

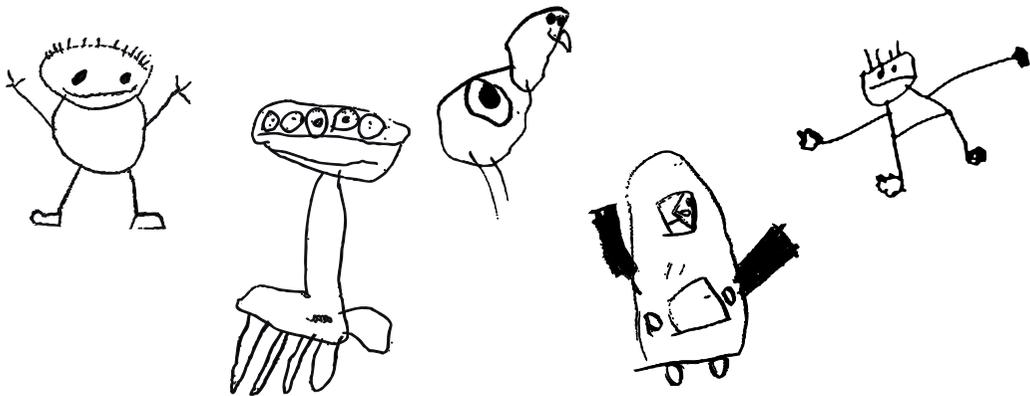


An Leanbh Óg

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Rosaleen Murphy, Frances Clerkin and Judith Butler

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Editors 2017-2018

Rosaleen Murphy, University College Cork

Judith Butler, Cork Institute of Technology (President, OMEP Ireland)

Frances Clerkin, Cork Institute of Technology.

Guest Editors, Volume 11, Special EMEC/IMEC Issue

Máire Mhic Mhathúna, Dublin Institute of Technology

Valerie Sollars, University of Malta

Jan-Erik Johannson, Oslo & Akershus College of Applied Sciences, Norway

Maelis Karlsson Lohmander, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

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Editorial

On behalf of OMEP Ireland, we are delighted to introduce Volume 11 of *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*. This is a very special international issue, which had its origins in a conference held in Malta in November 2016, to mark the end of the EU funded programmes that led to the European Master in Early Childhood Education (EMEC) and its successor, the International Master in Early Childhood Education (IMEC).

Our guest editors for this special issue are Professor Valerie Sollars of the University of Malta, Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna of the Dublin Institute of Technology, Professor Jan-Erik Johansson of Oslo & Akershus College of Applied Sciences, Norway, and Maelis Karlsson Lohmander of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, all of whom have been involved (along with many colleagues and students) in EMEC/IMEC. The papers in this issue of the journal are drawn from among those presented at the Malta conference that marked a final celebration of the EMEC/IMEC, so that in many ways, this issue may be seen as the Proceedings of that conference.

In her Introduction to this volume, Valerie Sollars traces the history of the EMEC/IMEC, and while its international nature will be obvious from the papers that follow, these only begin to give a flavour of its truly wide-ranging influence. Some of the papers (for example those by Aline-Wendy Dunlop and Tona Gulpinar/Leif Hernes) reflect on the growth and development in thinking experienced by those involved in lecturing and teaching on the programme, while others are drawn from the research projects undertaken by EMEC/IMEC students and presented in their final theses. They cover a range of topics, and although the research projects took place in different settings, they identify some issues that will be extremely relevant to anyone interested in the future of early childhood education and care.

At a more local level, the Irish committee of OMEP has been instrumental in promoting and publishing research on early childhood care and education, and in helping to raise the professional profile of those working in ECCE in Ireland. By publishing papers such as those in this volume, we hope to contribute to the conversation we should all be having about what is best for our children

and grandchildren, and how we can make their childhood a good one and their future a promising one. We encourage all of our readers to consider submitting a paper to be considered for inclusion in future volumes of An Leanbh Óg. The guidelines for authors are available on-line on the OMEP Ireland website, www.omepireland.ie

We thank all our contributors and supporters, and in particular our guest editors, our authors and all others who contribute in different ways. Special thanks are due this year to Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna who first suggested this special issue, to the IMEC consortium for their financial support for publishing it, to Dr Frances Clerkin who co-ordinated the submission and editing process, and to Dr Judith Butler for her support for the project and her help with the final stages of putting together this volume.

Rosaleen Murphy

Dr Rosaleen Murphy, University College Cork

Dr Frances Clerkin, Cork Institute of Technology

Dr Judith Butler, Cork Institute of Technology (President, OMEP Ireland)

*Co-Editors, An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies
September, 2017*

Introduction

Valerie Sollars, University of Malta

EMEC co-ordinator and Conference convener

The articles included in this special edition of *An Leanbh Óg* are a selection of manuscripts from papers which were presented at a conference held in Malta in November 2016. It was not an ordinary conference but a celebration for six cohorts of students who, between 2007 and 2016 had formed part of a cohort of students following a joint Master degree in Early Childhood Education and Care.

The European Master in Early Childhood Education¹ (EMEC) and the International Master in Early Childhood Education² (IMEC) were both programmes of study funded by the European Commission which led to an EQF Level 7 post-graduate qualification. Both programmes were offered over two years of full-time study for a total of 120 ECTS. The course included eight taught study units, each allocated 10 ECTS, and a research component of 40 ECTS. The taught components focused on:

- Professional reflections
- Play and learning
- The evolution of early childhood research practices and policies
- Childhood and children in contemporary Europe
- Addressing Diversity
- Aesthetics of Children's Culture
- Questioning curriculum and critical issues

1 This programme was funded under the Socrates Programme Erasmus Projects: Erasmus – Joint Development of Study Programmes at intermediate and advance level (Grant Agreement: 74922-IC-1-2004-1-MT-ERASMUS-PROGUC-4).

2 This programme was funded through the Erasmus + Higher Education Joint Master Degrees; ERASMUS MUNDUS 2009-2013 - ACTION 1 A; ERASMUS MUNDUS MASTERS COURSES International Master in Early Childhood Education and Care, 2010-0132; 2012-2277

- Research Methodologies

Whilst this information does not suggest that there was anything extraordinary about these programmes, this special edition of the OMEP (Ireland) journal is a fitting acknowledgement, tribute and celebration for all who actively participated in and contributed to these programmes, from the initial discussions which started one cold, winter morning in Oslo in 2005 up to the concluding conference in Malta in November 2016. EMEC and IMEC dared to leap into uncharted territory since the vision for these programmes brought together academics and scholars from a number of higher education institutions across Europe with a view to collaborating and developing a programme of studies, which initially sought to:

- address the increasing demand for highly educated professionals in the EU;
- strengthen links between research, professional development and EU policy by drawing on the expertise of scholars from participating institutions;
- foster a clear European perspective on professionalism and leadership in a sector of high relevance for crucial European issues;
- promote mobility and employability in a common labour market; and
- attempt to offer a unified learning, teaching and research environment.

The first cohort of European students were all female and hailed from Germany, Ireland, Norway, Malta and Sweden but as the programme was subsequently offered through Erasmus Mundus funding, the cohorts became widely international and diverse. Alongside European students from Greece, Spain, Poland, Bulgaria and Croatia, the international cohorts came from as far as Nepal, Pakistan, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Maldives, Trinidad & Tobago, Iran, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Ethiopia, Guyana, Ecuador, Mexico and Canada. In all, some 95 students, predominantly women, graduated with a “joint degree” which reflected a programme of studies that had been jointly developed, accredited, delivered and recognised by a number of institutions.

For EMEC, the University of Malta was the co-ordinating institution, partnering with Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland; the University of Gothenburg, Sweden; Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany; Oslo University

College, Norway and the University of Strathclyde, Scotland. When offered as an Erasmus Mundus programme, four institutions proceeded with the IMEC programme – Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland; the University of Gothenburg, the University of Malta, and Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences - with the latter taking on the co-ordinating role.

EMEC was offered once, since the funding which had been secured (2005-2008), entitled the participating institutions to spend two years developing the programme and one year running it as a pilot. Of course, this implied facing the challenge of ensuring that students would be supported towards completing a two year programme (2007-2009) which had secure funding for only one year. All six institutions were highly supportive of the programme and to the extent possible, facilitated the running of the programme by allowing for derogations to established regulations without compromising the quality of the teaching and learning processes. Two of the taught study units were offered through intensive programmes which were funded separately whereas the remaining six study units were offered on-line. This in itself was an additional challenge as on-line teaching and learning was an issue which higher education institutions were still coming to grips with. Students, academic and administrative staff all experienced a learning curve in agreeing to a common virtual learning environment; and by participating in on-line activities whether to follow streamed presentations or to contribute towards the deliberations, discussions and eventually, completion and submission of assignments.

IMEC was offered to five consecutive cohorts (2010-2016). The available funding offered students a scholarship which enabled them to travel and spend a semester in each of the teaching institutions. Participants spent the first semester in Oslo, their second in Dublin, the third in Malta and the fourth semester depended on each student's choice of dissertation and preference for a participating institution. Apart from the wealth of personal and social learning experiences, in each semester students had the possibility to visit and spend time in early years settings, thus experiencing and developing a rich, cultural understanding of early childhood education in practice. A further benefit and enriching resource for IMEC related to the opportunity to invite visiting scholars from non-EU countries as well as guest lecturers from various institutions. Different student cohorts met and engaged with distinguished academic members of staff from Africa (Cameroon; Kenyatta), Australia (Monash; Griffith; University of Melbourne) and New Zealand (Waikato and Victoria University, Wellington) as well as Trinity College, Dublin; Open University; University of Roehampton, London; and the University of Strathclyde.

Although these programmes are no longer available – they are not sustainable in the absence of funding - there can be no doubt that they have achieved the objectives they set out. In addition to the strong professional and personal relationships, several graduates have successfully completed doctoral studies or are in the process of doing so; many have taken up leadership roles in higher education institutions, government agencies or within preschool and early years settings. There was no attrition from any of the Erasmus Mundus cohorts – a formidable achievement considering the overwhelmingly female participation, and the fact that many students left their families and young children behind when they travelled to Europe. The academic members of staff who participated in the programme, contributed to inspiring students and sharing with them their passion, dedication, commitment, scholarship and insightful reflections to ensure that future leaders in early childhood education have the necessary skills to promote rigorous research, formulate well-articulated discussions and take appropriate decisions to drive the early years agenda forward. Indeed, the programme of studies and its management, organisation and execution were all highly commended by a team of external evaluators led by Shane Watters, the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Manager for the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent. In their report, the external evaluators conclude that:

One of the most notable moments of the session with students was seeing them proudly hold up their joint degree certificates embossed with the official logos of each consortium institution. The University of Malta should be commended for producing both the final certificates and diploma supplements which were recognised and ratified by all consortium partner institutions. It is the understanding of the panel that the process worked by the University of Malta validating the credits collected at each partner institution, and then producing the final certificates through their own formal process. Each Certificate was then sent to be signed and ratified by a senior representative of each partner institution, the final certificates being presented to students at a formal degree ceremony.

The EACEA reports noted the challenges that the consortium had to overcome, including deep rooted and differing academic traditions and regulations, in order to facilitate the certificates and diploma supplements being produced. Despite these challenges, there was evidence that the ratified certificates and diploma supplements were available to all graduating students from all cohorts.

It is recommended that local coordinators within the consortium use the University of Malta as an example to their host institutions in terms of highlighting the ability to develop and produce future formal joint degree documentation.

The articles included in this special edition of *An Leanbh Óg* are a selection of manuscripts from the 26 presentations by students and staff during the final, celebration conference held in Malta in November 2016. They offer a snapshot of the range of topics dealt with during the taught components as well as the research projects which students conducted for their dissertation³. Whilst the conference brought together students and staff from all cohorts for two full days of presentations (28th – 29th November, 2016), this special edition of the journal, is a lasting testimony to the many memories created through EMEC and IMEC.

I cannot conclude this short introduction without gratefully acknowledging the insights, contributions and active participation of all co-ordinators from the various institutions, without whom, there would have not been any joint degree which has brought together so many students and future professional leaders in early childhood education. To each and every one of you, thank you for believing in the potential of joint degree programmes and forging ahead, despite all the odds.

- Mathias Urban – EMEC co-ordinator, Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany
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- Aline-Wendy Dunlop, EMEC co-ordinator, University of Strathclyde, Scotland
- Maelis Karlsson Lohmander - EMEC and IMEC co-ordinator and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, EMEC co-ordinator, University of Gothenburg, Sweden;
- Kjersti Winger, Programme co-ordinator, Oslo & Akershus College of Applied Sciences, Oslo, Norway;

Valerie Sollars

³ The students' dissertations are available at <http://www.hioa.no/Om-HiOA/Fakultet-for-laererutdanning-og-internasjonale-studier-LUI/Institutt-for-barnehagelaererutdanning-BLU/IMEC/Student-s-master-theses>

The papers

Thirteen papers were submitted as articles for this special edition of *An Leanbh Óg*. While a wide range of topics were covered they can be broadly categorised under one of three headings, Curriculum and Assessment, Cultural and Linguistic Diversity and Participation in early years settings and online communities.

Curriculum and Assessment

The article by Aline-Wendy Dunlop (Scotland) discusses the implications of questioning curriculum in the context of the EMEC/IMEC programme. This echoes one of the modules on the programme and the author argues that meaningful engagement in curriculum discussion should be based on bringing together authoritative curriculum discourses and students' own personal perspectives and experiences. These dialogues should inform and shape critical, rather than scripted or colluding, early childhood professionals. Dunlop's paper provides a philosophical and ethical framework for student engagement. Professional reflection in multi-modal ways was an intrinsic feature of the consideration of curriculum. Dunlop concludes her article by stating that curriculum can, and must be a reciprocal gift and that pedagogical and philosophical realisations and shifts are important for teachers, educational leaders and academic life.

Tona Gulpinar and Leif Hernes (Norway) set out to explore the possibilities for a better and fuller understanding of the importance of art when international students from many different cultures on programmes such as the EMEC/IMEC programme meet. From working with five cohorts of IMEC students, the authors experienced how cultures are challenged, and how these challenges are brought forth in the processes of making and performing collective aesthetic productions. The authors report that different cultural points of departure and different perspectives on aesthetic experiences and artistic meetings, challenged both students' and lecturers' ways of thinking. The authors suggest that the aesthetic processes and art productions which the students experience have the potential to bring forth nuances and new ways of reflecting in the process of creating environments for aesthetic learning.

Anna May Navarrete (Philippines) researched early childhood educators'

perspectives and practices regarding assessment in the early years in Ireland, focusing on approaches and strategies they employed within their settings. Adopting a qualitative design, interviews were conducted with eight educators from a representative sample of settings in Ireland. Findings highlight a notion of continuous assessment that plays the role of both process and product. It is seen as a cyclical process of observation, interpretation, and planning to facilitate children's learning and development, but at the same time, it is also viewed as a means of documenting and compiling information about children. As children's agency seems to be an ambivalent topic for educators, further training and guidance may be beneficial to have a greater understanding of children's active participation.

Two papers discuss scientific and sustainability issues. Jonna Larsson (Sweden) posits that traditionally children and science have been researched from a conceptual perspective where their understandings of specific concepts have been viewed as misconceptions or alternative understandings. In contemporary research such perspectives are challenged and instead an approach where science is viewed as emergent is foregrounded. Larsson's paper discusses scientific activities that occurs in everyday preschool contexts and focuses on the pedagogical value of such events. She studied learning related to science in four preschool settings in Sweden and found that children encountered science in terms of physics in planned and incidental contexts but that enhanced learning occurred when the teacher highlighted the phenomenon.

Adriana Burciaga González (Mexico) and Paul Pace (Malta) discuss education for sustainable development in early childhood education. The paper reports on a qualitative study conducted in Malta aimed at exploring young children's discourses of sustainability issues, particularly water consumption. Interviews with a group of children aged four to six were conducted and data were analysed using discursive analysis. The study concluded that children are capable of making sense of some environmental issues in creative ways. Their interpretations seemed to be influenced by anthropocentric discourses but also showed some ecocentric elements. Their conversations included topics such as water scarcity, life and death, caring for the environment and the monetary value of water.

Jan-Erik Johansson (Norway) introduces his article with a discussion on the context of out of home care for young children in Norway and the need for a coherent system of support services around the child and the family. He then considers the importance of curriculum that is relevant and meaningful for

children in the context of early childhood education in Kenya. He critiques a particular form of curriculum made available by a private company and contrasts this form of scripted instruction with Froebelian pedagogy, highlighting the programme's lack of interaction with the local cultures and languages. Froebel's philosophy of experiential and play based pedagogy is still relevant today with its emphasis on child-teacher interaction in close contact with the surrounding world.

In his contribution John Teria Ng'asike (Kenya) discusses early childhood education in Kenya. He begins by demonstrating the influence of European colonialists on African early childhood education vision and philosophy. In many African schools education has no relevance to the immediate needs of children. Teachers simply teach to cover the syllabus as they drill children for examination purposes. English is often the language of instruction even for young children who do not understand it. He presents a number of examples to illustrate how an African curriculum for example in nomadic pastoralist areas can be conceptualized. The article concludes with a description of a reading literacy enrichment project using mother tongue stories as reading material.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

Four articles discuss aspects of cultural and linguistic diversity. Ivana Bankovic (Serbia) and Valerie Sollars (Malta) explore the learning experiences of a cohort of children acquiring English as a second language in a Maltese kindergarten setting. In this qualitative case study, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with practitioners and questionnaires completed by parents. This case study provides insights into factors which impacted on language learning for this particular cohort of children. Results indicate that formally structured and adult-led language activities were organized daily with minimal opportunities for children's active engagement through interactions with adults and peers or child-centered activities. In conclusion, recommendations are made to address policy and practice appropriate for second language learning in early years.

Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Cathy Kelleher (Ireland) reflect on issues which arose in the context of an early years language planning project in Irish-medium preschools in the Irish-speaking areas of the west of Ireland. Of particular interest in the findings is the data on educators' views on child agency and language use and their implementation of preschool-home links. These issues are discussed in the light of the professionalization of the early years sector in

Ireland, professional development opportunities and policy initiatives in both early years education and Irish-medium education. Finally, tensions between competing discourses in language and education pedagogies are discussed and the importance of shaping approaches to meet sector specific needs acknowledged.

Masoumeh Abedinnejad (Iran) and Censu Caruana (Malta) studied practitioners' experiences and perspectives of cultural diverse early years' settings in Malta. A multiple-case study methodology was applied to this research. The results of the study indicate that participants generally believed that introducing children to the concept of diversity from the early ages is unnecessary. Language was discussed by the participants as a major issue in integrating children in multicultural ECEC settings. The involvement of parents in the schools' daily life was identified as relatively poor by all the practitioners. Generally, all the practitioners expressed a need for more education and training with regards to cultural diversity and related issues.

Mary Claire Camilleri Saliba's (Malta) research focused on how six Maltese girls at kindergarten level constructed their personal and social identities during free and structured play. Identity is seen as a dynamic and socially-constructed process, influenced by the immediate contexts in which the children live. In this case study, children's construction of identity in everyday situations within the kindergarten classroom was analysed through the observations of children's interactions. Two kindergarten assistants were also interviewed. The author concluded that identity is understood as the way children relate to others, both peers and adults, and that the environment plays an important role in their construction of identity.

Participation in early years settings and online communities.

The final theme includes two papers which discuss different types of participation, - one in early years settings and the other in online communities. Katarzyna Anna Wensierska (Poland) compares children's right to participation in Norwegian and Polish kindergartens through teachers' perspectives. Although Articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasise children's right to express their opinions freely, this right is realised differently in different countries. Results from the small-scale qualitative study indicated that teachers in Norway and Poland are aware of the rights of the child to participate but there are challenges, including those posed by policy and curriculum documents, related to the realisation of these rights in day-to-day practice.

Xin Luo (China) discusses the potential of participation through social media for early years education and parenting in China. He explores how social media is used by Chinese parents as a tool to facilitate children's learning and fulfil parents' socially constructed expectations for their children's education. Using an ethnographic approach, the author immersed himself in a parent group in a Chinese social networking app, for an extended time. Data were gathered from the online discussions and some parents were also selected for interviews. Initial findings indicate that social media proves to be multi-functional in providing complete pictures of informants in educational ethnography. The paper also highlights the potential of social media to further enlarge the gap in education resources between different families.

Several unifying themes and threads can be seen running through the papers in this special edition of *An Leanbh Óg*. Firstly, the wide geographical spread of contributors reflects the diversity of the groups of students and lecturers on the EMEC/IMEC programme. Secondly themes of collaboration are embedded in many of the articles, collaboration with/between children and collaboration with/between adults working with children. Thirdly the overarching principle of respect for all, both children and adults is strongly evidenced in the papers. Finally a huge enthusiasm for early childhood education in all its various contexts is manifest and bodes well for the future of early childhood education in our respective contexts.

The EMEC/IMEC Consortium would like to sincerely thank the editors of *An Leanbh Óg* for facilitating this special edition. It has been a real pleasure to work with Dr. Rosaleen Murphy, Dr. Judith Butler and Dr. Frances Clerkin on this initiative. Frances acted as managing editor and organised the submission processes in a truly professional and efficient manner. We would also like to thank the peer reviewers who assessed each article. For those who participated in the programme we hope this is a fitting testament to your involvement and engagement. For other readers, we hope this gives you a flavour of the programme and stimulates further reflection and consideration of the many important aspects of early childhood education presented in this volume.

Valerie Sollars

Máire Mhic Mhathúna

Jan-Erik Johansson

Maelis Karlsson Lohmander

Guest Editors, Vol 11

A moment in time: what does it mean to question curriculum?

Aline-Wendy Dunlop

(University of Strathclyde)

Abstract

Bringing authoritative curriculum discourses together with personal perspectives to create new intersecting dialogues for and between students within an ethic of meaningful engagement is argued to be at the heart of questioning curriculum. These new dialogues are formative and influential in shaping critical, rather than scripted or colluding, early childhood professionals. This paper addresses a philosophical and ethical frame for student engagement. Three principal tools were employed: anticipatory content preparation, introductory engagement and shared generation of sets of pedagogical beliefs, values and an ethic of early childhood education and care as pedagogical leaders in the curriculum contexts students faced internationally.

Key Words: engagement, principles, curricula leaders

Looking back

The opportunity to be involved in a curriculum development project to create a new early years masters degree for Europe in cooperation with five other universities with resources from the European Socrates lifelong learning framework was a dream indeed. At my own University (University of Strathclyde) we had benefitted previously from other masters level funding to pilot new learning opportunities for early years graduates including teachers and early years practitioners. Knowing the relation between highly qualified staff and rich opportunities and experiences for children and understanding the significance of

such findings as those generated by the EPPE study (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004), exploring and developing strong models for the education of professionals in early childhood was an easy imperative to advocate for and into which to pour energy.

The development and implementation of a new Masters degree was rich in process and in its final form, but such projects are about more than course design. They are about cross-cultural collaboration, attempts to develop common knowledges (Edwards, 2011) both for the development team and the students, and about commitment over time. As is documented elsewhere, the original EMEC programme was developed over a three year period by six universities; in due course it became the IMEC Erasmus Mundus with a consortium of four of the original universities. As a member of staff of one of the 'outsider-institutions', I was invited make a continuing contribution on a personal professional level to the "Questioning Curriculum and Critical Issues" module, which I had been particularly involved in developing in EMEC, without my home institution being one of the partners in IMEC. This context is explained to aid understanding of the nature of the 'outsider' engagement: the challenge of contributing in a relevant way on the final taught module of the programme lay in developing an ethic of engagement with already established groups of diverse student membership in a short time, and without involvement in any of the course team meetings.

