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# Prekindergarten Policy and Politics: Discursive (Inter)play on Readying the Ideal Learner

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Prekindergarten Policy and Politics:

Discursive (Inter)play on Readyng the Ideal Learner

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### Abstract

This chapter illustrates how Florida's voluntary prekindergarten education (VPK) policy forwards a particular conception of prekindergarten/ers and the implications of such policies in facilitating socially just and kind programs through critical discourse analysis (CDA). This study uses assemblage policy as the theoretical framework and is situated amid concerns about neoliberal influences on policy negotiations concerning prekindergarten/ers. Key, exemplary, and authoritative policy texts are analyzed using a form of CDA called critical rhetorical analysis. Analysis of key and exemplary texts illuminate terms around which the attempt to persuade was strong: *high quality*, *age appropriate progress*, *readiness*, and *literacy*.

Authoritative texts and early childhood education literature provide insight into related political negotiations. Findings suggest contradictory interplay between policy documents including creation of the term age appropriate progress, conveyance of a narrow band of meaning and associated goals for the terms readiness and literacy, and misuse of the term *screenner*. Further, disproportionate emphasis on emergent literacy standards was found to narrow conceptualizations of the ideal prekindergarten learner as ready to progress appropriately towards literacy performance. With the ideal learner constructed out of privileged conceptions of readiness, the capability of these policies for facilitating socially just and kind programs is questionable.

*Keywords:* Neoliberalism, early childhood education, education reform, education policy, critical discourse analysis, learner identity, social justice, ethic of care

### Prekindergarten Policy and Politics:

#### Discursive (Inter)play on Readyng the Ideal Learner

This chapter illustrates how Florida's voluntary prekindergarten education (VPK) policy forwards a particular conception of prekindergarten/ers. Within this chapter, the authors utilized critical and poststructural methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to illustrate how the VPK policy assemblage not only shapes VPK but also shapes a conception of the ideal VPK learner. The relationship between conceptions of the child, normalization, and expectations of students has been an object of social concern in the context of early childhood education (ECE) (Woodrow & Press, 2007). Since the early 20th century institutionalization of kindergarten in public schools, educational emphasis has changed from social and moral development to academic instruction (Russell, 2011). With playtime replaced with time spent completing worksheets, practicing math drills, and bubbling answers on standardized tests (Hemphill, 2006), kindergarten has become the new first grade (Tyre, 2006). Meanwhile, electronic media increasingly shape children's early literacy and play experiences to reconceptualize learning and children as techno-literate netizens of the new millennium and their families as an enabling communications and entertainment hub (Luke, 1999).

The academic press that became evident in the 1950s has been reignited in recent decades due to the emphasis on accountability (i.e., use of high stakes tests to evaluate student learning) (Jeynes, 2006). Furthermore, when accountability in the form of test results frame children's performance as success or failure, it also shapes children's schooling experiences and identity as learners (Bradbury, 2013; Polakow, 2007). Bradbury (2013) examined how England's assessment system for preschool children facilitates student identities. She asserted expectations

embedded in the assessment system communicate the basis for reconstructing children's identity into a particular type of learner. That identity type is reified in classrooms where boundaries of good/poor performances establish who is perceived as a good/poor student. Bradbury's study revealed how assessment and related school-based activities construct what is considered normal and appropriate in prekindergarten.

The concept of readiness is embedded in conceptions of ECE, learners, and learning. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009b), a broad definition of readiness that considers all areas of children's learning and development is needed in discussions of ECE. We would add broad definitions of various types of readiness could be the starting point in discussing readiness. Distinct yet related types of readiness include readiness of the student (for learning, to enter school), community, families, and organizations. Readiness of the organization encompasses school readiness, but school readiness is not limited to the condition or actions of schools. "School readiness, in the broadest sense, is about children, families, early environments, schools, and communities" (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004, p. 42). According to NAEYC (2009b),

. . . discussions of school readiness must consider at least three critical factors: (1) the diversity of children's early life experiences as well as inequity in experiences; (2) the wide variation in young children's development and learning; and (3) the degree to which school expectations of children entering kindergarten are reasonable, appropriate, and supportive of individual differences. (p. 1)

Shifting and conflicting conceptions of children, their family, and pre/kindergarten beg the question of what prekindergarten/ers is/are en route to becoming through the shaping forces of policy.

