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International Perspectives on Play

Alyson Lewis, who leads the Foundation Degree in Early Years and BA (Hons) Early Years at The College Ystrad Mynach, on international curricula.

Introduction

This paper explores features of different early years international curricula from New Zealand, Italy, United States of America, China and Wales. Most of the countries selected for discussion were based on the fact that they formed the basis of the Foundation Phase in Wales (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2005) except China which has been included in the evaluation to examine and compare the pedagogy (the relationship between learning and teaching) to the other countries.

The role and status of play within each country will be critically analysed and various definitions of play and relevant theorists will be mentioned. Comparisons will be made about the role of the adult and the different views of childhood, in addition to the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches. It is important to note early on in this paper that, 'getting a broader perspective, looking at international patterns and keys to success, is important but there is no blue print' (Tornberg and Lindholm, 2009, p.33).

How is play defined across cultures?

For thousands of years play has fascinated many stakeholders such as philosophers, educationalists, psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists (Bruce, 2004) and especially over the last 150 years numerous writers have attempted to define play but as yet there is not one single coherent definition (Brown, 2008). It is thought that 'an understanding of play can be derived from perspectives of developmental, cognitive, behavioural and social psychology as well as theories of education' (Sayeed and Guerin, 2000, p.9). For Bruce (2004) play aids logical reasoning and develops interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

According to Sayeed and Guerin (2000) the role and value of play in countries is continuously changing and is a reflection of socio-cultural values and perspectives of a society (Fromberg and Bergen, 2006). Soler and Miller (2003) and Sayeed and Guerin (2000) suggest that many professionals and politicians feel strongly about what is appropriate for young children and often have conflicting views about curricula. Melhuish and Petrogiannis (2006) argue that numerous social factors influence the content of a country's policy on early childhood care and education.

Curtis (1994) and Bennett et al. (1997) argue that play is at the heart of many International curricula but how it is interpreted and understood may be quite different. Furthermore, 'research shows that there is an immense gap between the rhetoric and the reality of play being at the heart of the early years curriculum' (Fisher, 1996, p.95) and Bennett et al. (1997) point out that play is closely linked to learning but the pedagogical principles are often

complicated. Fisher (1996) strongly argues that regardless of any complications, play should be regarded as a necessity in early childhood and its status should be guaranteed by everyone.

The significance of play (in five different countries)

The 'Te Whāriki' early years curriculum has recently been established as the first national curriculum guidance, aimed at children aged between 0-5 years in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996). Guidance is given throughout the document for infants, toddlers and young children and consists of principles, strands and goals. Each strand has goals with specific learning outcomes. For example, the first goal in strand five known as 'Exploration' states, 'children experience an environment where their play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.16).

In New Zealand practitioners are expected to have a thorough understanding of play and are able to facilitate it by careful intervention. Practitioners believe that children learn by being actively involved in tasks, socialising with others, questioning ideas and events and by using resources in a creative and innovative way (Ministry of Education, 1996).

In the 'Te Whāriki' curriculum document it states 'a reference library should be available for both children and adults as well as information for parents on...the value of play in learning and development' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.83). It is widely known that in many countries parents acknowledge that children play but they don't always appreciate that their child is capable of learning through play (Curtis, 1994). Both the New Zealand and Italian approaches place greater emphasis on working with and building positive relationships with families, perhaps it is because they understand that when parents are more involved the quality of play is improved and enhanced (Sayeed and Guerin, 2000). Especially in the early years, it is unquestionable that, an Italian society places high expectations on parenting (Musatti, 2006).

The Italian 'Reggio Emilia' approach was founded in 1963 by Loris Malaguzzi and caters for children from birth to six years of age (Abbott and Nutbrown, 2001). Reggio Emilia began in 1945 when World War II ended and it was generally felt that children needed to be educated to understand democracy and act as innovative thinkers (New, 2000). The contributing educator, Loris Malaguzzi, mirrored John Dewey's main principles; effective collaboration between adult and child, active participation and worthwhile involvement in the learning and thinking process (Soler and Miller,

2003). New (1998) explains that play is highly regarded as promoting holistic development. However, it is not any more significant than the long term projects that the children get involved in. Play is viewed equally alongside drawing, drama, movement and painting and documentation such as, photos, videos, paintings help children remember what they have done and can be revisited at any time for any reason (Edwards et al., 1998) which is similar to the High/Scope model where children are encouraged to review their work.

The 'High/Scope' approach is based on three main concepts of planning, doing and reviewing. The children are encouraged to plan their own activities, carry them out and reflect on them with others (Schweinhart et al., 1993). It is thought that when children are given opportunities to choose activities, learning becomes more meaningful and memorable (Bennett et al., 1997). The 'High/Scope' model originated in the USA in 1962 and was founded by Dr Weikart. Essentially, 'it is a philosophy of early years education comprising a developmentally appropriate curriculum which advocates active learning' (Northern Ireland Childminding Association, 2004, p.2). The model highlights the importance of the process of play (Moyles, 1989; NICMA, 2004).