Looking forward: a short shared journey

Over the five IMEC cohorts the Questioning Curriculum module was one of two modules taught in Malta. The other was the Professional Reflections Module. Sometimes these modules ran concurrently, sometimes the other module finished slightly ahead of my involvement in the curriculum module. Having been involved in the writing the original module outline, the Questioning Curriculum and Critical Issues module was well known to the author, who always taught one week of the programme. The bulk of the module teaching was undertaken by other overseas academics, and over the five years three different people did either a year or two consecutive years each. Working on the programme every year made it possible to develop an overview of the five years of the curriculum programme allowing reflection on change over time and on the qualities of a short shared journey at the end of a much longer shared student journey. In four of the five years, my contribution fell in the very last week prior to a student group, who knew each other over the first 18 months of their shared two year programme, going their separate ways to the university of their dissertation

choice. The challenges of picking up the threads of the course were at their easiest in the two years in which there was an overlap with the outgoing tutor. The mood of the group was very future-focused and this demanded careful consideration of how to engage the students fruitfully. This meant learning quickly about their experience, passions, ambitions and commitment to the early childhood arena and also being ready to share mine.

Principal tools for the job: A philosophical and ethical frame for student engagement

Over forty years' experience of strong engagement in early childhood, primary and special schools and the University sector informed my thinking and my preparation. In order to contribute as much as possible to the almost completed student journey three approaches were employed: anticipatory content preparation; introductory engagement; shared generation of futures.

This meant embracing

- » shared generation of sets of pedagogical beliefs, values
- » an ethic of early childhood education and care
- » the students' future roles as pedagogical leaders in the curriculum contexts they faced internationally.

Anticipatory content preparation

Anticipatory content preparation meant revisiting and rethinking my own beliefs, theoretical principles and assumptions year on year, informed over time and integrating this with what the students had already covered with the main module tutors year on year. Topics included children's interests, funds of knowledge, working theories, dispositions, learning, experiences, education, curriculum comparison and analysis, planning cycles, observation, cognitive development, schema, thinking, questioning skills, metacognition, approaches to supporting learning, critical theory, a questioning repertoire, equipping children, cultural development, play, proximal and distal processes, intervention, companionship, identity, self-esteem, agency, ICT, leadership, rights-based approaches, the affordances of spaces and environments, models held of the child, voice and what is privileged in curriculum. In particular Giroux's reconceptualising of curriculum as cultural scripts and recognition of cultural work (1992), Bourdieu's (1991) gift of human capital and Bruner's (1996) faith in the complexity, competence and creativity of the child made visible through

their cultural narratives and meaning making, informed my own preparation.

Introductory engagement

This took the form of bringing together past, present and future through verbal, drawn and written dialogues. We took time to talk and share around the group, highlighting professional reflection as a critical issue embedded in any consideration of curriculum. All were invited to think about what most mattered to them in critiquing and questioning curriculum: in a sense we summed up their past on the IMEC course, but importantly we drew on the individual past experience through early childhood storying, leading to recording a drawn image of the first classroom or playroom they could each remember, the strongest positive and negative memories held of those spaces and what those experiences had contributed to their 'present' as an early years professional in their current and future/ hoped for roles. Across the five IMEC cohorts with a total of 70 students we generated memories of early childhood spaces across the world and reflected on their qualities, affordances and potentialities for learning. 69 of the 70 IMEC students involved gave consent to the author to work with these images and discussions, one chose not to share because of a very volatile political home climate. IMEC students recalled a spectrum of childhood experiences including warm, affectionate, strict, harsh, formal and informal settings: in country situations that bridged rural and urban settings and peaceful and war-torn societies. Some examples of these many visual representations and accompanying written comments are shared here:

Figure 1: Contrasting early memories

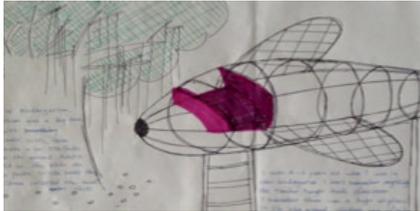
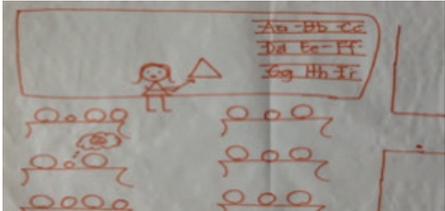
	
<p>I was 4-6 years old when I was in this kindergarten. I don't remember anything the teacher taught inside the classroom. I remember there was a huge airplane in the playground, children can climb and drive the airplane. It was high and risky to climb but I loved it. In kindergarten there was a big tree with aerial roots, there were a lot of little fruits on the ground. Adults told us the birds ate the fruits. In the break time the children collected the small fruits. Homework was one of the most impressive parts from my kindergarten life. My surname is so hard to learn and write. I asked my parents why we have a difficult surname.</p> <p>(Tzuting, Taiwan)</p>	<p>This is what I remembered the most of my preschool years. I was about 5 years and I was attending a public day care. Day Care in our country was and still is set up as a formal classroom. I remember being scared in my seat because I didn't want to be called by the teachers. I didn't know what the shape was and the teacher was strict and scary with her very long stick which she used to hit our desks when she got angry or when the class got noisy. I am the tiny figure with the thought bubble. I also remember going to this place on a weekend and saw that it was also used as a public space for whatever functions the community needs in an enclosed space.</p> <p>(Nuraisha, Philippines)</p>

Figure 2: Teacher qualities

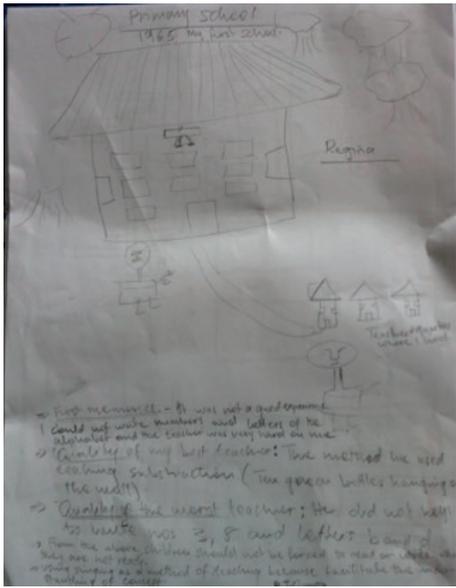
 <p>Primary School 1965 my first school</p> <p>Remao</p> <p>Quality of my best teacher: she used teaching subtraction (Ten green bottles hanging on the wall)</p> <p>Quality of the worst teacher: she did not help to write numbers 3, 8 and letters b and d</p> <p>From the above: children should not be forced to read and write when they are not ready; using singing as a method of teaching because it facilitates the understanding of concepts. The teacher needs to know children as individuals and identify their problems and try to assist them. It is good for children to go to school at the right age.</p> <p>(Regina, Cameroon)</p>	<p>First memories - it was not a good experience. I could not write numbers and letters for the alphabet and the teacher was very hard on me.</p> <p>Quality of my best teacher - the method she used in teaching subtraction (ten green bottles hanging on the wall).</p> <p>Quality of my worst teacher - he did not help to write numbers 3 and 8 and letter b and d.</p> <p>From the above: children should not be forced to read and write when they are not ready; using singing as a method of teaching because it facilitates the understanding of concepts. The teacher needs to know children as individuals and identify their problems and try to assist them. It is good for children to go to school at the right age.</p> <p>(Regina, Cameroon)</p>
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Figure 3: It feels like family

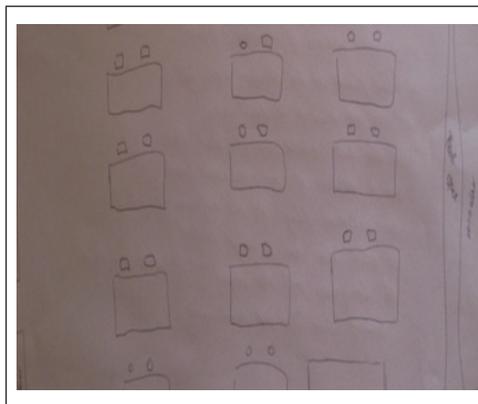


It was 1990 - 3-6 year olds - I remember the long ride to school - I always got sick. I had many friends and I could paint a lot. I had many friends (we were too many - the good and the bad). Pili was my sweet teacher - we call her Pili Pilula (wig). I started day care when I was around 1 year old. But I have memory about my preschool which was in the school. I was 2 years old, almost 3. I studied there for 16 years of my life. The school was a private school in the mountains, so every day I travelled with other children 45 minutes in the school bus. The school and the classes were gigantic, around 3000 students. So at 3 a lot of courage is needed and responsibility for the child. The children are 35 hours/week in school still now. I had many friends and a very sweet teacher that was always loving and caring. We had a very big garden/playground where we found lizards, worms, birds... and we played all the time, sometime we got too dirty or wet, then the teachers were not too happy.

I still hang out with the friends I met in kindergarten, after 16 years it feels like family.

(Lorein, Basque Country)

Figure 4: The politics of early education



Our classroom had one teacher for thirty children. There were no toys in the class only images and pictures of numbers and letters. There were plants on the window space, but we were not allowed to touch them. On the wall behind teacher's desk there was a picture of our president and our national flag. At the entrance to school there was a huge picture of Comenius with the slogan "U se U se a U se" meaning "Learn, learn and learn again"

(Martina, Czech Republic)

The personal drawing, reflection and writing on past experience as a child served both to contextualise the students' personal experiences and to inform their current thinking about the influence and affordances of learning environments. Features of curriculum enactment, the use of space, time, materials and the role of the teacher in relation to the children, as perceived by the child, all surface. For many there was a clear thread from earlier experiences to aspirations to change and develop early childhood approaches in their own countries: this is powerful for future pedagogy. In the case of the particular drawings presented here, the contrasting early memories, the power of the educator to affect children through the strategies they use, the family feeling of a long and consistent educational experience and visible political discourses, all shape the ways in which educators envisage their future curriculum values and principles.

Discussion focused on what curriculum is for, making curriculum work for adults and for children, considering whether curriculum and pedagogy are inextricably linked or whether there is room for manoeuvre. Models held of children as learners, perceptions of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and how the curriculum has been and is being used to promote children's development, learning, participation and status in many countries. Curriculum understood as a political act to be contested and examined in order to recognise its complex scripts was increasingly recognized. Our short shared journey emphasised the value of sharing early experience and linking it to present thinking about curriculum and underpinning values and principles and led naturally to the development of a set of shared principles for future work.

Shared generation of futures

Each year group produced a set of issues they would like to focus on in this very last part of the taught programme. Discussion of their own experience had implications for their critique of curriculum and questions generated by students during the module were included in the tutor's planning. Finally this journey brought the last of the five International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care (IMEC) cohorts to a mutually agreed foundation for their professional and academic futures, and indeed for mine: shared generation of futures used nominal group technique (NGT) (Kennedy and Clinton, 2009) to tease out the most important factors for each student in terms of philosophies, practices, thinking and being. NGT uses a strict protocol (Tague, 2005), in brief:

1. Independent generation of ideas in response to a stimulus question.

2. Sharing (and listing) of these ideas in round-robin fashion with no discussion.
3. Clarification of each individual idea, and grouping of similar ideas together.
4. Individual voting to prioritise ideas.

It was explained to the participants that the intention was to ask a holistic question, which would allow them to think about both the specific and wider impact of their role and contribution to children, colleagues and family experience, in the communities in which they have worked. Using a single stimulus question provides consistency. One of the strengths of NGT is that it allows individual views to be stated, then merged and prioritised through discussion and negotiation within the group, providing consensus of opinion on the order of importance of the points raised (Dunlop, Frame, Goodier et al, 2016). As this was a negotiated process involvement in this process was voluntary, but the choice to participate was agreed to provide consent to use the ideas generated for academic purposes. The emerging and merging of values and professional identities (Gee, 2000-2001) in relation to curriculum and pedagogy were expressed by the fifth IMEC cohort in eight distilled and mutually agreed master statements which captured the depth of individual thinking.

Table 1: NGT Master Statements: IMEC COHORT 5

Item	Master Statements	Rating
1	My personal philosophy and pedagogy (pedagogies)	45
2	Education and experience (educere and educare)	35
3	Image held of the child	32
4	Socio-cultural influences	18
5	Challenging the taken-for-granted	17
6	Frameworks and curricula	6
7	Leadership and teamwork	6
8	Bridging influences	6

An ethic of early childhood education and care

The emerging shared values informed the development of an ethic of care which took account of the quality of the environment, the nature of the teacher, the relationship with other children and with the first teacher, the very different ages

of the child at the entry to school, family support, expectations, pedagogy and the importance of play. Participants highlighted the value of peer interactions, the richness of childhood and the importance of developing and holding fast to respectful images of childhood in order to provide relevant curriculum.

Pedagogical leadership

Focusing on curriculum resulted in a mutually agreed foundation for professional and academic futures, which recognised the power of preschool and school adults and called for a more dialogic pedagogy. Our discussion threw everything into question (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2004), challenging notions of the universal child and a one-world view. We focused on curriculum as a vehicle: our short shared journey resulted in an individualised but mutually agreed foundation for our professional, curricular and academic futures.

Conclusions

Over the nine years (three for EMEC; six for IMEC), nearly 100 students graduated with a Masters degree from these programmes of study. One hundred people with an advanced understanding of the early years of life and of early education and childcare across nations: potentially groups of people with the capacity to influence future policy and practices globally, their continued contact with each other render them guardians in sustaining high quality and appropriate experiences for children in their many home countries. It has been a privilege to work with dedicated people from Armenia, Basque Country, Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guyana, Iceland, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Kenya, Macedonia, Malta, Mexico, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Scotland, Serbia, Seychelles, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Early childhood is a political arena. Vaughan and Estola (2008) draw a distinction between an 'exchange' paradigm and a 'gift' paradigm; applied to early childhood, curriculum experience for adults and children must move away from competition and acquisition to engaging with empathy and affection with others. In questioning curriculum we raised many issues, concluding that curriculum can, and must be a reciprocal gift (Dunlop, in press). Together we have worked to bring together external and internal dialogues and to link these in curriculum conversations across borders in country specific ways as well as across the educational borders that exist for each nation's children. Pedagogical

and philosophical realisations and shifts are important for teachers, educational leaders and the academic life: recognizing the lifelong impact of international engagement.

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How can Aesthetic Meetings create deeper cultural understanding of aesthetic learning?

Tona Gulpinar & Leif Hernes

(Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences)

Abstract

From five cohorts of IMEC students, the authors of this article have experienced how cultures are challenged, and how these challenges are brought forth in processes in making and performing collective aesthetic productions. Different cultural points of departure, different angles on aesthetic experiences and artistic meetings, challenge both students' and professors' ways of thinking. Aesthetic processes and art productions the students experience are crucial for their understanding of similarities and differences and bring forth nuances and new ways of reflecting on the process of creating environments for aesthetic learning. Challenging one's practices through the eyes of multiple cultures creates new practices and viewpoints that will affect both students' and professors' new encounters with art and education. In this paper, we want to explore the possibilities for a better and fuller understanding of the importance of art when international students from many different cultures meet. How can this heighten their understanding of their own aesthetic and cultural practice in the process of aesthetic learning?

Key words: Aesthetic learning, art, culture

Introduction

Through six years with IMEC, four professors from Oslo and Akershus

University College have tried to facilitate the students' insights and experiences into the complexity of understanding as well as experiencing Children's Aesthetic Culture. Our point of departure is that the aesthetic dimension is an important part of any culture. This work opens up possibilities to recognize the aesthetic dimension as an important gateway to mutual understanding and to enable people to live together in a multicultural society.

With students coming from all over the world, different backgrounds/cultures are challenged, and what we observe is how these challenges are brought forth in processes of making and performing collective aesthetic productions. Children's culture, aesthetics and art are our main focus in the IMEC module, *Children's Aesthetic Culture*. Aesthetic processes and art productions the students share during the module are the basis for discussions and workshops where one tries to search for an understanding of cultural differences and similarities; and to bring forth nuances and new ways of reflecting. Our discussions about culture, children's culture, aesthetics and art take their point of departure in the different cultures we meet in our lives and which frame our cultural practice.

Theoretical issues

When we look into theories used to understand the art-processes and art-meetings we find the concept of *Relational arts* represented by Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) relevant. It allows for a relational practice to become art, with the consequence that you can both be a part of and contribute to the art concept as well as being an observer from within the concept and an audience to the concept. Richard Schechner's *Performance theories* (1998/2003) that look upon how play, rituals and theatre constitutes meaning and how they relate to each other in form are relevant to underpinning the importance of the students' work. In relation to the audience/fellow-students' perspective it is important to understand and experience how this is treated in Roland Barthes' ideas in the article "The Death of the Author" (1967), which allows the audience to enter into discussion with the artist. It reminds us how the students need to work through the process towards form, as well as giving a perspective on how one can approach art-meetings.

An artist who contributes to our understanding of the aesthetic process and the artistic form is Joseph Beuys with his ideas about social sculpture that gives an expanded understanding of what art is and can be. He was a performance artist who looked upon art as a political action, which in itself is a necessity if one wants to change the world we are living in. As a work of art, social sculpture

includes human action in order to shape the environment and the society we live in (Blom, 2001).

Children's culture and children's play

When talking about children's culture, we are talking not only about the culture that is produced/presented for children but also the culture that is produced by children themselves. A great part of this is children's play. This article tries to show the relationship between children's play culture and the making of artistic form with students (Schiller, 1794/ 2004; Schechner, 1998/2003). Both build on earlier experiences in life, experiences that are nourishing the play as well as lived life and art. The focus on aesthetics in the *Children's Aesthetic Culture* module is all about the cultures and earlier experiences that students bring into the group. Berger and Luckmann (1996) claim that we create our social reality through our interaction with other people, both through what we say and how we behave. Our understanding of the world is not an objective way of understanding, but a socially constructed understanding. A phenomenon is dependent on the context within which it is interpreted. As we research this in detail the nuances in the phenomena arise. Experiencing the truth or the reality affects our thinking and therefore what we say and do.

In sociocultural theories by Berger and Luckmann (1996), the main message is that learning and knowledge must be seen in relation to culture, language and community. Learning happens everywhere, and it is fundamentally social. Learning emerges mainly as one becomes part of a community. As for the aesthetic module, these processes are what the students as groups go through in their approach to the given task; to give artistic form.



With permission from participants

To focus the students' own practice

In our work with the IMEC students the professors experienced how a meeting between the students representing different cultures creates challenges, and possibilities, and these are brought forth when the students start their processes with the artistic productions. Both the context and the individuals create mutual possibilities according to Säljö (2001). In a teaching context differences create questions that construct students' and professors' understanding of each other. By making our own practice visible and discussing practice in meeting with other practices, our understanding of our own practice will be more multifaceted. The professors encouraged the students to "enter the stage" as early as possible in the process, in order to not only talk about what they want to convey, but also to play with actions and movements. To be able to justify and analyse practice, there is a need for insight, understanding and application of theory as well as the requirement to see and experience meaning.

Cultural meetings through art

Throughout the course, which lasted for about six weeks, the professors wanted the students to experience many ways and many approaches to what art can be. This happened through visiting exhibitions, attending theatre and dance performances, and through discussion of art theories. Different experiences and different views were brought into the discussion, often based on cultural backgrounds influenced by where and how students were brought up, and about those meetings we have with the actual art form.

The students met in Oslo, which means that we had to find art productions and art exhibitions suitable for our work in this specific city. Often these were both produced and staged in Oslo and heavily influenced by the culture and the preferences that are inherent. The hope was, however, that these art-meetings would be of such a character that they would in due course expand our understanding of each other, and that we could together can widen our frames of references of what art can be (Dewey, 1934/2005; Schechner, 1998/2003); that we are open to the different expressions and that this can show us new dimensions for our further work with own aesthetic processes as well as further work with children and art.

The professors wanted the students to meet with contemporary art. It is vital that the students meet with art that is made in our time and accordingly should say something about the time in which we live. Another reason is that today's art-scene deals with ideas that may be more globally based. Contemporary art

is political in the way that it always will be a comment on or an answer to the time we all are a part of – be it literature, theatre, art, dance or music (Rancier, 2012). What is challenging, though, is that for many people, whichever culture they represent, this is a world unknown to them. This might not only be about your own culture, but also what insight you have into the art-world.

By having these art experiences, we hoped that the students could function on an impulse, and that they could evoke an interest and a wish to express themselves through artistic form (Ross, 1978/80).

Methods

In teaching on the subject of children's culture, aesthetics and art, we take a point of departure in the different cultures that students bring, and the frames they have had in own education and the practices they themselves perform and act accordingly.

The aesthetic processes we let the students go through and the art productions that they produce are important parts of the teaching. These experiences create the point of reference for discussions and workshops where we together try to respond and where there are several answers to every question. Our aims are to find nuances and different ways of understanding and experiencing the students' different backgrounds, aesthetics and art.

At the core of these processes are students' differences, different views and different approaches related to aesthetic experiences, artistic productions and cultural productions as well as discussions. Both professors and students were challenged in relation to any given structures as well as ways of thinking. We are challenging our own practice through different cultural views that influence the processes that we participate in. We, the professors, meet the students affected by our baggage of norms and ideas. We want in spite of that to try to open up to many different ways of understanding each other in order to take care of the individual student's point of departure.

Attending and meeting with art-performances and art-exhibitions are our points of reference when the exam starts. The tasks for the practical exam were as follows:

Part A:

1. Go home and think of something you want to convey to us – fellow students and professors – and don't tell anyone. Something that really means something to you and that you

want to share with us.

2. Think of a medium or a way to convey this to us.

Part B:

1. Go in groups of three-four students. Tell them what you would like to convey.
2. Listen to the other three students and their ideas about what they would like to convey.

Part C:

Now your group has three-four different themes/ideas/stories, and at least two or three different ways of expressing oneself is presented. Together you shall look at similarities and differences in what you all have presented, and as a group you are going to mould and merge the different ideas into one idea/story/theme and make this into artistic form suitable to convey to fellow students and professors.

The professors compose the groups from criteria based on themes and backgrounds. The discussions and the actions that followed aimed to transform the different ideas into artistic form. The students had to mould their ideas and go through different possibilities over and over again in order to make everyone feel they can recognize themselves in what the group are supposed to express, be this a theme, a statement, a feeling, a message, a movement and so on. One of the ways the groups negotiated was through physically trying out ideas on the floor as a way to find artistic form for the merged ideas. This was a process where everyone had to be heard and seen, and a process where they had to share the history behind what they wanted to convey. It is a process where listening was important, it was important to ask questions and to formulate themselves in an understandable way in an atmosphere of acceptance and respect both towards their own ideas as well as to fellow- students' ideas. In this process the professors act as supervisors. The ethical issues in this setting were the way the professors dealt with the students in order to fulfil the process from encounter, to impulse, to process, towards artistic form (Ross, 1978/80). It is important that we face the challenges related to studying different cultural understandings of aesthetic learning that might arise from normative preconceptions, which influence individuals' contribution to the field of study. As professors, we have to be conscious about our personal cultural references that we bring into our

teaching, and in meeting with art together with the students we need to benefit from being on an equal level.

Both sound-recordings as well as video-recordings formed the basis for our pedagogical work in this module as well as the basis for this article. Before using video and sound-recordings we have ensured that everyone taking part agrees on these methods of documentation and ethical considerations are taken into account.



With permission from participants.

Findings

We based our findings on notes, interviews and video-recordings of conversations and discussions as well as art productions with five cohorts of students. Most of our students had a common background as they all have been working with children and education, and their interests lie within these fields. Most of the students work in their pedagogical practice with the art-subjects or have had their own experiences through their own education.

By challenging both professors as well as students' practice through the eyes of different cultural backgrounds and different points of view, new practices and viewpoints were created. This will influence the work of both students and professors in their future encounters with art and with education both in schools and in kindergarten settings. We have experienced how the merging in the meeting point between all the different backgrounds the students represented changed attitudes and interests in the group in the process of making an

artistic production. This has heightened and challenged everyone's focused experiences, both being a part of as well as taking part in these processes and all the choices that had to be made to reach artistic form.

In order to understand each other better and to understand and experience how other people understand them, most of the students reported that this process has affected how they look upon art and how they will deal with art in educational situations in the future. In this process, the aesthetic approach has been the basis. The search for an understanding of different opinions, different values, different understandings, different nuances and new ways of reflecting has permeated the process. Students also reported back that in this process they got to know each other and each other's cultural background in a way that increased their understanding of their own cultural practice.

