

“So Yeah, I Stepped Outside the Box:” Decentering Quality with Practical Wisdom

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Teachers are ethical actors tasked with protecting the best interests of children. This is central to teacher professionalism and written into codes of professional ethics. Ethical teaching demands a teacher qualified and permitted to make both small and large decisions. This capacity is hampered by what is referred to as “quality.” In contrast, practical wisdom describes a daily knowing in which a person considers the right thing to do, the right way to do it, and how to act in a manner that is responsive to context. I showcase how practical wisdom lives in the decisions of one new teacher as she tries to work around quality to act in “the children’s best interest.”

Introduction

I’m a big believer in taking safe risk. And at one of the programs I was at, they wouldn’t let their children jump off. It was a structure about three feet tall. And I kind of shared the value of allowing those children to take their safe risk. Yeah, we kind of built up the children’s confidence. So at first I would hold their hands and they would jump. And then finally, within like a week or so they had the self confidence that they could jump on their own and I would let them know, “when you’re jumping you could fall, are you okay with that?” and like allowing them to make that judgment call if they did feel safe or, you know, switching my language of like, “oh, no, be careful” to like, “do you feel balanced?” And of course, allowing them to take these risks, but also knowing when to step in when it was a safety concern. You know, when they’re climbing on a branch that is not big enough, that is now a safety concern, because they could fall without knowing that that branch isn’t going to hold them. (Juliet,¹ Pre-K teacher)

Teachers are ethical actors tasked with protecting the best interests of children and helping them grow (Higgins, 2011; Santoro, 2018). The nuance, subtlety, and skill of this daily work is captured in Juliet’s explanation of how she supports children jumping from a structure in a manner that looks out for, in her words, these “children’s best interest.” This capacity demands that Juliet have what Aristotle referred to as practical wisdom, knowing the right actions to take in accordance with ethics in context (Aristotle, 1999; as applied to education see Furman & Traugh 2021; Furman, 2022; Furman, 2023; Furman, 2024). Practical wisdom, as Juliet demonstrates with her carefully crafted and tailored questions, requires subtle awareness of the situation, the child, and quite a bit of teacher-skill.

¹ This is a pseudonym. Quotes have been edited slightly for readability and reviewed for accuracy by Juliet.

The capacity to make ethical decisions is written into standards and codes of ethics that guide teacher work (Council of Chief State Officers, 2011; Follari, 2015; Maxwell, 2017; NAEYC, 2011). The first line of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethics Preamble reads: “NAEYC recognizes that those who work with young children face many daily decisions that have moral and ethical implications” (NAEYC, 2011, p. 1). Similar ethical codes are widely adapted in public schools, including the elementary school where Juliet taught (Maxwell, 2017) and reflected in the capacities called for in the National Teacher Standards (Council of Chief State Officers, 2011).

Yet, teachers’ capacity to make decisions has been increasingly stripped from them (Saltman, 2017; Santoro, 2016). Pressures to teach “to fidelity” have dictated everything from the curriculum taught to a teacher’s pacing on a given day to how they handle minor infractions in the classroom (Saltman, 2016; Santoro, 2016). Many factors have placed decision-making in the hands of those outside of the classroom but I focus here on one network of constricting elements that dominates early childhood education referred to as “quality” or “quality care” (Moss et al., 2000; Dahlberg et al., 2013). Despite significant critique, quality remains such a dominant ethos in early childhood circles that it is a near universally accepted and uncontested good (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2000). Building on Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence’s (2013) contention, I critique quality from the standpoint that it removes decision-making from local actors responding in context and places it in the hands of external experts focused on universalized norms. I argue that the over-dependency on “quality” in early childhood (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Follari, 2015) has undermined the very ethics and efficacy sought.

Foremost, my critique is an over-reliance on normative standards. As I describe in my account of quality, I zoom in on quality as a problematic concept itself because of the specific ways in which quality metrics reduce good teaching to particular and measurable indicators. Further, the word quality suggests adhering to those indicators will deliver uncontestedly good results. To showcase the limitations of quality and the potential of practical wisdom, I offer a portrait of one talented teacher seeking to do well by children, Juliet.

From a wider study on teacher ethics, I turn to Juliet because of the nuance and precision of her account of her own teaching and the sharp contrast between her sense of doing well by children and the restrictions imposed by quality. With Juliet’s words, I first surface the subtle and daily examples of practical wisdom in her work. I then showcase how despite her wisdom, her capacity to act in “children’s best interest” is infringed upon by how quality is enforced in her context. I ultimately maintain that if we are to live out a commitment to ethical practice as a key part of teacher professionalism, we must shift our focus from quality and the interfering fetters it brings with it, to practical wisdom. Put differently, if early childhood educators are to act in the best interest of children, they, like Juliet’s students learning to jump, must be supported in making decisions and given much more autonomy in doing so.

