

FIVE PRESCHOOL CURRICULA – COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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SUMMARY

In recent years the OECD has undertaken the evaluation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on behalf of ministers of education in a number of countries in order to support quality improvement in this field. This article is based on a workshop for the national coordinators of early childhood policy in Sweden, 2003, which dealt with Curriculum and Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education. The five curricula presented were Reggio Emilia, Te Whāriki, Experiential Education, High/Scope and the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschool. The aim of this article is to compare these curricula, establishing similarities and differences discussing quality aspects and problematising the general and the cultural specifics of each curriculum per se and in relation to the others. A further aim is to raise awareness of curriculum questions in connection with children's learning and development. The article is based on a pedagogical perspective of quality, which takes the perspective of the child and focuses on what is best for a child's learning and development in a specific culture. The results of the analysis show that the five curricula are of high quality in relation to each country's culture. High quality in preschool means giving the children a good start in life. The unique and competent child has rights of its own and should be treated with respect. In focus are the individual child's opportunities for building up knowledge and expressing their understanding of the surrounding world. High quality is also related to the competent and professional teacher with theoretical and pedagogical knowledge.

RÉSUMÉ

Pendant ces dernières années, l'OECD, au nom des ministres de l'Éducation de différents pays, s'est chargée d'évaluer l'Éducation préscolaire (ECEC) à fin d'améliorer sa qualité. Cet article a son origine dans un atelier qui a réuni les coordinateurs nationaux de l'Éducation préscolaire en Suède en 2003. L'atelier fut consacré aux Programmes et à la Pédagogie de l'école maternelle. Les cinq programmes présentés étaient les suivants : Reggio Emilia, Te Whāriki, Experiential Education, High/Scope et le Programme suédois du niveau préscolaire. L'objectif de cet article est de détecter les similitudes et les différences existant entre les programmes, de discuter leur niveau de qualité et d'analyser les aspects culturels, généraux et spécifiques de chacun des programmes. Un autre but de cet article est d'accroître la conscience autour des questions relatives à l'apprentissage et au développement des enfants dans le cadre des programmes d'éducation. L'article est centré sur le thème de la qualité du point de vue pédagogique, en prenant la perspective de l'enfant, et il donne priorité au sujet à ce qui est le mieux pour l'apprentissage et le développement de l'enfant dans une culture spécifique. Les résultats de l'analyse montrent que les cinq programmes sont de haute qualité, par rapport à la culture de chaque pays. Haute qualité signifie ici que l'éducation préscolaire est capable de donner à l'enfant un bon point de départ pour la vie. L'enfant, unique et compétent, a des droits par lui-même, et devrait être traité avec respect. On vise ici, en premier lieu, les possibilités de l'enfant de connaître et d'exprimer leur compréhension du monde qui l'entoure. La haute qualité est aussi en rapport avec le fait d'avoir des instituteurs compétents et professionnels possédant des connaissances théoriques et pédagogiques.

RESUMEN

En los últimos años, la OECD, por iniciativa de un grupo de ministros de Educación, ha asumido la tarea de evaluar la Política de Educación Pre-escolar. Este artículo se basa en un taller que en el año 2003 reunió a los coordinadores nacionales de la política de Educación Pre-escolar en Suecia. El tema del taller eran los Programas y la Pedagogía de este nivel de educación. Los cinco programas presentados fueron los siguientes: Reggio Emilia, Te Whāriki, Experiential Education, High Scope y el Programa sueco para el parvulario. Este artículo se propone detectar semejanzas y diferencias existentes entre ellos, discutir aspectos de calidad de los mismos y analizar aspectos culturales, tanto generales como específicos, de cada uno. Otro objetivo es el de incrementar la conciencia de los problemas ligados al aprendizaje y desarrollo del niño, dentro del marco de los programas de educación. El artículo enfoca el tema de la calidad pedagógica desde la perspectiva del niño y se plantea qué es lo mejor para el aprendizaje y desarrollo del éste en una cultura específica. Los resultados del análisis muestran que los cinco programas son de alta calidad, en relación con las culturas de sus respectivos países. Alta calidad significa que el parvulario provee a los niños de un buen punto de partida en la vida. El niño, único y competente, tiene derechos propios y debería ser tratado con respeto. Como foco de primordial interés aparecen las posibilidades para cada niño de conocer y expresar su comprensión del mundo que lo rodea. El concepto de alta calidad se relaciona también con la competencia y profesionalidad del maestro poseedor de conocimientos teóricos y pedagógicos.

