodge et al., 2000; Dodge et al., 2002; Dombo et al., 1997), including an assessment called the CC *Developmental Continuum Assessment System* [Developmental Continuum], which rested on teachers' documented observations and focused, ongoing collection of work samples illustrating children's development in areas like language and literacy, mathematics, social and emotional development (Dodge et al, 2001). The Developmental Continuum is the predecessor of the GOLD assessment announced as a part of the Bright Starts initiative. By 2023 Teaching Strategies called the CC "the most widely used preschool program in the nation" (Teaching Strategies, 2023).

A Slippery Research Foundation

Mayor Adams's announcement of Bright Starts called the CC a "research-based program" (Mayor's Office, 2023, para. 6). However its research base, as is often the case in education, is far less certain. While Teaching Strategies (2013) self-published an "independent," "Gold Standard," "Effectiveness Study," the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (2013) analysis concluded that the CC had "no discernible effects" on key early literacy skills, specifically "oral language," "print knowledge," and "phonological processing" (p. 1). A later Brookings Institute synthesis found an "overall lack of empirical support" for the CC, although this review importantly noted the limited number of studies included in their analysis (Phillips et al., 2017, p. 40). The company's marketing effectiveness has obscured a research base still in its infancy.

Early Childhood Educators' Analyses

What is missing in top-down debates among researchers and policy makers about the *right* curricula and assessments (and how to get teachers to implement these with fidelity), are bottom-up policy analyses from educators. To provide a sense of these, we share educators' perspectives from two separate studies, one conducted in 2018-2019 with Head Start teachers in Chicago and another, currently underway, with early childhood educators from across NYC. Returning to the 2019 focus group conversation that opened our paper,

> *Elodia:* [...] With *Creative Curriculum*, you were able to become creative. You were able to put your own spin and twist and things on that.... I wouldn't say fidelity, but— [2]
>
> *Accsalia:* It is fidelity.
>
> *Carmen:* [...] We know that *Creative Curriculum* and MTS [My Teaching Strategies is the online user interface] is because of the funders...
>
> *Louisa:* [...] We have to generate so many reports and documentation.
>
> *Accsalia:* Exactly. It's like they base everything around it, so when an observer comes out, that's what they look for. They look for the question of

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

> the day, which is a very limited question. It's like, what? Then you're expected to do the [curriculum] web design off of that.[3]
>
> *Diana:* Yeah. They want to see the web.
>
> *Elodia:* Kids lose interest real quick.
>
> *Accsalia:* It's like a tracking tool.

Their discussion centered on how the CC has changed over time—and their assessment of these changes and their effects on their teaching and children's learning.

From its humble beginnings as a film strip, the CC has shifted online, blurring the distinction between curriculum and assessment. The reports these teachers were discussing are based upon ratings of children's development for 38 objectives in nine areas: social-emotional, physical, language, English language acquisition, cognitive, literacy, science and technology, mathematics, and the arts. Many of the objectives have additional indicators. For instance, "Demonstrates positive approaches to learning" has five indicators: (1) attends and engages, (2) persists; (3) solves problems; (4) shows curiosity and motivation; and (5) shows flexibility and inventiveness in thinking (Teaching Strategies, 2024a). These ratings are completed three times per year, and in most programs there is a requirement that documentation (e.g., photographs, observation notes, or scanned work samples) are uploaded into the system to substantiate the ratings. While there is a logic to this process that is in keeping with common notions of best practice in ECE, their discussion also raises important questions about what this system is really for: information for teaching and program improvement or surveillance?

The DOE Way?

This issue of constant monitoring and surveillance undermining teachers' and children's engagement in learning is echoed in the current study with teachers in NYC, which seeks to understand their experiences of the Bright Starts initiative. In interviews with 25 NYC PreK for All teachers, they reported missing crucial moments of interaction with children because the teachers were so focused on the need to capture data for the required GOLD. For instance, Rachel shared in an interview, "I feel like I'm less engaged with them because I'm focusing on taking all the data every second of every day, and it puts a lot of stress on me [...]." In Marcela's evaluation, the curriculum is,

> [...] hard to follow and not engaging. The [provided] books' plots are so convoluted. Kids lose interest. [...] They are too long. The level is so high for PreK. I use them but have to paraphrase them. I know that misses the point of "follow the print" and make the "text-to-word connection." I try to at least use one book of mine that I know would be a hit. Those are my secret books...the ones the kiddos love. And forget about the kids that are not speaking English. They really struggle with those long incoherent books. Sorry, it just makes me so sad.