Methodology

I draw from a qualitative study on teacher ethics in which 12 recent graduates (within 10 years) of an elementary and early childhood public undergraduate teacher education program were interviewed. I asked teachers how their “ethical center” was realized in their daily interactions, where their values came from, and how those values were sustained, challenged, and reinforced when teaching. I recruited teachers for this study who teacher educators identified as particularly rooted in values. Upon completing the interviews, I initially read and took note of themes that emerged. I also coded for pre-established themes such as practical wisdom, statements of ethics, and insights into how ethics were developed and sustained (Heath & Street, 2008). Drawing on grounded theory, as new themes emerged, I went back and re-coded, passing through the data two additional times (Hubbard & Power, 1993/2003).

One emergent theme was instances where the teachers’ capacity to act with practical wisdom was infringed upon by external norms. These included policy regulations such as mandated fidelity to a curriculum and community derived customs such as how children should be seated. Juliet’s testimony

stood out because of her clear ethos and consistent demonstration of practical wisdom (as described in Furman 2023 and 2024) and the degree to which her commitment to doing right by children was intercepted by external regulations (Santoro, 2018). Put differently, Juliet's capacity to act ethically was limited and infringed upon by commitments to quality.

Peter Moss (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2024) offers "story" as a means of "getting 'beyond quality'" (p. 25). To center the story of the individual teacher, I draw solely on Juliet's testimony though similar commitments and tensions emerged across my interviews (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I chose Juliet specifically because of her experience working in a range of headstart and public school programs with children birth–5 years old. Countering the quality culture that privileges external norms and dictates over the wisdom of the individual, I chose Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's methodology of portraiture. I rely extensively on Juliet's words, analyzing recurring motifs to provide a detailed and nuanced look at how one teacher thinks about her context (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Juliet read and was encouraged to give feedback on this paper before publication.

Quality and its Critiques

According to the philosopher Michel Foucault (1997), ethics are informed by technologies, daily practices that influence how we perceive, think, and act. Foucault (2009) argues that we are "conducted" into a particular ethos as unreflected upon and often unperceived norms reinforce our commitments (p.193). We then further reinforce these commitments, enacting them in our daily "conduct" (p.193).

Just as a commitment to "accountability" and "standards" dominates the K–12 educational terrain (Jones et al., 2016; Saltman, 2017; Stengel 2024), calls for quality are ubiquitous in early childhood contexts. A norm maintained through wide-reaching technologies, quality permeates early childhood education and care through the rules, regulations, and techniques such as curriculum, assessments, and instructional practices (Arndt & Tesar, 2016; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Murriss & Haynes, 2018). Quality encompasses a wide repertoire (some of which are described below) of often unreflected upon but perceived as necessary goods (Arndt & Tesar, 2016; Dahlberg et al. 2013; Jones et al., 2016; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008).

The National Association for Nursery Education, which came to be NAEYC, was officially established in 1926 with the intention of elevating the experiences of children in early childhood settings by increasing the professionalization of programs and the people who work in them (Follari, 2015). In the 1980s professionalism became closely linked with "quality," and the accompanying notion that best practices in early childhood are determined by "something—objective, real, knowable" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 4).

The language of quality corresponds with increasing emphasis on "evidence-based practices" or an emphasis on "what works" (Biesta, 2007, 2010, 2026). The pressure to follow "evidence-based practices" has come from policy makers, researcher communities, and professional communities themselves (Biesta, 2026). The effect is a narrow vision of education so dominant that words like "quality" have come to be nearly synonymous with particular policies (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Invoking quality has the power of shutting down on-going deliberation and interrogation, silencing dissent (Furman, 2022).

With evidence-based practices there is often an assumption that empirical studies can dictate with clarity how to teach well. Empirical studies yield data on what will "work" and then teachers are tasked with implementing these approaches. The focus on empirically derived "best practice" came out of an interest in making sure that teaching was carefully researched, that decisions about practice were empirically grounded, and to prevent the implementation of practices based on a teacher's "opinion" or arbitrary considerations (Biesta, 2007).

As Dahlberg et al. (2013) showcase in their ground-breaking and field-building monograph, quality is a narrow mode of valuing evidence-based practices that depend on comparisons to a norm and measurable components. Moss (2016) explains:

The concept of quality assumes the possibility and desirability of experts discovering and measuring universal, objective and stable norms: a “quality” early childhood service is one evaluated as conforming to these norms. As such, quality is a language of evaluation inscribed with the values not only of universality, objectivity, and stability, but also certainty and closure; and which presumes an autonomous observer adopting a God’s eye view to make a decontextualized and true statement of fact. It is a technical language applying expert-driven templates to particular settings (e.g. rating scales, checklists and standardized inspection procedures. (pp. 9–10)

Quality translates into policy, regulation, and the promotion of practices in which “it has been assumed that both indicators and outcomes are universal and objective, identifiable through the application of expert knowledge and reducible to accurate measurement given the right techniques” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 5). Fidelity of curriculum is implemented so that experts can measure the effectiveness of an approach—treating the classroom as laboratory (Biesta, 2007). Then, once efficacy, best practice, is determined, fidelity to that practice and the curriculum that supports it is mandated. The idea is that “what works” in one context will work across contexts (Biesta, 2007).

