

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULA

Pamela Oberhuemer

SUMMARY

The early years of childhood are receiving increased public policy attention in many countries around the world. Debates on providing quality services and ensuring a good foundation for lifelong learning are generating a new interest in curriculum issues. What understandings do we have of young children? How do they access and construct knowledge about the world around them? What can adults do to effectively enhance children's learning opportunities? According to prevailing values, traditions and priorities, countries differ in their approaches towards answering and regulating curriculum issues such as these. A recent research study based at the State Institute of Early Childhood Education and Research in Bavaria/Germany draws together innovative theoretical and empirical work on the curriculum by 30 scholars from 12 different countries worldwide. Curriculum models in 5 European countries (Denmark, France, Poland, Scotland, Sweden) and 5 non-European countries (Australia, Chile, China, New Zealand, Nigeria) are analysed with regard to their aims and theoretical orientation, key learning areas, approaches to evaluation, and links with primary school. The presentation outlines selected findings of this cross-national study, identifies similarities and differences between countries, and raises questions regarding research and policy approaches.

RÉSUMÉ

On accorde dans de nombreux pays une attention accrue aux premières années de l'enfance sur le plan des politiques nationales. Des débats portant sur le fait de fournir des services de qualité et d'assurer un bon fondement à une formation devant durer tout au long de la vie suscitent un nouvel intérêt pour toutes les questions relatives aux programmes scolaires. Que comprenons-nous des jeunes enfants? Comment apprennent-ils à connaître le monde qui les entoure et organisent-ils ce qu'ils en savent? Que peuvent faire les adultes pour améliorer de manière efficace les chances d'apprentissage offertes aux enfants? Selon les valeurs, les traditions et les priorités courantes dans un pays ou un autre, les pays diffèrent par leur manière d'appréhender les réponses possibles et de réglementer de telles questions quant aux programmes scolaires. Une étude récemment réalisée par l'Institut de l'Éducation et de la Recherche pour la petite enfance de l'État de Bavière en Allemagne rassemble des travaux théoriques et empiriques innovants sur les programmes scolaires avec les efforts conjoints de 30 spécialistes de 12 pays. On a analysé les modèles de programmes scolaires de 5 pays européens (Danemark, Écosse, France, Pologne, Suède) et de 5 pays non-européens (Australie, Chili, Chine, Nigeria, Nouvelle-Zélande) par rapport à leurs objectifs et leur orientation théorique, aux principaux domaines d'apprentissage, à leurs approches d'évaluation et aux liens avec l'école primaire. La présentation expose les grandes lignes de conclusions choisies dans cette étude internationale, identifie les similitudes et les différences entre les différents pays et soulève des questions sur la manière d'appréhender recherche et politique en ce domaine.

RESUMEN

Los primeros años de la niñez están recibiendo cada vez más atención de la política pública en muchos países de todo el mundo. Debates sobre la provisión de servicios cualitativos y la consolidación de una base adecuada para la formación permanente están creando un nuevo interés en los asuntos curriculares. ¿Cuál es nuestra comprensión de los niños pequeños? ¿Cómo acceden a sus conocimientos del mundo que les rodea y como los construyen? ¿Qué pueden hacer los adultos para aumentar eficientemente las oportunidades de los niños a aprender? De acuerdo con los valores y las tradiciones y prioridades existentes los países se distinguen por su acercamiento hacia responder y regular tales asuntos curriculares. Un estudio de investigación reciente basada con Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik (Instituto Estatal de Pegagogía Infantil) en Baviera/Alemania resume trabajos teóricos y empíricos innovativos curriculares hechos por 30 científicos de 12 países del mundo. En este estudio se analizan modelos curriculares de cinco países europeos (Dinamarca, Francia, Polonia, Escocia y Suecia) y de cinco países no europeos (Australia, Chile, China, Nueva Zelanda, Nigeria) con respecto a las metas y la orientación teórica, los ámbitos claves del aprendizaje, el acercamiento a la evaluación y los enlaces con escuelas primarias. La presentación incluye resultados selectos de este estudio internacional, demuestra las similitudes y diferencias entre los países y plantea cuestiones con respecto a los acercamientos de la investigación y política.