[3] A curriculum web is a visual tool for brainstorming and planning topical explorations with children. These can be a way of assessing children's prior knowledge of a topic, teaching children to think about connections, and exploration of what they would like to learn about (see Helm & Katz, 2001)

Marcela raised multiple, important points. First, the DOE's previous curriculum was available in multiple languages, while the CC is only offered in Spanish and English—a decades-old concern raised about universal curricular-assessment approaches like the CC that are not developed to sustain and honor emergent multilingual learners' cultural and linguistic assets (Michael-Luna & Heimer, 2011).

Second, Marcela's felt need to use "secret books" suggests how prioritization of assessment can make teaching incidental—or subversive—a theme shared by Alex,

> I try to sneak their favorite things, but I'm not going to lie, I'm in constant fear that my director will say, why are you doing that? Also, I feel tense about it, like I'm doing something wrong by adapting. My IC [instructional coordinator, a coach from the DOE] or director may not approve, and I feel torn between doing the curriculum or doing my thing. My director was very clear that she is afraid that the DOE feels we are not following what they asked. So I don't want her to get mad."

Mica offered an additional perspective on implementation costs,

> I feel like there are times we think about what it means for the teacher to have to follow something so scripted. And I know it is stripping me of my brain power, like my value. But have we thought about what it does to the kids? They are learning to accept something incoherent, irrelevant, because "I say so." I think that is what kills me about this. That the kids are losing those aha moments, you know? The ability to tell us what they love, what they want to learn…Like when we did the ball unit and we asked them what they wanted to learn about ball, a girl told me, "I don't want to learn about balls." What was I supposed to say? "Too bad?" That is what is the main issue.

What the teachers in these two studies, from different times and places, have shared triangulates with other research. In Kim's (2016) analysis, GOLD changed the nature of teachers' roles from being developmental guides of young children to deskilled instruments of what Shore and Wright (1999) called "audit culture" (for related analyses see Michael-Luna & Heimer, 2011; Peters & Graves, 2021). This compliance orientation, "the DOE way" (Peters & Graves, 2021, p. 28), not only diverts teachers' limited time and attention away from teaching during the school day, it can result in "time creep" (i.e., entering documentation outside of work hours), threats to validity (Cabell et al., 2009), increased cognitive load, and, as Marcela, Alex, and Mica suggest, exacerbated pre-existing workplace stress that can have multiplied negative effects on teachers and children (Hindeman & Bustamante, 2019).

Discussion: ECE and the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)

To this point, our focus has been on describing one curricular-policy decision in one locale; however, the answer to our guiding question: What happened to the creative in the Creative Curriculum? is best understood as a case study of the GERM at work. Our earlier account of the CC's development is incomplete. While Teaching Strategies may have begun as a "pretend" company in the 1970s, it was sold in 2018 to Summit Partners, a private equity firm, who saw early childhood as a "distinct

opportunity to make a profound impact on educational, social and economic outcomes both for individuals and society as a whole" (Summit Partners, 2024). In 2021, NASDAQ announced, "KKR to Snap up Teaching Strategies" (Bose, 2021).

What is Private Equity and What is It Doing in ECE?

Private equity firms, which control more than $6 trillion in the U.S., are companies that purchase businesses, restructure them, and then resell them to provide profits to their investors, which may include pension funds (Morran & Petty, 2022). In recent years, private equity firms' involvement in the *ECE* sector has increased, with eight of the largest child care chains in the U.S. owned by private equity—and growing while the rest of the sector may be contracting (Goldstein, 2022; Harris, 2024; Haspel, 2023). As we mentioned earlier in this paper, the majority of ECE in the U.S. is privately operated, with high costs, low wages to staff, and low profitability (Helburn et al., 1995). Why would these firms be interested in what is generally accepted to be a small margin sector?

Suzanne Helburn, an economist who has studied child care, explains that ECE is an example of a "market failure," that is, a "failure to produce what consumers want at low cost" (Helburn et al., 1995, p. 17). One solution to market failures is increasing public funding, which in ECE could address tensions that exist between providing high quality programs (which largely mean the high costs of adequately staffed programs that pay professionals adequately) at rates that parents can afford (Helburn et al., 1995; Lash & McMullen, 2008). With costs comparable to college tuition, very few families can afford child care out of pocket (Goldstein, 2022).