Within this framework, teachers don’t make decisions but instead execute the “right techniques” as determined externally. Words like “quality” treat these regulations as uncontested goods (Santoro, 2016). As such in the name of quality for the sake of professionalization early childhood teachers and institutions have been increasingly and stringently regulated (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2017; Duhn & Grieshaber, 2016). As Park and colleagues (2024) summarize, “the conflation of quality with control is not new to early childhood, but has amplified” since 2013 with President Barack Obama’s “early learning initiative” (p. 50).

A thorough analysis of how quality in particular has translated into daily usage is beyond the scope of this paper and has been well covered (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Here I highlight a few components to share the contours. First quality depends on normative conceptions of the child, the teacher, and the learning environment. The child’s actions and growth are expected to conform to a preestablished set of developmentally appropriate milestones. A high-quality learning environment moves children efficiently through these milestones promoting developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) (NAEYC, 2011; Follari, 2015).

Much criticism of quality has challenged DAP—emphasizing that DAP should be situated, culturally derived, and vary individually (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008; Nxumalo, 2016). While milestones can and should be expanded and revised to local contexts, within a standards-oriented discourse milestones remain limited by a particular community’s determination of what is normal. Cultures are not static and patterns manifest differently for individuals (Paris & Alim, 2017). The effect is that the very nature of milestone tracking imposes a “deficit” (Nxumalo, 2016, p. 1) orientation where children are measured in relation to how they adhere to and fall short of the norm (Franck & Nilsen, 2015; Furman, 2022). In addition to being harmful to individual children, maintaining a norm imposes racist views of personhood (Kromidas, 2019; Nxumalo, 2016). Approaches to observation that focus on who the child is and a child’s ever-growing self in relation to culture counter DAP’s reductive and deficit-oriented focus on milestones (Duhn & Grieshaber, 2016; Frazier, 2024; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2017).

Narrow assumptions of who the child is are accompanied by and reinforce the belief that particular ways of teaching provide “best practices” for all children (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018; Park et al., 2024). Quality metrics are used to measure and impose curriculum and to inspect early childhood environments (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Hooper et al., 2021). Narrowed assumptions about what and how people learn are disrupted by calls for curriculum that builds from and ideally are co-created with communities, families, and individual children (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Dearani, 2024; Duhn & Grieshaber, 2016; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2017; Sole et al., 2024; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

Teacher capacity and attributes are also narrowly conceived of with teacher quality measured by conformity to particular dispositions as assessed by narrow rubrics (Souto-Manning, 2019). Teachers are expected to implement a curriculum and program that has been externally determined as meeting standards for DAP (Dahlberg et al., 2013). As with the measurement of children, the “accountability” focus is deficit oriented, looking for spaces where teachers fall short of predetermined and externally derived expectations (Stengel, 2024). Speaking to the pervasiveness of quality as an ethic, quality metrics even apply to the home. Parenting and the parent are also measured (albeit more informally) through external standards and encouraged to follow narrow ways of being with children (Hackett, 2021).

My critique here is not the value of external standards nor to say that external standards can’t have any place in a national education system. Dahlberg tells of a graduate student who asked, “What is the minimum standard a preschool must have before children are harmed?” (Dahlberg et al., 2023) Dahlberg’s response is that “I could not believe that someone could ask such a cynical question” (p. 133). I too find this question depressing, but I also hear the student’s concerns. Standards evolved out of chaos and some real issues in early childcare (as well as K–12 schooling). I agree with certain baseline expectations and the clear communication of these components (Hooper et al., 2021). These metrics though can and arguably should serve as a limited baseline confirming a minimum amount of community agreed upon, and regularly re-examined, standards (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010).

I challenge a structure where assessing based on such standards dominates the conversation (Biesta, 2007). Further, I also critique whether such standards should be encapsulated within the wider ethic of quality. Whether the term quality can be recommissioned, should be done away with in relation to schooling, or has merit has been much debated (Moss, 2016). I am very sympathetic to Mark Nagasawa and Christina Medallin-Paz’s (2024) pragmatic wish expressed in the title of their special issue to “reconceptualize quality early care.” It is tempting to reclaim and reposition the language and intentions of quality because the word has so much force and is deployed so universally (Jones et al., 2016; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008). Speaking to this desire, Jones and colleagues (2016) choose not to eschew quality from their vocabulary but instead,

following both [Rosi] Braidotti and [Brian] Massumi, we would like to suggest that a concept like “quality” could be made useful when it is not tied to an expected success or outcome. This effectively places “quality” in the present. Situating quality in the present means that, in every situation, including mealtimes, the way in which all the different elements interrelate will be so complex that we will not be able to immediately comprehend the situation or the event. (p. 35)

Ameliorative work can be appealing with words like quality that are in wide circulation. On the other hand, determining the boundaries and contours of a word is important. The situated, relational, and ever shifting present-oriented frame that Jones et al. (2016) propose is fascinating, important, even crucial. I would though argue based on the close analytic study of quality by Dahlberg et al. (2013) and later Moss (2016), that what Jones et al. describe is not quality. As Moss writes, “Trying to turn ‘quality’ into a ‘a subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept’ is futile for quality is a concept with a very particular meaning and inscribed with specific assumptions and values” (p. 9).