KEYWORDS: preschool, curriculum, pedagogical quality, comparative perspective

INTRODUCTION

During the last six years the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has worked on behalf of the education ministers with the evaluation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in countries that have volunteered to participate in the project. Its purpose was to support quality improvement in this field, since young children's lifelong learning has now been placed on the agenda in many countries (OECD, 2001).

While the organization of national reviews is the primary aim of the project, another important goal is to disseminate the knowledge and research base relevant to early childhood policy. With this purpose in mind, two workshops are organized each year for the early childhood policy makers attached to the ministries in participating countries. At these workshops, international exchanges take place, policy developments (what works) are discussed and major issues or research interest explored (OECD, 2004).

This article is based on a workshop for the national coordinators of early childhood policy hosted by the Swedish Ministry of Education in Stockholm, 2003. The OECD had given the three of us who participated in the workshop the task of reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of all curricula¹ presented there. The aim of this article is to establish similarities and differences, discuss quality aspects and problematise the general and the cultural specifics of each curriculum *per se* and in relation to the other curricula.

¹ Curriculum should be seen as a framework, guidelines, program – a text guiding the direction of work in preschool/Early Childhood Education and not as a narrow way of prescribed sequences of educational activities.

The topic of the workshop was Curriculum and Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education. The five curricula presented at the workshop are described on the OECD's Internet site. These are: Reggio Emilia (Italy), Te Whāriki (New Zealand), Experiential Education (Belgium), High/Scope (USA) and the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschool /Lpfö 98 (Sweden). The results of this workshop in terms of policy recommendations are also published on OECD's Internet site: www.SourceOECD.org.

*A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE OF CURRICULA FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE*

Pamela Oberhuemer (2005) expressed six reasons for the growing interest in curricula for early childhood education and care. 1) The so-called knowledge society tries to make early childhood institutions visible. 2) Recent research on brain development shows the importance of experiences in the child's early years. 3) The national process of decentralization requires a curriculum guide. 4) It gives the professionals in the field a shared framework. 5) Mandatory guidelines are seen as a quality improvement and equality measure. 6) A curriculum provides early childhood professionals with a common framework for enhancing communication between staff and with parents (op cit., p. 31).

Ten years ago curricula for preschool on a national level barely existed, although guide-lines have been there since Froebel's time (Hewes, 2005, see also Vallberg-Roth, 2006, in this issue). Today they have become more common, even though there are such alternatives as regional or community guidelines or curricula. In parallel with the development of common guidelines, a critical question has been raised, whether or not it is possible to have a national curriculum in view of the diverse cultural experiences of children in each country. Or, what about a global curriculum (OMEP & ACEI, 1999) in a world where every culture considers itself unique? Nazhat Shameem (2004), Judge in the Supreme Court in Fiji, in a speech challenged the whole research field by questioning the ongoing trend with focus on the uniqueness of each culture. She claims: "If we all believe that we are so unique in each culture, we end up in a relativity where there are no human rights!"

Curricula for early childhood education and care vary not only in scope, objectives and evaluation (Oberheumer, 2005), but also in methods or perspectives on children and their play and learning (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999; Karlsson Lohmander & Pramling Samuelsson, 2002, 2003).

Curricula also differ from the perspective of quality. The time children spend in preschool is an extremely important period in their lives, and research on quality shows that attendance at preschools of high quality has an unquestioned impact on children's learning and development (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Sylva, 1994; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). Despite its great influence on children's wellbeing and their possibilities for learning and developing in ECEC, quality as a concept in educational settings is highly questioned by some researchers (see for

example, Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000; etc.). One of the main issues concerning quality is whether there is a common core of values and objectives, or if the meaning of quality purely depends on the situation and the context in which it is used and/or on the perspective of the user. Another is the uncertainty of how to understand, define and give meaning to quality as an educational phenomenon.

The five curricula chosen by OECD for the workshop, which is the base for this article, are all well known in the field of early childhood education and care. They all enjoy a reputation for providing high quality early childhood education and care. What then, is high quality as regards young children's wellbeing and education?

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE FIVE CURRICULA

The five curricula outlined are Experimental Education (EXE), High/Scope (H/S), Reggio Emilia (R/E), the Swedish curriculum (Lpfö) and Te Whariki (TW). The last two are national programs, while the first three are locally developed preschool programs. The locally developed programs may involve a larger number of children than the national ones. These five curricula have been in use for different lengths of time, are based on different cultures and traditions, and have also been exposed to research to a different extent².

