Developing the EC Curriculum – policies and purposes

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What do we mean/understand by curriculum?

How do we understand ‘content’ – international perspectives

How does the curriculum contribute to high quality education?

How do we plan for a relational and culturally-responsive curriculum?

Ethics and purposes
Organising concepts for today’s presentation:

Children’s interests, working theories and funds of knowledge as sources for curriculum content

Integrated pedagogical approaches

Converged (digital and traditional) play

Implications for co-constructed curriculum (structure and flexibility), to support transitions, progression and continuity
Increasing intervention of OFSTED in matters of quality, play, pedagogy, assessment, school readiness, professionalism, professional knowledge, reading ……

‘Recasting the focus on curriculum’ - ‘missing in action’, and on ‘teaching’ rather than pedagogy.

What is the problem? Who is responsible? What are the solutions?
Acts of persuasion and coercion lead to…

Intensification of the power effects of policy texts and discourses for practitioners, children and families.

OFSTED is now the sole arbiter of quality.
How are ‘problems’ represented?

- ‘Bold Beginnings’? ‘fresh insight’ ‘curricular gap – EYFS-Year 1’ ‘reducing attainment gap’ ‘painful consequences of falling behind their peers’ (appeal to emotions)

- What and who are the proposed reasons for the problems? ‘whether EYFS is appropriately designed to prepare pupils for Year 1’ ‘Reception year is …beginning of a child’s formal education’ children must be ‘equipped’ to meet the demands and challenges (rationale)

- What are the proposed solutions, and on what evidence are these based? Direct teaching in Literacy and Mathematics, systematic, structured, sufficient time, effective teaching, formal outcomes, (moral basis of the argument)

- OFSTED reports + new EYFS = desired practices and the desired ‘school ready’ child.
What alternative discourses are available?

(How) Can the ECE community act with, act back, and act against policy logic?

Research reviews – e.g. BERA/TACTYC (2017) – focus on diversities, complexities and uncertainties.

International scholarship – models and approaches

Contemporary theories of learning + cultural understandings of child development
Three concepts from contemporary research

- Working theories
- Children learning
- Funds of knowledge
- Children’s interests
Working theories and the New Zealand ECE curriculum

• ‘The learning outcomes of Te Whāriki include knowledge, skills and attitudes which combine as dispositions and working theories’ (MoE, 2017, p. 22).

• Although working theories are sometimes partial and emergent, they nevertheless are open to development and modification over time (Hedges, 2014a).

• Working theories are developed and expressed within children’s peer cultures as they collaboratively construct and share funds of knowledge, drawing on everyday events, popular culture and existential issues.
Working theories… represent the tentative, evolving ideas and understandings formulated by children (and adults) as they participate in the life of their families, communities and cultures and engage with others to think, ponder, wonder and make sense of the world in order to participate more effectively within it.

Working theories are the result of cognitive inquiry, developed as children theorise about the world and their experiences. They are also the means of further cognitive development, because children are able to use their existing ... understandings to create a framework for making sense of new experiences and ideas. (Hedges and Jones 2012, pp. 36-37)
International research that focuses on the links between children’s interests, working theories and funds of knowledge explores how these combine to motivate learning (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Hedges, 2014a, b).

Funds of knowledge derive from diverse sources in children’s lives such as everyday events, popular culture and the media.

Funds of knowledge reflect everyday social and cultural practices in children’s home and community lives (cooking, shopping, hobbies, work, family interests and activities)
Hedges and Cooper (2016) identified a gap in theorising the nature of children’s interests, and the need to move beyond the surface of activity choices to understand children’s questions and enquiries, and how these relate to their funds of knowledge.

Play typically provides a range of contexts for the expression of interests, with the potential for those interests to be sustained over time through peer and adult relationships and multi-modal interactions. (Hill and Wood, 2019)

Children’s funds of knowledge in their play are sources and areas of knowledge, that have movement and direction over time. (Chesworth, 2016)
Curriculum decision-making is dynamic

Planning can be responsive as well as anticipatory

Children’s interests are not just expressed as activity choices – they are content-rich

Curriculum as lived experiences

Continuum of activities to support responsive planning

Activities can be led/structured by children and/or adults

Allow time for using and applying skills, knowledge and concepts

Fig 1: A model of integrated pedagogical approaches
Children draw upon mutually constituted funds of knowledge to co-construct meaning in their play across home and school contexts.

Children’s access to funds of knowledge may influence the distribution of power, agency and choice within classroom peer cultures.

Craig: detailed knowledge of cars, garages, mechanics, repairing, engines, tools, workshop ➔ building a go-kart in school.

Ellie: baking and cooking at home, ➔ playdough in school, the cultural scripts of writing invitations, preparing and arranging party food, and welcoming guests.

Children’s curriculum-making at home enabled them to co-construct everyday knowledge.