Private equity's interest becomes clearer when considering increased public funding (federal, state, and local) for ECE in the U.S. (approximately $13.37 billion in 2023, Friedman-Kraus et al., 2024). While some of this funding goes to school districts and non-profit organizations, ECE lacks the facilities-funding mechanisms that public schools have, making a "mixed delivery system" necessary—meaning that expanding services requires that administrative agencies contract with community based organizations, which can include non-profits, private schools, sole proprietor child care businesses, and the large child care chains (Garver et al., 2023; Nagasawa, 2020). Viewed in this light, ECE may be becoming the "cash cow" (Harris, 2024) that a 1977 *New York Times* column presciently suggested it would be, explaining that Kinder-Care's founder envisioned it being, "to the preschool child what McDonald's was to fast food and Holiday Inn to the salesman's one-night stand" (Lelyveld, 1977, para. 2). The column goes on to illustrate the entrepreneurial mindset of "the Colonel Sanders of child care for profit," Perry Mendel, who saw in it, "…a great captive market….manufacturers may even pay Kinder-Care for the right to test market their products in its centers" (Lelyveld, 1977, para. 3, para. 6). However, today's reality differs from Mendel's vision. Teaching Strategies is not paying to have its products tested. It is being paid to test children.

However, just how much Teaching Strategies is receiving from NYC taxpayers is unclear—let alone how much public funding it receives from Head Start, states' preschools, and private child care across the country. However, there is some basis for considering this. Per-child licensing costs for GOLD, which do not include prices for curricular materials, are publicly available for some states, for example

$11.45 in Colorado and $15.05 in Vermont (Colorado Department of Education, 2024; Teaching Strategies, 2024b). Because the per-child cost in NYC is not public, we are cautious about making estimations, but the NYCPS (2023) projected that school year 2025 would enroll between 118,700 and 127,300 children, with a capacity for 140,000 children.

Neoliberalism and GERM

In our analysis, which we assure is leading towards practical ends, the current developments in NYC are best seen as a local illustration of global political-economic forces that are often described as neoliberalism and its expression in global education reform movements (GERM). Neoliberalism is a term that is widely used but is under-discussed. In our understanding this speaks to a contemporary ideological kaleidoscope of sometimes paradoxical elements: libertarian anti-governmentalism, conservatism's nostalgia for social order, and contemporary liberalism's progressive visions of social improvement through scientific and technical innovation–all bound together by an underlying faith that free market logics and trickle-down economics will lift all boats (Gledhill, 2005; Lipman, 2011). In U.S. education this can be seen in calls to liberate educators from the burdens of over-regulation through the creation of charter schools, improvement of traditional public education through standards, accountability, and increased competition, which in practice is often a transfer of public funding into private hands (Baker & Miron, 2015; Lipman, 2011).

Importantly, Pauline Lipman (2011), analyzing school reforms in Chicago, illustrates how neoliberal ideology pervades policies that are often thought of as separate but which, instead, act in ensemble telling tales of failure, decay, and danger: housing, economic development, policing, and education–with the end result being undermined social institutions, privatization of services, and racial containment. Gledhill (2005), writing of São Paolo, notes that these dynamics are often masked in celebrations of multicultural participation, inclusion, and empowerment but with no underlying structural change. While seemingly far away from ECE's children's gardens, it bears remembering that ECE, while marginal within the broader GERM project, has long been within the education reform gaze, take for instance school readiness was goal one of the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994* and the World Bank's (2019) interest in early childhood as the "foundations of human capital" (p. 3, see also Penn, 2002). On a final note, in interesting contrast with more typical curricular "push down" from elementary school into ECE (Harmon & Viruru, 2018), Teaching Strategies has begun marketing GOLD for vertical integration with kindergarten-third grade (Teaching Strategies, 2024c, 2024d).

Call to Action

It would be understandable to see our account of the CC as another example of neoliberal, capitalist, and GERM inevitability—and in honesty we have had similar feelings. However, the opportunity to come together from across institutions to discuss these issues has clarified for us that the (seemingly) unassailable GERM has been a movement of people, albeit often powerful ones. Therefore, it can be resisted through persistent organizing, negotiating differences of perspective, and coalition-building. Towards this end, we present two broad and related principles for consideration.

First, those of us who seek to organize must help each other to disrupt ritualized

interaction: role-performative, sloganeering, and anti-dialogic exchanges that construct good and bad guys, winners and losers (Freire, 2004; Goffman, 2017; Nagasawa, 2020). Examples of this idea can be found in the comments sections across social media, ones where each side's arguments can be predicted almost verbatim. Our case example also runs the risk of falling into this trap. Within our group, some of us are proponents of the NYCPS's old curriculum which, based upon direct experience with it, allowed for flexibility, was translated into multiple languages, and was free—but it had not yet been researched.