We establish similarities and differences but also strengths and weaknesses in the curricula presented; it is important to stress that within the similarities there are minor differences and within the differences there also are minor similarities. It is also important to stress that this article is an attempt to make certain aspects visible and possible to compare, thereby raising the awareness of curriculum questions in relation to children's learning and development.

SIMILARITIES

The most obvious characteristic of all the curricula is that the child is described as an *active child* who initiates communication and who is interested in the surrounding world. This is a perspective that may be traced back to Froebel (1863/1995), and a perspective that should be understood as different from the perspective on learning in school, even though the traditional perspective of children in school is under change, and by that comes close to the ECEC perspective.

The perspective of the active child

In the *EXE program* the active child becomes visible through being involved in different tasks or situations. The child's degree of involvement in a certain activity is seen as an indicator of learning. Involvement is a quality that occurs in solitary activities as well as in social interaction and communication.

² If you are not familiar with these five curricula and pedagogics, see [www SourceOECD.org](http://www.SourceOECD.org)

Learning reaches its peak when the child is totally concentrated on a task. The program describes that children generate a form of exploration drive for getting a better grip on reality. The way the exploratory drive can be triggered differs from child to child. Goals are created in cooperation with the child, which means that the child is a co-constructor of his or her learning. The program is focusing on engaged teachers, who are getting each child interested in something and allowing him or her work on what interests them.

A solid base for the *H/S program* is Piaget's theory about the structure of the intellect and the gradual change related to the age of the child (Rye, Smebye & Hundeide, 1987). The active child creates its own knowledge within the frame of its biological maturity. The task for the teacher is to support the child towards its own development. Also, the interplay between children is pointed out as essential for knowledge development. With the perception that active, intentional learning is central for the development of thoughts as a starting point, and from Piaget's description of children's development, practical day-to-day work with children is suggested through books, manuals and training. The major feature of the approach is the daily routine of: Plan – Do - Review. The children are asked to state an intention (plan) for what they wish to undertake. Children then experiment with their ideas (during work time). Finally, they reflect and talk about what they have discovered and discuss it with the teacher and other children (review). The program is a well planned, and systematic, and the children are active within its frame. In this frame, however, each child has great freedom in his/her own group. Each one has to consider what he or she wants to work with and carry this out. Last, but not least, they have to look back, to reflect upon what they have done and how it worked out.

Within the *Reggio Emilia* centres, the child is seen as competent, active and critical. It is the child's rights, rather than its needs, that are emphasized. Further, the child makes up questions, theories and meaning in interplay with the surrounding world in a continuous process. The reciprocity of the interaction becomes important for the child's creation of identity and understanding of the surrounding world. The child is seen as unique and "rich" in Reggio Emilia, according to Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999). This means that there is trust in the child's own ability to create meaning and reach an understanding of the surrounding world. Knowledge is built upon the idea that whatever the child is working with, he or she should be allowed to develop his/her thoughts about it, find it joyful and achieve a strong self-confidence. The ambition is to let the pedagogy be guided by the children's interests and questions. The interplay between the children and the teachers is sophisticated. The teachers naturally pay attention to what the children expresses, and it is followed up and developed.

In the *Swedish curriculum* the active child is visible in the goals formulated as learning and development. A responsibility of preschool is to give children the opportunity to develop in the direction formulated. Preschool is supposed to form a unity in which the education is built on care, fostering and

education. The activities should stimulate play, creativity and joyful learning, and use children's interest in learning and mastering new experiences, knowledge and skills. The flow of ideas and the diversity should be explored. Preschool should strive to ensure that children feel secure in developing their own identity, free to develop their ability to listen, narrate, reflect and express their own views, develop their vocabulary and concepts as well as their communicative skills. Interrelated with the learning and development goals are "every-day-life-skills". These correspond to a number of qualities (in terms of properties and skills) such as cooperative skills, responsibility, initiative, flexibility, reflectivity, active attitudes, communicative skills, problem-solving skills, critical stance, creativity, as well as an ability to learn to learn. These different qualities are seen as general and part of all school subjects, and form a central dimension in preparing the children and students of today for the society of tomorrow (EU, 1996). There are also goals focusing on children making sense of the world around them, aspects relating to culture, natural science, reading and writing, mathematics etc.

The *Te Whāriki* program is influenced by the Maori human development theory and ideology. This means a deep respect for the life force of the universe, where everything is interconnected, and a learning theory related to a Vygotskian perspective with the social context as a forceful indicator for learning and development. In a government document *Quality in Action* (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 6), it is stated that the desirable objectives and practices in early childhood education in relation to the curriculum are founded on two guiding principles:

- work in partnership with parents/whānau to promote and extend the learning and development of each child who attends or receives the service
- develop and implement a curriculum that assists all children to be competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and secure in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society.