In China, kindergartens are aimed at children aged between 3 to 7 years where their daily activities consist of a combination of child and teacher directed tasks with a focus on play which reflects a social-constructivist theory (Bennett et al., 1997). Three pieces of specific legislation highlight the significance of play and how it should govern learning (Shenglan, 2006; Zhu and Zhang, 2008). It is thought that 'play is what children are involved in when they initiate the task and work is what they do when they fulfil a task required by an adult' (Bruce, 1987, p.17) and for some educators as soon as an adult plans a play activity or has a play agenda then the child is definitely not playing (Fisher, 1996).

However, it has been stated that in China, '...children learn through play and play activity sessions are therefore planned by teachers to match children's developmental needs...' (Shenglan, 2006, p.158). This implies that the child is viewed as scientific of biological stages (Dahlberg et al., 2007). According to Bruce (1989) adults should develop appropriate skills that enable them to enter into a child's play and view themselves as a shared partner in the play process. Finally, Curtis (1994) argues that in China play does not have high status and is not considered a major component in early childhood curricula.

In contrast, the Foundation Phase in Wales for 3 to 7 year olds is a new initiative and regards play as a fundamental part of the curriculum that should be meaningful. It emphasises the importance of play being understood by all stakeholders and should be recognised and accepted as an essential element of a curriculum for young children (Welsh Assembly Government, Play/Active Learning, 2008). However, the 'Play/Active Learning' document appears to refer more frequently to the adult planning children's play rather than supporting or facilitating learning, as in the Reggio Emilia approach. It is thought by Clarke and Waller (2007) that the Foundation Phase in Wales supports a balanced programme of play-based

teaching and learning activities with the hope that children are viewed as co-constructors of knowledge (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

WAG documentation states that 'children's ideas can be included when planning topics/projects' (WAG, Learning and Teaching Pedagogy, 2008, p.13). Interestingly, on page thirteen of the 'Play/Active Learning' document it describes a developmentally staged approach where children will progress and move at different rates within their learning (WAG, Play/Active Learning, 2008) that implies firstly, a view of the child as scientific of biological stages (Dahlberg et al., 2007) and secondly, it implies a 'step ladder' approach, similar to the English Foundation Stage and very different to the 'Te Whāriki' curriculum. Welch (2008) points out that the particular system in Wales (and England) has 'accountability' at the core of the curriculum rather than the children's best interests.

Interestingly, the Foundation Phase in Wales has derived from features from the Italian approach 'Reggio Emilia', the New Zealand curriculum 'Te Whāriki' and the American High/Scope model (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2005). But it is thought that practitioners both in the UK and the USA tend to engage in play with young children and manipulate play rather than in mainland Europe where adults have less tendency to dominate and control play (Kalliala, 2004). Possibly, this is because in Europe 'play is considered to be such an educationally powerful process that learning will occur spontaneously, even if an adult is not present' (Bennett et al. 1997, p.1).

Comparison of approaches

Gonzalez-Mena (1993) and Freeman (1998) point out that Eastern cultures (China) promote collaboration with others, teamwork and making connections with society whereas Western cultures (USA, UK, NZ and Italy) are keen to encourage individuality, independence, personal progress and achievement. However, it is worth noting here what Lilian Katz reports, 'I am always amazed at the similarities across countries... at least in the field of early childhood education; low status, low pay, and poor or insufficient training that is commonly found' (Katz, 1999, p.1).

O'Keefe (2001) describes her impressions and views of early childhood education in China and mentions that when children are given opportunities to play freely the most obvious similarity was spontaneity of actions and movements. She also writes that in China there seemed to be more structured, teacher-led activities, larger classes and a distinct difference between teaching art in China compared to the USA. However, she concluded with 'I think we have a lot to learn from each other and it is clear that we care deeply about our children and want them to have the best learning experiences' (O'Keefe, 2001, p.3). However, Shenglan (2006) reminds us that children have only recently been granted unlimited access to the toilet and that children in Chinese kindergartens must not talk when they are eating food and are strictly governed by the teacher.

Bottery (1990) suggests four main models of the school education system and points out that a 'child-centred' approach and 'social-reconstruction' model

(adopted mainly in Reggio and High/Scope approaches) disregards the needs of society and by encouraging children to focus on their personal interests creates a narrow early years curriculum. In China, Bottery (1990) refers school education to the Gross National Product (GNP) model where the main focus is on training children to match the needs of the economy where the interests of the children are often ignored and forgotten.