The policy process is “a multidimensional and value-laden state activity that exists in context” (Fitz, Davies, & Evans, 2006, p. 34), and results in policy discourses critical policy researchers analyze. Critical policy analysis approach policy as power negotiations that privilege some voices and silence others, distributing material and social consequences inequitably (i.e., Apple, 2008, 2012; Ball, 1993, 1997; Hyatt, 2013; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009; Liasidou, 2011; Stein, 2004). Policy processes and discourses are social and cultural constructions forged through systems of reasoning and taken-for-granted assumptions (Lee, 2010). Circulating in education policy discourses are assumptions of neoliberal reasoning such as the state as facilitator of the educational marketplace and parents as “good” economic actors who can access and navigate it (Perez & Cannella, 2011). Neoliberal emphasis on individual, rational actors tends to ignore how historically oppressive societal structures prevent participation. Methods of CDA can expose dissembling language such as giving misleading impressions when framing an issue or justifying some manner of addressing it (Seymour, 2013). CDA can also be used to explore how policy discourses construct identities through “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1977, p. 49 as cited in Ball, 1994, p. 21).

Critical policy analysis helps unravel conflicting education policy discourses that make it difficult to discern what is just or best for learners and illuminate concerns about morality. To analyze policy, Tronto (1993), Noddings (1999), and Sevenhuijsen (2004) have engaged the ethic of care as a moral and political concept. As an action, caring depicts values of attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, and meeting others’ needs (Tronto, 1993). According to Noddings (1999), social policy guided by care attempts to establish conditions under which caring flourishes. For example, the government would support groups in searching

for alternatives that work for them rather than expecting all groups to respond to the same policies in the same way. Last, Sevenhuijsen (2004) acknowledged policy texts develop from complex political compromises resulting in contradictions and inconsistencies within normative frameworks. She posited identifying ruptures in normative frameworks could create discursive spaces for considering the potential of the ethic of care (Sevenhuijsen, 2004).

### **Historical Policy Context for the Development of VPK in Florida**

During the 1990s and early 2000s, various education reform initiatives in ECE (i.e., standards-based reform) occurred nationally and internationally (Wood, 2007). Meanwhile, in Florida, education reforms under then Governor Jeb Bush became known as “Bush Reforms” (Shober, 2012, p. 564). Bush’s A+ Plan (1999) promoted high stakes testing, merit pay, and school grades. Following implementation of the A+ Plan came the national implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) promoted by his brother, then President George W. Bush (Borman & Dorn, 2007). Amidst a wave of neoliberal education reforms, bills advancing universal prekindergarten died in Florida’s legislature in 2001 and 2002. Universal prekindergarten was not part of the reform agenda, as was evident by the Legislature’s refusal to pass the bills (Hampton, 2004; Hartle & Ghazvini, 2014). Yet in 2002, voters approved a citizens’ initiative amending the state’s constitution to include a universal prekindergarten provision. Although the citizens’ initiative came amidst a web of Bush Reforms, it compelled Governor Bush and the Legislature to design and fund early learning for four-year-olds. Two years later, Governor Bush vetoed a bill that would enact the VPK program, and in a letter to Florida’s Secretary of State, he outlined concerns and recommended “a system concerned with performance standards, outcome measures, and a curriculum that facilitates early literacy” (Bush,

2004, para. 3). VPK was ultimately designed by the Legislature to fit within the context of Governor Bush's neoliberal reform agenda (Hartle & Ghazvini, 2014).