The children's own narratives are central in the curriculum. The children have an active role in developing teaching and learning stories related to the strands and goals in the curriculum. The child's participation is important as both teaching and learning stories are used as a base in the implementation and the evaluation of *Te Whāriki* (Carr, May & Podmore, 2000).

The view of children's rights, communication and interaction

In all the programs there is also a similar tendency to *visualize the child's rights*. This is also a question with deep roots in history (Hewes, 2001) not least in the view and work of the Polish pedagogue Korczak (1986), who devoted himself to and fought for the rights of children. Arnold Gesell was also deeply preoccupied with developing a democratic individual when he made his studies of the natural development of children and the natural rhythm of the day for a child (Gesell &

Ilg, 1961). Later, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has made these rights visible. However, if related to the perspectives in the different curricula, the meaning of children's rights differs slightly. In EXE and H/S the children's needs are seen as the base for their rights, while in RE, TW and Lpfö children's rights are stated.

The third strong similarity is the role of *communication and interaction* as a key factor in children's learning and wellbeing, even though the emphasis is a little stronger in TW, which focuses on the interaction between children's learning and their social and cultural context. In the Swedish curriculum the paradigm of learning is described as an internal relation between the child and the surrounding world. Learning and development become two aspects of the same phenomenon. Here it is emphasized that meaning is created in children's communication. In Reggio Emilia the focus is more on the teacher's listening than communicating, even though the listening is supposed in the end to lead to an interaction. Although communication is an important aspect of the H/S and EXE in praxis, it is less emphasized in their documents. The focus on communication and interaction is totally in line with all recent theories about child learning and development (e.g. Rogoff, 2003; Valsiner, 1990; Säljö, 2000). In the EPPE-project (Effective Provision in Preschool Education) communication has also shown to be one of the main criteria for influencing children's learning in preschool (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002).

Cooperation with parents

The fourth similarity, *parents' cooperation* with the ECEC, has been recognized since the time of Froebel as a key factor for success in all curricula (Hewes, 2001). The important question to consider is what that means in different curricula and for different groups of parents. Parental involvement is most evident in TW, RE and Lpfö.

Central in the EXE program is that interaction between all participants is highly valued (Laevers, 1994). In H/S the role of the adult is to support the child towards its own development. The work of getting the parents engaged is also important in the program, as well as the teachers' teamwork – aspects that contribute to the interaction between teachers and children. Communication and language are also focused on in the learning process. Counting, reading and writing are included in meaningful situations. The act of learning is based on concrete action and experimentation in combination with different forms of language use. Children are put in situations where they talk with other children and adults about experiences that are meaningful to them. These situations do not just deal with logic. Feelings are also given a great deal of space.

The Reggio Emilia pedagogy says that the children must be given responsibility and power over their own thoughts and the reality that they can influence. This reflects a socially constructive perspective in which the parents take an active part. Actions and group socialization are important factors

(Rinaldi, 1993), and the psychological principle that we treat people as we conceive them becomes a strong factor for the teachers to consider (Hundeide, 1999). That is one reason why the Reggio Emilia preschools are putting a lot of effort into continuing training and an increasing awareness among the teachers. Malaguzzi used to say that what takes place within the Reggio Emilia should not be seen as a preschool pedagogy but as a philosophy where everybody involved with the children should be engaged in the explorative phase in which the child discovers the world.

In Swedish documents we can see a qualitative change in the relationship between parents and ECEC from 150 years ago to the present time. In the beginning of preschool the role of the teacher was to foster and inform parents. Later the notion of collaboration between parents and ECEC appeared on the agenda, and today we are talking about parental participation as making an equal contribution to children's learning and development. Although the view of parental cooperation has changed in official texts and documents, we can recognize all these three perspectives in dialogues with staff in ECEC today (Göteborgs stadskansli, 2003).

