Defining Exemplary Curricula

Bibliography
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Compassion and Caring
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Current Context for Early Learning and Care

Since May 2005, the New Brunswick Department of Social Development has been working with the Early Childhood Centre at the University of New Brunswick to develop this curriculum framework for infants, toddlers, and young children aged three and four. Ideally, the framework is suited for use in home and centre-based childcare. It also is intended to serve as a source of information about children’s learning and care for parents, and for staff in other programs and services designed for young children and their families.

Given the current emphasis, worldwide, on early childhood policies, programs, and practices, there is an extensive body of literature about what constitutes exemplary curricula for infants, toddlers, and young children. Drawing upon the work of numerous researchers and curriculum developers, a common international theme for curriculum development focuses upon broad based learning goals and the cultural and social contexts of children’s lives as the means to exemplary practices.

Contemporary Research and Theory

John Bennett has reviewed practices, policies, and curriculum from more than twenty countries for the OECD. He and his research team specifically contrast a social pedagogical approach with a pre-primary approach. The pre-primary approach focuses on preparing children for school, often neglecting the complexity of children’s daily experiences and social interactions. A social pedagogical approach recognizes the context of children’s learning and the importance of attending to the todayness of children’s lives and their diverse personal, social, and cultural experiences. A curriculum grounded in this approach has the simultaneous effect of promoting overall well-being and capacity for learning.

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57 For detailed references see Bibliography.
58 OECD, Starting Strong; OECD, Starting Strong II.
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Canadian discussions about appropriate curricula for early learning and care have taken place in the *Interaction* journal published by the Canadian Child Care Federation. *Interaction*, a highly accessible Canadian Early Learning and Care publication, presented several exemplary curriculum frameworks including Te Whāriki developed in New Zealand; Reggio Emilia emerging out of Italy; High Scope from the United States; Experiential Education (EXE) from Flanders, and the Swedish preschool curriculum. Not surprisingly, these curricula have also been commended and researched in numerous publications in the academic literature. Exemplary curricula also include the New South Wales curriculum, *The Practice of Relationships*; the Tasmanian curriculum referred to as *Essential Connections: A Guide to Young Children’s Learning*; and the Finnish curriculum, *National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education in Finland*. All of these emphasize the diverse personal, social, and cultural contexts of children’s lives, and the importance of warm, caring relationships for children’s well-being and early learning.

Finnish researcher Eeva Hujala proposes a curriculum model based on such a contextual orientation of children’s learning. Within this model, there are three overarching components to address when developing curricula for infants, toddlers, and young children. These include a conception of children as active participants in their own learning, the quality of the children’s interactions with others, and the role of the teacher as the designer of an active growth environment for children. These components can be found in many contemporary curricula recognized as exemplary.

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60 OECD, *Starting Strong*.
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Conception of Children as Active Participants:

- The Swedish curriculum is conceived as a values and norms based curriculum. Democracy and opportunities for democratic actions on the part of the child, as well as opportunities for the child to have influence are an integral part of the learning process. Children’s learning is connected explicitly to the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the adults and the norms and values of the Swedish society.62

- All the exemplary curricula reviewed hold that the children actively construct their own learning. Experiential Education (EXE), a model of education developed and researched in Flanders, found that effective learning for young children takes place by attending to the child’s well-being and involvement. EXE theory and practice suggest that the most valuable way to assess the quality of any educational setting is to focus on two dimensions; the degree of the child’s emotional well-being and the level of involvement.63

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Teacher-Child and Child-Child Interactions

- Through the practice of attentive listening to young children at play, the Reggio Emilia teachers — early childhood educators collaborating with art educators — co-construct curriculum with the young children in their educational care. This research and thinking indicate that young children communicate more easily through graphic representation and sustained dramatic play than through print. Dramatic play and the arts play a large role in the literary practices of young children.

- The Leuven Involvement Scale (associated with EXE) assesses the child’s level of involvement with his or her environment. Action strategies serve as a self-evaluation tool for teachers to assess how successfully they engage the child’s interests. This Flanders model, highly researched and extensively implemented in Belgium, also serves as the foundation for research, structure, and programming in the Early Education Excellence Centres in the United Kingdom. Laevers proposes that the quality of a child’s activity can be recognized by concentration and persistence and is characterized by motivation, fascination, and implication.

- In a study reported by Bengt-Erik Andersson, the quality of the interactions of the staff with the children was found significantly improved when the staff had time to meet and discuss the goals of the curriculum in relation to the learning of the children. The Swedish curriculum goals, in this case, serve as a self-evaluation guide for actively involving children in developing collective attitudes.

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66 Bengt-Erik Andersson, What is a good day care? (Plan-it Quality Conference: Regina, 2005).
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- There is an emerging body of research on child-child interactions, conceived in the literature as pro-social behaviour, friendships, playful actions, and togetherness. Children are believed to begin to form friendships as infants. Activity, not just proximity to other children, is a crucial condition for children to begin developing friendships, and social-emotional learning that occurs when engaging with a range of playmates.

Teacher as Designer of the “Active Growth Environment”

- In the Reggio Emilia approach, the environment is carefully planned. In her book Authentic Childhood, Susan Fraser writes: "Creating an environment that acts as a third teacher supports the perspective that knowledge is constructed not in isolation but within the social group.”