Once the Legislature provided Governor Bush with an acceptable bill establishing Florida's VPK program, an outcry emerged from the ECE community regarding use of the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) for program accountability. Barnett (2005), director of the National Institute of Early Education Research, argued Florida's policy makers took a "simple approach" to accountability and were wrong in assuming a single test could assess the quality of children's experiences in prekindergarten. He further argued these policies could unfairly punish programs serving the state's most vulnerable children. This concern was also expressed in a 2008 report from the Florida Legislator's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA). While the report found "children with disabilities, limited English proficiency, Hispanic and African American children showed the strongest benefit from participating in the VPK program" (p. 3), it also indicated "providers who serve high percentages of children eligible for free and reduced lunch, and those designated as Hispanics or with limited English proficiency, were more likely to be classified as low performing than providers who served other groups of children" (OPPAGA, 2008, p .9). Governor Bush's educational reforms were described as following a neoliberal mindset given their use of financial incentives for high performing schools (Lee, Borman, & Tyson, 2007).

The dynamics of the policy context described above provide a starting point for examining how discourses are constructed: (a) denial of normativity, (b) concealment, (c) self-evidence, (d) contradictions and inconsistencies resulting from the first three, and (e) compromises (Sevenhuijsen, 2004). Policy makers tend to uphold notions of value neutrality, present their work as objective, and neglect their responsibility to critically reflect on values and

morals they promote. Instead, they employ political rhetoric that scatters values and morals throughout policy texts, conceals them between the lines, and presents them as self-evident (Sevenhuijsen, 2004). In the following section, we situate this study amid concerns about the neoliberal influence on VPK policy negotiations concerning prekindergarten/ers and describe assemblage policy as the theoretical framework guiding our analysis.

### **Discursive Interplay: Assembling Policy through Disassembling**

Play in educational policy can be “productive play” amid negotiations and controversies, for in creation of a policy assemblage (assemblage/ing) of multiple texts, multiple actors play with their roles, each other, their contexts, and the policy itself (Koyama & Varenne, 2012, p. 157). Productive play is a perspective that eschews the view that policy process is simple linear implementation. Instead, policy arrangements involving large numbers of actors, with varying authorities and knowledges, interacting with the policy over time leaves room for “‘play’—or room for negotiation, interpretation, and selective appropriation” (Koyama & Varenne, 2012, p. 158). Our focus is on policy actors and the interplay of policy arrangements or assemblages prior to implementation.

The philosophical rhizome informing Koyama and Varenne’s (2012) analysis emerges from work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), which has been extended by DeLanda (2006). DeLanda (2006) articulated assemblage theory as an ontological stance through which to engage in analysis of social processes, and that the interactions of associated components, when recombined or replaced, provide more than its individual parts. Assemblage theory challenges traditional analytical approaches by focusing on how assemblages are historically contingent constructions from heterogeneous (texts, actors, events) and non-linear material (i.e., a veto letter) and expressive (i.e., the syntax of the language in the veto letter) formations. Through

CDA of central texts delineating VPK, we explore their interplay as evidence of negotiations among organizational actors that together assemble a discourse of the ideal VPK learner.

### **Rhetorical Analysis into Impetus and Inception**

To understand how VPK policies construct prekindergarten/ers we identified several types of policy texts: Key texts are influential in framing a discourse and spurring development of subsequent texts; exemplary texts clearly reflect a discourse or mode of thinking echoed in other texts; and authoritative texts impose a dominant definition or way of speaking about an idea and are generally supported by the power of law (Sevenhuijsen, 2004). This analysis utilized Florida's universal prekindergarten constitutional amendment (Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(b)) as a key text and Governor Bush's veto letter (Bush, 2004) as an exemplary text. Authoritative texts include Florida's VPK statutes (§§ 1002.51-1002.79, Fla. Stat., 2013), Florida Early Learning and Development Standards for Four-Year-Olds (FELDS) (DOE & Florida Office of Early Learning [OEL], 2011), and FLKRS Administration Manual (Pearson Education Inc. & DOE, 2012). This compilation of texts was analyzed using a form of CDA called critical rhetorical analysis (Winston, 2013).

Rhetorical analysis acknowledges persuasion as an important aspect of policy activity and focuses on forms of argumentation to persuade audiences to engage and respond as the author intends (Winston, 2013). Attributed to Aristotle, the central means by which argumentation unfolds is through persuasive appeals to *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. *Ethos* is an ethical appeal through credibility or authority; *pathos* is an attempt to invoke the audience's sympathies or reflect their imaginations; and *logos* is a logical appeal through reasoning (Weston, 1992). These persuasive approaches rely on a variety of rhetorical strategies; however, such communicative techniques can also weaken arguments (logical fallacies; faulty premises).

