

### Curriculum in Early Childhood Education and Care

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) poses a dilemma for curriculum designers. On the one hand, there is the need to guide the personnel in early childhood centres, especially when they have low certification and little training. A curriculum helps to ensure that staff cover important learning areas, adopt a common pedagogical approach and reach for a certain level of quality across age groups and regions of a country. A curriculum can also be a focus for further training. On the other hand, it is widely recognised that the aims of the ECEC curriculum must be broad, and contribute to the child's overall development as well as to later success in school. These aims will include, for example, health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; positive approaches to learning; communication skills; cognition and general knowledge (NEGP, 1997). Moreover, because of the learning patterns of young children, social-emotional and cognitive progress will be at the child's own pace, and take place through play and active methods, governed in so far as possible by the self direction of the child. These considerations suggest caution about designing a detailed cognitive curriculum, which staff should 'deliver' to compliant young children.

For this reason, national or provincial ministries in many countries have chosen to issue short guidelines about early childhood programming, addressed as much to parents and local administrators as to the educators (OECD, 2001). Essentially, these guidelines or curricular frameworks establish the value base and programme standards on which early childhood services in the country are to be founded. The aim is to encourage a shared sense of purpose between parents and early childhood centres; to promote social and cultural values important for society; to ensure a certain unity of standards; and to inform and facilitate communication between staff, parents and children.

The curricular framework may include then the following features:

- A statement of the principles and values that should guide early childhood centres, e.g. that centres should adhere to the principles of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, including respect for parents as the first educators of the child.
- A summary of programme standards that parents may expect in the early childhood centre, e.g. child/staff ratios, educator qualifications, indoor and outdoor learning environments.
- An orientation concerning content and outputs, that is, an outline concerning the broad goals that centres will pursue, and of the attitudes, dispositions, skills and knowledge that children at different ages can be expected to attain across different developmental areas;

- Pedagogical guidelines outlining the processes through which children achieve the outcomes proposed, e.g. through experiential learning; open, play-based programming; 1 involvement. They may propose also how educators should support children in their learning - through adult interaction and involvement; centre and group management; enriched learning environments; theme or project methodology.

The reluctance to fix detailed cognitive goals and content, as in a traditional curriculum, stems from new understandings of society, young children and their learning. In the gradual democratisation of societies, the rights and needs of social groups and local populations are increasingly recognised. Governments and international agencies differentiate human services, in the knowledge that the needs of young children and families differ widely from one context to another. Many countries also include different ethnic groups and languages. Respect for diversity requires that minority groups should be supported to continue their own child-rearing and early education practices. At the same time, a common national framework can build bridges between ethnic and social groups by calling attention to shared values and by mobilising communities around common tasks and challenges. For these reasons, rather than formulating a 'one-size-fits-all' cognitive curriculum, ministries may prefer to develop a general value-based framework, and allow local centres and communities to develop their own curricula, guided by the national framework and the needs of the local community.

New understandings of young children are also changing ideas about early education and the role of adults in centres. In the Nordic countries in particular, the child is considered as a subject of rights and as a competent active learner, whose central task is to build her own meaning and self-identity at this age. The Convention on the Rights of the Child reinforces this viewpoint, encouraging adults to allow a high degree of initiative to young children. A new culture of participation and co-determination is now emerging in areas of life important for young children, including life in early childhood centres and the manner in which curriculum is generated and implemented. Young children are being treated with far more respect and knowledge. It is recognised, for example, that for deep and more permanent learning to take place, the child's environment should be constructed "so as to interface the

<sup>1</sup>. "To define play as an activity that (only) gives pleasure to the child is inaccurate" Vygotsky (1978). Play is included in curricula not just because children like to play, but also for its voluntary and experiential features, and its importance for identity formation, expression and social learning. However, Ailwood (2003) points out that it is important to be vigilant about the circumstances and discourses which produce a key place for play in curricula.

cognitive realm with the realms of relationship and affectivity” (Malaguzzi in Edwards *et al.* 1993). In other words, young children’s learning is grounded in the affective and social domains. Children learn best within positive relationships – with their parents and families, with their peers and with well-trained early childhood educators.

The results achieved from such programmes are also encouraging. The pleasure in learning experienced by young children in the Reggio Emilia schools is internationally recognised. A negotiated curriculum encourages identity formation, positive attitudes, communication and negotiation skills in children, and may cater more effectively for the profile required in entrepreneurial cultures rather than the more passive, compliant behaviour found in children who must adhere to a previously defined curriculum (Bowles *et al.*, 2000). Curricular research by Laevers and his team (2003) also indicates that learning achievement is high and relatively permanent in child-centred programmes that are conducted by well-trained professionals.

Does this mean that teaching and learning socially valued knowledge are excluded from contemporary curricula for young children? Of course not. It would be irresponsible not to teach and model for young children essential knowledge and skills, such as the basic rules of living together, personal health and nutrition, house and road safety, codes of interaction and the like. Furthermore, certain groups of children in all countries have additional learning needs, e.g. children from bi-lingual families and from poor homes. These children have much to gain from the enriched environments of early childhood centres and from a focus on language and appropriate literacy practice. Structured, half-day, early learning programmes enable children from at-risk backgrounds to make progress in cognition, language and socio-emotional maturity (Leseman, 2002, Sylva *et al.* 2003). However, such programmes should be pedagogically sound and conducted by appropriately trained professionals. A high quality programme in early childhood implies child-initiative and involvement. If a programme is over-focussed on formal skills, it is likely to place certain young children in situations where they fail. This can lead in young children to a higher dependency on adults, and negative perceptions of their own competencies (Stipek *et al.* 1995) and at times, a fall in literacy ability in primary school (Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993).

To adopt an open framework approach to curriculum requires, however, certain preconditions, e.g. that staff are well-trained and well supported. To co-construct an organised and comprehensive curriculum with young children requires advanced knowledge of child psychology and strong pedagogical training. Research in several countries highlights the link between professional education and the achievement of high quality in programmes (CQCO Study Team, 1995; EC Childcare Network, 1996; Oberhuermer and Ulich, 1997; Abbott and Pugh, 1998; Bowman *et al.* 2000...). Other important conditions are that learning environments should be well-

resourced and that child-staff ratios should be reasonable. The notion of a reasonable ratio differs across countries, but fewer numbers help children to generate peer communication and engage together in project and group work according to their affinities and interests. The presence of sufficient numbers of staff also ensures that each group can enjoy the support of a trained professional who will lead children toward the attitudes, skills and knowledge valued in a particular society. In Sweden, for example, national statutory requirements for child-staff ratios do not exist, but the average across the age group 1-6 years is 5.6 children per trained staff member. In the pre-school class for 6-7 year olds, the national average is one teacher + assistant for 13 children.

Such ratios and conditions are generally difficult to bring together in developing countries, but this should not be a reason for discouragement. To reach the levels of formal training found in richer countries may not be possible, but through the mobilisation of local mothers by community educators, programmes for young children can be generated at local level that enjoy satisfactory child-adult ratios and are highly relevant to the needs of participating children (Ball, 2002). The issue of adequate pedagogical resources is resolved through the thoughtful use of what is present and available: nature, recycled materials of interest to children and the effective use of cultural heritage: language, stories, games, dance and music. With guidance from trained community educators, the central aims of early childhood programming can be assured, namely, the health and well-being of young children, support for their intellectual and social development, and the participation of parents in this foundation stage of lifelong learning.

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