KEYWORDS: Curricular frameworks; Early childhood; International policy approaches; Practitioner role

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is the early childhood curriculum, in particular national curricular frameworks, and how related issues are being debated and researched in different countries. I shall be drawing mainly, though not exclusively, on the findings of some recent work which I co-ordinated at the State Institute of Early Childhood Research in Munich (IFP), and which I shall refer to as the IFP curriculum review (Fthenakis & Oberhuemer, 2004). The aim of the review, which was part of a larger research project on early education funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, was to explore pedagogies and policies in other countries in order to inform and stimulate professional practice and policy decisions in Germany. To this end, we invited 30 scholars from 12 countries to contribute to a book with theoretical and empirical work on curriculum development, and with analyses of the national or regional curricular frameworks in 5 European countries (Denmark, France, Poland, Scotland and Sweden), and in 5 non-European countries (Australia/Queensland, Chile, China, New Zealand and Nigeria). This paper outlines selected themes and issues arising from this study. First of all, however, I should like to start by explaining why a cross-national study on early childhood curricula has come at an opportune time for developments in Germany.

WHY A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY ON EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULA?

Germany is one of the few European countries which only very recently began even to consider adopting formal curricular guidelines for work in early childhood settings. This has something to do with the intricacies of a federal system comprising 16 regional states, each with autonomy in education policy. It is also related to the fact that diverse voluntary agencies – which provide 60 per cent of childcare services in Germany - have traditionally had independence in curriculum issues. Consequently, pedagogical frameworks, if they existed at all, have hitherto been formulated in a very general way, and until recently, any hint of increased regulation was a controversial issue.

However, the attitudes of both policy makers and the early childhood community towards the state regulation of early education programmes are currently undergoing a radical shift. A major catalyst for this change came in December 2001 with the publication of the first round of findings of the PISA study, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment of 15 year olds. These findings received high media coverage. The reason was that Germany found itself in the lower third of the ranking tables of 32 countries in the three basic skills assessed – reading competence, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy (Baumert et al., 2001). Moreover, a large number of children from disadvantaged and migrant family backgrounds were to be found in the group with the lowest level of skill competence. The education system had clearly failed to compensate for differences in social background related to level of achievement.

The PISA findings have thus intensified the education debate in general – and, for the first time since the 1970s, – the early years have entered the arena of public policy discourse (Fthenakis, 2003). Bavaria was the first of the 16 regional states (*Länder*) to develop a curricular framework for the age-group birth to 6 years which is currently being piloted (StMAS / IFP, 2003). Almost all *Länder* have in the meantime drafted curriculum documents, and in 2004, the 16 ministers for youth affairs and the 16 ministers for education agreed for the first time on a common (non-mandatory) framework to guide pedagogical work in early childhood centres (JMK, 2004; KMK, 2004). Consequently, our study on international developments has been able to contribute towards the ongoing policy debate – particularly in Bavaria – in a very pragmatic way.

These initiatives in Germany, which needed the so-called PISA shock to get them off the ground, echo a recent trend in many other Western societies. The early years of childhood are receiving increased public policy attention and governments are becoming more aware that investment in early years provision contributes towards an important range of societal goals. Beyond numerous child, women and family related benefits, a number of recent studies – in the U.S., Germany and Switzerland, for example – have highlighted the multiple economic benefits of investment in high quality early childhood services (Müller

Kucera & Bauer, 2001; Cubed, 2002; Bock-Famulla, 2002; Lynch, 2004). The moves in many countries towards expansion of early childhood provision, with concurrent debates on the quality of services and on how to guarantee an effective foundation for lifelong learning, are generating a new policy interest in curriculum issues.