Alongside the traditional teacher-led early childhood services, New Zealand also has a tradition of parent-led early education for young children, with mainly mothers operating family play centres in their communities. This means that mothers (and today sometimes fathers) established alternative preschools with themselves as providers. Taking responsibility for this kind of early education program demanded further training, an education that many mothers took part in. Many of these mothers became supervisors at play centres or later trained as early childhood teachers. So, traditionally the link between the family and preschool has been very strong. This link became one of the pillars in New Zealand's first national early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Visualizing the child

The fifth similarity is that all curricula make a point of it being necessary for the staff to develop a better *understanding of the child by being reflective*. To understand each child and his or her experience is no longer a question of just having a knowledge of child development, even if the field of child development is recognized as a base for making sense of children's actions. For example, H/S is a well planned, systematic program, in which children are active, state their intentions and reflect within its frame. The teachers support the children and help them to work towards key notions. The R/E pedagogy empowers the children by giving them responsibility and influence. Lenz Taguchi (1997, p. 34) writes:

So, it is the individual child's expression, and the knowledge and experience mediated thereby, that becomes the centre of our interest when the child is a subject.

She continues:

Pedagogical documentation is a tool that can help us see children's individual and common expressions. (Our translation)

The Reggio Emilia pedagogy is without a doubt an example of what we today often talk about as the new child perspective with roots both in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and in research (see, for instance, Sommer, 1997, 1998). All kinds of preschool pedagogies, including the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, are characterized by the preschool tradition, in other words, learning with all the senses – or from action to thought (Froebel, 1863/1995).

The Swedish curriculum/Lpfö states that preschool should strive to ensure that each child develops its ability to discover, reflect on and work out its positions on different ethical dilemmas and fundamental questions of life and daily reality. A further goal is that preschool should develop children's ability to listen, narrate, reflect and express their own views.

The different means used to understand the child are: documentation (RE/Lpfö), learning stories (TW), observations (EXE, Lpfö) and supervision (H/S). The four different strategies are intertwined with each other, but are still different as shown in descriptions about curricula.

Value orientation and teachers' professionalism

As a sign of our time in history, all curricula are *value oriented*, and this is another similarity. Value orientation is either adopted implicitly (H/S and EXE) or expressed more explicitly (RE, Lpfö, TW). One aspect of EXE is explicit, and that is the emotional health of each person. In Te Whāriki this orientation is about acknowledging and including the values of the indigenous population. In Reggio Emilia there are strong political values, both for the base of the program and as the most important content of ECEC. The approach to value questions in the Swedish curriculum is close to that of Reggio Emilia, being both part of the democratic goals of society and a content of ECEC. The difference, however, is that values and norms are not only part of the curricular content but a base for all learning objectives in the Swedish curriculum (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003).

All curricula also emphasize the *teachers' professional competence* even if the meaning they attach to the word competence differs. More than half the teachers in ECEC in Sweden have had a university education, and the rest of the staff have a three-year senior high school (Sw. Gymnasium) diploma. A future goal (2012) for New Zealand is to have fully qualified teachers (university diploma or degree) in all teacher-led ECEC. In H/S and EXE the teachers have both basic education within the field of child development and early childhood education and specifically directed in-service training. RE lays strong emphasis on directed in-service training. Sweden also has yearly in-service training in the municipalities, and regulated planning time, similar to RE.

Working with young children in ECEC requires the same competence as that needed for teaching older children. The teachers need to have professional competence, that is, to have both a basic education and continued in-service

training. Research produces new knowledge guidelines, and curricula change over time. Children differ and their experiences bring about change as well. These are sufficient arguments for a life-long learning process on the part of ECEC staff. One could also claim that the most highly educated teachers ought to work with the very youngest children within ECEC since that is where children are the most vulnerable and easily influenced. Research also shows that the competence of the teacher is closely related to the quality of the program. Well educated teachers can maintain high quality practice even in quite a large group of children (Bjurek, Kjulin & Gustafsson, 1992). The meaning of competence can also be viewed from different perspectives. First, of course, we have formal competence in terms of an educational base. But we can also look at the teacher's competence as a question of his or her ability to relate him or herself to, or communicate with, children. This is often dependent both on education and attitudes and an effort to try to take the child's perspective and see the child in a democratic way as an individual with rights? (Johansson, 2003; *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige*, 2003).

Finally, it is important to stress that the primary goal of all the programs and curricula presented here is *to give children a good start in life!* A good start does not mean pushing the children; it means being sensitive to their needs, interests and experiences. Implicit in this is also that preschool is different from school, according to curriculum and pedagogy.

DIFFERENCES

Pedagogy related to the view of the child

The *view of the child* appears to vary in the different curricula. In TW, Lpfö and RE it is obvious that the child is seen as a cultural citizen. In TW the cultural and historical roots are emphasized, and specifically the bi-cultural questions of the Maori and the European (pakeha) population. In RE it is the competent child – an exploring child in collaboration with the teacher – that stands out. In the Swedish curriculum, too, it is the competent child in interaction with other children and the teacher who comes into view. In the EXE and H/S it is the developmental psychological child with different needs and possibilities at different ages that appears.