Our findings through talks, discussions, art meetings and art productions show that by challenging our own practice through the eyes of different cultural backgrounds and points of view, practices and viewpoints were created that will characterize the work of both students and professors in their future encounters with art and pedagogy. "If we accept that our lived lives affect our being in our encounters in daily life as well as in art, we will understand the importance of realizing that all staff in kindergarten also are mediators of culture." (Gulpinar & Hernes (In press). Our findings show that the aesthetic dimension is an important part of any culture. By making a practice visible and discussing practice in meeting with other practices, one's understanding of one's own practice will become more multifaceted.

Conclusion

The aim of the module Children's Aesthetic Culture has been to explore the possibilities for a better and fuller understanding of the importance of art when international students from many different cultures meet and how this can heighten the understanding of one's own aesthetic and cultural practice in the process of aesthetic learning.

Meeting with different cultural points of departure, different perspectives on aesthetic experiences and artistic meetings, challenges both students' and professors' ways of thinking. By challenging one's practices through the eyes of multiple cultures, we create new practices and viewpoints that will effect/affect both students' and professors' new encounters with art and pedagogy.

Acknowledgement

We want to thank all the students in the five cohorts of IMEC for their reports and for their contribution to the module Children's Aesthetic Culture.

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Practitioners' Experiences and Perspectives on Cultural Diversity; A Multiple-Case study in Maltese Early Years' Settings

Masoumeh Abedinnejad and Censu Caruana

(University of Malta)

Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore the practitioners' experiences and perspectives of cultural diversity in early years' settings. A multiple-case study methodology was applied to this research. The results of the study show that participants generally believed that introducing children to the concept of diversity from the early ages is unnecessary. Language has been discussed by the participants as the main issue in integrating children in multicultural Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. The involvement of parents in the schools' daily life was identified as relatively weak by all the practitioners. Generally, all the practitioners expressed a need for more education and training with regards to cultural diversity and for strategies in tackling its related issues.

Keywords: Diversity, Culture, Cultural diversity, practitioner's experience, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Respect for diversity is an issue which is increasingly emphasised in European childcare. The increasing number of immigrant and refugee children in European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings calls for inclusion and respect for diversity and equity for all children. Malta, like other European states, is increasingly becoming a multicultural society due to the

high rate of immigration from European and non-European countries. Maltese schools represent an increasingly multicultural and multilingual environment because of the long history of colonialism, labour immigration, and recent flows of refugees and asylum seekers (Falzon, Pisani and Cauchi, 2012). As reported by the Migration Policy Index (MIPEX), Malta has just started to adjust to this manifestation of diversity, and yet the intrinsic element of multiculturalism is not reflected in education or in the classroom (Falzon *et al.*, 2012).

During the past decade, many international studies have been published to address policy makers, practitioners and trainers on issues of diversity, equity and social inclusion (Vandenbroeck, 2007). Although policy level perspectives are crucial for regulating the direction of approaches to cultural diversity, at the same time, educators have a determining role in applying ECEC policies in daily life. Apart from skills and knowledge, personal views on cultural diversity are also important, as diversity may be experienced differently by each individual (Diversity and Equity in Early childhood Training in Europe [DECET], 2004). As Peeters and Vandenbroeck (2011) suggest, a technical body of knowledge is not enough for practitioners to deal with difficulties in a diverse setting. They need to reflect on their practices and develop the ability to be reflexive (Peeters and Vandenbroeck, 2011). In addition, Robinson and Jones Diaz (2005) state that exploring practitioners' perspectives on cultural diversity is important for understanding how they connect their own identities and personal perspectives to culturally diverse communities.

A study on ECEC practitioners' perspectives on cultural diversity can give them a voice and facilitate the understanding of their perspectives, experiences and challenges in daily practices. Such a study could also help college principals, centre management, policy makers and teacher trainers to identify the practitioners' challenges and needs in culturally diverse settings.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research method to develop a deeper understanding of practitioners' experiences and perspectives. A multiple-case study methodology was applied to this research to shed light on the practitioners' challenges of working in multicultural (ECEC) settings. A purposive sampling method was used. Eight practitioners from two multicultural primary schools in Malta were chosen to take part in this study, including six teachers and two school managers. The primary teachers were working with children aged four to six years old in grade one and two. Ethical issues such as consent,

privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of data were considered at each step of the research.

This study used semi-structured interviews as the main mode of data collection. Additionally, participant-observations and archival records were used. Thematic coding was applied to categorise data based on themes that were grounded in the research questions and related theoretical concepts.

Findings

Perspectives on Culture and Cultural Diversity

Findings from the interviews showed that practitioners held a variety of perspectives on the meaning and implications of cultural diversity. However, the most common understanding of the concept was related to particular aspects of cultural diversity, namely religion and language. For example Sara said:

Cultural diversity is about people who are coming from different countries to Malta, who have different language and religion; people who are different from us but we live together and we need to acknowledge them (Sara, Primary School A).

However, Cecilia in Primary School A presented a broader definition of the concept;

In my opinion it is about people's differences and it is important to celebrate those differences. We are all different yet we are the same. I think it is important to highlight the differences not to pin point at them.

When prompted to reflect on the opportunities that cultural diversity provides in the ECEC context, most of the practitioners believed that it is a learning experience for children and for themselves. They viewed it as a positive opportunity which helps them to understand, respect, and tolerate the differences.

Additionally, the interviews show that the practitioners tended to define cultural diversity in terms of minority groups versus majority ones. Cannella and Viruru (2004) discuss post-colonialist views about multicultural education which regarded diversity as a minority issue, and believed that the reason for inequality lies in minority cultures. They further stated that majority cultures have been viewed as the norm, while minority ones were considered as deviant from the norm. The advocates of the anti-bias approach suggest that awareness and

reflections on one's own culture are determining factors for practicing culturally meaningful education (Derman-Sparks and the ABC task force, 1989).

Young Children and Cultural Diversity

According to the findings from the interviews, all the participants in this study shared the idea that young children are too cognitively immature to be exposed to the concept of diversity and culture. In one case Sara in Primary School A said:

We cannot teach children about the culture or cultural diversity at this age because they are really young and they won't understand you.

Moreover, most of the participants restated that introducing the concept of diversity is irrelevant and unnecessary for young children. In another interview, Cecilia in Primary School A believed that:

You don't have to talk about different cultures with children. You don't have to expose them. They are really open and they don't see the differences.

However, throughout the interviews, the practitioners referred to several examples of children asking questions about other children's religion, food, and language. Besides, two of the practitioners (Anna and Catherin from Primary School B), discussed some examples of biases among children due to race and skin colour differences:

A girl in my class hears a lot about racism at home and I have children with different skin colour and she doesn't want to talk to them, and every time a fight raises for example in class, she always point to the girl because she is dark skinned (Catherin, Primary School B).

These findings are important as they suggest that in spite of evidence of children's awareness and understanding of culture and differences, the practitioners tend to believe that addressing cultural diversity and its related issues and exposing children to these concepts is irrelevant at this age. It can be interpreted through the discussion suggested by Robinson and Jones Diaz (2005), who argue that practitioners' perspectives are highly influenced by discourses surrounding them. The lack of attention to intercultural education and cultural differences in the Maltese National Curriculum Framework and the schools' policy documents might result in underestimating the importance of addressing cultural diversity

issues by practitioners in this study. Additionally, according to Griesbar and Cannella (2001) practitioners might not have the confidence to challenge dominant discourses.

Post-structuralist theories have critiqued developmentally appropriate practices which are dominant in the field of childhood education. They argue that the basic assumptions of developmental psychology stem from studies that were carried out in white, western societies (Cannella, 1997). Moreover, western perspectives on childhood had an influence on the prevailing idea that young children cannot hold biases or prejudices against people who are different from them (Griesbar and Canella, 2001).

Practitioner's Role in a Culturally Diverse ECEC Setting

During the interviews, practitioners were asked to reflect on their experiences of working in a culturally diverse setting and their role in a multicultural environment. In most cases they did not refer to their own culture and the potential for bias towards different cultures and groups.

The practitioners who participated in this study had different perspectives on their roles in a culturally diverse ECEC institution. Their perspectives ranged from the idea that all the children are the same and should be treated equally, to a belief in acceptance and celebrating the differences. However, in both primary schools, there were no examples or explanations to show how the diversity and differences are being celebrated. Most practitioners rarely organized activities to address issues related to culture. Nonetheless, those who could recall instances of racist comments from children tried to address the issue, either through some planned activities like storytelling or with external help.

The findings also show that in cases where children came up with questions about different cultures or religions, teachers were unable to go beyond short responses and they did not initiate any kind of discussion or activity in this regard. Fennimore (2007) suggests that there are different reasons that might influence practitioners' reluctance to address diversity in ECEC. The reason could be the lack of awareness of their own biases or biases that are preserved by dominant discourses, lack of collegiality and support within the setting, and fear of discussing issues that are sensitive.

Cultural Diversity in ECEC Context: Main Issues

Language

Findings from the study depict that among the various issues related to cultural diversity, participants highlighted language and religion as critical aspects in ECEC. The centrality of language and religion was brought up during the interviews with all the participants. For instance, while asking the practitioners about different aspects of cultural diversity that can be related to early childhood education, Anna and Seana in Primary School B discussed language and religion.

Well, I think the most important things about cultural diversity in early childhood education are language and religion... language is the basic because we need a way to communicate and then is the religion (Anna, Primary School B).

All the practitioners underlined the importance of English as the determining factor in integrating children in a culturally diverse setting. The findings of the study suggest that language was identified as the major challenge for practitioners working with children from various cultural backgrounds. Language was also identified as the main difficulty in communication with parents.

The participants in this study reiterated that learning English or Maltese is crucial for children to be able to communicate and to achieve the academic goals. They also believed that learning the mother tongue is important but it is the family's responsibility. There were no representations of children's native languages in either setting.

This implies that learning the mother tongue and exposing children to their home languages at school is not considered important in comparison with English and Maltese. Cummins (2001) suggests that when a message, implicit or explicit, conveys to the children that their mother tongue is not as important as the majority school language, children will leave a central part of their identities outside of the school. He further argues that this feeling of rejection might lead to a passive participation of children in the classroom. The emphasis on religion and religious differences could be connected to the practitioners' religious background and social context. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2005) suggest that early childhood practitioners' perspectives and experiences are shaped by discourses that are present to them within the professional field or in general in society.

Parents' Involvement in the Life of School

Interviews with the practitioners in both primary schools show a relatively weak level of communication between the schools and parents in general. However, all participants emphasised the importance of interaction with parents, and having knowledge about the families' cultures and backgrounds. The school's plans for communicating with parents in both Primary School A and Primary School B were limited to occasions such as the parents' day that occurs twice a year, and open day which occurs once a year. On parents' day, teachers meet the parents of children individually and discuss with them about children's issues and strengths. Open day is when the parents are invited to school to see their children's activities and school performances.

Aside from the parents' day and open day, some examples of daily communication with the parents from various cultural backgrounds were brought up during the interviews. Language was the main obstacle mentioned by almost all the participants, and they identified it as the main reason for the lack of communication with immigrant families. Practitioners referred to some families' difficulties in communication with the school because they know neither English nor Maltese.

Lack of time is another important issue mentioned by practitioners as a reason for lack of communication with immigrant families. The importance of communication between school and parents for ensuring cohesion has been highlighted in the research literature (De Gioia, 2013; Adir and Tobin, 2008). A study in Australia examined the communication patterns between parents and school in six different early year settings. The results show that if there is no dialogue or discussion between educators and families, misjudgements and biases might arise without the teacher or parents even being aware of them (De Gioia, 2013).

Conclusion

The results of the study show that in general the practitioners in this study viewed cultural diversity in ECEC as something positive. They believe that cultural diversity within the ECEC setting provides an opportunity for them and for the children to improve their knowledge about different cultures and also to enhance the ability to accept and tolerate differences. Nonetheless, the findings from the interviews indicated that in order to actively tackle the issues related to cultural diversity, they need more knowledge of intercultural and multicultural education. Generally, all the participants in this study showed an interest in and

need for further education and in-service training in regard to cultural diversity. The practitioners' shared experiences and educational background in this field demonstrated lack of knowledge and skills to deal with issues related to cultural diversity such as communication with the parents, planning culturally related activities, dealing with biases and negative attitudes among children, and tackling the negative perspectives prevalent in society.

Communication with families from diverse cultural backgrounds in both primary schools was identified as relatively poor. In most cases, participants in this study are open to have more communication with the families. Language has been identified as the main cause of the lack of communication with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. This finding has implications for schools and colleges to provide services for cultural and language mediation, to plan group activities among parents from different cultural backgrounds and other planned activities to improve the involvement of parents in the life of schools.

Considering the culturally diverse characteristic of Malta, this area of education needs specific attention and effort to give voice to the minority cultures and provide an arena for democratic education and cultural dialogue in the ECEC settings. Moreover, college authorities could provide opportunities for in-service training courses to empower practitioners with the crucial skills to implement inclusive strategies and culturally sensitive practices in classrooms.

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Developing a sense of identity in a Maltese kindergarten

MaryClaire Camilleri Saliba

(University of Malta)

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how girls at kindergarten level construct their personal and social identities during free and structured play. Although some might argue that small children lack identity formation, others suggest that children's qualities and sense-of-self develop gradually through life experiences and have defined identity construction as a process of interaction in specific contexts (Mac Adams, 2006; Reese, Yam, Jack and Hayne, 2010). However, a child's identity cannot develop in a vacuum; it is through interactions, observations and play that children learn the extent of their abilities and start forming their identities. Identity is seen as a dynamic and socially-constructed process, therefore identity is viewed as a continuously evolving process affected by the community which the children form part of. In this study, identity is understood as the way children relate to others, both peers and adults, and the way the environment around them is utilised in order to construct the children's identities.

Introduction

Uprichards (2008) claims that children start forming their sense of who they are from the moment they are born and that it is particularly during the interaction and learning experienced in kindergarten that children start developing their

sense of similarities and differences to other people. Malaguzzi (1998) has worked together with parents, teachers and other community members to create an education system which revolves around particular understandings of the child, such as the child who has rights rather than needs, the child as a constructor of knowledge, the child as a researcher and the child as a social being. Schaffer (1996) has explained how identity drives two main human purposes: the need to belong to a particular group of people and the need to be distinctive and individualistic within the same community of others. What young children learn at school is a cultural curriculum which offers a wide array of opportunities and practices within the cultures they inhabit. A child's cultural pathway helps him/her develop a sense of identity within their own culture, which will ultimately allow them to coexist with individuals of different beliefs and practices. Since developing a cultural identity is fundamental for young children, the cultural identity which the child forms at home needs to be secure enough to help them experience a positive transition into early childhood settings without them being part of a "risky adaptation" (Woodhead and Brooker, 2008:26), mostly in relation to language, attitude and behaviour. Schaffer (2006) has explained how recently research has shown that the identity acquired by children from birth is more complex than a unique identity which remains unchanged throughout the children's lives. Children's personalities are constructed on several patterns and although these might indicate different purposes, they are still linked to each other. Children tend to define themselves by how similar or different they are to each other. In order for adults to avoid stereotyping children's identities, teachers have a crucial role in designing a curriculum which helps children to grow into masterful learners and respectful beings (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2010). In addition, in relation to gender identity, James (1993) has explained how gender is a mark of difference within the children's social world - while boys mostly engage in competitive games, girls tend to share common activities and communication strategies. Play offers "voluntary and experiential features" for the child's identity formation (Bennett, 2006:21). Pretend play has been perceived as crucial for a child to develop his/ her moral qualities within friendships and allow him/ her to experiment in various social roles and identities (Dunn, 2004).

Methodology

The aim of this research was to explore how children construct their sense of identity in a kindergarten setting. The public kindergarten setting is part of a primary school. Toddlers as young as two years nine months old are registered to start the first year of kindergarten with the Head of school. All kindergarten

classes in this school are equipped with an Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) and computers. In all the classes there is a library and there are big circular tables where the children can sit around. There is also a free play section, with toys such as blocks, puzzles, beads, and buttons. There are also mats which the children can sit upon while they carry out reading sessions or during free play. This study may be regarded as a single case study if one focuses on how, in this case, a single kindergarten influences the construction of a child's identity. On the other hand, it can also be seen as a multiple-case study of a few children who may be influenced differently within the same kindergarten environment. In both instances, this study is being approached as an instrumental case-study in that it is not seeking the understanding of one particular case, be it a specific environment or one child, but rather it is using the data from one kindergarten and a few children to support the development of an in-depth understanding of the construction of the sense of identity within the kindergarten setting. A narrative approach was implemented in this research study, as I was interested in exploring the girls' construction of identity in the everyday life of a kindergarten setting through direct observation. The girls shared personal stories, beliefs and experiences through free play. This reflected their own perceptions of a sense of self, well-being and belonging. I also looked into the practitioners' practices and the girls' parents' perspectives of their daughters' evolving identities. The data collection technique used gave the kindergarten practitioners a chance to reflect on their own practices and share experiences on how they develop the children's sense of identity in their classroom. In addition, parents gave a more detailed account of how their children construct their identities at home.

This study was carried out in a state kindergarten setting as I was particularly interested in looking at how Maltese children, and in particular 'typically developing' girls, form their identities within the school environment. In this case, the term 'typically developing' refers to girls who do not require any additional aid during play or any activities carried out at school. I wanted to take a closer look at the substantial issues which are present in these girls' lives; what experiences they encounter and how these experiences shape their lives through their use of language, social space, and relationship formation at school. For my research study, I chose to focus solely on young girls, aged three and four years, as I wanted to see whether their social interactions and divisions show characteristics such as social exclusions and intimacy amongst other processes. MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford (2010:242) mentioned how direct engagement with young children is a way of "gaining invaluable insight into the educational process, contributing to finding new ways of living together". The

participants in this study were three three-year old girls attending the first year and another three four-year old girls attending the second year of kindergarten. By listening to the children's own narratives, I was able to get a deeper insight into their identity construction during this crucial period of their life. I was very much interested in the girls' well-being at the kindergarten setting from a constructivist point-of-view. The observational data was translated into short narratives. Only those narratives which were regarded as providing data that could be related to an understanding of the children's sense of identity were used. After gathering the necessary data, the field notes were transcribed into 'small stories'. During this process, the data was analysed. For the sake of data interpretation, the field notes were re-read from a specific point-of-view, that of how the children construct their identities in everyday situations within the kindergarten classroom. The themes which were very common in all narratives were then elicited and further discussed after every narrative. The thematic analysis of narratives was utilised for the interpretation of the small stories. The focus was on the content that these small stories communicated about the construction of the girls' identities.

Our ethical norms entailed being respectful to the subjects and being responsible towards the participants' well-being. This study adhered to codes and guidelines issued by the University of Malta and provided authentic information and consent in order to protect the subjects' identities and treat them with respect. Pseudonyms were used throughout to assure anonymity.

When dealing with case-study findings, the results are discoveries as much as they are experiences. The key to ethical research is informed consent and this is based on the view that every person is entitled to autonomy. After the Ethics Committee at the University of Malta granted me permission to carry out this research study within a primary state school, the head of school, the Kindergarten Assistants (KGAs) and the parents of the children were given an information sheet and a consent form. Due to the philosophical nature of this research, and for confidentiality reasons as a researcher, I had to choose particular incidents or 'small stories' so as not to put direct light on the child's inner worlds, as some incidents reflected the child's out of school environment.

The process of analysing the themes within the narratives and then relating them to the relevant theories and systematic ideas within the research has been described as a means for the researcher to acquire validity, objectivity and reliability. The findings of this study were then connected to the main research question. Triangulation of the data gathered from the observations and the

interview was also included. The methodological triangulation employed in this study aimed at using multiple methods in order to get different perspectives of the same concept, that is, the children's development of identity within a kindergarten setting.

Findings and Analysis of Data

This study highlighted the importance of meaningful peer and adult interactions for the construction of young children's identities in a kindergarten setting. In everyday situations, children encounter circumstances where they constantly discover who they are from the way they are expected to deal with certain issues. The girls who participated in this study were constantly faced with circumstances which at times included them within particular peer groups and activities while in other instances, made them feel excluded. The concept of having and being friends is crucial for children's identity development (James, 1993). Being excluded from certain peer relationships might have negative impact on the child's sense of well-being and identity development (Puroila & Estola, 2013).

During interactions at school, the participant children spoke about themselves while they listened to how they should act in order to become better humans. Due to this, the KGAs had a crucial role to play. The KGAs' participation during free-play appeared to be entertaining and exciting for most of the children. Some children were pleasing and easy-going in their responses while playing with the KGA, while others wanted to be creative. One of the KGAs who was interviewed stated that she adopted a "firm, fair and friendly" attitude in her class in order for the children to understand what they have done right or wrong and know what to do to act upon it. Both of the KGAs believed that children should be independent from a very early age; however the observations at certain times suggested the opposite. Mostly due to time-constraints, KGAs used to carry out certain tasks like cutting or cleaning-up themselves. Similarly to Bitterberg's (2013) findings, this study suggests the importance of giving children the space and time to carry out tasks on their own. Another issue which emerged from this study is the KGAs' feedback in relation to the participants' behaviour. Whenever the KGA praised a child, the child appeared to feel satisfied and content. This was reflected in the child's facial expressions such as smiling and laughing. This suggests the importance of the KGA's practices in making children feel positive about themselves. Whenever a child needs to be corrected, this needs to be done in a professional and sympathetic manner and not in a rebuking way. Wenger (as cited in Carr & Lee, 2012) advises that for the formation of

their identities, children need a place where they can engage in activities and interact with others, materials which help them relate to the surrounding world and experiences to prepare them for the outside environment, and ways of making their actions count in the everyday life. Similarly, some of the findings from the narrative data indicate that children need to feel safe and secure within their environment in order to be able to fully express their ideas and to learn from their mistakes. This fits with the suggestion by Woodhead and Brooker (2008) that young children value the concepts of trust, intimacy and support as much as adults do.

The KGAs need to create meaningful relationships with children who would then feel safe to communicate with a sensitive and listening adult. Due to the large teacher to children ratio (1:20), the KGA was unable to engage with all of the children at the same time. Hence in certain cases, children were left to deal with situations on their own. Although the KGAs aimed at instilling the concept of resilience within children, sometimes this ended up in being a negative experience. On two occasions, girls encountered problems while communicating and working with other children; however the KGA did not attend to what was happening in order to guide or model appropriate behaviour within a group. This meant that some children appeared to feel submissive while others appeared to be more dominant.

The physical environment which surrounded the children and the kind of resources available were also found to be influential on the children's identity development. A positive environment helps children to further develop creative and imaginative skills and also overcome challenges which they might encounter (Brooker, 2008). In one of the narratives, the dirt in the playground instigated a kind of pretend play where the girls pretended to be 'Mothers', and one of the main jobs of being a mother reflected in the play was to wash clothes. Hence, the girls pretended to use washing powder (dust) in order to wash the clothes (the KGA's shoe). The resources available for play were also a source for the children to construct their gender identity.

Both KGAs said that they believed that children's toys should not be stereotyped by gender. However there was only one narrative which showed a girl playing with blocks, and the reason for this was that this was expected of her by her teacher and peers. During free-play or during recess-time, the ball was always given to the boys to play football. Even though not all of the boys chose to play football, the other boys played running games. During recess-time and free-play, the girls played with skipping-ropes, chanting clapping games, and other

pretend play games. Hence this indicates the importance of all children being provided with diverse resources as well as encouraging them to make use of all the materials in order to break down gender stereotypes in class. Although some parents claimed that their children played with all toys at home, this was not reflected at school. This study shows that while the outcomes within the National Curriculum Framework (2012) for the early-years sectors entails valid and relevant goals, there needs to be more focus on the personal identities which children are developing within this particular context.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of effective communication skills and relationships between the children and their KGAs and the significance of one-to-one interactions with children on a daily basis. Also of significance is the physical environment which surrounds the children together with the materials and resources available for their development. As well as instilling cultural norms and values, considering the children's family and cultural backgrounds is essential while planning activities for the children. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of exposing the children to diverse cultural, religious and ethnic practices, of good relationships between the home and school environments, and of encouraging children to participate and be proud of their work. All of the above are important elements in the construction of young children's identities.