Since 1996, governments in countries such as New Zealand (1996), Norway (1996), Finland (1996), Queensland (1997) and other states in Australia, Sweden (1998), Scotland (1999), Chile (1999) and England (2000), have decided to regulate the early childhood field more closely by introducing curriculum frameworks. Some have taken an overarching stance, formulating goals for the education system from birth to 18, as in Sweden and in South Australia, some have issued guidelines for the years from birth up to compulsory schooling, as in Norway, and some, as in Queensland Australia, have chosen to focus on the year or two directly prior to formal schooling. What is interesting is that for most of these countries or regional states, this is the first time that the field has been regulated in this way. Why is this? Six main reasons were reported in the IFP curriculum review (Oberhuemer, 2004, p. 360)

- (1) Within the context of a global economy, education is taking on a new significance as a valuable resource in so-called knowledge societies. Regulating the curriculum is seen as a pro-active contribution towards acknowledging the early years as an essential foundation for individual learning biographies, and towards raising the status and visibility of early childhood institutions.
- (2) Recent neuro-scientific research on brain development in the early years has contributed to a sharpened perception by policy makers of the educational potential of high quality early childhood provision, although it must be added that the implications of this research for the curriculum debate are still unclear.
- (3) Within the context of national decentralisation policies resulting from new forms of public management, curricular frameworks are seen as a necessary goal steering device and as a public accountability measure within the education system as a whole.
- (4) In countries with a pre-school sector traditionally representing diverse community and cultural groups and different pedagogical and philosophical approaches, curriculum guidelines are regarded as establishing a shared framework of guiding principles, providing these are developed in collaboration with the major stakeholders in the field.
- (5) In countries intent on significant expansion of a poorly resourced sector, mandatory guidelines are seen as a quality improvement and equity measure.
- (6) Finally, curricular guidelines are considered to provide early childhood professionals with a common framework for enhancing communication between staff in the centre and with parents.

Whereas a regulated curriculum and the increase of state control is a new step for the countries I have mentioned, quite different developments have been taking place in two further countries in our study – China and Poland. Both have a long tradition of state mandated curricula which expected early childhood educators to operate a detailed and centrally regulated programme. In the context of changing political and education systems, there has been a move towards decentralisation and diversity. In Poland, for example, early childhood educators can now choose between eight different curricula recommended by the Ministry of Education, and are encouraged to develop their own regional and centre-specific programme profiles (Karwowska-Struczyk, 2004).

The years 2002 to 2004 have witnessed further early years policy initiatives. France updated its 1995 curriculum document to focus more specifically on language development, including a reference to second language learning (Rayna, 2003). Finland is extending its pre-school curriculum for 6 year olds into a Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care from birth to 6 (Lindberg, 2003). In October 2003, the Danish government announced its intention to introduce a pedagogical framework (laereplan). And finally, in Germany we have witnessed a series of first-time policy initiatives which I have already mentioned.

The trend across countries is therefore clear. Regulation yes, but the question is – how? I should now like to look at some of the similarities and in particular at the differences between policy approaches.

GOALS TO STRIVE TOWARDS OR GOALS TO ACHIEVE?

In the curricula presented in our study, basic principles are outlined, areas of learning are defined, play is generally acknowledged as a valuable form of learning in early childhood, and a holistic approach to children's learning with an emphasis on well-being endorsed. Despite these similarities, curriculum documents have many different faces.

In Sweden, for example, where education is steered by a system of management by objectives, the *Curriculum for the pre-school* for 1- to 5-year olds is a slim, 16-page brochure. By contrast, in Sweden's neighbouring country Norway, the *Framework Plan for Day Care Institutions* sets out principles, goals and guidelines for implementation on 160 pages.

In the New Zealand bi-cultural curriculum *Te Whāriki*, based on the guiding principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships, 5 curriculum strands are formulated in child and community oriented terms: (1) well-being; (2) belonging; (3) contribution; (4) communication; and (5) exploration. This particular choice of concepts, in which the worldview of the indigenous (Maori) population is also represented, is an exception. Most countries formulate key areas relating more explicitly to (from a Western perspective) familiar dimensions of children's growth and

learning. In France, for example, based on the republican principles of equity and integration, the emphasis is on developing a rigorous progression of learning in five domains (Rayna, 2003; Zimmer, 2003): (1) Language as the key to learning; (2) living together; (3) movement and physical expression; (4) discovering the world; and (5) sensitivity, imagination, creativity. New in the revised curriculum framework is the absolute prioritisation of the French language, with guidelines for supporting language and literacy. New also is the specification of outcomes for each of the 5 domains.

