

Preschool Programs: Effective Curriculum. Comments on Kagan and Kauerz and on Schweinhart

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Topic

Preschool programs

Introduction

Canadian preschool programs provide organized environments to children prior to entry in the school system at age five years. Possible settings include child care centres, nursery schools, preschools, prekindergarten, junior kindergarten, child development centres, play groups and Aboriginal Head Start.¹ Researchers agree that the combination of staff education, child-staff ratios and group size are structural elements that have an impact on the quality of preschool programs and on child development outcomes. Important process or dynamic elements highlight children's interactions with adults as key elements of quality that impact on child development outcomes.^{2,3,4} The structure of programs - how many staff with what professional education with how many children - influences the quality of the daily interactions with children. Heightened awareness about early development, particularly early brain development in setting the foundation for life long learning, behaviour and health⁵ coupled with concerns about children's social, emotional and intellectual developmental difficulties at school entry⁶, have turned the attention of policy-makers and practitioners to the content of preschool programs.

Several jurisdictions in Canada are developing, or have developed, curriculum frameworks for preschool programs. Ontario's *Best Start Early Learning Framework*⁷ and the *New Brunswick Curriculum Frameworks for Early Learning and Child*⁸ both set out a guide for curriculum and pedagogy, recognizing the diverse array of approaches now used in early childhood settings. Quebec has a province-wide curriculum, *Jouer, c'est magique*, that is used in its regulated child care settings.⁹

The Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Policy was launched in 1998 by the Organization for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD). The review examined early childhood education and care programs and policies in 20 countries (including Canada) between 1998 and 2005. The second OECD comparative report, *Starting Strong II*^{10,11} summarizes the findings of the reviews and makes two recommendations that are relevant to a discussion on curriculum and pedagogy in preschool programs:

- *To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies.*
- *To develop with stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services.*¹²

Lawrence Schweinhart of the High/Scope Education Research Foundation has been a lead researcher of the Perry Preschool Program Study since the 1970's. The goal of the Perry Preschool Program was to improve the development and learning of young children living in disadvantaged circumstances. The study was a randomized control trial of 123 children that has followed the participants through age 40. Schweinhart and his colleagues found stunning results and return on investment - \$17.05 per dollar invested. The cognitively-oriented program developed for the Perry Preschool Program Study has grown into a large curriculum resource organization that supports curriculum development in programs in the United States and internationally, including Canada.

Schweinhart¹³ points to the role of curriculum and its implementation as a critical element in the kinds of results that were found in the Perry Preschool Program Study and in two other model preschool programs: the Carolina Abecedarian study¹⁴ and the Chicago Longitudinal Study of Child-Parent Centres.¹⁵ All three programs were carefully monitored as part of the ongoing research initiative. They employed qualified early childhood staff, had extensive parent involvement components, and guided the implementation of well thought out, but different, curricula approaches.¹⁶

Sharon Kagan is a leader in measuring children's achievements. She is a strong advocate in the need to link early learning standards, curriculum and assessment to better prepare children for the transition to school.¹⁷ Kagan defines early learning standards as what children should know and are able to do across the five developmental domains (physical and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language and literacy; cognition and general knowledge) that are used by the National Educational Goals Panel.

Kagan and Kauerz. correctly point out the confusion between curriculum and pedagogy but do not provide clear definitions or distinguish between the two concepts. Instead they recommend indicators of effectiveness that "entwine curriculum and pedagogy",¹⁸ including that curriculum is aligned with learning standards and appropriate assessments.

Research and Conclusions

Two predominant approaches emerge in cross-country comparisons of curriculum: social pedagogy and pre-primary.^{11,19,20} Social pedagogic practices, common in Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, and Italy, include a broad developmental framework and local curriculum development. Curriculum decisions are driven by the interests of the children within the context of their families and immediate communities. The focus is on developmental goals, interactivity with educators and peers, and a high quality of life in the early childhood setting. The curriculum has broad orientations for children rather than prescribed outcomes. Goals may become less clear and there is less accountability in

achieving these goals and little emphasis on assessment of children's mastery of skills. Broad goals are established for each child in consultation with parents and are informally evaluated through on-going observation and documentation unless further screening seems advisable. The acquisition of developmental skills is perceived as a by-product rather than as the driver of the curriculum.

Pre-primary practices are common in France, United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. They are characterized by centralized development of the curriculum, often with detailed goals and outcomes that determine or influence curriculum decisions about what and how children learn. The goals and outcomes are often stated as learning standards or learning expectations and are related to school readiness tasks and skills, that in turn are related to literacy and numeracy in preparation for entry into Grade One.²¹ Educators tend to interact with children around activities related to the identified learning expectations and rely more on direct instruction strategies. Specific learning expectations may be set at a national or regional level. The assessment of children's achievements in meeting the learning expectations is usually required. Sometimes referred to as the 'schoolification' of the early years¹¹, this approach is in contrast to other jurisdictions that are developing curriculum based on ideas and values about childhood and the purpose of preschool programs.^{21,22}

In practice, most jurisdictions use approaches that blend elements of both, but lean towards either a pre-primary approach or a social pedagogic approach. Canada has a balance of both approaches among its early learning and child care programs, as well as many programs that do not have a clear approach at all.^{21,23,24} As Kagan and Kauerz, and Schweinhart point out, a substantial and growing research base points to the importance of a clear purpose, goals and approaches in establishing the what (curriculum) and how (pedagogy or educational strategies) in early learning and child care programs for preschool children.²⁵ But there is less agreement on what the approach should be.

Implications for Services, Development and Policy

Kagan and Kauerz and Schweinhart point to the value of having a curriculum approach and direction in preschool programs that prepares children for success in their school years. They recommend a holistic, developmental approach, skilled early childhood practitioners, clear and specific program and early learning standards. Their approaches are consistent with pre-primary approaches prevalent in the United States.

A Canadian review of the pedagogy of play suggests another approach that is similar to socio-pedagogic practices.²⁶ Children are viewed as independent agents who can have an active role in shaping their learning environments. The focus is on enriching and extending learning opportunities that emerge, based on the early childhood practitioner's knowledge of child development, observation and documentation of the child's activities, and the child's family and community context.

The critical element that runs across all discussions of effective preschool programs is a skilled early childhood workforce. Early childhood educators who are reflective and

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responsive practitioners are essential in establishing preschool programs as early learning environments.

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