Conclusion

Since identity is a constantly developing process and is embedded within the children's everyday experiences and relationships, this study attempts to offer an interpretation of the narrative identities gathered. These findings are representative of the six children who participated in this study, together with the two KGAs and the children's parents and cannot be generalised to represent all state schools in Malta. The findings of this research offer rich data which can be useful for future research studies. The main findings within this study indicate that children are constructing their identities through their engagement in various forms of interactions. The theme of power relations emerged in the short episodes. Along with this theme, the different types of social competences exhibited by the girls with their peers and educators were evident. The degree of opportunity for creativity and self-expression also had an impact on the child's ability to exhibit, or not exhibit, characteristics which made her understand who she is and whether she belongs. Finally, the girls' level of verbal and non-verbal communication skills were useful tools which helped them in articulating what they were feeling or thinking. From the observations, it was also concluded that

in spite of the KGAs' efforts, some children were still not given the attention that they required during specific times. The KGA-child ratio might be an issue. Due to the large number of children in class, 20 children in all, the KGAs found it difficult to manage all the children at once. Hence, they made use of rewards charts, treasure boxes with sticker stars and good behaviour charts to get children to conform to adult expectations. Space and time are also of crucial importance in providing children with the opportunities to fully develop and nurture their sense of identity. Although the KGAs were very knowledgeable and showed that they are passionate about their jobs, from the way they justified their practice and decisions taken regarding the children, issues came up in relation to the amount of work that they have to cover over the period of one year. This was mostly a concern in KGII, where the KGA explained that the syllabus of the second year of kindergarten covers a lot of work which is done during the first year of primary school. Hence the time for free play was limited. KGAs expressed how they might also benefit from more reflections in relation to their practice. Although they give a great amount of attention to the aesthetics of the classroom and to the resources which are utilised in class, they might also profit from reflecting upon the children's social identity development, especially while interacting with peers. Although there is no general recipe for acquiring a positive sense of self, the school physical and social environment should be one which is sensitive to the children's needs, welcoming to the children's expressions and supportive for the children's development.

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English as a Second Language in a Maltese early years setting

Ivana Bankovic and Valerie Sollars

(Department of Early Childhood & Primary Education, University of Malta)

Abstract

This article explores the learning experiences of a cohort of children acquiring English as a second language within a Maltese kindergarten setting. In this qualitative case study, data was collected through classroom observations, interviews with practitioners and questionnaires completed by parents. This case study provides insights into factors which impacted on language learning for this particular cohort of children. Results indicate that formally structured and adult-led language activities were organized daily with minimal opportunities for children's active engagement through interactions with adults and peers or child-centred activities. In conclusion, recommendations are made to address policy and practice appropriate for second language learning in early years.

Introduction

Internationally, acquiring English as a second or foreign language from an early age has gained importance. Within the European Union the number of young English learners has increased significantly in recent years. Promoting early second/foreign language learning and teaching, the provision of teaching in several languages, increasing awareness of the benefits of teaching languages at an early age and encouraging measures to prepare teachers to work in the field of early language learning form the basis of several policies and actions

within the EU (Eurydice, 2008).

Introducing very young children to languages other than their mother tongue has several advantages. It contributes to fostering multiculturalism that would enable greater understanding, respect and openness to Europe's cultural wealth. It potentially provides children a head start by being a useful resource for further achievement. Learning languages at a young age further offers support to the much-debated argument that a language is learnt more easily and quickly when children are young rather than as they grow older. Thus, the issue of second language acquisition (SLA) is becoming progressively more relevant on a global level, particularly for the field of early childhood education (Murphy, 2014; Murphy and Evangelou, 2016).

Education in Malta is compulsory for five to sixteen-year-olds. Non-compulsory kindergarten provision for three to five year olds is widely available and accessible. There is 100% attendance at kindergarten settings for four-year-olds. In the Maltese contexts, successful SLA of English is associated with several advantages including access to information, communication with people abroad, academic achievement and improving one's opportunities in the labour market. Higher education cannot be accessed unless individuals achieve competence in both Maltese and English. Although both are official languages, research suggests that the majority of children acquire Maltese as a native language at home and then familiarize themselves and start acquiring English later on, generally when they enter kindergarten or school (Camilleri, 1995; Falzon, Pisani and Cauchi, 2012).

The aim of the current study was to examine how four-year-old children were introduced to English as a second language in a Maltese kindergarten setting. The research sought to document the pedagogy and choice of activities presented by practitioners in order to facilitate SLA and to reflect on the extent to which the activities were conducive to positive and appropriate learning experiences.

Theoretical framework

This study was set within the socio-cultural theory of children's learning and development (Lantolf, 2000). Socio-cultural theory recognizes the child as an active participant in the learning process and acknowledges that the child's capacities are influenced by the culture of the environment in which he/she develops.

Socio-cultural theory considers language as an important mediation tool in

the development of higher mental processes of learners, thus enabling the developing communicative and cognitive functions to move from the inter-psychological to the intra-psychological plane (Vygotsky, 1987). This requires the active engagement of children in social interactions with peers and adults (Lantolf, 2000). Children have agency and intentions which enable them to learn and construct their understandings through interaction with the environment. Moreover, the socio-cultural perspective of language development acknowledges the relationship between the development of language and thought which are tightly interwoven (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

The opportunity to use language as a means of making sense of experiences with others is a crucial step in learning to use language meaningfully, appropriately and effectively. It enables the child to internalize the language and to carry it into further performance (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The value of imitation is emphasized in children's language learning: internalization through imitation is not a matter of just miming and copying but entails an active and frequently creative, reasoning process (Lantolf, 2000). Thus activities involving role-play and pretend play are important for young children's development. Play is a particularly important activity in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of development. Through play, children create a zone of proximal development in collaboration with others, in which they perform beyond their current abilities since they have the support of others (Vygotsky, 1987).

Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted in a school which admits children from kindergarten through secondary school. The participants in this study included two preschool practitioners and forty-one parents of children aged between 3 years 9 months and 4 years 9 months. Within the school, English is introduced at kindergarten, and subsequently used as a language of instruction for most school subjects. Enrolment in the kindergarten is decided by ballot, preventing bias in the selection process. This ensures that children attending the school have different academic abilities and vary in their linguistic and socio-economic background.

Data collection

A qualitative case study design was adopted allowing for the study of a complex phenomenon within its context. Data were collected through 40 hours of observations conducted over three weeks. Anecdotal notes and running records

were kept to document the observations. The data from the observations were supported by a semi-structured interview conducted with each of the two practitioners in order to gain their insights about introducing young learners to a second language. Quantitative information collected through a parent questionnaire contributed to a holistic understanding of the topic.

Ethical considerations

Permission was sought and obtained from the school authorities and informed consent gained from the practitioners and parents ensuring voluntary participation. The identity of the institution or the participants was never disclosed and where necessary, pseudonyms were used.

Results and discussion

From the observations conducted during the study, it was evident that most communication and activities organized in the kindergarten were done through English. The morning routine, watching drama, storytelling, instructions which accompanied craft, number, dance and movement activities, were almost exclusively conducted in English. Such exposure augured well for children's receptive skills as they were immersed in an English-speaking environment with the possibility of establishing firm foundations. Quantity and quality of exposure to the second language are very important for the process of SLA (De Houwer, 2011; Tabors, 2008).

However, closer analysis of the range and nature of the activities conducted within the setting indicated that practitioners adhered to a fixed timetable with formal, structured activities resembling primary school tasks. There was little flexibility or time for practitioners to adapt to children's individual needs or interests and no opportunity to engage in child-initiated activities. Despite daily crafts and free play, staple activities included tasks associated to recognition, sounds and names of letters and recognition and value of numbers.

Since most kindergarten settings in Malta are physically situated within schools, it is not surprising that kindergarten is perceived by practitioners and parents to be an extension of the primary school where numeracy and literacy skills are emphasized (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2006).

In the setting under study, English was the official language for the school's activities. Children were expected to be sufficiently competent with the language by the time they started compulsory education. Parents' responses to the questionnaire indicated that the majority of children who attended the setting

were not native speakers of English and thus practitioners and children were under pressure since there were high expectations about children's achievements during the one year spent at this kindergarten setting. Children needed to be prepared for the first year of compulsory school where they were expected to start reading and writing in English as well as follow subject knowledge taught through English. Practitioners thus took on the role of instructors rather than facilitators without engaging children or giving importance to contextualised learning opportunities.

The teacher-directed approach evidence in this school is in contrast to more recent pedagogical approaches to second language learning. Recommended practices by experts such as Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren (2011) do not include the teaching of skills through highly-structured activities but rather through developmentally appropriate practice which is holistic, individually-focused and developmentally-interactionist. Activities offered to children at kindergarten should grow out of teacher observation and informal assessment of each child, providing for his/her physical, emotional, social and cognitive development (Kostelnik et al., 2011). Practitioners should view the process of learning as one which is highly interactive, therefore acknowledging children's agency and intentions in order to construct their understandings (Kostelnik et al., 2011; Lantolf, 2000). This is in line with the socio-cultural framework which maintains that learning, cognition and language develop through social interactions. For children acquiring a second language, such development requires the provision of a suitable environment for the necessary interactions which facilitates learners' initial attempts at using the second language (Tabors, 2008).

The focus of language activities was on the English alphabet through phonics. Practitioners gave explanations and instructions primarily about how to pronounce the words containing specific letters and how to write them down. Children repeated letter names and sounds orally and then recorded the letters in workbooks. Research suggests that second language learners benefit from this kind of focused stimulation on particular language features (Tabors, 2008). There are benefits from explicit teaching of the components of literacy, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and writing (Goldenberg, 2008). However, considering the age of the children it is doubtful that such formally-structured activities would lead to positive and appropriate language gains. The children quickly lost attention and concentration during the activity, became fidgety, and were clearly disengaged and bored. Although effective English language development requires explicit teaching of features of English, it also

requires ample, meaningful opportunities to use English (Goldenberg, 2008; Goldenberg et al. 2013).

Practitioners explained that curricular demands and time constraints prevented certain activities and hindered appropriate pedagogy. They also expressed their belief that second language is learnt through exposure via listening. This may explain why they did not set up more opportunities for language use, interaction and communication, promoting exploration and free expression.

In order to help children get beyond non-verbal communication techniques and actually use the language, Tabors (2008) recommends that practitioners should set up and use communicative opportunities to help children expand and extend their language skills. Classroom observations indicated that the practitioners did not expand the conversation with children. On the contrary, children were frequently asked to respond to closed-questions that required one-word, correct answers rather than open-ended questions that required expression of their opinions or thoughts.

Classroom observations clearly indicated that both practitioners made adjustments in the way they communicated with the children in order to facilitate understanding and support SLA. They often tried to simplify the language they were using, combining it with a lot of repetition as well as gesticulation and body language. They also provided visual support in the form of pictures, charts or props. All these strategies are identified as very beneficial for young children's acquisition of second language in terms of setting up a low-demand situation, conveying the meaning of words and helping understanding (Tabors, 2008).

Play was attributed some recognition in this setting and free play was very important for the children mainly because it was the only time children could act on their own initiative, make their choices and determine what went on. Free play presented a crucial opportunity for children to express themselves, socialize and practice using language in real life communication. This is as significant for SLA as it is for the overall development of children. In this context, it is laudable that the kindergarten provided free play activities daily.

Unfortunately, play and learning were not integrated in the kindergarten. Completing letter or number activities was clearly seen as serious work in contrast to free play where children could relax and play. The practitioners did not recognize the possibilities to use play as a learning opportunity or to discover knowledge. Thus, whilst learning activities were formally-structured and adult-controlled, play was totally unstructured, free from practitioners' supervision or engagement and not organized to incorporate learning. There was no attempt

at integrating play and learning: when it was time for letter or number activities the children were working, and when it was time for free play the children could relax and play. As practitioner A explained, “a fun activity and then we write, and then something more fun, where they can stand up”. The lack of interest expressed by practitioners in the children’s activities in free play may convey a message that children’s interests and ideas generated in play are not valued by the adults.

Conclusions and recommendations

The central issue that emerged from this study is that children lacked the opportunities for language use, active engagement in a variety of interesting and challenging activities and meaningful interactions. This could potentially have a negative effect on their language acquisition as well as their cognitive development (Genesee, 2016). This is especially significant considering the age of the children (DeKeyser and Larson-Hall, 2005). Kindergarten practices and pedagogy need to be adjusted to provide for appropriate early years experiences and better facilitation of SLA of English.

The education of the practitioners is of crucial importance for the quality of early years experiences in general and second language learning in particular. Practitioners need to be provided with appropriate pre-service professional training as well as opportunities for continuous professional development. In light of the complex language situation in Malta and the high status of English, pre-service and in-service training should offer courses specifically related to bilingualism and the acquisition, learning and teaching of a second language for young learners. Training should not only enable practitioners to gain insights into theoretical and pedagogical knowledge but also to translate this into effective practice. Similarly, it would appear critical to have management staff who are informed about appropriate early years practice in order to offer suitable support to the practitioners.

Current SLA pedagogical thinking advises that pedagogical practice in early years needs to cater for a holistic approach to children’s learning and development through a child-centred pedagogy based on children’s interests and individual needs (Kostelnik et al., 2011; Lantolf, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Tabors, 2008). Formal learning activities should be replaced with interesting, engaging learning opportunities that are playful and fun and at the same time provide opportunities to expand children’s cognitive and language abilities and knowledge. The results of this study call for a reappraisal of current practice and

consideration of the process of learning in young children. Children's agency and ability to construct their understandings through interactions should be emphasized. This would in turn facilitate the process of SLA as well as mediate cognitive development and thinking, since as stated earlier, speaking and thinking are seen as tightly interwoven (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In addition to planning and delivering appropriate learning opportunities, reflection and critical analysis of pedagogical practices could be nurtured. Reflection and analysis are important for ongoing planning, taking into consideration children's interests and reactions in order to offer the best approach to facilitating exposure to the second language as well as quality early years experiences.

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Children's right to participation in the kindergarten – teachers' perspectives in Norway and Poland

Katarzyna Anna Wensierska

(Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences)

Abstract

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes in Articles 12 and 13 that children have the right to express their opinions freely. However, this right is respected differently depending on the country. Research was based on a qualitative study conducted in kindergartens in Norway and Poland to investigate similarities and differences in teachers' perspectives on child participation. The small-scale study indicated that teachers in Norway and Poland recognize the rights of the child to participate but there are some issues related to the realization of these rights in day-to-day practice.

Key words: Children's rights, participation, teacher's perspective

Introduction

Children's right to participation is acknowledged as an important issue in early education, strengthening the focus on children's position in society and giving more attention to the validity of children's opinions. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) in Article 12 and 13 emphasized the children's right to freedom of expression and the ability to communicate their needs. A commitment towards children contained in the UNCRC obligates adults to consider them to be capable of expressing their needs. In regard to early education, the teacher is responsible for respecting this right. However, the laws and guidelines of the relevant country must be

followed. The teacher is dependent on the laws imposed by the state and must follow the designated rules. The teacher's relationship with the child depends mainly on the perspective adopted by the country and the position of the child in that society. This in turn directly affects the scope of the child's participation and involvement in the context of the ECEC and his /her decision making (Bae, 2012). The teacher is responsible for promoting and respecting the rights of the child and determination of a space to implement them in kindergarten (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011).

The aim of this article is to identify differences and similarities concerning the identification and implementation of children's rights to participate according to the perspectives of kindergarten teachers in Norway and Poland.

Children's participation in ECEC

The concept of 'children's participation' can be defined simply as the exchange of information between adults and children; based on mutual respect, taking into account the level of development and age of the child (Lansdown, 2011). It also requires an understanding of both the adults and children who are the subject of adult laws. Listening to the child's opinions allows adults to take a new, fresh and different perspective, which has not been considered from the point of view of the adult. Moreover, the child is the best informant on issues that relate to his/her own life and interests.

The kindergarten is the first educational institution where children learn patterns of democracy. They can learn how to express their opinions and experience democratic processes and expression from the earliest age. Through respect for their rights, children may learn to respect the rights of others. Moreover, promoting and encouraging participation in the kindergarten depends on the teachers who work with children and those who take care of them. It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure the implementation of children's rights and wellbeing in practice. The child has agency which manifests itself through participation and active use of their skills and knowledge in relationships with others. However, Bjerke (2011) says that we should remember the agency of adults who can include or exclude children's participation and who are the final decision makers in regard to taking the rights of children into account. Moreover, when the child is already involved, a final interpretation is that the decision on the extent of their participation belongs to the adult. Furthermore, it seems that the adult considers the child's agency through the lens of his own agency.

The scope and direction of the child-adult relationships in kindergarten related to

children's participation depends on the teachers and the pedagogical approach the teacher has adopted which is mostly predicated on the core curriculum. Therefore, we can distinguish between two different approaches; on the one hand the teacher who encourages the child to participate and creates a space for discussion with the child and on the other hand, the teacher may be located in a conservative context which controls the child, with restrictions prevailing in the classroom and not prioritising child participation (Jenni, 2013).

Comparing the content of Norwegian and Polish core curriculums, there is a notable difference in the scope of rights of the child to participate. This is particularly surprising given the significant impact of participation on development and the importance of children's rights in the international arena. In 1979 Poland put forward the first draft of articles on children's rights for the Convention on Human Rights, while Norway in 1981 has established the first Ombudsman for Children. However, meaningful variations can be observed in implementing the child's right to participate in practice in both countries. The Norwegian core curriculum includes information on children's participation, whereas Poland does not contain information on this subject. The Norwegian core curriculum emphasizes the importance of the child's right to express opinions and points out that children should have the opportunity to express an opinion on issues that concern them (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011). By contrast, the Polish core curriculum does not guarantee children's right to express their opinion and to participate in decision-making. The perspective of the child, as one of the reports highlights (Giza & Wisnicka 2010), is not recognized, and the main causes are lack of an individual approach to the needs of the child and not recognizing them as citizens. A report presented by the Ombudsman for Children in Poland (Gawlicz & Rohborn, 2013) emphasizes that the curriculum lacks reference to the child's participation in everyday decisions in kindergarten. The Polish programme also does not reflect the learning opportunities in a democratic society or the value of children's right to express their opinions and give their views. The Polish core curriculum also lacks reference to the children's diversity such as gender, origin, family status and children's competencies. The Norwegian framework emphasizes the involvement of children in daily activities and their planning. The child has the right to have a different perspective and opinion which allows the teacher to look at certain issues from a different point of view (Meintjes, 2011). It seems that the teacher who works with a curriculum that includes children's right to participate is more aware of the needs of the child and his/her interests. This is a reflection of teacher-child relations and power in the classroom.

Research design

The research project adopted qualitative methodology using a phenomenological approach in order to gain a deep understanding of the subject and to explore various issues related to the research questions. In this small-scale research study, eight teachers participated through semi-structured interviews designed to collect the data. The teachers were employed in two kindergartens in Norway and two in Poland. The researcher consulted with Norwegian Social Science Data Services on ethical issues because all research conducted in Norway requires such a notification, but was assured that because the research was completely anonymous and personal details were changed, notification was not required. Nevertheless, the researcher followed ethical guidelines.

Children's rights and children's involvement in the kindergarten

The findings of the research indicated that the Early Childhood Education and Care teachers who participated in the study recognized the importance of respecting children's rights, including the right to participate. Both the Polish and Norwegian teachers considered it a key aspect of child development in the kindergarten. This is based on the perception of the children as rights holders and respect of these rights by adults (Lansdown, 2011). However, despite the recognition of children's participation by teachers, it is manifested differently in both countries. In Norway, participants highlighted the engagement of children in decision making. Norwegian teachers are obligated by the framework to implement children's rights in everyday practice (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011) and to consider the child as an active member of society having his own identity. Norwegian teachers are mandated to involve children to participate in the life of kindergarten, to make decisions and to have the chance to express their own opinions. Children's needs and interests ought to be followed by the teacher when preparing activities for their development.

Unfortunately for the Polish participants, this is a problematic issue due to the lack of guidelines and regulations, even if they recognize the importance of children's participation. However, referring to their practice, the Polish teachers try to involve children in decision making on their own initiative. Moreover, differentiated approaches to the issues of involvement in both countries affect the extent and manner of expression and presentation of opinions and needs by children. The Norwegian teachers' statements show a high awareness of their role in encouraging and listening to children. The teacher has the power to shape the child's way of expression, but first of all, there needs to be space

for children's participation. They also highlighted that children have individual knowledge and adults can learn from them about topics the child is interested in. In contrast, the Polish teachers recognized only the positive views expressed by children and emphasized that a child who expresses a negative opinion is considered as rude. This viewpoint demonstrates the lesser importance given to children's voice and opinions, as well as the relatively powerless position of the child in relation to the teacher. Nevertheless, the findings show that the Polish teachers are willing to change the situation regarding to listening to children and try to implement their own ideas and solutions to acknowledge children's rights in kindergarten.

The visibility of children's participation in the respective frameworks in Poland and Norway shows a wide diversity of approaches to this issue at the level of preschool education. This shows the level of awareness of the significance of child participation and its importance in the teaching and development of the child. It also reflects the child's position in an institution and preschool environment. It can be concluded that teachers in Norway are more focused on the importance of the children's right to express opinions and make decisions than in Poland where this right is still not sufficiently recognized.

Children's expression, encouragement and teacher's role

Children's participation in everyday practice is closely connected to their expression of thoughts, wishes and needs. Moreover, the teacher's role in encouraging children to express this information is very important.

The Norwegian participants showed a high level of awareness of the value of children's expression of opinions as this gave the children a sense of security and the opportunity to make their own choices in the kindergarten environment. What is more, they considered themselves as persons who are able to shape children's ways of expression. This refers to the relationship between the teacher and the child. The teacher should keep an open mind in interpreting children's opinion in order to understand the true meaning. Encouraging children to express their views leads to better understanding of children and looks at specific issues from the child's perspective (Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006). Moreover, the child can be considered as a person having personal knowledge and capable of sharing some power between the child and the teacher. Nevertheless, the teacher has control over the child, because the adult gives the right to the child and determines its range (Smith, 2007).

In the case of the Polish teachers, it was concluded that the situation was

different, mostly because they valued only positive views connected with children's expression. Some of the teachers highlighted that they did not meet with criticism or negative opinions from children during daily activities or practices in the Polish kindergarten. This viewpoint reflects the teacher-child relationship and the children's opportunity to express a range of opinions. Moreover, it shows that the teacher does not accept children's criticism and holds all the power over the child. The Polish teachers stated that they give children limited choices, which can be seen as pretending to share the power with the child but also as leading the curriculum. Furthermore, these choices involve neither the interests nor views of the child. In fact, if the adult does not want to listen to the views of the child, his/her voice will not be heard and taken into account (Lansdown, 2011).

Despite the differences, teachers in both countries recognize the importance of their role in implementing children's right to participate and in taking responsibility for their conduct, as well as their relationship with the child. The teacher is a role model of how to communicate properly. Although the Norwegian teachers are more aware of the importance of respecting the views of children and of making them aware of these rights, the Polish teachers also recognise their responsibility in this issue. Furthermore, sharing power with the children, in particular on issues that relate to their interests and changes in the structure of power between the teacher and the child, can lead to more democratic child-rearing in the early years of development (Bae, 2012).

Children's participation and expression of opinions are connected to the determination of boundaries and ability to bear responsibility for their actions. The teacher's role is to set the boundaries in order to learn to listen and respect others' opinions. It is important that the child from an early age becomes acquainted with self-governing and boundaries in order to know how to function in society and in adulthood (Smith, 2007) and take the consequences. The Norwegian and Polish teachers highlighted that it is important that the child knows how to behave among peers and in relation to the teacher. They also need to learn how to respect other's feelings. However, in order to encourage children's expression and opinions, children should not have any restrictions regarding their viewpoints, as one of the Polish teachers stressed. On the other hand, as pointed out by one of the Norwegian teachers, children in Norway know their rights and this can lead to a lack of respect for others. These extremely varied statements show how important the teacher's role is, in facilitating and respecting children's participation.