Whereas in Sweden, relatively abstract “goals to strive towards” are formulated, in some Australian states, England, and now France, the emphasis is more on goals to achieve (Woodrow, 2004). Whereas in Sweden, no specific strategies are formulated for translating the goals into practice, the curricular guidelines in England, for example, give goal-related examples of 'what children do' and 'what the practitioner needs to do' (QCA, 2000).

The particular kind of goal specification appears to be related to different cultures of assessing and evaluating children's learning. In England, for example, assessment procedures currently include the testing of 7 year olds in school and, in preceding years, baseline assessments on school entry at age 4 or 5. Since 2003, a more competence-based approach (what the child can do, not what he/she should be able to do) has been introduced. This Foundation Stage Profile (QCA, 2003), relating to the government endorsed Curricular Guidance for the Foundation Stage which spans the two years preceding compulsory schooling and year one of primary school, is a multi-method assessment approach which is completed during the first year of compulsory schooling.

New Zealand has adopted a different kind of child-focused approach, with an emphasis on mapping individual learning paths over a period of time. It is a narrative approach, focussing on the 'learning stories' of each child, the 'outcomes' being defined primarily in terms of enhancing positive learning dispositions (May, Carr & Podmore, 2004).

In Sweden, it seems that a more global approach has been adopted. Evaluations at the centre level do not so much focus on child-related outcomes, but more on overall quality enhancement. Centres are encouraged to use a variety of evaluation procedures, and are expected to produce an annual report for the local authorities. They are also involved in regional evaluations. For example, in the city of Göteborg in 2003, early childhood practitioners met with local officials and a researcher to discuss the impact of government reforms, to identify areas in need of improvement, and to mutually agree on a strategic plan of action (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2004).

A key issue at hand here is that these diverse documents reflect both explicitly stated and implicitly couched assumptions not only about the overall function and aims of early childhood education and care, but also about the role of early childhood pedagogues.

Whereas in some countries it is taken for granted that practitioners are well trained, reflective professionals who will translate fairly abstract goals into effective practice according to the needs and possibilities of the specific learning community at the local level, in others it is assumed that they need clear guidelines in order to implement the specified goals successfully. Such decisions are invariably linked to the country-specific situation regarding the initial professionalisation of lead practitioners in early childhood settings. However, whatever the level, length and quality of training, it is vital that practitioners have a sense of ownership in curriculum matters.

WHO OWNS THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM?

In order to answer this question it may be helpful to consider how the role of teachers in compulsory schools has been changing over recent years. Against a background of globalisation, it seems that new economic, social and knowledge contexts are having contradictory effects on education systems. On the one hand, there is evidence of tighter government control regarding decisions about the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. On the other hand, decentralisation, privatisation and devolvement of responsibility to the regional or local level are also in evidence. The implications of these various policy moves for teacher professionalism in schools have been scrutinised by scholars across countries (see, e.g., Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Day & Sachs, 2004). It has been observed that in many English-speaking countries, the curriculum and all it involves is no longer an area of autonomous professional practice, but one that is increasingly regulated in a number of ways. In a way, we may be witnessing a similar development in the field of early education and care. Before the introduction of state mandated guidelines, the early childhood curriculum had in many countries been an area of professional autonomy. A specified framework for curricular activities is therefore arguably ambivalent for practitioners. On the one hand, they may appreciate the improved status which this kind of regulation and codification of professional practice implies. This was one of the findings of a small-scale empirical study in Queensland Australia (Grieshaber & Yelland, 2004). On the other hand, a prescribed framework may be interpreted as a control mechanism which could undermine their professional independence (Woodrow, 2004). If play, learning and care are to be seen as an integrated whole (Karlsson Lohmander & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003), then tensions on the ground are inevitable.