- Documentation of the children’s activities demonstrates and facilitates further co-construction of curricula and learning, and the concept of the environment as a third teacher. Parent and community involvement are key features of this approach.

- The American High/Scope Curriculum, designed in the 1960s for children and families marginalized by mainstream society, requires that teachers systematically create ‘key experiences’ for children from a set of guiding principles and practices. These experiences include sustained activities in creative representation, language and literacy, creative and social relations, movement and music, and logical reasoning.


68 Judith Dunn, The Beginnings of Social Understandings.

69 Susan Fraser, Authentic Childhood, 55.


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- The Tasmanian curriculum for young children incorporates a values and purposes based approach with essential learnings and outcomes. Rather than being somewhat subject based as is High/Scope, the Tasmanian curriculum proposes essential learning categories: communication, personal learning, social responsibility, and world futures. Thinking is considered to be the all-encompassing category.72

- The Te Whariki curriculum is based upon an integration of principles and learnings strands and examples of experiences for children. Outcomes and questions for teacher reflection are an integral part of the curriculum framework, the role of the teacher in the design of the social and physical environment is key.73

- The work of Laevers and Moons presents an inventory of ten types of initiatives by the educator that facilitates children’s well-being and involvement.74


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Curriculum Issues

John Bennett\textsuperscript{75} suggests that current conceptions of curriculum for young children include:

- Statement of principles and values to guide staff working with infants, toddlers, and young children.
- Short outline of content and outputs of the dispositions, values, knowledge, and skills that children can be expected to learn at different ages and across broad developmental goals.
- Pedagogical guidelines outlining the process through which children learn.
- A summary of program standards, that is, how curriculum can be supported by structural quality features such as ratio and qualifications.

In common with other contemporary curriculum scholars, Bennett’s conception assumes that the official curriculum document be a curriculum framework that enables early childhood educators to structure daily learning experiences responsive to children’s individual, social, and cultural experiences.

The importance of a carefully planned environment and the relationship between environment and quality of curriculum enactment is pervasive in all the literature reviewed. Perhaps the environmental scales most familiar to people in the field are the ECERS-R and ITERS-R scales developed by Harms, Cryer, and Clifford.\textsuperscript{76} These scales have been utilized and adapted in Canada through the \textit{You Bet I Care} study.\textsuperscript{77} The ECERS scales have also been adapted in Sweden by Mona Andersson\textsuperscript{78} to assess the environment and the quality of the interactions. These scales provide a key starting point for discussions on high quality physical and social environments for infants, toddlers, and young children.

\textsuperscript{77} Gillian Doherty et al, \textit{You Bet I Care!} (University of Guelph: Guelph, 2000).
\textsuperscript{78} Mona Andersson, \textit{The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) as a tool in evaluating and improving quality in preschools} (Stockholm Institute of Education Press: Stockholm, 1999).
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Related Issues

The expansion of literacy practices
Concerns about the push for literacy, narrowly defined, have raised the issue of how we define literacy in the early years. Envisioning a broad and balanced curriculum calls for a reconceptualization of literacies that includes a range of embedded communication practices — multimodal literacies, and the hundred languages of children,79 and the expressive arts.

Quality outdoor environments in home and centre based care
Concerns about well being for children and adults have led to a serious examination of opportunities for exercise and the development of positive attitudes towards outdoor recreation. There is a call for playground development, accessible community programs, and an increased valuing of outdoor play and being in the outdoors.

The need for inclusion/responses to diversity
Concerns about the marginalization of children with special needs, aboriginal children, children living in poverty, children of rural, immigrant, and refugee families have raised issues of how we define inclusion. In order to practice inclusivity, there is a call for a critical re-thinking of the language and practices of curricula.

Relative roles and responsibilities of parents and practitioners
Concerns about parents in the workforce, absentee parents, and the professionalization of child-rearing, raise questions about the relative roles and responsibilities of parents and caregivers. To honour diverse parental knowledge and circumstances, and the professional knowledge of early childhood practitioners, there is a call for a range of practices to enable parent-professional collaboration.

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Co-construction of professional development with early childhood educators
Concerns about the status and structure of early childhood education and care have raised questions about the educational opportunities and qualifications of early childhood educators. With all stakeholders, there is a need to address the devaluing of educators and their work with children in order to co-construct flexible and diverse professional possibilities.

Integration of services
Concerns about fragmentation of children’s experiences have raised the issue of the need for integrated and seamless services for children and families. In order to provide a more coherent and continuous experience, there is a call for inter-sectoral collaboration and consultation.
In Closing

The development of a curriculum framework that is potentially usable for parents and all family and child organizations — including child care centres, family daycare, family resource centres, early learning centres, children centres, and early intervention — requires extensive, ongoing consultation at all levels and across all constituencies. The implications following from the literature suggest the need to contextualize curriculum work within the current child and family policy environment and to examine and re-examine exemplary curriculum models and frameworks. Given the complexity and long-term nature of the curriculum development process, there is a need to coordinate the development phase of the curriculum framework with a strategic plan for the long term.
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