The *view of pedagogical approach* is usually linked to the view of the child, as we can see above. But the view of pedagogy is also strongly related to the role of the teacher in children's learning. However, despite the differences, there is a strong similarity in the *view of pedagogy*, that is, there is an emphasis on "here and now"; in other words, seizing the opportunities offered in children's experiences and interests is a common base. But what are the techniques and the role of the teacher besides being here and now and seizing moments? The child is said to be competent in RE and TW. Sommer (2005) defines children's competence as follows: children are born with social potential to participate in social life, but it is the interaction and communication with

adults that bring about competence development. Although relationships and aesthetics are viewed as central for the quality in Reggio Emilia, the child is perceived as intelligent, someone who wants to learn and knows how to learn (learning means living), and all children are also considered to be different from each other, according to Rinaldi (2000). Te Whariki also talks about children as being competent and teachers as being sensitive to and supportive of children's own narratives (Ministry of Education, 1996). In the view of H/S and EXE, the child's competence develops through interaction with the environment, that is, both teachers and the physical world. The Swedish curriculum comes in between both these perspectives of the child as being or becoming competent. There is a respect for each child's world and experiences and the social competence of the child, but a child's competence in different areas will expand in interaction with competent peers and teachers (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003). It also appears that High/Scope and the Swedish curriculum are the two curricula with explicitly stated long-term goals. The teachers in the different programs all appear to be active, guiding and challenging, and to be working towards continuity or goals for children's learning to varying degrees. How all these aspects are dealt with also affect the teacher's role when responding to a child's questions or interacting with children. Are teachers and children equal partners in the learning process? A question to think about is how the progression in children's learning is viewed in ECEC and later in the school system.

The learning environment

Another difference seen in the five curricula is the *view of the environment* and its role in children's learning. In TW the links between the environment and learning are emphasized but no details are supplied. The strongest emphasis on the physical environment as rich and stimulating is found in the H/S and EXE. This means that it is not only the human interaction that is of importance but also the physical world. The H/S program emphasizes that the arrangement and organization of the room are important, since many of the activities need to take place individually or in small groups, with the teacher walking around, communicating with the children. Here there is a similarity to Montessori's carefully planned classroom, but not the rigidity of materials and their use.

In EXE the child must be challenged just to the right extent, not too much and not too little but so that he/she can reach his/her full potential. This means that if there is involvement, the child is operating at the very limit of his or her capabilities. To reach this, teachers must make sure that the environment covers a wide range of levels of difficulty. Children seek challenges by themselves if the environment offers opportunities.

Reggio Emilia takes the environment one step further and talks about it as the third educator. In this perspective the environment is as important as the teacher when it comes to influencing the child's learning and growth. High/Scope does not talk about the environment in these terms, but the meaning

they attach to the equipment and the environment suggests similarities to the Reggio approach. In Sweden the environment is recognized not as equal to the teacher but as having a central role in children's lives and learning.

The role of assessment and evaluation

Assessment and/or evaluation are also dealt with differently in the various curricula and programs. H/S is the only curriculum in which children's outcomes are evaluated and followed up and viewed in a long-term perspective. There is evidence that the "plan – do – review" approach helped those children at risk who were involved in the H/S from the beginning to handle their lives better and so become better adapted to the U.S. society.

The EXE program has been evaluated and studied scientifically in research but only in terms of the degree of wellbeing and involvement, that is, the two main factors emphasized in this program. However, the findings are based on the assumption that these factors lead to better learning and the long-term effects have not been studied. In New Zealand great efforts are being made to find alternative ways to evaluate praxis by creating learning stories related to the curriculum (Carr, 2001).

Reggio Emilia is the program that takes the strongest stand against evaluation. They claim that the documentation, for which they are so famous, is more than enough to follow the child's learning process. By documenting the process and letting the child participate in it, they make the child's world visible for adults to reflect on. They do not feel any need for further evaluation of children's development in the longer term, although they are aware of complaints about this from well-known researchers.