These are issues for continuing professional development activities. Early childhood pedagogues need the chance to clarify their own views on professionalism, relating these to the new demands and expectations. They need to be encouraged to find ways of repositioning themselves as a professional. This can be best achieved in a collaborative culture, in a spirit of what some researchers have called democratic professionalism (Day & Sachs, 2004;

Oberhuemer, forthcoming). The early childhood curriculum within a democratic and participatory framework, is owned by the practitioners, children, parents and local community contributing to filling that framework with life. The Swedish curriculum is exceptional in that it places an explicit emphasis on the pivotal role of teamwork in striving mutually towards implementing curricular goals. These goals – as Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson points out in her contribution to the IFP review - are then lived out in practice and worked upon in the collective arena, using as a content children's individual and age-specific ways of thinking and expressing themselves (Pramling Samuelsson, 2004). In conclusion, I should now like to turn to this central question: What are the understandings of young children and their learning processes that underpin curriculum documents?

WHAT ARE OUR UNDERSTANDINGS OF YOUNG CHILDREN LEARNING?

One of the recurring stances in the theoretical contributions to the IFP curriculum study is that our images of childhood and young children are deeply embedded within specific historical, cultural, geographical, economic and political contexts, within certain sets of societal norms and values. While childhood is a biological fact, the way in which childhood is understood, is socially determined. In this sense, official curricula for young children can be considered to represent an interface between a particular society's cultural views of childhood and its structural plans for children's learning processes, as a blueprint for child development goals that are seen to be culturally relevant (New, 2004). An educational experience that is sanctioned in one country may well be considered "inappropriate" if removed from its local or regional context. We may not always be aware of the extent of this contextualization. This is where a cross-cultural approach can be illuminating. It can contribute towards making the 'familiar strange', towards unravelling the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday practices, towards revealing underlying assumptions and epistemological traditions.

It is now widely recognised in the early childhood research community, that children are social agents, participating in constructing and influencing their own lives. This means for the adults close to them that listening to children is a serious business, essential for understanding the multiple facets of childhood and the individual lives of children, and a necessary basis for involving them in democratic dialogue and decision-making. These images are far removed from understandings of children as immature and dependent young persons, or as mere recipients or reproducers of knowledge and culture. Thus regarded, childhood is constructed both for and by children, within an actively negotiated set of social relations. Diversity is not only the starting point for individual learning processes and teaching approaches, but also must be their characteristic feature.

According to Iram Siraj-Blatchford, drawing on findings from a large-scale study in England and Wales which she co-directed (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), *sustained shared thinking* between the child and an attentive adult is an essential prerequisite for children's learning. She describes effective pedagogy (1) as mutual involvement on the part of the child and the adult, (2) as a joint process of constructing knowledge, meaning and understanding, and (3) as instruction, understood as demonstrating, explaining, and asking questions, particularly open-ended questions which further stimulate the child's thinking and learning. This implies that the instructive elements can only be effective if they support the active process of co-construction, and not if the pedagogue acts from a perspective of mere knowledge transmission.

Consequently, any attempts to impose a standardised curriculum must be regarded as inadequate. Rebecca New, as a contributor to the IFP curriculum review, expresses concern about current trends in the USA and in other countries to transform preschools into settings responsive primarily to the global economic agenda, tending to foreground competencies related to so-called school readiness. She challenges current efforts to dislocate curricula from the contexts in which they are embedded, and – drawing in particular on the Reggio Emilia approach to community oriented learning - sees an early childhood curriculum as a “conceptual arena where adults and children engage in collaborative work that addresses both the real problems and imagined possibilities of life in the 21st century” (New, 2004).

While curriculum frameworks formulate societal goals, goals to pursue for all children, human rights principles foreground the uniqueness of each individual child, and socio-cultural theories the specific contexts and cultures in which children live and learn. The implication, then, is that curricular frameworks should give early childhood centres, pedagogues and children the largest possible freedom to follow individual pathways, while striving towards goals based on agreed societal norms and values (see also OECD, 2004). This is a vision located not only within a knowledge society paradigm, but within that of a civil society. Endeavouring to achieve this balance is one of the many challenging tasks facing early childhood professionals.

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Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to:

Pamela Oberhuemer
pamela.oberhuemer@extern.lrz-muenchen.de
State Institute of Early Childhood Research (IFP)
Winzererstr. 9, Eckbau Nord
D-80797 München
Germany