Additionally, Sarah Ahmed (2010) reminds that “words are sticky; they retain associations even if we use them differently” (p. 214). Ties with external measurement and universal norms stick to quality. Teachers’ experiences over time of being the brunt of quality measures also stick, leaving anxiety (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

Eschewing quality, Moss (2016) calls readers to dream “beyond” and come up with a different “story” that depends on different words (p. 12). Jones et al. (2016) reorient “by thinking of the concept of quality as an experiment, it becomes possible to ask: What could be the next experimental step?” (p. 35). Letting go of the word quality, I lift this commitment to asking in response to observations from any educational moment “what could be next?” The value of an action or approach is then measured in responsiveness or the degree to which a practitioner takes in Barbara Stengel’s (2024) words

“responsibility.” This brings me to introduce, as encouraged by Moss (2016), a different “story” (p. 12), or way of storytelling about teachers, with a term I have not seen employed as a counter to quality, that of “practical wisdom.”

Practical Wisdom: Centering the Decision Maker

Dahlberg et al. (2013) write:

Each discourse involves the making of choices, or judgment. But whereas the discourse of quality speaks of value-free technical choices, the discourse of meaning making calls for explicitly ethical and philosophical choices, judgements of values, made in a relation to the wider questions of what we want for our children here and now and in the future—questions which must be posed over and over again and which need to be related to even larger questions about ‘what is the good life?’ and ‘what it means to be a human being?’ (p. 107)

Dahlberg et al. (2013) call for a teacher who thinks and acts by drawing on ethical commitments, context, content, and pedagogical strategies (Clandinin, 1985; Elbaz, 1983; Furman, 2018; Furman, 2024; Furman & Traugh, 2021; Lampert, 2001; Smith, 1999; Van Manen, 1991). A range of schemas and accompanying terms describe teacher situated knowing. These include but are not limited to personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985), pedagogical tact (Van Manen, 1991), and responsibility (Stengel, 2024). I turn to practical wisdom finding that it offers the most robust, descriptive, and precise description of teacher-knowing that is both practical and ethically situated (Furman & Traugh, 2021).

Questions of the “good life” and situated know-how invite the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Here I showcase how Aristotle’s concepts lend precision and layers to tell an alternative story about ethical teacher praxis. I draw on Juliet’s thinking and actions to animate the concepts and showcase how they translate to teaching.

Aristotle (1999) uses the word *phronesis*, often translated as practical wisdom or prudence, to describe situated knowing that helps one act both ethically and effectively. *Phronesis* describes how a person responds to daily contextualized conundrum by deliberating and then acting on the right thing to do and the right way to do it (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). Acting well demands that a person has a clear sense of values, a broad range of potential actions to draw from (often referred to as methods or a toolbox in teacher parlance) and attentiveness to context which includes particular people and the environment (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Juliet values safe risk—the capacity to navigate the mean between hazards to be avoided and trying new challenges. “Safe risk” depends on a child’s capacity and interest. Juliet observes her students to help them navigate a jump. As such, bringing her values to context, Juliet acts with *phronesis*.

Aristotle (1999) offers other ways of knowing alongside *phronesis*. *Sophia* is reasoned through universal principles that apply regardless of context. *Episteme* is factually derived information. *Techne*, craft knowledge, is the capacity to execute a task effectively and, unlike *phronesis*, isn’t ethical for Aristotle. In Aristotle’s world, the teacher and doctor operated with *techne* and the politician *phronesis*.

To build from and then mark my movement away from Aristotle, I use the translation “practical wisdom” instead of *phronesis* to describe teacher knowing (Smith, 1999). I avoid reifying Aristotle’s concepts but instead draw on them as they add insights to conversations about teaching. Contemporary scholars have argued that practical wisdom can be adopted for teaching when teaching serves as a mode of living ethically and involves but is not limited to technique (Levinson & Fay, 2016; Higgins 2011; Phelan, 2005; Smith, 1999; Furman, 2018; Furman & Traugh, 2021; Furman, 2024). This contemporary adaptation intentionally places the craft of teaching, “best practices,” within the wider scope of ethics.

As highlighted in my description of Juliet, different kinds of knowing are present in the same situation and practical wisdom offers a powerful umbrella for these different components. Juliet engages in *sophia* when she seeks a mean between recklessness and risk avoidance. Juliet draws on *techne* to offer

skilled word choice with children. She avoids words like “be careful” and instead intentionally asks questions to guide the child to make their own decisions.