Initial readings of the constitutional amendment and veto letter pointed us to key terms and themes, signaling modes of communication and narrative conventions that help produce a hegemonic discourse (Sevenhuijsen, 2004). In the constitutional amendment below, we have italicized comments in parentheses and underlined key terms and phrases to illustrate what we viewed as central in the developing narrative:

Every four-year old child in Florida shall be provided by the State a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity . . . which shall be voluntary, high quality, (*fallacy of division: assuming the parts of the whole must have the properties of the whole*) free, and delivered according to professionally accepted standards (*Whose? When? To what extent?*). An early childhood development and education program . . . designed to address and enhance each child's ability to make age appropriate progress (*development and education program, but appropriate progress is based on age in connection to ability*) . . . in the development of language and cognitive capabilities and emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities . . . and such other skills as the Legislature may determine to be appropriate (*window for Bush's reforms*). (Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(b))

This amendment requires VPK to be “delivered according to professionally accepted standards.” The reference to professionally accepted standards begs the question of which professionals’ standards were to guide program delivery. Rather than include the entire veto letter, we present samples of text and analysis.

To further support his argument, Governor Bush (2004) alluded to research on high quality (“research tells us that only a high quality learning opportunity leads to improved educational outcomes” para. 3). This double rhetorical move demonstrates ethos by invoking research as an authority and pathos by provoking a sense of connectedness through the use of

“us.” In arguments from authority sources should be cited (Weston, 1992), and since they are not, the appeal to truth (logos) was weak. Even though the appeal to connection (“us”) continued in the form of “we” (“we must also make it possible for parents” para. 3), there was a shift in who was implicated in the collective. The shift from “us” (Bush, voters, and parents) to “we” (Bush and voters) excluded the parents. The interruption in the rhetorical strategy of speaking to parents from an insider’s perspective (pathos) weakened the appeal to their sense of affiliation or allegiance.

The rhetorical analysis of key and exemplary texts illuminated terms around which the attempt to persuade was strong: *high quality, age appropriate progress, readiness, and literacy*. Repetition of key terms, parallelism, is a rhetorical strategy supporting persuasion through familiarity of language (words, syntax). Furthermore, this analysis identified inconsistencies between the constitutional amendment and veto letter, and between concerns of experts representing professional organizations regarding skills ECE programs should develop. Inconsistencies and failings of argumentation in the veto letter can lead readers to doubt motives for advancing VPK as Governor Bush recommended. Also important to consider within assemblage theory framework is the historical context in which VPK was developed and initially implemented. Because VPK was designed during the accountability movement, terms repeated across texts are also evident in the language of NCLB (2002). For instance, there was backlash around the term high quality from educators who disagreed with NCLB’s emphasis on content over pedagogical knowledge in the definition of high-quality teaching (Porter-Magee, 2004). We return to the emphasis on high quality in the discussion of findings related to literacy.

Next, we turn to authoritative texts guiding implementation of VPK (statutes, standards, assessment) and refer to literature authored by academics and professionals in the field (i.e.,

position statements) to provide insight into related political negotiations. Dissembling language that surfaced among key and exemplary texts becomes more evident in analysis of authoritative texts in juxtaposition with academic and professional literature. From a CDA perspective, what dissembling language conceals is more important than how it occurs. What VPK policy conceals helps to illuminate what/who it constructs.

### **Assembling the Ideal VPK Learner: Appropriate, Ready, Literate!**

Dissembling language garners support for what policy (de)emphasizes in the early years of educating children in Florida. The most significant examples are seen in the interplay between policy documents including: (a) creation of the term age appropriate progress, (b) conveyance of a narrow band of meaning and associated goals for the terms readiness and literacy, and (c) misuse of the term *screeners*. Each example of dissembling language can be understood through interplay in the VPK policy assemblage constructing a discourse of good prekindergarten/ers based on concepts of readiness, appropriate progress, and literacy.