Interweaving of:

- Multigenerational family practices (food preparation, caring for siblings, religious practices)
- Multilingual communication
- Popular culture (TV, YouTube vlogs, films) (converged play practices – digital and traditional)
In the play culture of the nursery, we identified children’s knowledge and interests through recognition of…

Liz Chesworth, Aderonke Folorunsho, Elizabeth Wood, funded by Froebel Trust

- Embodied ways of knowing
- Multimodal meaning-making
- The value of dialogue
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New play pedagogies for teaching and learning in the early years

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[A child with Autism Spectrum Disorder] really loved his Monster Trucks. He came and wanted one day to build a Monster Truck track. And he said to me, ‘How do we build one?’ … So I said to him, ‘Why don’t we YouTube it?’

So we YouTubed Monster Truck tracks. So it was basically a guy doing a tutorial on how to first you dig up the dirt. Then you add the water. Then you might want tracks – so you might want rocks. So he and three or four other boys sat and watched that. … I put it up there [on a big screen]. …
We were probably out digging for an hour or more. … So once it was all done, they then went and got their trucks, then I videoed them. …

At the end of the session we came back and we played it on the screen for the whole group. And then he came up in front of the group and talked about it. … This is the one that wouldn’t speak in front of the group. …

His confidence grew more and more. … he’s quite a nervous and anxious child [but] when it’s something he already knows a lot about, and he’s comfortable with, then his anxieties aren’t there.

- Death-rebirth, death and dying
- Good and evil, bad/good, disobedience and punishment
- Tools and equipment
- Gender – what it means to be a boy/girl
- Family roles and relationships
- Babies and being a baby
- Animals and being an animal
- Search and rescue (after Christchurch earthquake, NZ)
- Popular culture
- Myths and legends, Disney, fairy and folk tales
- Power and control – agency, what it means to be a child/adult
- Knowledge and coming to know – sources of knowledge
Play progresses in complexity and challenge

A group of children have once again made a swimming pool using the brown foam building blocks. Jake (4:11), Tracy (5:6), Peter (5:9), Chloe (5:8), Rosie (5:2) and Helen (5:8) are playing and during the course of the play there is a change of focus and it becomes about dying and resuscitation. I observe the play and make notes.

Jake: Pretend I died (he lies motionless face down on the floor)
Tracy: Oh no! He’s died. Quick take off his gloves and shoes. (Jake is wearing a pair of goalkeeping gloves).

(They lift him and move him over about 2m)

Tracy: Pretend I am the doctor

Tracy: He’s dead. We have to wrap him up.
Helen: He’s all white. His head is white, and his tummy is white, his feet and arms are white.
Chloe: His bum is white
Adam: (to Michelle) Do you know the world’s greatest football player, he died and went to the doctor and the doctor electrocuted his heart and he became alive? He didn’t even come back alive by a ghost.

Peter: That’s not true

Adam: (to the researcher, his eyes are wide open as he speaks) He says that’s not true but my cousin told me.

Peter: Sometimes people can be wrong

Adam: Well even everyone in the world says it’s true.

Later that day Adam’s mum tells Michelle that Adam’s older cousins have been to stay and had told him the news story about the footballer collapsing on the pitch and being revived using a defibrillator (the story had been headline news in the UK).

Children’s interests in sources of knowledge, and how knowledge can be verified.

Play incorporates funds of knowledge – working theories are open to modification over time.

Children are interested in knowing and coming to know.

Children draw on diverse sources of knowledge (more complex than the skills and behaviours in the EYFS).
Play progresses in complexity, social organisation and cognitive challenge.

What lies behind the children’s interests – sustained enquiry and engagement with knowledge, sense-making, meaning, inquiry, coming to know and being knowledgeable.

Converged play (digital and traditional) and multimodalities.
Dissonance

Children’s dynamic and embodied knowledge, interests and inquiries, expressed in multi-modal ways.

Expansive view of knowledge, skills and concepts, acknowledges diversities and complexity.

Smooth transitions – structure and flexibility, continuity with progression and challenge.

Dissolving binaries – play/work, formal/informal,

Universally imposed, regulated curriculum informed by a linear model of child development.

Reductionist view – differences and diversities are problematic and place children in deficit.

Abrupt transitions – play to work, informal to formal.
Curriculum purposes – who and what is curriculum for?

Curriculum as text: What are the consequences of a centrally regulated curriculum, what is included and what is left out? EYFS as ‘minimum standards’

Curriculum everywhere: In what ways could curriculum build upon the social, cultural and material contexts of children’s home and family practices, and their everyday lives of which ‘formal’ education is just a part?

Intent - What are the purposes of education, and of the curricula we co-construct for and with children, taking into account differences and diversities.

What are the ethical and relational foundations of how we design and co-construct curricula in ECE?
Available on the BERA and TACTYC websites