It should also be noted that, apart from differences in the content of the curriculum statements, the Norwegian and Polish teachers were working with different group sizes. In Norway, a teacher cares for about 18 children. In Poland, however, one teacher has to take care of about 25 children. This difference in group size impacts on the facilitation of children's participation in practice.

Conclusion

The child's right to participate in the kindergarten is considered as an important and positive issue in the role of teachers and requires a lot of attention and understanding. We can see several significant differences between the two countries, Poland and Norway, but recognition of children's rights to participation is a major issue for all teachers. The most significant difference that affects the level of children's involvement and expression of opinion is the implementation of children's rights in practice. This is connected with the duties and guidelines set out in the respective curriculums and the place of child agency and expression in child development. It is based on the recognition of the child as an active member of society having an opinion on issues concerning them. This has implications for the child engaging in daily practice and identifying his voice as an essential part in planning and carrying out activities relating to his interests. Moreover, it is also linked to the notion of power in the teacher-child relationship. The position of the child can be identified in two ways: as a partner for discussions with their opinions in the context of Norway, as opposed to the Polish context where the child is considered as less competent and in need of development. The Norwegian teacher has set guidelines to ensure the implementation of children's rights in practice. The Polish teacher, while willing, is working under a different set of guidelines that barely recognize the child's right to participation in practice and the lack of implementation is therefore expedited. Overall, the social and cultural context affects the positioning of the child and his/her right to participation and influences how they may differ from each other depending on the country.

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Assessment in the Early Years: The Approaches and Strategies of Early Childhood Educators

Anna May Navarrete

(Dublin Institute of Technology)

Abstract

This paper highlights sections of a Master's dissertation that aimed to study early childhood educators' perspectives and practices regarding assessment in the early years, focusing on approaches and strategies they employed within their settings. Adopting a qualitative design, interviews were conducted with eight educators from different settings in Ireland. Through thematic analysis, findings highlight a notion of continuous assessment that plays the role of both process and product. Collaboration was also found to be important to assessment practice. Moreover, responses reveal ambivalence towards children's self-assessment and limited opportunities for children's genuine participation. It is hoped that the findings of the study can influence future investigations surrounding assessment practice and children's agency in assessment.

Introduction

Inherent in young children is the desire to learn and make sense of their immediate world, and the role that adults play is significant in guiding their development (Duffy, 2010). In early childhood education (ECE) settings, it is the educators who hold this responsibility.

Assessment, which is an integral part of the curriculum (Dunphy, 2008), can be regarded as a vehicle to facilitate the process of learning and development in ECE settings. The perception of assessment in the field of ECE has moved

beyond the narrow focus of screening and diagnosis; as a result, the information obtained from assessment is not only a manifestation of the child's skills and potentials, but also reflects the adequacy of the settings within which they are embedded.

As more centres offer longer hours for their services, there is a need to reflect on children's experiences and whether the provision they receive across different settings is appropriate to their needs (Duffy, 2010). From a Children's Rights perspective, children are viewed as social actors, who have their own voices and an active relationship with their society, participating beyond their families and homes (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). From this perspective, concepts such as "children's agency" and participation are critical in order to emphasise the important role which children play in shaping their own childhoods (Woodhead, 2006).

Assessment leaning towards the child's rights perspective entails decisions made through negotiations between children and adults, where listening to the child's voice is not only considered, but deemed essential. Realising children's participation rights is essential to facilitate inclusion, foster resilience, and empower children to enact change (Smith, 2007). Moreover, regarding children as agents is considered of vital importance in developing their identity and self-esteem, taking into account their active role in the process of assessment (Dunphy, 2008).

Assessment in the early years looks at, examines, and documents children's perceptions and capacities, seeking to understand how children think and learn, to track their progress, and further facilitate learning (Dunphy, 2008). Having a holistic picture of the child entails using both formative and summative assessment, where the former is seen as a tool for planning and the latter gives a glimpse of a child's capacities during a given period of time (Linfield, Warwick, & Parker, 2008).

Working together with children and families is also considered an integral part of supporting children's learning and development. This collaboration supports educators in building a more holistic and accurate picture of a child, his or her capabilities and development, as the wealth of information from the home provides context and is taken into account in understanding each child (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009).

In light of the growing attention to and awareness of the importance of assessment in early childhood education, this study aimed to investigate early childhood educators' perspectives regarding assessment in the early years,

focusing on children from birth to five years. In particular, the study set out to explore the approaches and strategies early childhood educators employ in doing assessment within their settings.

Methodology

Sample

The research sites chosen for the study represent the range of services available for young children in Ireland – publicly-funded, private, and community-based. Purposive sampling was used to identify eight early years' settings as potential research sites for the study, inviting one educator from each to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview about their experiences and perspectives on assessment.

Data Gathering and Analysis

An extensive interview schedule was developed based on the aim and objectives of the study, enquiring about participants' perspectives on and practices of assessment in the early years. Each interview was conducted in the educator's workplace and these were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Once all interviews were transcribed and documentation on assessment tools was compiled, a thematic analysis was applied to the data gathered. Excerpts from interviews were included in the main findings and discussion.

Ethical Issues

The entire research process was underpinned by the Dublin Institute of Technology Research Ethics Guidelines, with the design and methodology reviewed and approved by an Ethics Committee. Detailed information was given to potential research sites and participants, and consent forms emphasised the participants' rights, and made clear the voluntary nature of the study. Data protection was a key priority for the researcher, and significant consideration was given to keep the identities of centres and individuals confidential.

Main Findings and Discussion

A significant theme that emerged from the responses is how educators viewed assessment as both a process and a product. It is seen as a cyclical process of observation, interpretation, and planning to facilitate children's learning and development, but at the same time, as in Dunphy (2008) it is also viewed as a

means of documenting and compiling information about children:

Assessment is finding out where the child is at and then tailoring what you do in the following week with that child to what they actually need...So therefore assessment kind of informs me what I need to know about each individual child so that I can tailor my teaching, my teaching the next week to what they actually need to learn. (Participant, in Navarrete, 2015:37)

Ongoing assessment was embedded in daily routines and activities, enabling the gathering of information about children to guide learning, and to generate meaningful information for stakeholders involved with them (Dodge, Heroman, Charles, & Maiorca, 2004). Using planned and spontaneous activities as assessment strategies suggests a view of assessment that is integrated with the daily routines of the early years' setting:

...because we assess all the time. And we assess daily to set goals. We assess everything, we assess the building every day, you know... So assessment, I suppose it's ongoing, every day. Ongoing. Unconsciously we are assessing constantly. (Participant, in Navarrete, 2015: 41-42)

Collaboration in Assessment

A major finding of the study points to the importance of collaboration, with colleagues, parents, and to an extent, children themselves, as a strategy to make assessment practice less burdensome for educators. Responses illustrate that, as in Dodge et al. (2004), working within a team facilitates dialogue and discussion among colleagues and supports reviewing assessment information together, and this exchange of ideas makes planning more manageable and more effective to carry out:

...the reason for that is because they might see something I mightn't. Or, they might be in – they might be good in, say, communications, and I'm good in well-being. You know, so, you bounce off each other in that way so that's why it's good for them to fill [the checklist] out. (Participant, in Navarrete, 2015:47)

The reciprocal nature of collaboration with parents was emphasised by educators as they drew attention to the two-way process of relaying and receiving information with parents, pointing to the importance of linking home and early childhood settings for children. Findings indicate that educators maintain

positive relationships with parents, and endeavour to communicate and partner with them to support children's learning and development as recommended in both the *Síolta* early years quality framework (CECDE, n.d.) and the *Aistear* curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009). This building of partnership was seen as beneficial in forging a connected practice between educators and parents:

And it is also working in collaboration with the parents so that we can plan for the children if the parents are concerned, if we are concerned and how we can work together. So, things that we might be doing here in the centre, that maybe the parents can bring home, or that the parents are doing something at home that maybe is working that we can bring with us. (Participant, in Navarrete, 2015:40)

Children and Self-Assessment

There was substantial variation around educators' perspectives on children's role in their assessment. Educators had divided opinions with regards to children and self-assessment, and its use in the early years' setting. For some, self-assessment is something that occurs implicitly and organically within a child, illustrated as the ability of children to ascertain their capabilities and decide how to act accordingly:

So they're kind of, they're self- assessing their own abilities, what they need to kind of move forward and looking at ways to do that. So it's not kind of always coming back to the adult and saying, the adult taking over and saying 'Oh look, you can't do that.' They need to assess themselves to see if they're able to do that. (Participant, in Navarrete, 2015:45)

One educator shared their view that self-assessment is not innate in children, and educators have the role of cultivating this aptitude in them:

I think they need guidance in this. But I think if you help them through it, I think it's a skill that they need to learn. I don't think self-assessment is innate in us. I think it's some skill that you have to learn. And I think that's our role in helping them. But they can actually. It's possible. (Participant, in Navarrete, 2015: 45)

For some educators, there was a sense of ambivalence when it comes to the issue of children's self-assessment, especially with making it more explicit and structured in the early years' setting:

I mean there's always again, in a very informal way, talking about, like, oh, 'Look what you can do now,' and, you know 'Show me that you can do this,' or if there's something brilliant, 'Show this to [redacted],' or, you know, things like that. But I would be very wary of involving them too much at that young age because I wouldn't want them feeling the pressure, and I wouldn't want them feeling any element of being compared to any other child, or feeling like they failed at anything. (Participant, in Navarrete, 2015:45)

Part of the wariness towards self-assessment was also associated with the risk of putting stress on children and taking away the sense of enjoyment in their playful activities:

I think that there's a big push at the moment on kids assessing themselves. Now I don't know do I agree with that so much, 'cause then I think you're, from the start they're under pressure to think, does this...like I have to do everything right, I have to be good at things, and I think they're putting extra pressure on... They want you assessing everything that the kids are setting themselves and everything. Whereas there's no sense of just, do it for fun, or do it to do it. It's all, I have to do it and then, review it then, did I do it well or did I not? (Participant, in Navarrete, 2015:46)

Child's Rights Perspective

There also seems to be an ambivalence towards aspects of the Child's Rights perspective, where participants demonstrated mixed opinions about children as agentic beings having a voice (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004). In the interviews, they expressed different views concerning the extent and nature of children's participation in the assessment process.

For some, assessment is a process that children are unaware of, particularly because children might feel undue pressure if they are made conscious of the assessment process. And so their contribution is demonstrated through their unconscious provision of information about their development, needs, and interests:

I think children sense that you're testing and stuff, and if you have someone sitting beside you with a pen and a piece of paper and they're writing down or ticking off what you can do, what you can't do, it's off-putting. And that makes children feel like they're on the spot and that they're on show. And I don't think that you're

going to get a true reflection of what they actually know. So, the informal, catching them doing something, making a quick, subtle note about it. (Participant in Navarrete, 2015:38)

Other educators expressed the challenge of involving children, citing constraints such as children's language, age, and other contextual factors that come into play:

But I think with this age, and especially in this area, language is such a big issue, that language is so poor that it's very hard to get them to help you with the assessment. D'you know? A lot of it has to be the tick boxes, or, yeah. (Participant in Navarrete, 2015: 44)

Particularly with regard to children's age, educators conveyed a lack of confidence in assessing younger children and were disinclined to view them as agentic beings. Educators working with those below three years of age especially articulated this view:

Like, I do love the playgroup. But I find it difficult to set them goals because it's easier for a preschool group. Obviously, they're just goals. But they're kind of baby steps obviously because that's the age they are. It's the same process. But personally, I find it a bit more difficult. (Participant in Navarrete, 2015:44)

Nevertheless, one educator spoke of actively involving children in the research process, emphasising their competence and describing how children are given some say in, for instance, creating some assessment tools like documentation:

Definitely, definitely. They're so capable. And they are so more capable than people think they are... Well what we do, when we create photographs we might stick them on an A4 page at that day, like the children bring the cameras home with them. The children use the cameras here themselves. So the kids know that photos happen. So say you're doing something and we would say, oh wow, look what you're doing, or what d'you think, and they'd say to you sometimes, can I take a picture of it? And they take a picture of it. (Participant in Navarrete, 2015:45)

In light of these responses, it is evident that the collaborative approach used is more adult-oriented, with the educators carrying the bulk of decision-making when it comes to assessment.

In the main, assessment practices displayed limited opportunities for children to express their agency and voice, usually by having prearranged choices or

collaborating by providing the information educators need. Although there was value given to having children participate and take part in the assessment process, as well as belief in their capabilities, the findings predominantly indicate that children were largely reflected as unaware, passive partners in the assessment process, being observed and regarded from a distance. Self-assessment is relegated to something that fits into an informal setting, because there is the fear that raising it to a more overt practice will stifle children. Hence, children are not yet viewed as fully integrated social actors capable of contributing their own voices in society (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study found that educators see collaboration as an important strategy to aid assessment, and partner with colleagues and parents to exchange information to enhance the assessment process. Findings also indicate that children have limited participation in the assessment process, and that educators have tentative views about children's agency and self-assessment. Although collaboration with children does happen, this is mostly in the form of children providing assessment information needed by educators through answering questions or performing tasks. From the findings, implications for practice and policy arise. As children's agency seems to continue to be an ambivalent topic for educators, further training and guidance may be beneficial to have a greater understanding of children's active participation, but to also have its principles actually applied in practice. Guidance and mentoring may also allow educators to be more reflective on their assessment practice, and approach the process more critically and meaningfully. Assisting educators in applying theory to practice, such as interpreting observations, planning in accordance with observations and engagement with children, and promoting children's active participation, may help them carry out assessment with more ease.

Child's rights issues are particularly ripe for research, and significant data could be gathered from delving into the expression of children's agency and voice in the assessment of their own learning. Shedding light into issues of children's involvement and participation in assessment could serve to contribute to a paradigm shift towards a stronger and more genuine partnership with children in the ECE sector.

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Reflections on a Language Planning Project in Context

Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Cathy Kelleher

(Dublin Institute of Technology)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reflect in broad terms on issues which arose in the context of an early years language planning project in Irish-medium preschools (*naíonraí*) in the Irish-speaking (*Gaeltacht*) areas of the west of Ireland. *Borradh* Language Planning Project was commissioned in 2009 to provide guidance and planning templates for early years educators to develop the Irish language competency of children in their early years groups. Due to the changing language ecology of the *Gaeltacht* areas, many families now raise their children through both Irish and English and children enter the early years services with differing Irish language competency levels. Three phases of the project were developed and evaluated and a high level of satisfaction was recorded with the planning templates and guidance provided. The final project report was delivered in 2015. Of particular interest in the findings is the data on educators' views on child agency and language use and their implementation of preschool-home links. These issues will be discussed in the light of the professionalization of the early years sector in Ireland; professional development opportunities and policy initiatives in both early years education and *Gaeltacht* education. Finally tensions between competing discourses in language and education pedagogies will be recognised and the importance of shaping approaches to meet sector specific needs acknowledged.

Key words: Language planning, preschool-home links, child agency, professionalization.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect in broad terms on issues which arose in the context of an early years language planning project in Irish-medium preschools (*naíonraí*) in the Irish-speaking areas of the west of Ireland (*Gaeltachtaí*). The paper will give a brief overview of the language planning project and then moves beyond the details of the project itself to reflect on the pedagogical issues that emerged. The findings on the adult's role and child agency in the *Home Corner* and the opportunities for home-preschool links will be analysed and discussed in relation to *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and the recent Gaeltacht education policy document, *Policy for Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

The early years settings are sessional services situated for the most part in rural areas of the west of Ireland where the Irish language is spoken on a community basis by varying numbers of people. A survey conducted by Ó Giollagáin *et al.* in 2007 showed that families where both parents were fluent speakers of Irish were more likely to speak Irish but that the intergenerational use of Irish was rarer when only one parent was a fluent speaker as was often the case. The children who attend the Irish-medium preschools have different levels of competency in the Irish language and it is a challenge for educators to support language development of beginners, mid-level and competent speakers of Irish in their settings in a changing language ecology. The project was commissioned in 2009 by *Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta* to develop language planning templates for early educators that would facilitate children's language development in a differentiated manner and provide guidance for enhanced practice. The project adopted a socio-constructivist approach to language learning, i.e. it was underpinned by the principle that language learning is based on culture and social interaction as well as internal cognitive processing (Gray and MacBlain, 2012). It recognised the importance of appropriate pedagogy and the influence of the social spheres around children on their language learning and wider development. The project also recognised the importance of and current emphasis on child agency and the value of home-preschool links in early childhood education discourse.

Three sets of thematic guidelines were developed, giving accessible theoretical background knowledge and suggesting a range of language-focused activities. The planning templates showed how the activities could be differentiated for each level of competency and how child-initiative could be encouraged and links made to parental and wider community involvement. The guidelines are

available in the Irish language at www.comharnaionrai.ie/.

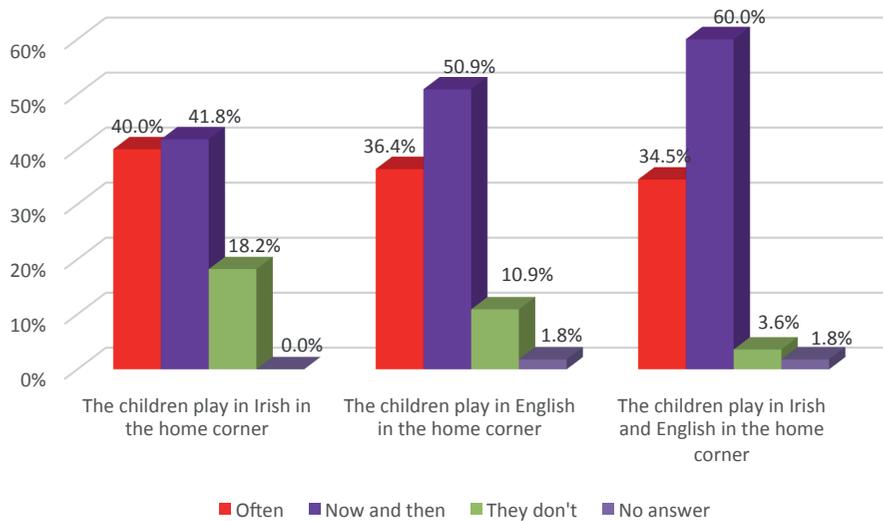
Each stage of the project was evaluated through a questionnaire administered to the educators. The evaluation was conducted in line with ethical standards laid down by Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). Ethical clearance was granted by DIT Research Ethics Committee. Interesting data emerged on the implementation of two key areas, the educators' views on child agency in regard to language use and preschool-home links.

Adults' role and child agency in Home Corner

The Home corner is the traditional site of child agency and free play. There is a significant dilemma in working out how to facilitate child agency and children's use of the target language with educators and peers in mixed-language contexts. It was encouraging to see that 53% (often) and 24% (occasionally) of educators were listening to children's own plays and translating these into Irish (n=55). However although 87% of educators thought Child-initiated play was very important, 51% of educators initiated plays often and 44% did so occasionally in the Free Play time. Over 47% strongly encouraged the use of Irish in the Home Corner but 43% preferred to gently encourage use of the language. This shows that competing discourses are at work, the early childhood education discourse on the value of child agency (James, 2005) and the discourse of language immersion education (Tedick *et al.*, 2011). The respondents clearly recognised the value of child-led play in the Home Corner, and at the same time they were implementing the philosophy of language immersion education, which is to carry out all learning experiences in the target language. In practice this meant that adults wished to lead play through Irish even when children are playing through English. These ideological dilemmas (Puskas and Björk-Willén, 2017) are not often discussed or contested in their respective communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) but influence everyday practice at a deep level.

The frequency of children's Irish and English usage during play in the Home Corner are shown below:

Home Corner - Children's Language Use During Play



Approximately 40% of educators reported that the children play in Irish often and 41% play in Irish occasionally; Over 36% often play in English with an additional 51% play in in English now and then; 35% often play in both languages plus 60% occasionally play in both languages. From a language ecology point of view, it is significant that children are socialising with their peers in both languages and are developing language habits of communication through English that are likely to continue in school and the community (Ó Giollagáin *et al.* 2007). Only 24% of settings sent leaflets with words and phrases from the Home Corner to the children’s families often. The opportunity to transfer Irish into the home setting through giving families the vocabulary and phrases used by children in the Home Corner in Irish is a very rich learning opportunity to promote family use of Irish through play. It is also an opportunity to forge home-preschool links and promote discussion about the topic. Other potential opportunities to promote home-preschool links will now be discussed.

Home-preschool links

Data analysis revealed that the educators’ focus was mainly on working with children inside the settings, with little extension outwards to families and the community. The project proposed that puppet plays and stories would be augmented by using story sacks (collections of materials based on a picture book), selecting a book of the month to be read regularly, and that the words of

songs and nursery rhymes used in the setting would be sent home to parents.

The survey data revealed that

- 9% sent story sacks home often, 33% sent them occasionally and 47% did not
- Only 7% sent the book of the month home often
- 58% sent home words of songs and rhymes often and 36% did so occasionally

The most common way of connecting with parents in this way was to send the words of songs and nursery rhymes home, which shows the potential of building on this existing practice and expanding it to other areas such as books and story sacks. Parents could also be involved in making story sacks and selecting books. These issues need to be understood in the light of *Aistear* (2009), the Irish curriculum framework for the early years, *Síolta* (2006), the national quality framework, the developing professionalization of the early years sector, and the complex linguistic ecology (Haugen, 1972) of the geographical areas involved. A broad educational and linguistic ecological approach is adopted for this discussion reflecting the complex interplay of several competing discourses.

Aistear

Aistear curriculum framework was published in 2009 and advocates a balance between adult-led and child-led activities with most activities being child-led. However, little education/training was made available on a comprehensive basis at the time of publication. Some discrete/piecemeal training was made available through various projects but the main development is the publication of the on-line *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (2015) which advocates an emergent curriculum approach also implying child agency.

Issues such as the optimum balance between adult choice and child choice of language(s) are major themes with regard to working in a language immersion setting. The adult's response in an immersion type setting is to accept that many children will speak in their first language but in order to promote the acquisition of the target language, adults will usually respond to the meaning of the child's utterance in the target language. The degree of resonance of this ideological approach with the focus on child-led approaches is a source of tension and is rarely articulated or discussed.

Professionalization

As a language planning project *Borradh* achieved its goals but the added value was that it highlighted the need for increased discussion at least, and hopefully action, on facilitating child agency in appropriate ways and encouraging home-preschool links. This calls for increased professionalization of the early educators, as there is a well-established link between the quality of early childhood education and the education levels of educators (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014). The level of educators' understanding of early childhood pedagogy and of language-focused pedagogy is critical in any context, but especially so in endangered minority language situations. Most of the educators in the project were trained to Further Education levels, but modules on parental involvement or child agency may not have featured in their training. These areas in particular should be prioritised in CPD and other forms of in-service training and the training should be available in the Irish language to complement the philosophy of immersion education and the working environment of *naíonraí*. From a language perspective it is vitally important that materials needed to upskill are available in Irish so that appropriate technical and educational terminology is developed and used. While those working in the *naíonraí* can of course read English, it is important that they continue to have/make opportunities to discuss their work through Irish in a professional manner, and this includes using accepted professional vocabulary in Irish. It is noteworthy that the *Aistear* and *Síolta* framework documents are available in English and in Irish, including the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*. The availability of these documents in Irish flows from the official status of Irish in Ireland, highlighting the ecological importance of national policies and their impact on early childhood education.