### **To be Ready is to Make Age Appropriate Progress**

VPK is “designed to address and enhance each child’s ability to make age appropriate progress” (Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(b)). Prior to the amendment, and in contrast, NAEYC (1986) provided a framework for ECE called *developmentally appropriate practice*. The position statement has been revised in consideration of additional research (i.e., Maxwell & Clifford, 2004) and professional knowledge among leaders in the field, yet the term has remained the same (NAEYC, 2009a). The constitutional amendment’s use of age appropriate progress instead of developmentally appropriate practice casts doubt on the genuineness of the statement that the program would be “delivered according to professionally accepted standards” (Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(b)).

Absence of the term age appropriate progress in academic literature suggests its use here is problematic. Conflation of the terms age appropriate and developmentally appropriate is worth noting; however, the problem here is its use with progress and the redirection of the object of appropriateness from practices toward the individual (one's performance). This phrase ties students' performance to age (i.e., progressing to age/ing) dismissing other factors possibly impacting one's development. Accordingly, the constitution offers a normative discourse through the expectation that age-appropriate progress occurs "in the development of language and cognitive capabilities and emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities through education in basic skills" (Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(b)). While this statement provides several areas of development (in connection to progress) it ends with a focus on developing these areas through education in "basic skills" so children enter school ready to learn.

### **To be Ready is to be Literate**

The construct *school readiness* received much attention in academic literature during the 1990s. However, as a matter of policy, it gained more critical attention from the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1997). NEGP identified three components of school readiness: (a) readiness in the child, (b) schools' readiness for children, and (c) family and community supports and services contributing to children's readiness. Snow (2006) defined readiness in the child as the child's competencies upon school entry important for later success (p. 9). Kagan (1990) further divided readiness in the child into readiness to learn and readiness for school. The latter component implies the culture of the school into which children are being readied to enter should be considered given school readiness is a socially constructed concept. Of the types of readiness, the VPK policy assemblage focuses on readiness in the child to learn and enter school, and both are tied to particular ideas of literacy and progress toward it.

While the amendment does not mention literacy as a required component of VPK, it does include “other skills as the Legislature may determine to be appropriate” (Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(b)). Ultimately, what Governor Bush determined as an appropriate focus for VPK was mirrored by skills the Legislature determined to be appropriate. Bush’s desire for a program promoting early literacy was addressed in a statute requiring performance standards to “address the age appropriate progress of students in the development of . . . emergent literacy skills” (§ 1002.67(1)(a), Fla. Stat.). According to statute, the curriculum “must: (1) Be designed to prepare a student for early literacy; (2) Enhance the age-appropriate progress of students in attaining the performance standards . . . and (3) Prepare students to be ready for kindergarten based upon the statewide kindergarten screening” (§ 1002.67(2)(b) Fla. Stat.). This statute constructs prekindergarten learners in terms of their development towards literacy based upon performance on a screening measure. Its attention to early literacy, echoes Bush’s (2004) efforts guiding implementation of VPK on early literacy skills.

In the veto letter, Governor Bush (2004) used a simple cause and effect argument to support his focus on early literacy by switching between quality of life and high quality programs. He asserted,

. . . reading is the most powerful skill a child can learn, as it influences success in school and improves the overall quality of life. For this reason, in 2002 I supported passage of the constitutional amendment to give parents . . . the choice of placing their children in a high-quality early learning program . . . (para. 3)

He implied reading improves quality of life, high quality early learning opportunities result in high quality programs, and high quality programs promote early literacy. Although this argument is weak, its rhetorical strategy is the use of simple cause and effect. It defines high

quality programs as those focused on literacy to give readers the impression that the relationship between quality of life and quality of program depends on literacy. It further suggests this relationship was acceptable to parents and voters who supported the amendment.