The DOE's argument, gleaned from meetings with department officials (one of which lasted three hours), was that the CC, as a "research-based curriculum," would promote equity for children, who often move and have to adjust to an entirely different curriculum in their new setting. We could, as we did earlier, respond with evidence that belies claims about the CC and GOLD's research base, its limited cultural/linguistic responsiveness, and concerns about curricula-by-algorithm, but this either/or debate leads to a circular impasse, which brings us to a second proposition.

This work must be anchored in difficult commitments to resist one-best-way, purity-oriented stances that often derail organizing efforts (Lakoff, 2014; Sen, 2003). Linguist George Lakoff's (2014) popular translation of his research on ideology and language discusses foci that divide activists: socioeconomics (primary focus on class), identity politics (infighting over pieces of the pie), environmentalism (Earth first), civil liberties (protecting against threats to freedom), spirituality (from observant to atheist), and antiauthoritarianism (resistance to everything). Within power politics, advocacies that identify more strongly with one or others of these, such as civil liberties or environmental groups, rarely mobilize their members for others' causes. What inhibits this collaboration?

According to Lakoff (2014), it is a failure to see how concerns for seemingly discrete issues actually share a common vision of a nurturing society. Additionally, Rinku Sen (2003) notes that traditions in organizing, for instance labor movements, have sexist and racist roots that must be addressed but which adds additional complexity to the trust building needed to sustain collective action. What if, recognizing that school reforms can be viewed as part of a wider neoliberal agenda (Lipman, 2011), different advocacies mobilized their people for affordable housing, economic development, safety for all residents, education, and civic engagement?

Final Thoughts: Organizing for What?

However, the key questions that must always be addressed are: organizing for what, who else needs to be involved, how will priorities be set, how will these be communicated with various constituencies, and how will progress be gauged? Because we are a small group, our final thoughts are in no way intended as complete answers but rather as starting points for additional, action-oriented, conversations. To the first question, *what*?

There is existing work that can be built upon. For instance, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE, 2022) has developed the *Early Educator Engagement and Empowerment Toolkit* (Toolkit) for early childhood educators—the "best spokespeople about the conditions under which they work and what they need in order to thrive" (p. 4). The Toolkit provides talking points and recommendations for many of the major issues facing the field: understanding who makes up

the ECE workforce, racial disparities within the profession, barriers in professional pathways, working conditions they face, the role of public funding in ECE, and the need for better data (CSCCE, 2022). These talking points can be used to support local groups' advocacy, which we will illustrate with examples from our analysis.

Working Conditions

The Toolkit provides details about early childhood educators' working conditions that are related to our earlier discussion of the field's economics. For example, lack of funding often means no paid sick leave, vacation, retirement savings, and limited staffing. Our analysis suggests other ways working conditions are undermined in ECE through curricular and assessment policy decisions. Remembering some of the teachers' accounts of NYC's CC implementation: Rachel ("it puts a lot of stress on me"), Alex ("I'm in constant fear"), and Mica's ("it's stripping me of my brain power, like my value") experiences which are broader than any single curriculum or assessment and speak to the damaging potential to educators based upon how these are implemented (Frazier, 2023, 2024; Kim, 2016; Michael-Luna & Heimer, 2011; Peters & Graves, 2021). A common dilemma is that problems are relatively easy to generate, but identifying promising alternatives can be hard.

Humane Assessment

In the last year of Mayor De Blasio's term, the NYC DOE (2020) launched a one-year "Learning Stories Authentic Assessment Pilot," of a "narrative approach to assessment that acknowledges and welcomes teacher, child, and family perspectives" (NYC DOE, 2020). Unlike the major authentic assessments in use in the U.S., which have become data warehouses of decontextualized notes and work samples, Learning Stories use letters to children that describe and illustrate (photos and other documentation are included) what they were doing and share thoughts about where their learning may go next (Frazier, 2024). Furthermore, they are meant to be shared with children and their caregivers the day they are written. Because this may seem unfamiliar, it is worth sharing one letter in full,

