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Young Children's Curriculum Experiences

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Previously, I have written about early childhood pedagogies (Murray, 2018). In introducing this exciting extended issue of *International Journal of Early Years Education,* I focus on another key feature of early education, regarded as 'a foundational fulcrum on which quality pedagogy rests' (Kagan, Kauerz and Junus, 2022): curriculum. The wide range of manuscripts focused on curriculum that we receive at International Journal of Early Years Education are testament to the prominence of curriculum in the work of those who research in our field. In this paper, I argue that the key actors in an early childhood curriculum that secures learning that is most likely to be meaningful to young children are those who are directly engaged in its implementation: the learners and their teachers. In building my argument, I consider some definitions and components of curriculum, the potential of curriculum for reproducing or reducing inequalities, its role in an uncertain and dynamic global landscape, merits of an holistic approach, children's agency in curriculum, and the teacher's role in reifying a curriculum that has value and relevance for young learners whose lives as adults we cannot yet imagine (Wiliam, 2011).

When the term 'curriculum' was originally linked to education in the C16th Europe, it denoted an ordered systematic framework for what is taught and learned (Hamilton, 1989). Four hundred years later, Kerr (1968:16) defined curriculum as 'All the learning which is planned and guided'. These descriptions refer to the explicit curriculum, as distinct from the 'hidden curriculum', which is instrumental in the implicit reproduction of values and behaviours in schools (Jackson, 1968). In early childhood provision, the explicit curriculum may be described at its most prescriptive as 'an organized framework that delineates the content children are to learn, the processes through which children achieve the identified curricular goals, what teachers do to help children achieve these goals, and the context in which teaching and learning occur' (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2009). UNESCO proposes a more holistic view of curriculum that encompasses formal and informal curricula: the 'totality of what children learn while at school – including what they learn through classroom activities; in interdisciplinary tasks; across the school, for example, in the playground, at lunch time when eating (civic responsibilities, etc.)' (Stabback, 2022: 9). Equally, the early childhood curriculum has been defined as 'everything children do, see, hear or feel in their setting, both planned and unplanned' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and Department for Education and Employment (QCA and DfEE), 2000:1).

That which is taught is culturally influenced, a process that was in evidence as long ago as ancient Greece. Whereas the Spartan curriculum minimised intellectual education in favour of rigorous physical education, the classical Athenian curriculum inspired by philosophers, including Plato, Pythagoras and Aristotle, balanced physical education with academic subjects including grammar, logic, rhetoric, music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy (Beck, 2014; Habyarimana, Tugirumukiza and Zhou, 2022; Tubbs, 2014). A broad balance of curriculum components was also at the heart of the ancient Roman liberal arts education – 'ars liberalis' – and this model extended across contemporary western civilisations (Kirby and van der Wende, 2016). However, liberal arts education has tended to be afforded to more privileged students (Anders, 2017; Ferrero, 2007). When universal education is invoked, a narrower basic curriculum is often the offer, as utilitarian preparation for the labour market

that secures investment return (Bulaitis, 2010; Hillman and Jenkner, 2004; UNESCO, 2022). Focus on curriculum as preparation is evident in the first global education target for early childhood development 'to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education' (United Nations, 2015, 4.2).

In recent years, education policymakers in England and the USA have lionised 'knowledge of the powerful' – 'knowledge authorised by those in power' - as a principle element of curricula for children from five years (Beck, 2013; Muller and Young, 2019; Pondiscio, 2019). However, what counts as legitimate knowledge that is worthy of a curriculum - and who decides - are contested issues in a highly dynamic, hyper-technological C21st global context (Savage, 2015). Curriculum can be a tool for either reproducing or reducing inequalities from an early age, including those concerning coloniality, class, poverty, gender and age (Blossfeld, Kulic, Skopek and Triventi, 2017; Christie, 2020; Farini and Scollan, 2019; Kozlowski, 2022; Nxumalo, 2019). A narrow basic curriculum predicated on static 'knowledge of the powerful' is not guaranteed to enrich young children's lives now or prepare them for their future lives (Fan and Zou, 2020; Mann and Huddleston, 2015). 'Powerful knowledge' is posited as an alternative with potential to address inequalities: an accessible, provisional curriculum approach that purports to interconnect with pedagogy to enable students to move beyond their immediate experiences to think critically as active citizens (Muller and Young, 2019; Wheelahan, 2007; Young, Lambert, Roberts and Roberts, 2014; Young and Muller, 2013). However, the 'powerful knowledge' curriculum risks disregarding potential contributions to curriculum that other curricular characteristics such as skills could offer (Hordern, 2018). To this end, the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) (2022) proposes a dynamic model featuring not only knowledge, but also skills, attitudes and values with the aim of fulfilling students' potential while enabling them to 'contribute to wellbeing of others and the planet'. Alongside literacies and numeracy, *Learning Compass 2030* emphasises the importance of physical and mental health, social and emotional foundations and students' agency as curriculum keystones (OECD, 2022). This OECD (2022) proposal aligns with UNESCO's view that a quality curriculum should be 'relevant to students' current and future lives, experiences, environments and aspirations' (Stabback, 2016:11).