When Nancy Freeman (1998) visited China she observed children acting like robots; everyone was working on and completing exactly the same activity with little room for creatively or individuality. She pointed out, 'teachers expected conformity and a willingness to work toward the completion of a task that was chosen by the teacher rather than the child' (Freeman, 1998, p.1). Shenglan (2006) describes a typical day at a Chinese kindergarten and notes that children would generally start at 7.50am and finish at 4.00pm with a very structured timetable in between and it is made clear that the children only have one hour 'free activity' in an eight hour day. This seems significantly different from Reggio Emilia and High/Scope where children are immersed in a child-initiated environment and free from adult play agenda.

'Reggio Emilia' and 'High/Scope' are quite different to the others in that they do not have a framework or formalised component with determined outcomes (Soler and Miller, 2003). Schweinhart et al. (1993, p.34) explains that the High/Scope approach offers 'an open framework of educational ideas and practices based on the natural development of young children'. Whereas the Reggio Emilia approach is based upon underlying principles of socio-cultural values and beliefs and is predominantly community based and supported by local people and government which some may think offer a limited view of the wider world (Soler and Miller, 2003).

The role of the adult and the way children are viewed by adults are significantly different in the approaches. For example, the Italians view the child as an active social participant (with rights) rather than an empty vessel to be filled (Soler and Miller, 2003) or as Dahlberg et al. (2007) would suggest, the child as a co-constructor of knowledge. Their role is to work alongside the children over long periods of time and facilitate their learning. Adults ensure that children 'rise to new challenges... express themselves in ways that are more creative, more communicative, and more thoughtful' (Tarini and White, 1998, p.178).

The High/Scope model is based on ideas of Piaget where practitioners should stand back and observe and monitor progress to extend children's learning through play (Schweinhart et al., 1993). Piaget mainly saw the adult as an observer, interacting when appropriate knowledge had been constructed and thought that play facilitated cognitive development whereas Vygotsky and Bruner proposed that social interaction and playing with others aided learning and viewed adults as active participants, celebrating and embracing socialisation (Bennett et al. 1997). It is thought that the 'Te Whāriki' curriculum is underpinned by

Vygotsky's view of childhood, learning and teaching (Soler and Miller, 2003) and according to Dahlberg et al. (2007) practitioners view the child as knowledge, identity and culture reproducers.

The New Zealand early years curriculum is a combination of two cultures (bicultural), Māori and Pakeha, a holistic view of the child and a child-centred view (Soler and Miller, 2003). Similarly, in Wales there is the Curriculum Cymreig, where 'children should appreciate the different languages... and gain a sense of belonging to Wales, and understand the Welsh heritage, literature and arts as well as the language' (WAG, Learning and Teaching Pedagogy, 2008, p.39). Also both countries are similar in that the early years curriculum in Wales and New Zealand has been developed in relation to a National Curriculum in primary schools (Soler and Miller, 2003) with an essential focus on play. It appears that both the 'Te Whāriki' and Foundation Phase have prescribed goals and targets in place for children to achieve, contrary to the Reggio Emilia and High/Scope approaches. Soler and Miller (2003) suggest that when a curriculum is predominantly prescribed then children become less active, less involved to share their thoughts and ideas and have less power to co-construct a curriculum.

There is a view that in the UK the services that are provided and available for young children are essentially associated with a lack of status of professionals, a poor understanding of children's development and a limited view of childhood (Alexander, 1995). Apparently, 'if the field of early education is to advance in any innovative, creative manner, we need to be intellectually involved in imagining different existences, constructing multiple new identities, while thinking well beyond where we are right now' (Johnson, 1999, p.74).

Conclusion

The paper has highlighted different ways of approaching early years curricula and that there are multiple perspectives on childhood and play. It has confirmed that play is difficult to define and summarise and that many have tried to help practitioners understand the true meaning, importance and relevance to young children. It is understood differently in countries and Cultural attitudes, feelings and traditional values are part of the wider spectrum of development. Some countries, such as Italy and New Zealand place more emphasis on parental involvement in early childhood education and care compared to China.

All of the approaches that have been investigated consider play as a tool for learning and teaching, although it seems to be taken more seriously and understood differently in Italy, Wales, USA and New Zealand. In China, play is not as significantly important for children.

Some International curricula are more prescribed than others whereas the Reggio Emilia approach and High/Scope model have more flexibility and fewer constraints on children achieving specific goals than in Wales or New Zealand. International curricula in countries are dissimilar in many ways but essentially it depends on how politicians and the

government and societal values view early childhood education and care.

It is evident from the discussion that a balance of child-initiated and adult directed tasks are provided for children in Wales and New Zealand. However, in China there is a strong emphasis on teacher-led activities and supervision whereas in America and Italy children play more freely. It is clear that the role and status of play is underpinned by how childhood is constructed and the views that society, including professionals hold. Ultimately children, regardless of where they live, play, grow and develop, have a right to play.

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