Although Governor Bush first characterized reading as an ability improving one's overall quality of life, he proceeded to characterize it as an instrumental skill—a means to an end, thereby diminishing its value as enjoyment (leisure, recreation). Governor Bush's framing of reading was further reinforced in FELDS: "Learning to read and learning to write are among the most important tasks, and achievements, of young children today" (DOE & OEL, 2011, p. 76). By assuming reading is the child's most important achievement, the ideal learner is conceptualized through the standards as "becoming a reader." The positioning of prekindergarten as the time in which this process occurs is legitimated through evidentiary warrants (reference to uncited sources of research) in FELDS:

A vast amount of research accumulated across the last several decades tells us that the emergent literacy knowledge and skills that children can develop during prekindergarten are the key foundations upon which much of their later reading, writing, and content learning capabilities are built. (DOE & OEL, 2011, p. 77)

Unquestioned acceptance of such claims positions emergent literacy intervention in prekindergarten as a solution to society's burden of the illiterate.

### **To be Literate is to Perform on Demand**

Evaluation of VPK programs is performed annually using FLKRS (see § 1002.69 Fla. Stat.), a tool "designed to assess each child's readiness for kindergarten" (Pearson Education Inc. & DOE, 2012, p. 1). Students are assessed during the fall of their kindergarten year and their scores are then traced back to their VPK providers. Readiness rates are calculated as the

percentage of students from a given provider whose performance meets the screener's readiness criteria. While there are over a hundred standards distributed among five major areas of development (see DOE & OEL, 2011), FLKRS focuses on 16 of those standards with over half of the items addressing two emergent reading standards (phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge) (see Pearson Education Inc. & DOE, 2009). By placing disproportionate emphasis on these emergent reading standards, FLKRS serves to narrow conceptualizations of the ideal prekindergarten learner as ready, ready as progressing appropriately towards literacy, and literacy as performed on demand.

Moreover, the term *screening* generally refers to an initial, evaluative assessment of students to identify possible learning difficulties (Shapiro, Solari, & Petscher, 2008). A more fitting title for FLKRS would be the "Florida Prekindergarten High-Stakes Test" as its use is more consistent with that of high-stakes tests: administered statewide, once per school year, and provide little information to guide instruction (Shapiro et al., 2008). FLKRS results serve as a proxy for a provider's ability to produce students ready to enter kindergarten and the results (readiness rates) factor into decisions about providers' funding eligibility. The use of threats and sanctions make questionable the extent to which an ethic of care is operating in the VPK assemblage. Such practices have been critiqued by Noddings (2005) who claimed NCLB demonstrates a lack of caring by attempting to motivate through threats and sanctions.

### **Discussion**

VPK policy assemblage is held together by neoliberal reasoning manifesting a good student discourse of the ideal learner as one who is ready and literate, and emphasizes individual academic versus school and community readiness. Across the evolution of Florida's VPK policy, in the interplay among actors and texts, conceptualizations of the ready child emerge to

contribute to the normative discourse of the good student and offer an identity into which to fit VPK learners. Those not meeting expectations in the areas of age appropriate progress, readiness, and literacy are constructed as unfitting or deviant. The demand for age appropriate progress constructs conditions through which neoliberal reasoning can be expressed, as it emphasizes individual responsibility, provides a norm that diminishes attention to variation (in children, development, environments), and relieves the state of its duty of educational provisions for children by situating the marker of appropriateness in the progress of the child rather than in the developmentally appropriate practices of the program. The term begs the following questions: What kind of learner is constructed through the nexus of expectations from ideas of appropriateness, progress, and age? How does age appropriate progress limit our imagination for structuring programs and schools to make room for the full range of ways children live their lives?

Interplay between the concepts progress/development, readiness, and literacy was evident in the veto letter where the term *appropriate agencies* was introduced but resulted in little traction. Although Governor Bush (2004) asserted, “the legislation should set broad goals and parameters and allow appropriate agencies to implement policies to meet them” (para. 5), his recommendations and rationale for them present narrow goals and parameters and a plan for implementing policies to meet them. In closing he stated, “[DOE], under the direction of the State Board of Education, will refocus the statewide school readiness assessment on emerging literacy skills, develop literacy-focused curriculum standards, and lay the foundation for program integrity and accountability measurement” (para. 7). However, narrow focus on literacy does not reflect the recommendation for “broad goals” nor define the values to guide “appropriate agencies” in meeting those goals.