A key element of practical wisdom is attention to values or what Aristotle (1999) referred to as:

be[ing] able to deliberate finely about things that are good and beneficial to himself, not about some restricted area—about what sorts of things promote health or strength, for instance—but about what sorts of things promote living well in general. (p. 89)

Here Aristotle emphasizes the capacity to see not just what might be effective, to, in his words “promote health,” but also what more broadly supports “living well.”

When asked about the values that inform her practice, Juliet immediately responds:

I would say everything I do in my classroom is for the children’s best interest even if it goes against policy or anything like that. I like to think that if you’re doing an activity or changing something in your classroom, if you have the children’s best interest in mind, you can never be wrong. So that really guides a lot of what I do. I like to think about the why am I doing it like am I doing it because this is gonna make my classroom look cute, or am I doing it because there’s actually an academic purpose.

Here Juliet repeats her commitment to following “children’s best interest.” Juliet’s constant calibration with “the why” pushes her past what Aristotle calls the “restricted area” of a particular “activity” or element in her classroom environment to her larger commitment to follow “children’s best interest” or, again with Aristotle’s language, help children “live well.”

Repeating the phrase “best interest in mind” Juliet emphasizes her commitment to the needs of the learner. Reflecting universality, she goes as far as to say that “everything I do” is held to this threshold and her confidence in this commitment is revealed in her certainty that when following this principle, “you can never be wrong.” In regularly asking herself “the why am I doing it” Juliet holds herself accountable to her values with this habit of interrogating purpose. Throughout the interview, Juliet kept the child’s “best interest” central as she deliberated on how to help a child jump, get young children outside more, or advocated to change school policy to feed children whenever they were hungry. Of note, a standard, her commitment to “best interest,” guides Juliet’s behavior. Instead of adhering to a list of indicators, deliberation determines what meets the standard (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010).

Practical wisdom demands “knowledge of particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars” (Aristotle, 1999, p. 92). When we act, we are responding to the immediate scene around us and therefore determining how to act demands understanding of context. Juliet is able to follow “the children’s best interest” through “flexibility,” or put differently, on-going responsiveness to children in context. She explains, “kids should have that flexibility and teachers should have that flexibility too because they know what’s going to be best for the students.” As revealed in the epigraph, Juliet firmly believes the capacity to assess the risks of a choice and determine the best action is important in following a child’s best interest (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Sobel, 2016; Tough, 2013). Therefore, Juliet flexibly guides her young charges through risk-taking decisions. In situations like the low wall she gives children some control in ascertaining and experiencing what she calls “safe risks.” From regular observation, Juliet knows her students as movers and flexibly works with each child to support capacity.

Practical wisdom manifests in context and as such demands a teacher fluent in the environment. Committed to bringing children into the natural environment, Juliet’s wisdom includes assessing environmental risks like narrow branches (Sobel, 2016). It also demands being responsive to each child’s physical capacity. Juliet again shows “flexibility,” stepping in quickly and directly when dangers emerge and using questions to guide the child in lower risk situations. Juliet is committed to bringing her students outside. Yet, she describes how one year, the woods were a long walk for her young students. Committed to getting outside and responsive, Juliet built stamina, bringing her students further distances over the

school year so they could be safe and comfortable. Her principles intersected with the realities of her context.

Aristotle (1999) continues, “particulars become known from experience” (p. 93). Juliet builds her capacity to support children jumping, having guided many children through this process. Knowing must be constantly refreshed. As Juliet observes each child, she has clues into their capacity as jumpers—clues which must be ever-updated as these young children grow. Much of Juliet’s wisdom came from a lifetime outdoors doing and reflecting. Juliet also relied on the experience and shared *techne* of others. She attended conferences, sought out mentors, and worked with colleagues to keep her learning fresh.

Again, turning to Aristotle (1999), “and since prudence is concerned with action, it must possess both [the universal and the particular knowledge] or the [particular] more [than the universal]” (p. 92). As a robust knowing, practical wisdom includes attention to universals, *sophia*, as well as *techne*, “techniques” or “best practices.” Part of Juliet’s releasing responsibility to the young jumpers is teaching them how to dually learn their environment and their physical self. From extensive study of teaching methods in college, at conferences, through texts, and professional development, Juliet has learned techniques. As previously described, Juliet watches the children and chooses words carefully, she flexibly “scaffolds” the experience by identifying a child’s capacity and stepping in with subtle guidance to slowly release responsibility (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Sobel, 2016; Tough, 2013; Vygotsky, 2012). Juliet showcases her commitment to this slow release of responsibility and measured risk with phrases like, “do you feel balanced?” These words draw attention to the nature of the risk as opposed to the more vague admonition, “be careful.”

Instead of turning to quality metrics to measure effectiveness, Juliet considers the effect of her actions, “what could be the next experimental step?” (Jones et al., 2016, p. 35), by watching the results. Ever responsive to the best interest of children, Juliet measures the validity of her practices in three key ways: observing and listening to the children, talking with parents, and checking and developing her practice with other professionals. For example, taking her kindergarten students outside regularly, Juliet was affirmed in this decision because “those were days” that she and the children “looked forward to” and “parents,” months later “thank[ed] me for.”