> Dear Cecilia,
>
> During the Tuesday afternoon work time, you chose to go to the cozy loft. As you were looking out at the children from the loft, you noticed some cardboard, beads, and pipe cleaners in the art area. You came down and asked if you could join the activity. First, you sorted out the beads with the letters on them and strung them on to a pipe cleaner. Then, you made your pipe cleaner stick into the cardboard like a rainbow. Next, you decided to make bracelets for the children in the class. Children were so happy to receive your gifts. They each asked me to help them fasten the bracelet on their wrists. You were so thoughtful to use our materials to make gifts for the children. You have such a kind, generous, and joyful spirit, Cecilia. Thank you for being a loving member of the Hawthorn community.
>
> *What Learning is Happening Here?*
>
> As you strung the beads onto the pipe cleaner, you exercised the muscles in your hands. This will help you with your writing and drawing. The stronger your hand muscles get, the easier it will be for you to draw shapes and write letters. Cecilia, when you were doing this activity, you also focused for a long

> time—over 30 minutes! You kept on stringing beads to make bracelets. Developing the ability to focus and pay attention is an important part of becoming a student. Most of all, when you were doing this work, you showed that you care for your friends.
>
> *What's Next?*
>
> Cecilia, after they received your bracelets, many children became excited about stringing beads. I think I will look for more beads to add to our art area so we can continue to make jewelry and sculptures. I am also wondering if you might like to draw pictures or make cards for your friends and family.
>
> From,
>
> Helen (Frazier, 2024, p. 4)

Cecelia's mother read her the learning story that night and the next day, "her eyes were shining with recognition and pride" from being seen (p. 5). It was still early in the year and documenting her generosity was a wholly different kind of assessment—not just of one child's abilities but also of the classroom's developing culture and climate (Frazier, 2024). Unfortunately, the pilot project was interrupted by the pandemic and did not continue after the change in administrations.

Research Collectives

Concurrent with NYC's preschool expansion, the New York City Early Childhood Research Network (Network) formed. This is an unusual research-practice partnership (RPP), not only because of its focus on ECE but also because it is made up of the DOE, NYC Health Department, and researchers from across NYC to address questions emerging from the city's emerging ECE system, including pay inequities (Mavrides, 2022); educators' well-being (Nagasawa, 2022), and teachers' experiences with authentic assessment (Peters & Graves, 2021). Those of us who were members of the Network had begun conversations with the NYC DOE about how to draw lessons (experiential and outcomes-oriented) from the Learning Stories pilot.

While the pandemic also affected the Network, along with the precarities of grant funding, among the observations we have made from being part of this RPP is the untapped potential of working across institutional and methodological boundaries to address questions of concern to educators and policy makers. In addition to studying the Learning Stories pilot as a potential alternative approach, there were important questions about the implementation of the NYC DOE-developed curricula, and there are currently important questions about the implementation, experiences, and outcomes of the Bright Starts initiative that would include not just the common Is it working? question but also working for whom/not, how, why, under what conditions and so forth that should be pursued through multi-method, participatory, design-based research, which emphasizes research *with*, rather than on or about (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016).

Teacher Power

Finally, the CSCCE's (2022) Toolkit culminates with reminders about ECE's traditions of collective action, such as the Worthy Wage Campaign (WWC) which focused on: 1) creating collective voice; 2) agitating for tangible respect (i.e., compensation and benefits); and 3) promoting access to affordable, high-quality ECE for all children (WWC, 1993). The Toolkit also highlights contemporary organizing happening in Washington, D.C. (under3dc.org)

and North Carolina (ncearlyeducationcoalition.org). In NYC, People's Early Childhood began organizing following Mayor Adams's attempt to eliminate early childhood instructional coaches and social workers who played important roles supporting the city's early childhood educators, children, and their families. Additionally, we are aware of ECE on the Move, an alliance of 600 home based early childhood educators (eceonthemove.org), New Yorkers United for Child Care, a parent-led group organizing for free child care in NYC (https://www.united4childcare.org/), and the Brooklyn Coalition of Early Childhood Programs, which formed as a support network during the pandemic (https://www.bcecp.org/; Pinto-McKeen et al., 2023). We suspect that similar grassroots organizing is occurring elsewhere across the U.S. Imagine if these groups were connected with each other. What if they were also coordinating with national early childhood advocacy organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Child Care Aware, or the Children's Defense Fund? What if this developing ECE coalition was allying with other collectives, such as Black Lives Matter, the Poor People's Campaign, or the Human Rights Campaign? We are under no illusion that any of this would come about simply or painlessly but as farmworker organizer Larry Itliong argued about rights and justice, "You've got to make that come about. They are not going to give it to you." (Guillermo, 2015).

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