Emphasis on literacy in these policy texts reflects what Smith (1992) called *hyperliteracy*, “an exaggerated investment in the power of literacy to the detriment of attention to how life is lived” (p. 250). In the VPK policy assemblage, neoliberal discourse of accountability travels along a narrative plot where reading is a path to success in life. Thus, VPK should promote emergent literacy, and in doing so it becomes a high quality program. The narrative of success in life based on emergent literacy and the refocusing of the readiness assessment on emergent literacy skills de-emphasizes broader understandings of school readiness including social, emotional, spiritual, and other subject matter areas. The reduction of reading to a few basic skills ignores other types of textual engagement (read alouds, free reading), promotes decontextualized reading activities (phonological awareness, letter recognition), and diminishes the idea of reading as enjoyment.

Furthermore, accountability measures treat emergent literacy as a narrow range of skills constituting the ideal learner. FLKRS prioritizes which skills among those represented by 102 performance standards the ideal learner should perform. While the ideal learner should be able to progress in language, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development, the ability to perform tasks of early reading is prioritized as most important. Apple (2005) argued in accountability oriented education reforms “only that which is measurable is important” (p. 11). When providers are defunded based on poor or inappropriate student performance, one can blame the student rather than the system. The underperforming student can be recast through this system as the deviant “educational other” (Youdell, 2006, p. 97 as cited in Bradbury, 2013, p. 6) constructed within “predetermined normality . . . a particular way of passing through the early years of life” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 103). By focusing on perspectives of

normativity, policies are designed around the needs of the “normal child” and thereby “privilege particular knowledges and skills while disqualifying others” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 104).

### **Recommendations**

To play with (rather than just within) the rules and norms constructing learner identity we return to the idea of development and rethink the terms age appropriate progress and readiness. Both terms were used in policy texts to focus on the individual (readiness to learn, age as a basis for judging appropriate progress), as is consistent with neoliberal reasoning. Instead, we imagine a broader notion of progress or development, literacy, and readiness demonstrating care for society. While progress and development are relevant in discussing ECE, these terms also have economic meanings and are often used synonymously. Explicit broader concerns about the development of a literate population can undermine neoliberal discourse when informed by critical perspectives focused on justice and care.

### **Values Clarification in the Appropriate Development of VPK Policy**

The definition of development by Todaro (1994) focuses on economic rather than individual development and can bridge understandings of the child (individual) and the systems in which the child is embedded. Todaro (1994) identified three core values to serve as a conceptual bases for understanding what it means to develop: *sustenance* (meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, and protection), *self-esteem* (encouraging a sense of self respect, worth, and dignity), and *freedom* (providing choices supporting freedom from oppression, access, and protection). If the purpose of VPK is to prepare providers who develop individuals’ skills, then such providers, and that which guides them (i.e., policies, standards, assessment, funding mechanisms, accountability measures), would demonstrate these values. Neoliberal reasoning is challenged by this definition of development given its focus on values associated with care and

justice. Todaro's (1994) definition of development addresses inequity, as does NAEYC's (2009b) definition of readiness. The ethics of care and justice embedded in this definition of economic development can redirect appropriateness toward objects and organizations rather than people served by them. Instead of "age appropriate progress" of individuals we reimagine *age and developmentally appropriate progress of programs*. Programs making age and developmentally appropriate progress would develop as they age to better reflect the core values offered by Todaro (1994) more deeply and for a broader range of diversity among children.

### **Emerging from Pre-Literate to Post-Literacies**

Considering "what forms of schooled literacy are powerful intellectual tools, appropriate for these new times, and what forms are mere conventions or historical artifacts?" (Hull & Schultz, 2001, p. 603), we identify three responses absent or weakly addressed in VPK policy pointing beyond connectionist/behaviorist theories of literacy and reading (Crawford, 1995): *critical literacy*, *new literacies*, and *post-literacy*. Critical literacy recognizes relationships of power such as how social agendas help maintain privileged agendas of the dominant culture over those seeking to disrupt them (Crawford, 1995). The perspective on literacy communicated through the VPK policy assemblage is not reflective of Freire's (1970) critical literacy approach that includes reading the world with purpose to serve self and society. In arguing for critical literacy in ECE, Luke (1999) stated although basic analysis of media in preschool such as analysis of language, visual representation, plot, setting, or character features are important, learning opportunities should be expanded to include investigations of how texts are constructed in other media forms.