Speaking to the power of this largely unstructured outside time, Juliet explains:

I see completely different children, especially in kindergarten, when I had a really high energy, high needs classroom. I had, by the end of the school year I think four IEPs. I had two students that would elope out of the classroom. And when I would bring them outside, I saw completely different children. They had more control. They were engaged. When I asked them to stop and wait for their peers, they were willing to do that. And it allowed them to be children like I just felt there was more joy in what we were doing. And that’s powerful to see that change, when I would bring our work outside, and we weren’t necessarily just walking, they were more engaged, as well, like, just being outside having that fresh air. It was really cool.

A group of children who were not doing well in the classroom, needing “IEPs” and regularly “elop[ing]” [running out of the classroom] thrived and could “be children” when Juliet took them outside. Acting in their “best interest” took a professional risk (violating norms) and bypassing the standard curriculum. Juliet describes how the children both did better with a broad range of tasks such as “showing control,” being responsive to peers, and being “engaged” with activities and there also “was more joy in what we are doing.” In other words, across a range of metrics, happiness, academic and social engagement, children did better.

Finally, a key part of practical wisdom is problem-solving in unclear situations. Upon describing how she supported children navigating risk, Juliet kept going, explaining that this kind of teaching is:

something I’m trying really hard to incorporate . . . into my practice now. But working in the public school, you don’t really have the same opportunities, as you do with a . . . childcare center. . . . So that’s something that I’m trying to navigate and trying to figure out.

One of the new puzzles for Juliet to figure out was that, as previously mentioned, her new pre-K was located far enough from the woods that it was hard for children to access with short legs. At the time of the interview, she was working to slowly build up this stamina.

Another and more thorny and mysterious challenge for Juliet was how to help the children constantly “eloping.” As revealed in the previous quote, bringing them intentionally outside proved one helpful response but the issue remained that most of the day, Juliet was not at liberty to meet these children’s needs. Striking throughout the interview is that the challenges Juliet was grappling with were not simply determining how to best act in context—a sizable puzzle on its own (Furman, 2018; Furman, 2021; Phelan, 2005), but that doing right by her students demanded that she resist norms (such as school happens inside) and, as described in the next section, rules. Juliet’s commitment to the children’s best interest was directly and needlessly thwarted by what can be characterized as a commitment to quality in her workforce.

Practical wisdom offers a robust, affirming, and descriptive phrase that captures the nuances of how teachers know (Furman, 2018; Furman & Traugh, 2021; Higgins, 2011; Phelan, 2005). In an educational context where quality dictates a reliance on rules, practical wisdom reclaims attention to decision making amidst the complexity, and individuality of people and contexts (Furman & Traugh, 2021). A focus on a teacher making decisions in a complex world humanizes and counters the overreliance on uniformity of quality metrics (Dahlberg et al., 2013). In adding the concept of practical wisdom to the counter narrative of quality, I lend the support of an additional conceptual tool.

Practical Wisdom Amidst a Culture of Quality

Juliet opens the interview by articulating her commitment to acting in the “children’s best interest even if it goes against policy.” She faces restrictions and guidance from policy, leadership, colleagues, and cultural norms (Foucault, 1997). After speaking to the need to act in “children’s best interest even if it goes against policy” Juliet contrasts acting with “purpose” with superficial values, developing student work that “look[s] cute.” Juliet instead focuses on “process” to help children practice skills and think. In doing so, Juliet resists pressures to create student work that is “cookie cutter.” In focusing on process and encouraging imperfect results, Juliet resists the normative and easily measurable results associated with quality (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

Ways of being are influenced by the culture in which one is conducted (Foucault, 2007, p. 193). Values, unless reflected upon, tend to be inherited (Dahlberg et al., 2013). After describing how she moved from thinking nature-based education was “bizarre” to embracing it, Juliet notes, “and it’s interesting, because that’s the play I had as a child [outside and messy]. So it was almost like, “of course, this makes sense.”

Where in the previous passage Juliet used “cookie cutter” to describe children’s work, here she describes being “mold[ed]” by an external conception of an “ideal teacher.” Norms restrict not only Juliet’s actions but also can hinder her capacity to “think about what else it could be” (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Yet, Juliet resists the “mold” relying on her own childhood experiences that superseded her assumptions about teaching. She then affirmed that “once you start thinking about what else it [teaching] could be” you “create that [a vision of an ‘ideal teacher’] for yourself.”

Juliet’s firm commitments come to a head in two situations where Juliet actively resisted and, in fact, disobeyed. Juliet describes that when a child “would come in hungry, but they came in late they’d [the staff] be like, ‘Oh, you, you can’t have any food.’” Quality metrics are dominated by a uniform vision of the child and teacher (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Regulation of basic physical needs is a significant part of quality care with an emphasis on consistency and order over individual comfort or need (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Hackett, 2021; Jones et al., 2016). Quality care of infants and toddlers emphasizes getting children on routinized and externally determined eating and sleeping schedules. Food is heavily regulated (Jones et al., 2016).