The relevance of a curriculum to its students is indeed an important factor, since students judge the value of new information by assessing its relevance to what they already know, understand and believe (Nuttall, 2007). Moreover, young children 'do not separate their learning into different subjects or disciplines' (Ball 1949: 54). To this end, attempts to compartmentalise early learning into discrete subject silos are likely to be less successful than an holistic approach to early learning based on the interests of each student that 'are key to the developing mind, to persistence and curiosity, to enjoyment and wonder' (Gammage (2007:50). An effective early childhood curriculum design promotes learning by providing 'an interpretive framework that spreads across domains' (Clyde, 1995:115), linking experiences and concepts to extend understanding holistically and meaningfully from children's prior knowledge and interests: the 'very "hooks" of motive and attraction' (Alexander, 2010; Gammage (2007:50; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017).

Schemas and dispositions are two ways that young children reveal their interests (Athey, 2007; Carr, 2001; Katz, 1993; Nutbrown, 2006). Different from knowledge and skills, both schemas and dispositions may be regarded as curricular components. When young children engage in one or more of these varied patterns of behaviour, they are also leading their own curricula, so they are agentic in their learning, and intentionally self-regulating activities they

have chosen (Bandura, 2006). OECD (2022) emphasises the value of student agency as well as co-agency with their peers, parents and educators as factors in a C21st curriculum that promotes and future proofs learning. Equally, self-regulation is widely recognised as foundational for the cognitive, social, and emotional development as well as motivation that underpin successful learning (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2010; Whitebread, 2012). Additionally, the patterned behaviours that constitute young children's schema and dispositions make their emotional, social and cognitive functioning visible so they can act as starting points for educators to operate with professional autonomy by extending young children's early learning and designing curricula that are attuned powerfully to young children's learning needs and preferences (Nutbrown, 2006).

In order to recognise features of young children's agency and co-agency in curriculum leadership, early childhood educators must acquire and apply their own pedagogic subject knowledge alongside their knowledge of the children with whom they work. In addition, they need to be able to draw on rich funds of subject knowledge across multiple disciplines to leverage young children's learning in a context of co-agentic curriculum leadership. There is no doubt that these requirements have implications for early childhood workforce education, given that many early childhood workers are poorly educated not least in comparison with their colleagues in the school sector (Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD), 2019). However, the alternative is for policymakers to impose early childhood curricula on children and their educators. If this latter option is adopted, efforts should be made to avoid prescriptive detail. This is important because the imposition of a highly prescriptive centralised curriculum decontextualises learning and teaching (Gammage, 1999; 2003). It is immutable, meaning its value and relevance for young learners 'whose lives as adults we cannot yet imagine' quickly dissipate (Wiliam, 2011), and it risks diminishing children's agency and educators' professional autonomy which, as we have seen, are valuable features of curricula developed within early childhood settings.

To summarise, then, the key actors in an early childhood curriculum that secures learning that is most likely to be meaningful to young children are those who are directly engaged in its implementation: the early childhood students and their teachers. Curriculum is a fundamental feature of early learning requiring numerous considerations. These include – but are not limited to – defining curriculum and identifying its components, the potential of the early childhood curriculum for either reproducing or reducing inequalities, and the value of an holistic curricular approach, and the roles of children's agency and the early childhood educator's autonomy in reifying a curriculum with value and relevance for young learners now and for the future, given we cannot yet imagine their lives as adults (Wiliam, 2011).

This issue opens with two articles concerned with curriculum generally. Maria Birbili and Helen Hedges invite us to consider 'Curriculum as (re)culture(d): Early childhood policy documents in Greece and New Zealand', while Eman Al-Zboon, Ali Oliemat and Kholoud Al-Dababneh focus on 'The importance of and barriers to using reading pictures in the kindergarten curriculum: teachers' perspectives'.