Training for early educators in general is low-paid and especially challenging in dispersed rural contexts (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). Accessibility and cost are significant factors for educators who wish to upskill, as well as the fact that not all educators wish to achieve degree level training. A system to support a degree-led workforce as outlined in the *Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DES, 2010) needs to be developed through part-time degree programmes, online modules, with a planned programme of CPD training on key principles of the curriculum framework. These could include child agency, language acquisition, emergent curriculum development and parental involvement. Some of this training could be delivered on a CPD basis locally and based on the *naíonra* context but it would be important to have outside input as well for a broader

view drawing on wider experiences in the early years.

It may be helpful to consider successful professional development for other early years educators. In other words, what kind of professional development is most likely to effect change in the knowledge, skills, and practices of early years educators and to impact on child outcomes? Eurofound (2015) found evidence that professional development that is integrated with practice within the setting and that focuses on reflection with feedback can be effective. The review found that intensive professional development involving video feedback is linked to educator change and child development outcomes in shorter-term interventions. It also found evidence to support collective participation by educators in ongoing professional development focused on pedagogy and reflection, and provided by specialists. This in turn implies that specialists who can deliver professional development through the Irish language are required for educators in Irish-medium settings.

Language ecology

The recently published *Policy for Gaeltacht Education* (DES, October 2016) reiterates the importance of language socialisation in the *naíonraí* and the potential effect this could have on family use of Irish. The policy also advocates a more coherent approach to education in general in *Gaeltacht* areas and advises that stronger formal links be forged between local primary schools and *naíonraí*, which would enhance the sharing of information and resources and facilitate transitions. The document advises making early educators' participation in child development programmes more accessible and developing tailored programmes on immersion and other language approaches for *naíonraí* staff at higher levels. They note that the DES early years inspectorate is minded to provide their services through Irish, but state that the provision of other inspection and support services is a matter for the relevant Government department.

Conclusion

The points discussed above show that early childhood education does not operate in a vacuum. It is closely integrated and influenced by many other areas, including early education curriculum developments, early education policies, primary school policies, discourses on professionalization and Irish language policies. In other words we are looking at the intersection/mesosystem of these areas that influence the early childhood education received by children and delivered by educators in a complex policy area.

What are the implications for supporting early years educators in language planning for children with differing language competencies? Taking a broad ecological perspective to language and education, a planned and systematic programme of educator and teacher development should be developed under the aegis of the new Gaeltacht Education language policy and NCCA. This could include mentoring and coaching approaches delivered in local clusters of support between preschools and schools. The focus should continue to be language pedagogy but ensure that significant aspects of other educational discourses such as child agency and parental involvement are included, in addition to language-related discourses.

Some of the issues discussed may be of interest to other minority language situations, but one of the key messages is the importance of adapting educational discourses to suit local contexts. On the other hand, it is of vital importance that local educators, providers of education and training and policy makers are open to mainstream discourses and to contesting existing approaches and practices. This should lead to an integrated approach to developing children's languages as part of a holistic curriculum that is both education and language focused.

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The Role of Social Media in Early Years Learning and Parenting - an Ethnography Study in China

Xin Luo

(Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh)

Abstract

This article explores the potential of social media in early years education and parenting in China. With an ethnographic approach, the author immersed in a parent group in WeChat, a premier Chinese social networking app, for an extended time. Some of the parents were also selected for interviews. With *weike* as an example, the paper exemplifies how social media can overcome the physical barriers to bring parents together. Apart from all the promises social media brings to education and parenting, the paper also warns of the potential of further enlarging the gap of education resources between different families.

Key words: Chinese parenting, ethnography, social media

Introduction

Chinese parenting has experienced dramatic changes during the past decades. Parenting beliefs, practices and theories have undergone dramatic shifts due to the unprecedented socioeconomic changes that have taken place in Chinese society (Kuan, 2015). These changes have occurred within the context of an emerging market economy, increasing globalisation, westernisation as well as socialism and Confucian traditions (Fong, 2004). As a result, parents' ideas on what is good parenting and education, and how "good" parenting can contribute to "good" education vary. During recent years, with increasing

numbers of smartphone users and the rise of social media, parenting has frequently appeared as a popular topic in social media in China, where parents can openly criticise and confront the institution of official education, despite the control of the Internet censorship system imposed by Chinese government.

This paper is part of a doctoral research study of Chinese parenting practice, within the use of social media in early year's education contexts. Rather than discuss parenting practice, this paper will focus on the methodological implications of the project. It intends to explore how social media can be used as a tool to gain insights into parenting and education research. Specifically, it intends to explore how social media is used by Chinese parents as a tool to facilitate children's learning and fulfil parents' socially constructed expectations for their children's education.

The parents in the study are smartphone users of a popular Chinese social media app called "WeChat". Designed for smartphone holders, WeChat is the premier social media app in China, which combines messaging, video and voice calling, posting, sharing, grouping and other typical social media functions. Some people even regard it as a combination of functions of "WhatsApp", "Facebook" and "Twitter". The parents in my study voluntarily joined a parental group in WeChat with a common interest of pursuing better early years education (EYE), addressing concerns about the official education system and sharing information, opinions and practice of EYE.

Social media, as the primary space where the informants lived their lives and where I collected data, is understood as the informants' natural habitat (Parker Webster & Marques Da Silva, 2013). People create and communicate meanings there and can easily switch between the online and offline worlds, crossing the blurred border. The on-line space is built in people's offline world, while their offline life is reflected online. That is to say, the two worlds are not parallel, but intertwined. In this study, informants' online discussions are closely associated with their experience of education offline. Their opinions, attitudes and emotions towards education developed offline are also communicated and shared online. Moreover, people's online activities in social media may lead to change of their opinions, attitudes, emotions and even practices in the offline space, which are then brought back for further discussion online. The relationship between informants' online and offline space operates as a loop, which offers a window to understand what parenting and education means in their life. In the meantime, the unequal distribution of wealth and information, which constrains the learning of particular groups of people offline, also

poses challenge to further the achievement gap between families of different resources.

In this study, social media is the site, the basis of informants' existence and the mode of communication that mediates the interaction of the community (Howard & Jones, 2004). It is a site in a sense that informants, from various walks of life, are located and that space within which they live their lives and interactions with each other. Traditionally, interaction in a research site is bounded by space and time. That is to say, informants' activities take place within a limited time with clearly marked boundaries. However, social media that accommodates this study, revolutionises and forwards the notion of a research site (Hine, 2000; Parker Webster & Marques Da Silva, 2013). Through social media, people are enabled to cross the temporal and space barriers of traditional sites (Kendall, 2009). Indeed, social media provides the material basis for the existence of informants online, just as the Earth does for them offline.

In the following part of this paper, I will address the methodology of this research and briefly report some initial insights from the findings.

Methods and methodology

I employed ethnography to get thick data, go deep and think wide (Walford, 2008). Ethnography allowed me to creatively explore Chinese parenting in its rarely tapped territory, social media. A parents' group in WeChat that comprised of around 500 members was selected as the primary site for my research. The group members were mainly parents whose children aged between four and eight. As a member of the group, I immersed myself for eight months and disclosed myself as a researcher. I watched their monologue, conversation and sometimes argument. I read the posts they shared. And I tried to understand their concerns about education. All this information, together with my field notes, was treated as my primary data. With the initial analysis of the data, I selected eight parents and conducted semi-structured interviews with them, using the voice call function built into WeChat. The interviews were transcribed and, together with WeChat group data, were analysed.

By participating in the parent group's online activity and interacting with them, I tried to get the insider's view from the parents about how they perceive current Chinese early years education and parenting; in the meantime, I kept a field note journal in which I frequently kept an outsider stance and reflected my role in the research.

Instead of calling it "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000), "multi-sited ethnography"

(Hine, 2007) or “netnography” (Kozinets, 2009) , I define this study as an intra-sited ethnography as research in the two different sites, WeChat group and voice call interview, are both built in to the app of WeChat.

In this study, I redefined some key ideas of traditional ethnography and tried to accommodate them into the context of WeChat. For example, “being there” in social media can be “lurking”, i.e. a member can be there “invisibly” without intruding into other members’ lives; participating in a social media group can be simply joining and following, without making any tangible contributions, as the number of group participants itself has already (re)produced meanings; and observation needs more “ethnographic imagination” (Brewer, 2000) to connect people’s online activities with offline life.

For ethical purposes, I have fully disclosed myself as a researcher and have obtained consent from those informants who I followed and interviewed.

Findings and discussion

There are three main findings of the study.

Firstly social media proves to be multi-functional in providing complete pictures of informants in educational ethnography. It advances the definition of “research site” and brings people together without time and space barriers. As a powerful tool in the data collection process, social media allows researchers to track informants’ activity histories that take place in different time slots within one window. People in WeChat sometimes even share their family holiday, daily leisure activities and career life to either get feedback from others or simply express themselves.

Moreover, social media creates new social relationships, blurring the boundary between private and public life. The WeChat parent group is a strangers’ community; however, some people feel safer and more comfortable, probably due to the use of aliases and long physical distance, to talk about their children’s education. These all enable the researchers to have a thick description of informants’ life contexts. As in the offline world, people in WeChat will also build up webs of social relationships. Similar to offline worlds, people will have conflicts, disagreements and emotions to express. Social media such as WeChat mediates people’s interactions and affords them the opportunity to express themselves. For example, emoji in this study proved to be powerful in allowing the users to express their feelings, harmonise relationships, and in avoiding potential conflicts.

Thirdly, it is worth noting, however, that social media is increasingly under the surveillance and influence of neoliberalism in education in China. Some of the education resources in WeChat began with free access and soon turned to fee-payable once they had established a reputation. Depending on the content, audience, and the course lectures, some of the materials and information in WeChat can be quite expensive for some of the families. Thus, if not regulated, social media can further enlarge the education gap between classes.

I will use “weike”, or WeChat class, as an example to illustrate the points I made above. Designed as a form of online learning mediated by WeChat, weike is a product of cooperation between social media and educators where educational content is delivered by the different functions in WeChat. The educational content of weike can be innovative and flexible, compared with the traditional, offline classes. Weike has been increasingly popular among parents in the WeChat group. Some content was free to attend at the beginning and became fee-payable when they had accumulated enough audience and established reputation. For many parents, weike is innovative in both its form and contents. Regardless of where the parents are based, they can always receive weike as long as they are connected with the internet. In my virtual observation, I have noticed,

In weike, parents were enabled to talk to other parents who were based in America and whose daughter had high achievement; or the parents could talk to an expert in child development psychology. Parents were encouraged to prepare questions they wanted to ask before certain weike session began. During the weike, regardless of parents’ geographical locations, they could always overcome the physical barriers and arrive at the common virtual space. (Field notes: 02/04/2016)

The popularity of weike to some extent reflects the capacity of social media to deliver key information to a large, highly dispersed audience. Built in a social media, weike differentiates itself from other online learning resources such as “MOOCs” in that the educational functions are built in a platform whose primary focus is on socialising. To some extent, weike informalises learning by combining learning with socialising. However, unlike day-to-day communications, during weike, parents can always be connected with more knowledgeable others.

Some of the courses are designed specifically for children, under the guidance and supervision of adults. Luli was a mother I followed in my research. She occasionally signed up weike in WeChat for her daughter. During the interview,

she once talked about a weike session about currencies and both she and her daughter seemed to like it;

I used to send my daughter to the weike about currencies. The scenario was that if you were the leader of a country, how were you going to design your own currency? She once attended some free classes like this (Interview with Luli: 10/07/2016)

“Currencies” in the weike Luli spoke of were designed creatively as a project exploration that is not unfamiliar in the western education context. For many children and parents in China, this approach can be viewed as something untraditional and innovative. Children in this kind of weike are given enough freedom, autonomy and trust, facilitated and monitored by parents, to explore a topic in question.

Besides this, weike offers a flexible source of education materials. Children and parents can join in the activities according to their schedule and the education venue is not fixed in one single physical locality. For those people who have missed the live stream contents, there are textual, audio and sometimes even video forms of summarisation that people can refer back to. For the lecturers who give instruction and guidance to students, some of them can even build up private contacts with parents. In this way, they are likely to have further communication outside of the weike sessions. The private relationship can sustain in WeChat and people can get some professional but private guidance.

Embedded in social media, weike has been held by some to have the capacity to address education inequalities as it “open these high quality educational contents to people who do not have the access easily” (from the interview with Luli). However, there are also limitations of weike and social media in general that are worth noticing. For example, the use of social media in education can create new inequality if it is left unregulated.

In fact, economic constraints proved to be a barrier for parents like Luli to continue exploring the different choices.

[In] a small place like Shandong, where the purchase power is quite weak, four (weike) projects there cost almost four thousand RMB (about 470£), which is way too much. Nevertheless, the children seem to like the assignment of the weike. I believe that the economic factors can pretty much determine the choice for the lessons (parents sign up for their children in weike).

Under the influence of neoliberalism, commercial and market-oriented

components have increasingly been evident in education services in China, especially in early years contexts. Therefore, I argue that relevant research has to be done to study how commercialisation affects education through social media; accordingly government regulations have to be set up to prevent high quality education services being hijacked by commercialisation.

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Education for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood Education: Children's discourses about water consumption

Adriana Burciaga González
(UCL Institute of Education)

Prof. Paul Pace
(University of Malta)

Abstract

The paper reports on a qualitative study conducted in Malta aimed at exploring young children's discourses of sustainability issues, particularly, water consumption. The study was framed by post-structural ideas. Interviews with a group of children aged four to six were conducted and data was analysed using discursive analysis. The study found that children are capable of making sense of some environmental issues in creative ways. Their interpretations seemed to be influenced by anthropocentric discourses but also showed some ecocentric elements. Their conversations included topics such as water scarcity, life and death, caring for the environment and the monetary value of water.

Key words: Education for Sustainable Development, Early Childhood Education, images of childhood, water consumption.

Introduction

The idea of teaching young children about sustainability issues such as water scarcity, social and economic inequalities or unfair treatments has been strongly

encouraged (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008). In particular, the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education and Care [OMEP] and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have made important efforts to promote Education for Sustainable Development [ESD] worldwide and give light to successful ESD practices in Early Childhood Education [ECE]. Nevertheless, the relevance of incorporating a critical perspective of ESD in ECE has not been fully recognized. ESD in ECE is still misunderstood and at times contested (Elliot & Davis, 2009). It has been suggested that one of the factors of this reluctance relates to the developmental and romantic discourses of childhood that have dominated the field (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008; Elliot & Davis, 2009; Duhn, 2012).

Framework and aim of the study

The study was framed by post-structural thinking and was informed by notions of discourse and images of childhood as well as by the environmental sociology approach. A *discourse* is understood as a 'set of story-lines which interprets the world around us and which becomes deeply embedded in societal institutions, agendas and knowledge claims' (Hannigan, 2006: 36). Discourses act as regimes of truth that lead to the settlement of an authoritative consensus (Mac Naughton, 2005). The term *images of childhood* is linked to that of discourse as it refers to social icons that mirror preconceptions, expectations and understandings of what a child is supposed to be (Kennedy, 2002). Regarding *environmental sociology*, it is a field of study that seeks to analyse the discourses that govern the modes of thinking and acting about the environment. It claims that there are diverse understandings about the environmental crisis that shape our conception of it and our relationship towards it.

The aim of this study was to analyse the dominant discourses of ECE and ESD that influence young children's understandings of sustainability issues. Specifically, for this article the focus is on children's ideas about water consumption. The purpose was to form a picture of children's own discourses and, ultimately, encourage the incorporation of a critical perspective of ESD in ECE.

Making Sense of ESD

ESD is a changing concept and different views and names about it exist. Other common terms are Education for Sustainability, Sustainability Education or Environmental Education; there is still an academic debate about which is the most appropriate term. Yet, concern should be channelled at developing an

educational process that is contextually relevant, participatory, emancipatory and leading towards sustainable development rather than focusing on what term to use (Pace, 2010). The main principles, as outlined by UNESCO's roadmap (2014), are that ESD should:

- go beyond scientific knowledge about the natural environment, or simply spending time outdoors (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008);
- be concerned with the interactions of the social, the cultural, the economic and the environmental aspects of development;
- channel efforts towards a shift in values and ways of living that include democracy, justice and solidarity (Hägglund & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009);
- recognise the human-environment relationship in terms of equality and respect, moving away from the idea of domination towards one based on stewardship (Pace, 2009); and
- encourage agency, critical thinking, commitment, active involvement and participation (Hägglund & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009; Pace, 2009).

Images of childhood and their link with ESD

Romantic images of childhood often view children as fragile or innocent creatures who need protection, whereas developmental images frequently portray them as immature, as 'becomings' rather than beings. On the one hand these discourses depict ESD as an obscure, abstract, too complex or even risky topic, making teachers/adults assume ESD is not appropriate for young children (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008, Elliot & Davis, 2009). On the other hand, such discourses may also reinforce the misconception that ESD in ECE should only be about enjoying nature and learning about it (Duhn, 2012). These images of childhood make it rather hard to think of children as knowledgeable subjects capable of having a say or acting upon important sustainable issues. Consequently, they could be hindering the incorporation of a critical perspective of ESD in ECE. In those terms, 'rethinking childhood has to be a core aspect of eco-focused pedagogies' (Duhn, 2012: 21).

In contrast with the romantic and developmental discourses of childhood there is the socio-cultural approach. This perspective argues that children's learning is not only dependant on their natural or individual development,

but also strongly linked to social interactions, which occur within a particular cultural and historical context (Seel, 2012). Moreover, this approach has been linked to children's rights discourses and has reinforced the importance of child participation (Smith, 2002). According to these discourses, children are capable subjects and active learners who form part of the social, cultural, economic and political life. Thus, the images of childhood depicted by these theories seem to be more compatible with ESD principles and may allow the critical perspective of ESD to be easily incorporated in ECE.

Methodology

Research questions

The questions that guided the study were:

- a. What are children's ideas when presented with a situation that is typically regarded as a sustainability concern from an adult perspective?
- b. What are the discourses that underlie children's explanations and/or understandings of such sustainability issues?
- c. How do children's understandings of these issues challenge and/or reflect the dominant discourses of childhood and ESD in ECE?

Participants

The participants were six girls and five boys, aged four to six, from two different ECE settings in Malta. The girls attended a Catholic Church primary whereas the boys were enrolled in a State kindergarten. Both settings were part of the Eco-Schools Programme. The participants were selected using convenience sampling; they were all fluent in the English language.

Data collection method

The primary data collection method was a series of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with children using illustrations and a doll as a prop. The instrument consisted in a set of six illustrations showing a boy or a girl involved in what is typically regarded as a "good/expected" or a "bad/problematic" sustainability situation. The topics were: water consumption, interaction with other living things and socio-economic inequalities. However, for the purposes of this article only the first topic will be discussed. The images were presented in a digital version using a laptop. There was one situation per slide and two of them included animation effects such as movement and sound.

All the interviews were audio recorded. Before conducting the interviews the researcher spent up to four days in the participants' classroom and a pilot study was also carried out.

Situation 1. Water consumption



Figure 1. Example of the illustrations used in the study

Ethical considerations

School authorities and children's parents/guardians, were given an information letter and a consent form. To safeguard anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all the participants. Before conducting the interviews, children were given a brief explanation about the role of the researcher and were asked (verbally) if they wanted to participate and have their voices recorded. All the children agreed to do so.

Analysis

A discursive analysis approach was adopted. This started with a detailed transcription of the interviews. Once the text was produced, the content was organized in three main topics: water consumption, interaction with other living things and socio-economic inequalities. Afterwards, a thematic analysis of the texts looking for links with environmental discourses was conducted.

Findings

Children's ideas about water consumption

All the participants were able to recognise the situation and said that leaving the tap on while brushing your teeth was 'not ok'. The findings were organized in three themes: water scarcity, the importance of water and who needs water. For each theme other subthemes were identified.

1. Water scarcity

Most of the children saw water as a finite resource. They mentioned that by leaving the tap on, water will finish and this would limit daily human activities such as cleaning, brushing their teeth or washing their hands. Two of the girls made a connection between water scarcity and caring for the environment. One of them referred to the environment as ‘the Earth all around us’.

One boy mentioned that leaving the tap turned on may cause an entire building to run out of water and he explained that there will be no water until a plumber comes to fix it. He also related water to its monetary value and the legal implications that wasting water may have.

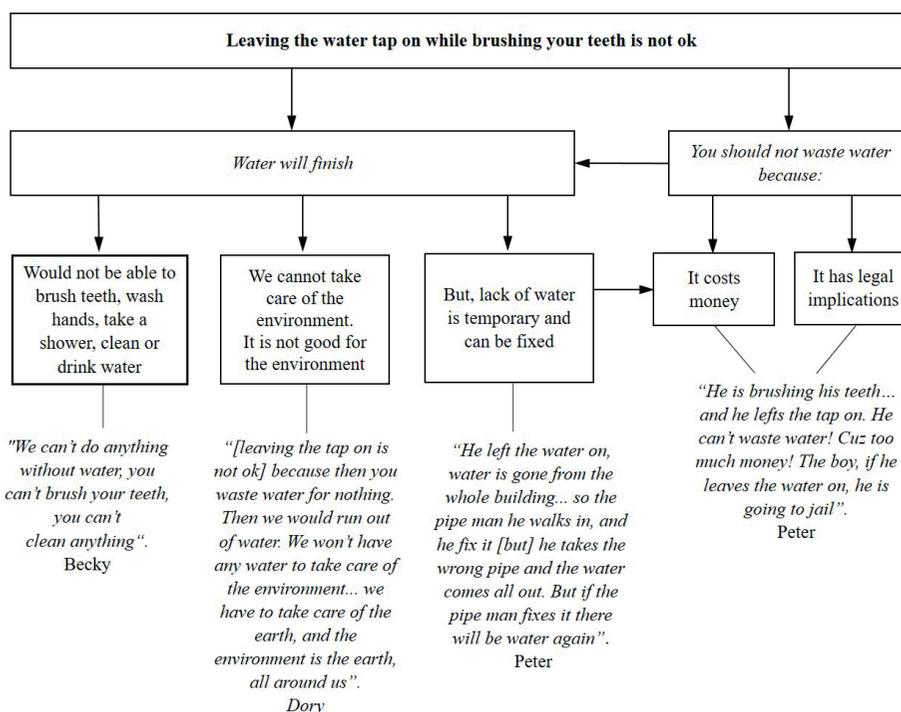


Figure 2: Mental map summarising children’s discourses about water scarcity

2. The importance of water

Most of the children said water is important for personal use: to drink, it contributes to good health, it gives you energy, or is needed to swim in the pool. One girl argued that water is important because it is socially valued and useful; she referred to water as ‘precious’.

Some other children related the importance of water to the consequences of leaving the tap on. One said the water from the toilet could finish, whereas two children said water might spill out and make someone slip, or it may get on the streets and cause car accidents. One boy also related the importance of water with money, the government and the legal system. He mentioned that water is important because it costs money and the government could make someone go to court to pay for any wastage.

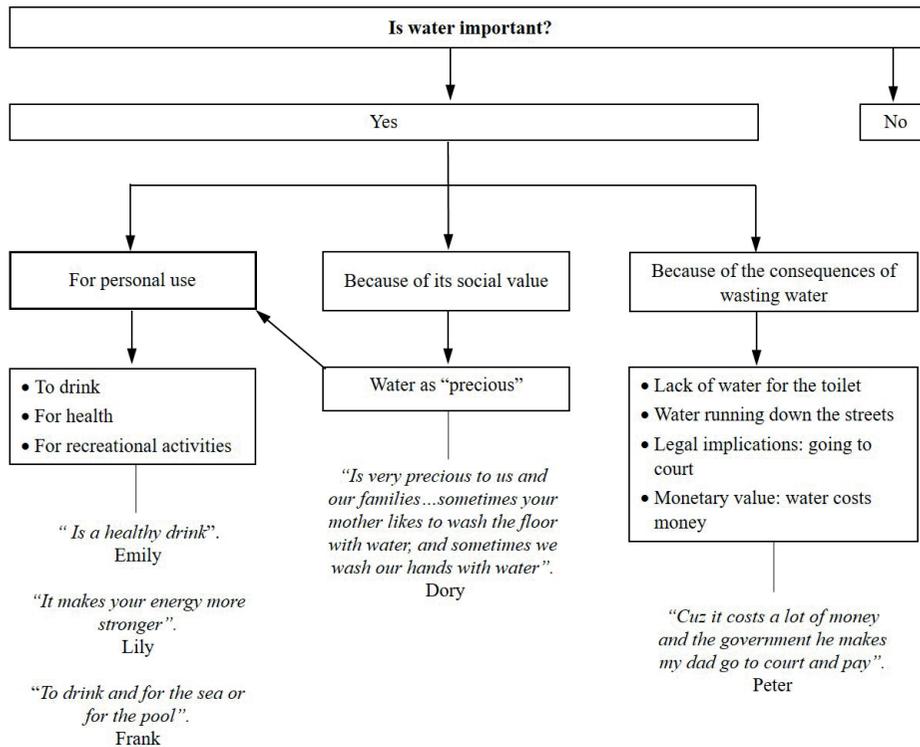


Figure 3: Mental map summarising children's discourses about the importance of water

3. The need for water

When children were asked 'who needs water?', they identified people, plants and animals. Some children also introduced ideas about life, death, religion and poverty. Their explanations were organized under three subthemes: People need water; Plants and animals need water; and Religious worldviews.