Juliet is adamant that following a child's "best interest" demands that children eat when they are hungry. Acutely aware of the population she worked with, she adds "And I didn't think that [denying food] was appropriate, where we were working for a Headstart school, and a lot of those children are coming from homes that do experience [food] insecurity." Quality, an external norm and set of rules, interferes with the hungry child being fed.

Juliet ultimately challenges food restrictions by going to the director and communicating her concerns. In response, she explains,

So they did end up changing and making a policy, putting that in place for children who come in a bit later. They could still have a food provided. It would be done discreetly. So other children wouldn't want it or ask questions. But those are some of the things that I think I've done with the children's best interest.

Striking is the center's commitment to uniformity and rules. The general guideline that children should only eat at certain times was rigidly kept with food outside the designated times offered "discreetly." Regardless of the exact intention, the initial effect of the center's rules was a message that teachers are (a) not supposed to feed children when they are hungry but at externally derived times and (b) teachers are supposed to follow an externally imposed rule instead of using their best judgment even when children's basic needs are at stake. With the modification, an additional message was that (c) when the rule was deemed harmful, teachers could make some exceptions but not change the externally derived policy. Sure that this policy was not in "the best interest of children" first, Juliet resisted by speaking up and then, soon after, took a new job.

At the new job, Juliet came up against a preschool curriculum that didn't support "children's best interests." Enacting a scripted curriculum that required reading *Make Way for Ducklings* (McCloskey, 1999), Juliet could see that a central plot twist "crossing the street is kind of vague to our students." Characterized as "high quality," the curriculum meets external metrics. The curriculum is developed by a respected leader in early childhood literacy, built around NAEYC principles including playful elements and experiential learning, centers vocabulary development and exposure to picture books, and has been systematically measured and declared successful (Bingham & Patten-Terry, 2013; Dickinson et al., 2003). McCloskey's book is "high quality:" a Caldecott award winner and widely beloved.

Gert Biesta (2007) stresses that one must ask what a curriculum works for. A curriculum might work to teach basic skills but at the same time might not be effective at promoting reading motivation (Erickson, 2023). Further, empirical studies of any given curriculum can show that the curriculum did work well at achieving a given goal for one group at one time but that never guarantees it will work for another.

Knowing her students well, Juliet suspected this "evidence-based" curriculum would be confusing to them. To support understanding Juliet explains "I would put my own twist to it even though that wasn't what I should be doing . . ." Demonstrating practical wisdom, Juliet draws on contextual awareness, describing the curriculum as "city based." Fluent in her own context, Juliet recognized rural students wouldn't be familiar with the book's premise—the dangers of crossing city streets and ducks' challenges finding a home in a "busy city." To address this issue, Juliet

brought my kids out to the parking lot, and we pretended to be ducks. And we walked across our road and from there we did a sound map. And these are all things that weren't part of the curriculum, but it could increase their understanding of what that meant to be in a busy city and hearing those sounds. And talking about how living in [rural state] is different than in a city, or in [small rural city].

Juliet draws on *techne*—craft knowledge. She knows that bringing the children outside to experience first-hand something like street crossing will help them connect to the book. Wanting students to understand the busyness of the city, Juliet leads a "sound map" where children sit quietly and note the

location and frequency of different sounds. This, and the reflection after, helped Juliet's students experience how sounds differ across environments.

Unlike in the issue around providing food, neither the curriculum nor the book is inherently wrong. Instead, the problem is the expectation that quality care demands following an externally created curriculum to "fidelity." Where "fidelity" demands a teacher implement a curriculum exactly as written (often with a script), an alternative framework is "integrity,"—knowing the key goals and features of a curriculum in order to, in Juliet's words, add a "twist" when implementing in a range of contexts (LeMahieu, 2011). Juliet shows integrity, following the curriculum's focus on language development and literature exposure through firsthand experiences. In fact, Juliet's adaptations are what enabled her students to learn with this book.

Juliet repeats "flexibility" three times in the interview, including right before sharing how she adapted the curriculum. To act in the best interest of her students, Juliet needed flexibility. Assessed on following the curriculum to "fidelity," Juliet did not anticipate that her innovation and practical wisdom would be celebrated as acting in "the children's best interest." Instead, doing right by the children she acted in a manner that, according to school quality standards for behavior, "wasn't what I should be doing."

Juliet resisted very narrowly. She read the assigned book and followed the curriculum. She then brought her students outside during a time not externally accounted for. For Juliet's students who were just learning to listen to longer books, class time would have been better spent reading books they could understand. Juliet could have met the curriculum goals of exposing children to high quality and more complex literature better if she could have chosen a more accessible book. Hampered by quality measures that required her to rely on an externally derived definition of an accessible book and practices, some of Juliet's practical wisdom went into resisting instead of creatively teaching reading.

In addition to practical wisdom, Juliet needed bravery and a willingness to speak against or break the rules—challenging another set of norms, that a "quality" teacher follows directions and even scripts (Souto-Manning, 2019). As a newly minted graduate and newly hired employee, Juliet first spoke up to protest food regulation and ultimately left the center. Juliet risked her reputation and livelihood to act in children's "best interest."