All remaining articles in this issue address specific curriculum subject area, suggesting that much contemporary discourse in the field of early childhood education is concerned with subject specific curricular knowledge, despite global recognition of the value of holistic learning in the early years (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2020). Four articles addressing literacy are first, starting with 'Learning to read in a shallow orthography: the effect of letter knowledge acquisition', from Menelaos Sarris and 'Evaluating Storytelling Activities for Early Literacy Development' by Irena Y. Maureen, Hans van de Meij and Ton de Jong follows. Next, Melike Yumus and Figen Turan bring us

‘Shared book reading in early literacy and language development in infancy: A pilot study’, then finally in this section the article ‘Nordic Preschool Student Teachers’ Views on Early Writing in Preschool’ is authored by Sofia Jusslin, Maria Magnusson, Hilde Hofslundsengen, Elisabeth Mellgren, Ann-Katrin Svensson, Ria Heilä-Ylikallio and Bente Hagtvet.

Mathematics is the focus of the next collection of articles. The first, from Maria Papandreou and Maria Tsouli, is entitled ‘Noticing and Understanding Children’s Everyday Mathematics during Play in Early Childhood Classrooms’. Next, Caterina Wästerlid focuses on ‘Low-Achieving Grade K-3 Children’s Early Numeracy Competences: a Systematic Literature Review’. Two further articles then highlight early mathematics education in Japan. Marcruz Yew Lee Ong, Carrie Ka Lee Ho, Manabu Kawata, Mayumi Takahashi and Kumpei Mizuno bring us ‘Understanding of base-10 concept and its application: A cross-cultural comparison between Japan and Singapore’, then we welcome Peter Cave’s article ‘Young Children’s Mathematical Activities in Japan’. Next, Kelly Johnson and Sheila Degotardi share research from Australia in ‘More than “more”: Educator use of mathematical language in mealtimes with very young children’, then Chris Speldewinde and Coral Campbell look at ‘Mathematics learning in the early years through nature play’. The penultimate article in this section – ‘Swedish year-one children’s parent-initiated mathematics activities: Age-appropriate complements to school?’ - is from Paul Andrews, Jöran Petersson, Judy Sayers and Eva Rosenquist, then Amy MacDonald and Samantha McGrath complete the section focused on early mathematics with ‘Early childhood educators’ beliefs about mathematics education for children under three years of age’.

Four articles about early science follow. First, Gregor Torkar, Špela Klofutar and Janez Jerman bring us ‘Direct versus Vicarious Experiences for Developing Skills of Observation in Early Science Education’, followed by ‘Young Chefs in the Classroom: Promoting Scientific Process Skills and Healthy Eating Habits through an Inquiry-Based Cooking Project’, authored by Kyoung Jin Kim, Jiyoon Yoon and Min-Kyung Han. Iskender Gelir’s article ‘Preschool Children Learn Physics, Biology, Chemistry and Forensic Science Knowledge in Teacher-led Activities’ is next, followed by ‘Cognitive style, motivation and learning in inquiry based early-years science activities’ from Maria Kallery, Angelos Sofianidis, Popi Pationioti, Kalliopi Tsialma and Xristina Katsiana.

Three articles about arts and creativity are next. Karen Wickett brings us ‘Arts and Early Childhood Education and Care collaborations: an exploration of what leaders believe are the challenges and the opportunities’, followed by ‘To teach creativity (or not) in Early Childhood Arts Curriculum: A Case Study in Chinese Beijing Kindergartens’ by Yan Jin, Susan Krieg, Amy Hamilton and Jing Su, then Emel Tok’s article is next: ‘Early childhood teachers’ roles in fostering creativity through free play’.

An article about computing in early years from Diana Perez-Martin, Raquel Hijón-Neira and Celeste Pizarro follows: ‘Coding in Early Years Education: which factors influence the skills of sequencing and plotting a route, and to what extent?’, then ‘Physical education and its influence on emotional and mental development of preschoolers’ by Anna Berestova, Alexei Yumashev, Ilya Medvedev and Alla Philippova is the last article for this issue.

Our feature ‘Education Research Abstracts’, edited by Elizabeth Coates, completes the issue. The increasing availability of open access articles makes it easier than it has ever been for our readers to access research reports in other Education Journals other than International Journal of Early Years Education, so from 2023, we will no longer be carrying this feature in our Journal. For their sterling service to the Journal as our three Education Research Abstracts Editors in recent years, we extend grateful thanks to Elizabeth Coates who was also founder

co-editor of *International Journal of Early Years Education*, Bert van Oers and Nikolay Veraksa. Thank you all. I am delighted to report that Elizabeth, Bert and Nikolay will remain valued members of our Editorial Board.

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