The most common message was that everybody needs water. Similar to what was found within the aspect of water scarcity, most of the children spoke about water for personal use, particularly for hygiene purposes. One of the girls,

however, related the need of water with poverty. She said that poor people need water because they do not have a house.

The majority of children mentioned that animals need water to drink because without it they will die. All the children affirmed that plants need water and that they could die without it. It was notable that most of the girls said plants need water to grow, whereas boys did not mention this idea. In addition, others commented that plants could die if they get too much water.

Some children brought into the conversation religious ideas, particularly about Jesus and his relation to the natural environment and life after death. One girl said that Jesus needs water too, and that he, like the rain and the sun, is in heaven. She also pointed out that Jesus could stop the rain when he wanted. Another boy centred his conversation around the idea of death. He explained that if he does not drink water he would die and would go to Jesus. He also said plants could die without water; however, they would not go to Jesus because only people can go there.

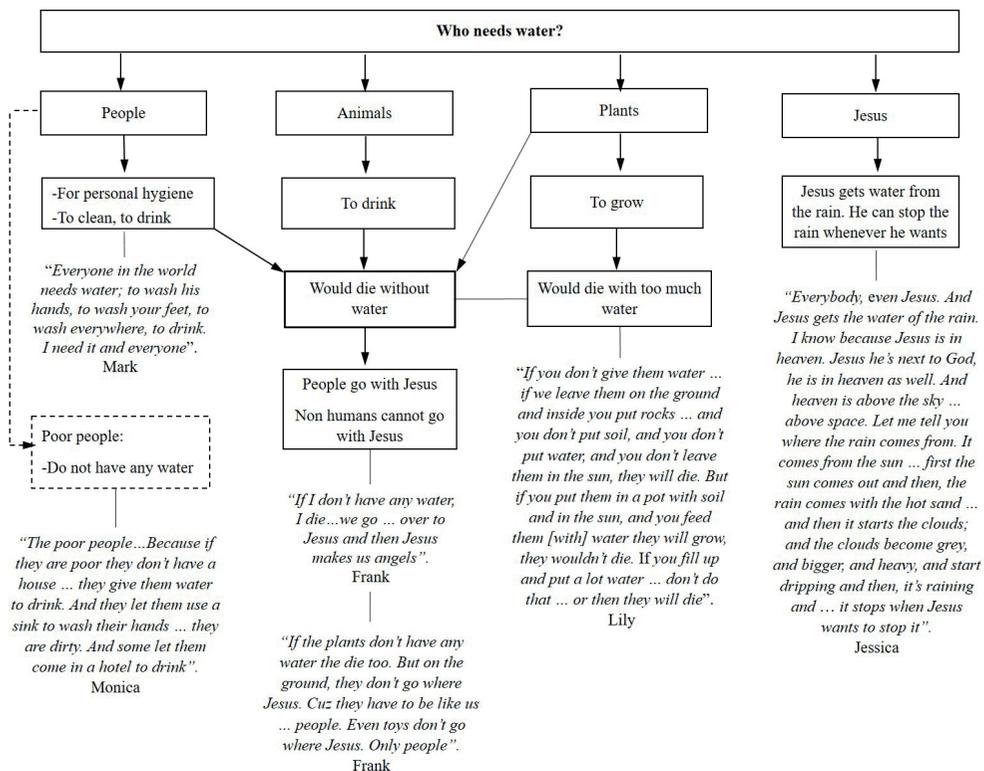


Figure 4: Mental map summarising children’s discourses about the need of water

Discussion

Children and environmental discourses

Most of the children referred to water as something that is essential to fulfil human needs such as cleaning, drinking or swimming. In this sense, the value of nature, rests in the utility it has for humans. This is a distinctive characteristic of the anthropocentric environmental discourse, which also portrays the natural environment in a lower category than human life and endorses human dominion over nature. It can be said that children's perspectives were highly influenced by the anthropocentric discourse, which is generally linked with the dominant social paradigm (Bell, 2009).

White (as cited in Bell, 2009) claims that the idea of nature domination is rooted mainly in Christian ideology. It is believed that humans are created in the image of God and have been given nature, by God, so that they could have dominion over it to exploit, transform or restructure it. However, Bell (2009) argues that the idea of domination is not exclusive to Christian doctrine, but a product of western ideology in general. He argues that the word *dominion* in the Old Testament can have different meanings and, it may also signify responsibility; associated to its Latin root *domus*, which means home, the message could be understood as having 'responsibility for one's home' (Bell, 2009: 154; Pope Francis I, 2015).

In this study some children offered insights about life after death based on Christian ideologies and spoke about the differences and similitudes between people, plants and animals. Furthermore, they depicted Jesus and his omnipresence as a regulatory stance with the possibility of controlling nature (stopping the rain) or determining who can go to heaven. The ideas about life after death within children's conversations suggest a hierarchy where people are seen as more valuable than other species.

The presence of religious discourses resonates with Malta's historical and cultural context as it is an island where Catholicism is the official religion and about 90% of the population is Christian. Besides, half of the participants attended a Catholic School. This highlights the importance of history and the local context for the construction of environmental discourses from a very young age.

In a country that has been officially identified as being water-stressed (EEA, 2008) and where water conservation is a common theme, children also showed contrasting views about the importance of water that can be related with two different discourses. On one hand, one boy linked water usage with its

monetary value and the legal system. Embedded in his conversation is the assumption that water has a cost and that there is a system, the government, which regulates water usage. These conceptions seem to reveal the influence of economic and managerial environmental discourses.

On the other hand, there is the girl who viewed water as precious and talked about caring for the environment by referring to it as the 'Earth around us. Her conversation shows the influence of an ecocentric discourse, yet mixed with anthropocentric ideas. The main idea within the ecocentric discourse is that humans are part of nature and must learn "to live within the limits in an interconnected world" (Bell, 2009: 174).

Children as capable and knowledgeable

This group of young Maltese children showed that they are already starting to construct their own discourses about environmental issues and making sense of the natural, social and even economic dimensions of life. As seen through their answers, they were capable of making connections between a concrete action, like leaving the tap on, and the consequences it may have for them, others and the environment. Likewise, they were aware that water is finite.

Additionally, most of them were conscious of the importance of water both to perform daily tasks and as a necessity to preserve human and non-human life. They also demonstrated a cause and effect understanding of the situation; some could even relate water scarcity with other topics such as death, economics and the government.

Conclusion

The study revealed that in general, children are able to construct discourses about water consumption and make sense of some sustainability issues that jeopardize life on earth. Hence, it supports an image of children as valuable research participants, whose perspectives can tell much about the cultural, moral, social and political life of a given context. Children can be viewed as active learners and social agents capable of producing and reproducing environmental discourses in creative ways. The next big challenge is thus to promote and incorporate these powerful images of childhood in the thinking of policy makers, practitioners, parents and children themselves.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that some children were more fluent and seemed more confident in discussing their ideas than others. This might be related to the familiarity they had with the topic, yet it could have been a consequence of

using oral language as the main data collection method. This aspect exposes the necessity to incorporate children even more into the research process, as well as using a wider range of data collection methods in order to gain deeper understanding of their views and how these are formed.

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Science as a learning area in children's everyday preschool context

Jonna Larsson

(University of Gothenburg)

Abstract

Traditionally, children and science has been researched from a conceptual perspective where their understandings of specific concepts has been viewed as misconceptions or alternative understandings (Driver and Easley, 1978). In contemporary research such perspectives are challenged and instead an approach where science is viewed as emergent (Johnson, 2014; Larsson, 2016b) is foregrounded. Such a viewpoint values children's opportunities to learn about what can be considered as science-related aspects in the surrounding environment. This paper discusses three activities that occurred in everyday preschool contexts and focuses on what kind of conditions that are evident when adopting an emergent science perspective.

Keywords: emergent science, preschool, teaching, physics

Introduction

Today, 84% of Swedish children aged 1 to 5 are enrolled in preschool, and thereby preschool can be considered as a part of their everyday context. The preschools function according to a national curriculum, provide children with playing and learning about nature and science during indoor and outdoor experiences which are inextricably linked. Research shows that the Swedish preschool has a long tradition of emphasising care for children, but contemporary settings emphasise both play and learning (Pramling Samuelsson, Sommer, and Hundeide, 2011)

even if preschool teachers often adopt a socially oriented stance (Williams, Sheridan, and Sandberg, 2014) that can hinder children from being given the support in content focused activities such as science (Larsson, 2016a).

While the outdoors and nature in general has long been an important part of the Swedish preschool, aspects of physics and chemistry have not been central to teaching and learning. When using the outdoors, many aspects have been taken for granted, as if just visiting a forest will develop children's knowledge about trees, plants and animals (i.e. biology). Such notions have been challenged by researchers (Eshach and Fried, 2005) who highlight that it is through the support of others and an exploring attitude in a communicative and collaborative context that learning about science related aspects becomes possible. It has been shown that children are content focused, if they get extended time and space to explore (Thulin, 2011) in a supportive context. Drawing on research conducted in diverse cultural contexts, Rogoff (1990) highlights that from an early age, children share meaning together with others, they observe and manage social activities in which they advance their skills and understanding. Viewing learning about science as emergent science (Larsson, 2016b) is to value children's experiences of nature as an opportunity for something more than just an experience in the present moment. It is about introducing and inviting them to a web of knowledge which may trigger interest in the wonder of the mysteries and amazing events of nature. However, such experiences need to be supported in order to be considered as an emerging knowledge of science.

The aim of this paper is to show how science in terms of "emergent science" can be made into a "learning area". This paper investigates what such a preschool didactical perspective may look like. The research question is: what kind of conditions within preschool are evident when adopting an emergent science perspective?

Theoretical and methodological issues

The theoretical perspective of this paper rests on cultural historical theory (Vygotsky, 1978) highlighting play as a leading activity in the early years. The analytical tool used is framed within such a cultural historical perspective (Hedegaard, 2012) and outlines four interrelated levels; society, institution, activity setting and person. The person level may be summarised as being about understanding another person's perspective, and the activity setting level as having a focus on interaction. The institutional level takes the preschool teachers' perspective in terms of being the representative of a mission that includes

teaching and learning within a specific society and it reflects the society level (Larsson, 2016a). From an ethical perspective, preschool practice is considered as a practice which is culturally sensitive (Larsson, 2016b). This implies that a high awareness of and careful connection to the Swedish Research Council's (2011) regulations have been central to the project. Furthermore, the notion of children being given the right to refrain from participating and to choose if and when to participate has been an additional consideration. The empirical examples reported here derive from a case study doctoral project focusing on natural science (Larsson, 2016b). The data was gathered by the use of a video camera according to a technique called shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007). This technique means that the children and teachers are followed by a researcher with a video camera during their daily activities, in their specific preschool.

Background and contextual information about the settings

The preschool settings are situated in the west of Sweden. The settings are all explicitly using the Swedish national curriculum for the preschool (National Agency for Education, 2016). The four preschools are to some extent different from one another. Two of the preschools are part of a project where the teachers make extra efforts to foreground science, and here the teachers were shadowed with a video camera. The two other preschools do not have a focus on science; they use the outdoors for play and other activities, but the overarching focus is on development and learning in a broader sense. In these preschools four children were shadowed, one boy and one girl in each setting. All participating teachers are qualified preschool teachers, hold bachelor's degrees, and have 7 to 18 years of teaching experience.

Findings

This section will highlight examples from three of the four participating preschools, framed as narratives that visualize children in different activities in an everyday preschool context. In these examples, the children are encountering diverse phenomena such as density, friction and sound, all associated with the content area of physics.

1. The challenge: to conquer a hill covered with snow

This narrative example comes from a preschool which does not work explicitly with science. It is winter and the children and their teacher are outdoors playing in the preschool yard, a large area with trees, bushes and pathways for bicycling,

Two boys have just entered the yard and the ground is full of snow. They both want to climb the top of the hill in the middle of the playground. Both boys are suddenly facing the challenge of conquering a hill covered with snow. One of them has winter boots which have a high level of friction in relation to the snow and this makes the walk up the hill easy for him. The other boy in contrast, has low-friction-boots, which repeatedly forces him to struggle to get up the hill – he constantly fails. Finally, the teacher perceives and acknowledges the challenge encountered by the boy and supports him – by urging him to use the stairs instead.

This narrative shows two children who, from the researcher's perspective, are encountering science in terms of physics, as visualized by the aspect of friction. From the teacher's perspective, support in conquering the hill is the main focus. The children themselves are both challenged by, and frustrated by, the fact that they need to climb the hill. Even though the children's encounters with friction are repeated, and the subject of playful situations evident throughout the day, none of the children are given the opportunities to talk about, or with teachers' support, explore the phenomena in terms of a scientific phenomenon.

2. Identifying air as a medium for sound transmission

This second narrative derives out of a thematic work initiated by two preschool teachers and followed by the researcher (author). The teachers implemented the project in a group of 4-5 year olds. The thematic work reflected here focuses on sound. The teachers have decided to support children to explore and discern a central feature of sound as "emergent physics". This, they say, means that vibration and movement (sound-transmission) are the central aspect to be highlighted during playful activities. When the thematic work has been going on for about nine weeks, the following episode occurs:

The room is covered with instruments and other tools that have been used within the thematic work several times before by teachers and children. The teachers support the children to once again explore and investigate all different sounds that are

available. One of the girls, here named "Rose", is walking around on her own. The teacher notices that she is holding a ruler to which a string is attached. A bit later, when gathering all children, the teacher picks up this particular item and says; "did anyone discover the mysterious sound that can be created by the use of this item?" All children respond "No" in unison and the teacher starts to swing the ruler in a circular manner by holding on to the string. A whining sound is heard. All children laugh, and the teacher repeats the action. When asking what happened, Rose raises her voice and says; "the air bumped against it and it sounded drr drr drr... like an airplane!

The teachers working in this context have a clear focus on sound as physics (Larsson, 2016b) and not as music or noise. They envisage what kind of experiences they want the children to explore and discern. The planning and setting of the work has led to an increased interest and focused the children's attention towards the phenomena of sound. This is here exemplified by Rose's utterance which refers not only to the presence of air (something that is not always evident or easy to understand) but that when the air 'bumps' against the object, a sound occurs, and she connects the phenomenon to something that she has previous experience of, that is, airplanes.

3. Detecting crucial aspects about floating

This last example derives from of another thematic work focusing on boats, floating and sinking. The theme integrates aspects such as art, excursions, experiments and exploring and investigative activities. During the teacher-initiated activity, not only floating and sinking are discussed among the teacher and the children. The children also talk about objects that can both float or sink, something that includes properties of both the item and the fluid. Also, they talk about the weight and size of the objects and the volume of water (Larsson, 2013b). While investigating, they are supported by the teacher and they come to elaborate their understandings around preconditions for floating and sinking, that is that an object that initially floats can suddenly sink, and the children form an understanding of what will occur when removing and/or adding weight:

Four children are gathered around a large tub of water. They have elaborated with their own hand-made boats for a long time and now the teacher adds another item to the playful cooperative activity. It is a plastic lid with a one-centimetre edge. The teacher

hands some items to place on the lid and asks the children how much they can place on the lid before it will sink. The children immediately start to, one by one, place items on the lid. They quickly identify that the location and the amount of the items are crucial. By discussion amongst themselves and one of the children taking the lead in highlighting central aspects in relation to stability and placement, the children can load the lid with a vast amount of items before it sinks.

One societal mission to be implemented by Swedish preschool teachers is outlined in the national preschool curriculum. That is, to give children possibilities to become aware of diverse physical phenomena and to learn about aspects of science during their early years. Such a focus is evident in the latter two situations. The teachers' planning and use of the activity and their knowledge about children's early encounters with physics makes the play into a collaborative action where sound and air as a medium in one case and buoyancy and stability in the other are the central scientific phenomena. The children's use of the knowledge within the group make the opportunities for learning more manifest and relevant to the activity as such.

Results and discussion

The three narratives described above illustrate important conditions for making it possible for children to encounter science in the everyday preschool context and for teachers to reflect upon when trying to adopt the perspective of emergent science. For example, children are repeatedly in contact with the phenomenon of friction during their play. Such everyday play situations may be evident in any cultural context since friction is a phenomenon that arises when any surface rubs or moves against another, for example when walking and sliding. The narrative named "the challenge to conquer a hill covered with snow" shows the importance of providing play and learning conditions. Teachers' ability to identify and use such situations cannot be taken for granted. In-service training from the perspective of emergent science could have been useful here in order to provide the teacher with preschool didactical tools that would direct children's attention towards the physical phenomena. This could be one way to inspire children towards other forms of play where the phenomenon of friction is prominent. Johnston (2014) foregrounds the importance of valuing children's emergent scientific skills and thinking in connection with the choice of pedagogy. Furthermore, teachers' own knowledge of science is of importance, together with the need for preschool related knowledge of pedagogy, children and childhood (Larsson, 2016b).

Within the second and third narratives, "identifying air as a medium for sound transmission", and "detecting crucial aspects for floating and sinking", a goal-directed stance interwoven in a play and learning preschool context together allow a focus on sound and on floating and sinking as emergent physics. Aspects such as the context and the concepts, purposefully used by the teachers, contribute to emergent science knowledge. Moreover, they also contribute to bridging children's everyday understandings of scientific concepts, even when the scientific vocabulary in the activity is rudimentary. Planning, using and developing exploratory and investigative contexts together with the children were also present in the activity where loading, floating and sinking were central. Such simple but important activities, supported by a teacher and by more competent peers (Vygotsky, 1978), must be valued and apparent in order to foster emergent notions of sound, density and the Archimedes principle. Rogoff (1990:190) has concluded that 'both cognition and development must be studied with an understanding of the particulars of the goals being sought and the circumstances and tools available, since these particulars are the substance of both thinking and development'. In a Swedish preschool context, it is advocated by the Swedish national curriculum for the preschool (National Agency for Education, 2016) that different forms of knowledge and ways of learning are used within the institutions in order to form a coherent whole. Furthermore, the mission is to integrate care and learning, not separate them. If care is seen as the only (or overall) priority, learning can be a task difficult to achieve in practice (Larsson, 2016b)

In summary, emergent science is not about challenging children's initial misconceptions or alternative understandings (Driver and Easley, 1978). It is about turning science into a learning area which becomes meaningful and relevant to young children. It is about respecting, enhancing and playfully contesting children's skills, experiences and their understandings of the physical world. It is about the pedagogical value of taking the children's perspectives and acknowledging them as important and reasonable, based on skills developed in harmony with their surroundings. Emergent science is about valuing children's own explanations because they work for them and more importantly, their utterances show that they have identified some key aspects that can be understood as emergent. However, according to a preschool didactical perspective (Larsson, 2016b; Pramling Samuelsson, Sommer, and Hundeide, 2011; Thulin, 2011), the teacher has the responsibility to support, extend and problematize together with children in playful and meaningful contexts, which are initiated both by children and teachers.

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Implementing Early Childhood Development and Education Curriculum in Nomadic Pastoralist Communities in Kenya

Dr. John Teria Ng'asike

Senior Lecturer, Department of Early Childhood Education, Mount Kenya University.

Abstract

This article is a narrative of the author's research in early childhood education in Kenya. The author begins by discussing the influence of European colonialists in African early childhood education vision and philosophy. The article argues that the education curriculum in the majority of African schools is likely to have little relevance to the everyday survival needs of children and families. In addition, the majority of teachers may not have the theoretical training to interpret the content of school curriculum to match the local context. The article discusses various examples to illustrate how a curriculum, for example in nomadic pastoralist communities, can be conceptualized to meet the needs of learners. The article concludes with a description of a reading literacy enrichment project using mother tongue stories as reading material.

Introduction

This article outlines the author's research experiences in early childhood education and care in Kenya. The author is an early childhood education practitioner and academic in Kenya. The work narrated in the article draws on ethnographic research the author carried in the Turkana nomadic pastoralist community in Kenya (Ng'asike, 2014) and the narratives of the author's

everyday experiences with teachers, the community and curriculum experts. This ethnographic work helped Ng'asike (2014) to understand the everyday life of children and families and how these relate to the education of children. In pastoralist areas for example, children and families survive by livestock herding, hunting and gathering wild fruit. Within these dynamics, education continues to operate under the shade of a tree or in classrooms without referring to what takes place daily to/by the children and their families (Dyer, 2006). Educators often operate without sensitivity to the struggles of the harsh realities of life for the children and families. This points to the need to question the relevance of knowledge and goals of education addressed in the national curriculum in relation to the skills of children of pastoralist communities. The expectations of the pastoralist communities are that education will be responsive to the needs of the children and parents (Dyer, 2006).

African education curriculum envisages that children, beginning from their early years of life, are active participants and useful contributors to family socio-economic activities. African generative curriculum places emphasis on social selfhood and social transformation (Nsamenang 2011). Parenting practices assign household and other livelihood tasks to children from the early years. Folktales and riddles are used to stimulate children's imaginations and promote the learning of moral values. African children learn as they grow up in an open environment which provides playing areas which may include river courses (river beds). Other playing areas include tree shades, swimming pools and sand (Ng'asike, 2014). Pastoralist children may be hunting, chasing birds or catching insects when they take a break from herding. The child builds trust in the environment as safe and available to use for play and learning. The mother trusts that the community is watching her child because in many African communities it takes the village to bring up the children.

Theoretical Framework and Africa Context of Early Childhood Education

This article draws on a wide range of theories that acknowledge the contribution of the cultural environment in nurturing human development. Among the major theories in this area of research are the socio-cultural historical theory of Vygotsky (1978), the ecocultural theory (Super and Harkness, 1986; 2002; Weisner, 2002), the "ecocultural niche" (Weisner, 2002) and the "developmental microniche" (Worthman, 2003). Vygotsky argued that children's cognitive skills rely on cultural inventions, for example literacy, mathematics, mnemonic skills, problem solving, creativity, and reasoning. Culture provides the tool kit

for learning. Super and Harkness's ecocultural theory advanced Vygotsky's theory and further argued that in particular cultural contexts, the customs, practices, traditions and diverse linguistic environment provide pathways for children's optimal development. Furthermore, Worthman (2003) added the "developmental microniche" which construes the immediate interface between the culturally-historically constituted environment as the product of interactions between the biological characteristics and the ecocultural processes. Gonzáles, Moll and Amanti's (2005) research on "funds of knowledge" outlines the importance of the resources within households that children engage with at the family level to learn important skills required to be useful in society. Funds of knowledge underscore the importance of a rich social-cultural environment and the usefulness of historically accumulated knowledge in traditional cultures as resources for learning. The overriding theoretical argument is that human development is best understood within a cultural-contextual paradigm (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999).