For the time being, no set agenda for evaluation exists in the Swedish ECEC, but it is seriously discussed for the future. The National Agency for Education in Sweden has worked out a scale for self-evaluation of the quality of the program as such (Skolverket, 2001). The curriculum also points out that it is the program that should be evaluated, not the children. Some local authorities use the ECERS (Early Childhood Education Rating Scale). The National Agency for Education has also published a book containing an overview of alternative approaches to evaluation (Rosén, 2001). However, there is research on the effects of children's learning according to different pedagogical approaches in preschool, and this has influenced the curriculum work (see e.g. Pramling, 1990, 1994, 1996; Pramling, Klerfelt & Williams Granelid, 1995). Generally either self-evaluation or external evaluation are used in ECED, but Sheridan (2001) claims that we need both to get a picture of the quality from different perspectives. It is important, however, not to forget about the children in this process (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001).

The similarities in the programs in focus here are that *parts* of the programs are evaluated and not the *whole program*. The holistic view should be a leading concept within ECEC. Making a more holistic evaluation of a program and curriculum means evaluating the following: conditions for learning and everyday activities from different perspectives (the perspective of the

educational setting, structural factors, competence of the staff, the actual content, the ongoing interaction etc.); the perspective of the child (the child's experiences and outcomes); the perspective of the teacher (his or her way of thinking about children and their learning, the teacher's view of and his or her role in knowledge formation); the perspective of society (expectations and discourses in media, from parents, the state via curriculum intentions etc.) (Sheridan, 2001, manuscript). All these perspectives interact with each other and no evaluation of the whole is complete without them.

Before bringing the review of the differences in the programs or curricula presented to a close it is important to say that these differences depend on many factors, both cultural and historical and not least the origin of the program. All five curricula discussed have long traditions (even if the curriculum in the form of a national document is quite new in Sweden and New Zealand), with deep roots in the culture (Lpfö, TW, RE) or in a specific research group and approach (EXE, H/S). Some programs are national, and have therefore to be accepted by everyone (Lpfö, TW), while others have been chosen or are being developed by a certain group or locally. Naturally, the view of the child, the learning and the role of the teacher are also important aspects, whether they are expressed or not in the curriculum.

DISCUSSION

This article is based on a pedagogical perspective of quality which takes the perspective of the child and focuses on what is best for a child's learning and development in a specific culture. The interpretation of what is best for a child is based on the values and goals presented in the curricula, modern theories of learning and research on quality in preschool. In other words, we are concerned with our shared knowledge and understanding of conditions that benefit children's learning and growth, an understanding that has been reached in modern time, and in a variety of cultures and contexts (Sheridan, 2001).

Pedagogical quality should be seen as an interactive perspective, as it originates from the understanding that quality is constituted in the interplay between the individual (the child) and the environment. Pedagogical quality may thus be defined as a multidimensional educational phenomenon in which interdependent aspects constitute an environment that distinguishes children's opportunities for learning in an educational setting. These aspects include/contain both sustainable and dynamic qualities that are inter-subjectively agreed on and subjectively conceived, depending on perspective, time and context (Sheridan, manuscript).

The core of pedagogical quality is in the interaction where it takes shape and develops. This implies that certain aspects of quality benefit a child's learning and development more than others do.

When this perspective of quality is related to the five curricula presented in this article, it is obvious that their common core of values and objectives

becomes visible as well as their differences in view. In all of the programs, high quality means a preschool that gives the children a good start in life. The child is competent, unique, with rights of its own, and should therefore be met with respect. In focus are the individual child's opportunities for building up knowledge and expressing their understanding of the surrounding world.

All programs emphasize similar skills and qualities that are valued as important for children to learn and develop, such as being active, reflective, able to communicate and interact with other children and adults. Here we can trace a global influence on quality aspects and qualities that can be drawn from modern theories of learning, emphasizing communication and interaction (Vygotskij, 1986; Bruner, 1996). Political documents have also contributed to a change of view, in that children are seen as competent and with rights of their own (Sommer, 2005; UN Convention, 1989). Researchers are also trying to identify qualities that are necessary for children and students of today to acquire for the society of tomorrow (EU, 1996).

High quality in all of the programs is closely linked to the competence and professionalism of the teacher. Teachers with both theoretical and pedagogical knowledge are required, who are enthusiastic and challenge the children to learn about the world around them. The teachers should be guided by the children's interest and questions focussing on here and now. This is the core of preschool pedagogy, and the expected approaches of the teacher are deeply rooted in the preschool tradition (Bruce, 1990).

The source of differences in the view of quality between the programs can be related to the view of the child, the overall intentions of the programs and their philosophical value orientation. These are important factors that discriminate how the goals in preschool are to be achieved from a perspective of quality.