Juliet conceived of herself as a teacher who resisted "cookie cutter" pressures to teach in a predetermined way and actively challenged the norm of the universal child. Juliet says

So yeah, I stepped outside the box . . . One day, we learned completely outdoors, we had clipboards and we'd go out on nature walks, and just finding ways that I could take my values and share with the kids, and those were days that they really looked forward to, those are experiences that the parents still thank me for. And I think it's because I didn't fit the mold of a typical public school teacher.

Challenging norms of a quality teacher as one who follows someone else's conception of "best practice," Juliet identifies as a resistor to narrow standards multiple times: "I stepped outside the box," and "I didn't fit the mold" by not engaging like a "typical public school teacher."

Finally, I want to note the effort and advocacy required to protect children's most basic rights to eat and understand the curriculum they are being taught. Juliet encourages children to wear sneakers and loose fitting, movable, clothes to school that can get messy. Dress up shoes and a stiff fitting outfit that must be kept clean makes play like jumping hard. Juliet showcased practical wisdom throughout, but she did so while having to also conform to ill-fitting quality metrics. When her practical wisdom went into responding to unnecessary confines, she potentially had less thinking power to adapt flexibly to more complex challenges like children running out of the classroom during a school year marked by a global pandemic.

Dahlberg and colleagues (2013) contend that to push back on externally derived metrics people must reflectively determine the values that guide their work. I return to Juliet's thought-through values

(for more see Furman, 2023 and Furman, 2024). Namely, Juliet said she didn't "seek permission first." Instead, because she could articulate the "why I was doing it" she was willing to risk "backlash." Acting well demanded clarity over Juliet's values and the capacity to speak those commitments respectfully.

Implications

In describing Juliet's work in depth, I share specific practices she implemented and her particular ethical commitments. Both can inspire other teachers. That said, an important layer of this paper is to highlight that faced with curriculum, policies, and workplace culture that impinged on following the child's best interest, Juliet relied on her ethical commitments, broad repertoire of practices, and capacity to read context, to teach ethically and effectively. In other words, Juliet relied on practical wisdom to act well and to resist injustice.

I opened with Juliet describing how she supported young children in taking "safe risks." In doing so, she explains how she guided students to assess a situation and determine how the children themselves wanted to handle it. Defenders of quality metrics claim that without predetermined assessments, care is jeopardized (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Quality and the technologies associated with it are defended as a necessary safeguard and protection for young children. "Safe risk" for Juliet means supporting the children in reading context and determining how to act. Taking away Juliet's decision-making threatens her capacity to act in the children's best interest. Children's immediate physical needs and long-term educational development is jeopardized.

It is tempting with young children to yell "be careful" or swoop in with rescue or rules such as no jumping from a low structure. It is similarly tempting to respond to the call for alternatives to quality by putting forth a "better" version of quality such as improving quality metrics to be more culturally inclusive. While this amelioration is necessary given the current ubiquity and force of quality, I call for a wider reform. I echo Dahlberg et al. (2013) and Juliet's own account of "safe risks," in arguing that the antidote to quality is supporting teachers' practical wisdom to make decisions based on values in context. Just as Juliet's students needed space to try jumping and maybe experience a scrape, teachers need space to think, explore, and try even if trying something yields missteps to correct. A beauty of teaching is that when teachers are allowed to be responsive in communities that support their growth, they can quickly refine, mend, and try again (Furman & Traugh, 2021; Phelan, 2005; Stengel, 2024).

Elsewhere I've offered extensive accounts of particular methods for developing practical wisdom (see Furman, 2024; Furman & Traugh, 2021). Here I limit my suggestions to focus on a few key interlocking criteria. A robust approach to teaching practical wisdom demands cultivating:

- (a) Attentiveness to context: Teachers learn methods for better observing and listening to children.
- (b) Reflection on core ethical commitments: Teachers regularly articulate core values and discuss how these values live in practice (see Furman, 2024 for activities).
- (c) *Techne* and *episteme*: A vast toolbox of methods and an understanding of content developed in methods courses and on-going professional development.
- (d) *True Friends*: A community that helps one analyze context, reflect on values, and share methods to determine how to best be responsive (see Furman & Traugh, 2021 for an account of how Descriptive Inquiry supports such a community).

In closing, I restate that for Juliet to act in the "best interest of the child," a value central to professional standards of early childhood teaching (Coppie & Bredekamp, 2009; Council of Chief State Officers, 2011; Follari, 2015) she must be, in her words, an "adaptable, flexible, creative teacher." She must cultivate and demonstrate practical wisdom: a clear headed, value-informed vision of adapting methods well in context. Juliet needs support in this process (Furman & Traugh, 2021, Furman, 2024; Park et al., 2024; Zapata et al., 2024), and, at the very least, those who seek to impose the more rigid and non-adaptive vision of "quality" should step out of her way.

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