Increased access to varied media forms being marketed to children and their families provides learners opportunities to engage in many more cognitive demands than the serial linear

processing required of print (Grabe & Grabe, 1998 as cited in Luke, 1999). For instance, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (which have been adopted in Florida with some variation) replaced the traditional reading framework (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) with an English Language Arts (ELA) framework. An element in this ELA framework is the focus on acquiring new digital literacies, skills of online learning, research, and comprehension. This element may require a level of thinking more complex than what was required in non-digital con/texts (Leu et al., 2013). New (digital, media) literacies are evident in expectations for students entering kindergartens where curriculum is based on CCSS or some variation of them.

Reflected in new literacies is the shift from the singular to plural. The 1990s emergence of new literacies challenged traditional notions of literacy as an asocial cognitive skill as it offered a view of literacy as sociocultural practices involving issues of power, social identity, and ideology (Gee, 2008). Additionally, the “new” in new literacies often refers to the changing literacy demands and opportunities the Internet and other technological advances make available (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Quickly changing technology allows one’s state of literacy to become new each day in response to changes in technology and its effects on social and cultural environments (Leu et al., 2013).

There is also dialogue mounting around the term post-literacy (Ridley, 2009) and the identity *post-literate people* (Johnson, 2009). According to Ridley (2011) post-literacy is a state of society in which reading and writing (visible literacy) are no longer dominant means of communication. His blog challenges the idea of the individual as literate/illiterate by including telepathy, collective consciousness, and cognitive prosthetics. Many capabilities he imagines in people are supported or augmented by technology. Others discussing post-literacy focus on

changes in how traditional “readers” access text (increasingly digitally) (Massis, 2012) so the post-literate person who emerges can read but also chooses to meet informational and recreational needs through audio, video, graphics, and gaming (Johnson, 2009). VPK’s emphasis on literacy development as an individual performance of age appropriate progress seems incongruent with current expectations and anticipated changes in how literacy is defined and practiced. The ideal learner imagined reads the world and lacks the tool to read the world. A question for policy makers and those negotiating policy into practice is: How singular or plural—static or fluid—is the idea of literacy and identity of the literate learner constructed by the VPK policy assemblage?

### **Playing it Forward**

While the constitution refers to moral capacities, it is neither defined nor addressed in other policy documents, begging the question of what constitutes moral capacities. Perhaps of greater importance is consideration of the moral capacities of VPK to provide education that promotes an ethic of care and justice. One might conclude this policy assemblage reflects an ethic of care via assumptions of high quality prekindergarten programs readying children to become literate citizens, thus advancing a high quality of life. However, it is important to note such a narrative constrains conceptualizations of quality of life. Nussbaum (2003) posited ten quality of life indicators suggestive of a just society. These indicators focus on how a society provides for dignified lives of its citizens—not on the ability of its citizens to do so independently. Among these indicators is the space for play: “to be able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities” (p. 42).

With the ideal VPK learner constructed out of privileged notions of readiness and (barely) functional and individualistic notions of literacy, the basis for supporting students to live

dignified lives is questionable. For example, Gutiérrez, Zepeda, and Castro (2010) claimed “overemphasizing decoding skills . . . is problematic for all young children and consequential for [dual language learners]” (p. 336). They suggested literacy instruction “serve as cultural amplifiers . . . that extend rather than constrain children’s repertoires of practice—repertoires that can be leveraged to ensure full participation in meaningful literacy” (p. 338). Meaningful literacy experiences can be part of an education offering dignified early learning experiences.

Future research should examine (inter)play regarding prekindergarten policy in two forms. First, in negotiations of those in leadership and education roles in context with prekindergarten learners as they consider the cultural instructions and rules associated with prekindergarten policy, and second in spaces for negotiation created by discursive gaps between the assemblage of policy and its translation into practice. We imagine these would be productive spaces to engage questions informed by an ethic of care: How can prekindergarten policy facilitate caring programs where children flourish into learners capable of maintaining, repairing, and renewing themselves, others, and the world for a more just and kind society?

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