Curriculum Challenges in Kenyan Education Institutions

Education in Kenya has continued to be a vessel for perpetuating Western colonization and African Christianization (Cunningham, 2008). African indigenous knowledge is undermined as education deteriorates to the memorization of meaningless facts to be parroted in English. Students memorize facts that they do not comprehend and cannot apply to their everyday lives or to their immediate world. Cunningham (2008) describes a lesson on nutrition, taught in primary classes, which requires children to learn the importance of a balanced diet. In the lesson, a balanced diet requires one to eat protein daily, plenty of calcium and magnesium found in green vegetables, legumes, fish, and whole grains. This lesson can only be facts for memorization, which do not have connections to the lives of children when sometimes getting a meal a day is a challenge. Why would a teacher teach children living in poverty about calcium, magnesium, green vegetables and fish? For these children even a drop of water is a problem to get each day and as a result the poor children stare in amazement as the teachers teach them the concept of nutrition. The teachers themselves might also be reading from the textbook without conceptual understanding. In Kenya, children are likely to be taught about the Mississippi and Rhine rivers in the continents of America and Europe without a mention of the Athi and Tana rivers of their own country - Kenya (Cunningham, 2008). In another example, children will be heard singing about "London Bridge" which they have never seen. Yet they cannot sing about Nairobi Bridge or any other bridge children

see in their everyday lives.

In my research in Turkana I observed a caregiver reading a story to children about a mango tree (Ng'asike, 2014). When I asked her what a mango was, the caregiver had no knowledge of a mango fruit. I expected this answer since mangoes are not grown in Turkana. The irony is that the teacher was teaching what she did not know and as a result, the children were merely parroting. I asked her to use books written about the content of the local environment which she resisted because she was guided by the syllabus and the textbook she was using was one recommended by the education curriculum experts. In Kenya, it is common practice for teachers to teach with textbooks that they do not understand and which act as vehicles for the transmission of Western values.

Language of Instruction as Barriers in Classroom Interaction

In Kenya, English is the language of education as well the official language of carrying out Government business. Kiswahili is the national language. The many mother tongues are recognized only as languages of instruction in lower primary and early childhood education (Cunningham, 2008; Ng'asike, 2011). However, except in schools, Kenyans speak in Kiswahili as well as in mother tongues even in Government offices. Yet to speak in a mother tongue in education institutions is regarded as a perpetuation of tribalism and backwardness (Ng'asike, 2011). In some rural communities such as in the pastoralists' areas and the Northern regions of Kenya, children hardly understand English or even Kiswahili. In these regions teachers teach in English with difficulty and children rarely comprehend curriculum content taught in English. Miscommunication in the classrooms is a routine and children hardly enjoy their education (Ng'asike, 2011). Mixing languages is not allowed and code switching is a stressful process as children struggle to answer questions from teachers (Cunningham, 2008). The majority of the learners remain silent for long hours in the school as they are afraid that speaking in English may result in making a mistake (Cunningham, 2008; Ng'asike, 2011). Speaking in Kiswahili or in a mother tongue may be punishable according to school rules. Despite the challenge the English language is posing for children and teachers, parents would not accept their children being taught in either mother tongue or Kiswahili. English for many parents in Kenya is equal to good education and the vehicle for success.

Curriculum Innovations in Rural Nomadic Pastoralists' Areas of Kenya

The author (Ng'asike, 2014) in an ethnographic study carried out in Turkana Kenya established that the community elders have an elaborate indigenous knowledge that draws on livestock herding and knowledge of the environment and the universe. The Turkana have deep knowledge of animals' anatomy, genetic characteristics, knowledge of grazing pasture and water discovery including a clear understanding of rainfall patterns, rocks, soil, weather and seasons. This knowledge is important to the pastoralist people in order to be able to figure out strategies for survival with their livestock husbandry. In an attempt to figure out a curriculum for African children it can be concluded that practices considered to be fetish, primitive, crude, archaic and negatively associated with African culture can be linked to formal content (for example in science) to support cultural relevance in modern education classrooms (Jegade, 1994). The author identified and analyzed Turkana cultural practices of their everyday life of livestock herding and their socio-cultural activities and made a comparison between these practices with modern science content taught in early childhood in Kenya. The table below illustrates these relationships.

Table 1: Local Knowledge Practices and National Curriculum in Kenya (Source: Ng'asike, 2014)

Local Science Practices	Early Childhood Science Curriculum
Preserving food stuffs	Human body
Fruits gathering	Health education
Animal skinning & slaughtering	Plants
Making cheese	Weather
Drying Milk, meat, fish	Water
Animal sounds	Animals
Animal hooves	Soil
Interpreting the clouds	Food
Rain making	Light
Classifying plants	Energy
Livestock treatment	Sound
Hunting	Air
Tracking animals	Simple machines
Rabbit snares	
Fire making	
Sharpening with stones or hard steel	
Myths	
Songs	
Stories	

The table shows that by studying nomadic children's cultural survival practices, one can draw a comparison between local knowledge and the national science curriculum content. There is a very important similarity between these knowledge systems which can be used in teaching to create harmony in content delivery to the children. Children will find their local knowledge useful in formal education classrooms and thus ease learning. The Turkana for example, have a calendar made up of two seasons of six month each. Each month of the Turkana calendar has a local name and a cultural activity, for example, harvesting month, flowering month, the month of fruit gathering and others. The formal school curriculum does not acknowledge the existence of the Turkana calendar, knowledge of livestock husbandry and other forms of indigenous knowledge systems. According to modern education, only the western form of knowledge exists. Knowledge from other diverse cultures is non-existent. The Turkana children can understand the value of the Western calendar if schools match two knowledge systems side by side to enable children develop a critical view of the reality of the world.

Early literacy Instruction in Early Childhood Education in Turkana

Government reports indicate that Turkana's literacy rates are at 18.2% country-wide. In some sections of Turkana communities close to 93% of the local people have no secondary education. As a result of low literacy rates such as these, accessibility of print materials for children's literacy support at the family level is non-existent as families themselves are illiterate. Ironically the main challenges facing children in schools is the struggle to master a Western model of education carried out in English. This is in addition to the fact that this Western English model of curriculum content is not contextually relevant to everyday life experiences of Turkana children (Dyer, 2006; Ng'asike, 2014). Lack of access to relevant learning materials in teaching has compelled teachers to teach in a state of an impoverished curriculum in primary schools and early childhood education centres (Ng'asike, 2014). Teachers in Africa who are not themselves English speakers lack the skills to inspire African children to learn to read in English (Ojanen, et al. 2015). Although Africans believe that English speaking is equal to a good education, learning to read and comprehend information in English remains a major challenge for children especially in regions where illiteracy is high among the parents and where there is an acute shortage of reading materials at the family level (Chansa-Kabali, and Westerholm, 2014). As parents demand that children should learn English in early childhood education centres, teachers rush to teach English with deductive approaches based on

rote memorization of alphabet letters without the input of local cultural context. With these challenges, I initiated a project on curriculum innovations, using mother tongue story reading materials to encourage children to learn to read in their native Turkana mother tongue as a strategy for improving children's reading skills. In this project I involved the children in narrating their indigenous stories in their mother tongue and in figuring out how to write these stories. In addition, I organized teachers' workshops for writing the stories in mother tongue which were published into simple short story books to be used as class readers. The stories can be translated into English and Kiswahili to encourage reading interest as children interact with familiar stories of their cultural folktales. Some of the story titles are:

- *The Danger of Abandoning a Mother*
- *Greedy Hyena*
- *The Child as Peacemaker*
- *The Hunter*

These stories are authentic cultural folktales where children enjoy sharing the stories to learn values, morals, curriculum subject concepts and issues of environment and peace. The project is gaining acceptance slowly due to resistance from teachers, a section of parents and local education officials. The reasons for resistance are many but the key ones include the following listed below:

- When you speak your mother tongue in school it is perceived as promoting tribalism
- Official curriculum oppresses any effort to introduce innovations in learning using local knowledge
- Teachers do not pay attention to mother tongue teaching even though education policy requires the use of mother tongue in lower primary and early childhood classes
- There is a feeling that teachers operate in fear of teaching cultural knowledge
- Academic performance overrides any effort to introduce any innovative ideas based on local knowledge of the children
- English is associated with examination success and the quality of education

Even with these challenges, schools lack story book readers in English or in Kiswahili that children can use to practice reading at home and at school. Emphasis is on the mainstream curriculum materials for teaching subject content. In Kenya, examination performance is everything that defines a child's education. Any additional materials that enrich the curriculum are considered a waste of time. Teachers will therefore try their best to maximize learning time by focusing on teaching content they consider as examinable. This trend has been transferred to early childhood where drills and rote memorization of academic content starts as early as the day a child joins the preschool.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article contributes to the global discourses of diversity in theorizing knowledge of early childhood education and care. There are many constructions of childhoods represented in diverse cultures of the world. Experiences of the diverse cultural constructions of childhood will add to the knowledge pool of early childhood research which is critical in figuring out the reality in meaning making about the children's world. In Africa, it is often easy to ignore the cultural context in which communities operate as families struggle in everyday life to bring up their children. Childhood is not a scripted process that is out there for families to follow, but should be understood as a cultural meaning making process that is context dependent.

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Preparation for school or developing as a child: Local curriculum or scripted instruction?

Jan-Erik Johansson

(Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences)

Abstract

Today there is a world-wide expansion in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). At the same time mothers are giving birth to fewer and fewer children. Mothers are educated and work outside home to a higher degree than before (OECD, 2016). It is a well-established (but often forgotten) fact that this means that the whole system of support services around mother and child needs to be coherent and well-integrated. An important question is how to design the curriculum for younger children. One current model is developed by Bridge International Academies in Kenya and is based upon scripted instruction. If compared with the Froebel original pedagogy with its focus on play, the contrast is evident. Among the problems with scripted instruction is a lack of interaction with local cultures and languages. Even though Froebel's work is from the 1840s, his research on play is still important, with a focus on child-teacher interaction in close contact with the world around us. It seems unlikely that scripted education is the way to the future of ECEC.

Keywords: Scripted instruction; Play; Bridge International Academies; Friedrich Froebel

Introduction

There are different answers to the question of how to design effective early childhood education in the future. One prime goal in early childhood education

and care, (ECEC), could be a combination of child play, happiness, interaction and reflection on the world around us, and finding new answers in interaction with adults. Another orientation could be to prepare and test for school readiness and academic competencies. Is it about memorizing established facts? Friedrich Froebel, the founder of the Kindergarten in Germany, saw this dilemma almost 200 years ago as a conflict between repetition of dead facts or developing free, thinking human beings.

This debate is at least as old as the 19th Century Kindergarten, and there is still no answer accepted by all. Some think of test results first and prefer to pay teachers in relation to student learning results, an argument Henry Levin discusses (2012). Others question the ideologies behind testing, academic school preparation and national evaluations (cf. Moss and Dahlberg, 2008).

I will outline a simplified picture of two ways of training and educating children: one recent example is the Bridge International Academies in Kenya (The Economist, 2017), and another historical one is provided by Friedrich Froebel's original Kindergarten pedagogy (Johansson, 2017). What are the pedagogical ideas we find in the two different models? I will start with the present context of ECEC.

New context - worldwide expansion of ECEC

When I was six years old in 1953, only one per cent of children in Sweden were in full-day care outside home. Like many other children I was in a half-day Kindergarten for one year before school, which started at seven years of age. Most Swedish mothers were at home, and if they needed childcare perhaps neighbours, relatives or friends could help, or nannies if affordable. Childcare was only one problem though; there were many other obstacles for mothers working outside the home.

Today the situation is totally changed and ECEC is expanding worldwide. Behind the expansion we find two interrelated processes: the number of children born in each family is falling in most parts of the world, and at the same time girls are better educated and work outside home much more than ever before (OCED, 2016). Factors such as urbanisation and modern housing mean that traditional contexts for upbringing children are weaker. Due to many reasons, there is hence a need for out-of-home childcare. Full day-care in the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, is one instance of this change, as today almost all children in these countries are in full day ECEC settings from one year of age. Behind this development, we find labour market demands combined

with political decisions.

The traditional nursery and elementary school presupposes that there is a mother at home to take care of the child both in the morning and in the afternoon. In many present-day families, both parents work outside home and children spend long days in day care, a totally new situation which politicians have to address. This task is analysed by UNICEF (2008:32) with a focus on child poverty and equality in the whole system around early childhood: child care quality, the level of staff training, amount of paid maternal leave, mother and child health provision etc. UNICEF describes a great variation in most aspects of ECEC provision world-wide, and still we have to adapt services to new and very different family contexts internationally. An important question is how do we organise the 50 hours a week that children in more and more countries spend in ECEC from the age of one year until they start school? This changing family context means that we have to develop new integrated services together with families and young children.

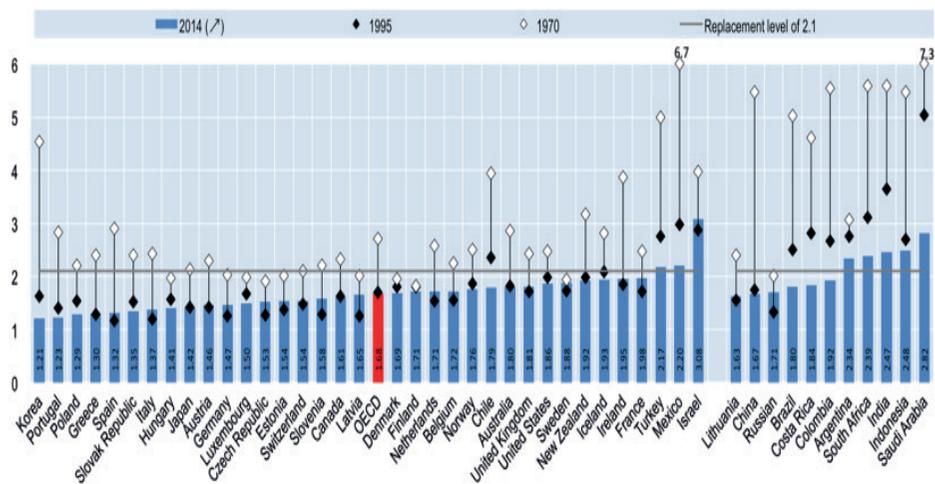


Fig 1. Fertility rates across the OECD.

Number of children per woman aged 15 to 49, in 1970, 1995 and 2014 (or nearest year)
 Source: OECD Family Database (indicator SF2.1), based from National statistical offices, Eurostat and World Development Indicators <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933405149>

The fact is that mothers' work is now recognized by both the EU and the OECD: 'Rising female education and employment, a need to secure a job and income, growing housing problems and in some cases insufficient support for families juggling work and children, have all played a role in declining fertility' (OECD, 2016:80). This change is not restricted to the member countries of the two organisations. Fig. 1 above gives a clear indication of the strength of the fall in birth rates.

School readiness only?

It is important to use the opportunity to build high quality ECEC during the present expansion. Apparent problems in doing this relate to poverty and other problems children meet (UNICEF, 2008). At the same time, individual differences between children seem to be forgotten when we discuss how well children do in school. Problems are evident and well known but seldom addressed. We know that children born at the end of the year have lower results in school, as is also sometimes the case for boys. Being poor as a child might negatively determine your future life, as is also the case of those with a minority background or experiencing discrimination (Bennett, 2012). Reading disorders remain a problem still, without any easy fix available. We also find individual problems involving health, parents, bullying etc. All this is necessary to keep in mind as preconditions determining life for children in ECEC, school and adulthood.

In this field James Heckman's curve which shows that the highest rate of economic returns comes from investment in the early years (Heckman, 2008, 2017) is debated. I like to underline his focus on social competence and his point that investment in early academic achievement is not enough for success later in life. All of us have to interact with others and handle our lives and ourselves. Hence we cannot only focus upon preparation for school in ECEC. Instead the whole and unique life context of each child has to be considered, even if this is easier said than done.

What is the direction for the future? There are many possibilities available. I chose to look at one recent model developed by the Bridge International Academies in Kenya and elsewhere. I will also present Froebel's original model from the 1840s, in order to outline two instances of opposing educational ideologies in ECEC. This will lead us to another divergent view about ECEC and elementary school services: the World Bank recommends services based on privatisation and cost sharing (such as student fees paid by parents), whilst the UN in general promotes free schooling for all.

Scripted instruction for the Test

If we move now to Kenya and the Bridge International Academies (BIA), we find that BIA has been operating private low-cost for profit schools since 2009. Like other private schools, BIA exploits the weakness of quality assurance and lack of supervision of schools by the Government. BIA offers nursery school from four years of age and elementary school starting with five-year olds. The educational programme is highly standardized, with *scripted* word-by-word instruction (mostly in English), meaning that teachers must follow exactly the lesson plans they access on their tablets or smartphones, and computerized school management. Detailed information about the programme is not easily available in the public domain.

What is new in the Bridge model? In principle the main ideas are known from the history of education: the idea of 'teaching for the test' is both established and debated, and the scripted instruction model is also known for instance from programmed instruction and educational technology from the 1960s. But the direct use of (electronic) tablets controlling teachers through scripts is a newer component.

A main aim is to develop a transnational low-cost for-profit model. The goal is to get 10 million students in the future, in order to break even and make a profit. So far, Bridge International is supported with funding from Bill Gates (personally), the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, together with other investors and funders. The explicit goal is to help poor countries achieve a better education, and at the same time pay back the investors.

The BIA model does not build upon teacher-educated staff. BIA offers their instructors an intensive training over a few months, which means that the demand for certified teachers is limited. It is a well-known fact that certified teachers are the greatest expense in schools. For years there has been a hope of finding cheaper alternatives to teachers through programmed instruction, computer-aided instruction, language labs etc. BIA reduces teacher costs by preparing scripts written by experts for the instructors to use word-by-word when teaching. The instructor is expected to read the script directly from her or his tablet, and simultaneously to document how the lesson is following the script.

The relation to the national curriculum is debated, and there is no prime focus on local languages and cultures. There is probably a limited local classroom variation in content since the national tests are in focus. The scripts that the

teachers read also restrict the interaction in the classroom. One question, which is not easy to answer, is how variation between students is treated in scripted instruction? According to BIA themselves results are good (cf. Bridge International Academies, 2015). However, the statistician Harvey Goldstein (2016) does not agree, and the BIA effect on child learning so far is an open question.

This review space is too limited to cover the business model developed by BIA in Kenya and the debate about whether it is possible to deliver high quality low-cost for profit education (The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 10 November 2016). It is an open question if this is the way for school development in African countries with too few children in elementary school. We know that the programme (even if low-cost) is too expensive for many poor parents to afford. One weakness of the education system in Kenya is inadequate funding. Even if education is free, families still pay school levies, like uniform, exercise books, pens, exam fees, extra coaching fees etc. Hence the free education system in Kenya can be costly for poor parents.

BIA is in the middle of an on-going conflict with school authorities in Kenya and Uganda, with the teachers' union in Kenya and with *Education International*, the global teachers' union (cf. Rutere and Ulrich, 2016). The interested reader may search for more recent information on the internet (cf. The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 23 March 2017).

Froebel and 'Play care' in Germany 1840

If scripted instruction for the test is the core of the BIA model, we find other aims in the roots of traditional ECEC. Friedrich Froebel is one of the founders of ECEC, but the heart of his original model was lost during the latter part of the 19th Century. I will present a few elements from its beginnings in the 1840s: the interactive teacher's role, and a nature-based play theory. The point is not to re-introduce 19th Century pedagogy, but rather it is about looking for its important components in educational thinking and practice. Such a leap in time is meaningful if we think of education as a set of continuously developing technologies, in which few elements are totally new (see Basalla, 1988, on technologies).

Froebel saw interaction as fundamental for young children's play and learning. He coined the concept 'Play care' which means that children's play has to be nurtured by adults. It is necessary to interact around materials in order to connect the child to the surrounding environment, and for Froebel geometry was the

tool to use. He was against memorizing 'dead facts' from books. The child is to build and understand its own knowledge in interaction with the world around. In this programme, the teachers' competence level is very important. However, this part of Froebel's early programme became forgotten. The Kindergarten instead trained poor children for their restricted adult life as workers, or focused upon home activities and motherly supervision, with the aim of disciplining the future members of the working class (Denner, 1988:102ff).

A new life for many children and families

Until the 1970s the discussion about the content and meaning of ECEC was of limited practical importance in most countries, since very few children and families took part in ECEC programmes. Most children stayed at home with their families until they began to attend school, and children in full-day ECEC and after school programmes were extremely few. Today the falling number of children in each family, together with a growing number of educated mothers who work outside the home, means that the situation is changing fast. The question is how to support children's lives and their families in the future. I have given only two examples: Froebel and Bridge International Academies, which are two very different models, both in time and place, in order to give a glimpse of the variation among ideas about ECEC education.

With BIA there is a weak relationship with the life-world of children and parents both inside and outside school. Many languages and local cultures might be traded for a standardized, universal instruction in English, which is not perceived as the best option amongst critical scholars (Ng'asike and Swadener, 2015, Pence and Nsamenang, 2008, and see also the paper by Ng'asike in this volume). In nations like Kenya with 40 local languages (Khejari, 2014) it is not easy to see how scripted instruction in English and Kiswahili could be a way to build upon local mother tongue education. On the other hand BIA is able to drill children to speak and read in English within a short time of admission. Poor parents believe that BIA gives them hope, since they want their children to speak in English like the children of well-to-do parents.

Froebel's work might be a starting point for an alternative view on education in ECEC and primary school. We might look at his curriculum from 1840, and address the child's understanding of nature and the world around us, for instance as *sustainable development* (Siraj-Blatchford and Pramling-Samuelsson, 2016). Froebel underlined the importance of interaction and play for adults and children, and also focused on the child's reflection of its own knowledge as a central reason behind development.

New solutions in local cultures

There are many ECEC programmes and elementary school systems; hence most components needed to develop ECEC for tomorrow are already available. But we have to think afresh, since the traditional primary school topics such as reading, writing and maths are only tools, not the meaning of life.

We need unified ECEC systems as full day programmes from birth and onwards. We should combine family support systems and ECEC institutions of different kinds, with elementary school and after-school activities into a well-integrated educational programme, as UNICEF outlines (2008).

It is all about the choice of educational programmes and about the life-world of children. In the Malta Times, Maja Miljanic Brinkworth (Brinkworth, 2016) tells us not to forget the price of child poverty, a serious problem that too many children meet, which might follow them throughout their whole life (Bäckman and Nilsson, 2010).

An integrated and open system of ECEC, school and family support cannot solve all the problems, but might support a better life together with the development of academic and life competences. We need to discuss the future of ECEC and not leave curriculum development to the traditional conflict between school and ECEC. ECEC professionals have an ethical obligation to stay close to all children and parents, not forgetting the value of local cultures and languages in a child's education. Low cost for profit models, like the scripted teaching programme developed by Bridge International Academies, do not seem to offer the solutions needed – but they address a very important task for countries, that is to move towards fulfilling the right to education for all (The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 10 November 2016). Clearly further work needs to be done.

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OMEP

Organisation Mondiale Pour L'Éducation Préscolaire

Organización Mundial Para La Educación Preescolar

World Organization For Early Childhood Education

About OMEP

OMEP is an international, non-governmental and non-profit organisation concerned with all aspects of Early Childhood Education and Care. OMEP defends and promotes the rights of the child to education and care worldwide and supports activities which improve accessibility to high quality education and care. OMEP is currently established in over 60 countries and is represented at meetings of UNESCO, UNICEF and other international organisations with similar aims. For further details on OMEP's history and its activities world-wide, see the World OMEP organisation website <http://www.worldomep.org/>

OMEP is represented in Ireland by OMEP Ireland, a registered charity dedicated to Early Education and Care (Charity No. 14213). The objective of OMEP Ireland is to use every possible means to promote the optimum conditions for the well-being of all children, their development and happiness within their families, institutions and society. OMEP assists any undertaking to improve Early Childhood Education and supports scientific research that can influence these conditions.

The mission of OMEP Ireland is to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood experiences, both because every child has a right to a high quality childhood and because of the effect on children's future life chances. To further this mission, OMEP Ireland holds an annual research conference and publishes its journal, *An Leanbh Óg*, with the aim of supporting early childhood research and bringing it to a wider public. Its publications can also be accessed through the OMEP Ireland website, www.omepireland.ie