To be valued as high quality practitioners, the teachers have to organise preschool activities, approach the children and act in accordance with the programs' aims and value orientation. The teachers in EXE are involved in this sophisticated interplay in order to involve the child, those in H/S make the child plan, do and review their activities, and in R/E they listen and allow the child to express their skills of communication in hundreds of ways. In the Swedish curriculum (Ministry of Education and Sciences, 1998), the teachers are expected to interact with the children by making the overall goals the objective of learning, and in T/W the teachers make the children express their understanding through narratives and learning stories. Here cultural specifics, societal intentions, philosophical standpoints and the programs' relation to trends in society are evident. This supports the old claim that it is very difficult to transfer a curriculum from one culture to another.

The program's view of the child also determines how the teachers structure the preschool day, the approach and interplay with the children, and thereby its quality. Quality is valued in relation to different theoretical traditions,

for example, it may reflect either a Piagetian (1975) or a Vygotskijan (1978, 1986) perspective.

Issues about the constitution of learning environments of high quality in preschool are central and emphasized by the enormous amount of research conducted in this area (see for example, Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios, & Wetzel, 1996; Dysthe, 1996; Bruner, 1996; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Asplund Carlsson, Pramling Samuelsson, & Kärby, 2001; Sheridan, 2001; Hundeide; 2001, Johansson, 2003). During the OECD workshop in Stockholm, Weikart presented results from worldwide studies showing that the most important quality indicator in preschool is the material aspect. The analysis of these five programs shows that all programs, except for T/W, consider the quality of the environment to be an extremely important to children's learning.

The attitude towards evaluation distinguishes the program's relation to quality as either a "relative" or an "inter-subjective, contextual and cultural experience" (see for example, Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000), implying a consensus on indicators that characterize good or poor quality in preschool (for example, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004; Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996; Sheridan, 2001). These different perspectives of quality focus partly on different dimensions or aspects of quality. The main difference between them is that the relative approach is based on visions of society, political and philosophical perspectives, while the inter-subjectively agreed approach is grounded in and based on research on theories of learning and development and on practical experience of preschool.

Despite differences in their views on evaluation, most of the programs conduct and focus on an assessment of the individual child's learning process and outcome; in T/W through learning stories, in R/E through documentation, and in EXE by evaluation the child's involvement. The assessment of the child's learning is made from a short-term (here and now) perspective, except in H/S where the child's learning is assessed from a long-term perspective. The assessment of the child is implicitly related to ongoing activities in preschool and thereby distinguishes the quality of preschool. The focus of evaluation in the Swedish curriculum is the preschool itself and not the child. A preschool evaluated as having high quality is seen as a guarantee for high quality in learning.

The analysis also visualized the program's implicit or explicit intentions for the children as adult members of society, or, in other words, what kind of citizens children are expected to become and how preschool should contribute to that. All five programs have a long-term perspective of children growing up as democratic citizens of society, able to live good lives themselves, together with other people, and to contribute to society as a whole. Each of them also embraces specific future goals for the children. The aim of H/S was to put an end to the vicious circle for poor children, fighting social injustice by encouraging equality and by giving them a better start in life and enhancing their chances of a better life as adults. The political view is emphasized in R/E,

children's learning and development in the direction of the overall goals in Lpfö/98, children's acceptance and acknowledgement of diversity in T/W, while EXE focuses on the individual child's wellbeing and health. In Sweden there is a whole concept of upbringing related to the curriculum, that is, political support in terms of quality assurance and a preschool for all children. This is provided by free preschool from 4 years of age, and a low fee for earlier ages (for further information about the social political frame in Sweden, see Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2004). The total cultural approach concerns democracy, equality and equity.

When a template of quality is laid over the five curricula, it becomes obvious that there is a common core of values and objectives, even if the meaning of quality depends on the situation and the context in which it is used and on the perspective of the user. It is the collective knowledge and the inter-subjectively agreed values that make it possible for programs like R/E to spread around the world. The differences in view also inspire teachers and policy-makers to learn from each other.

What is deeply held preschool tradition and what is new and related to present theories and trends in the society in question? We think we can claim that all the five curricula presented here are of very good quality in relation to each country's culture. This also implies that all cultures need to develop their own curricula for preschool, based on both cultural specifics and research, there are, however, certain features that are intertwined in all. Outstanding cultural qualities in Sweden are the democracy and equality aspects, in New Zealand we see the close relation to the Maori people, while in Reggio Emilia the philosophical value orientation and the critical approach stand out. In EXE the psychological features are emphasized, and in High/Scope the developmentally appropriate approach evident in the US culture.

What is not culturally specific is that children are perceived as subjects, and as different from older school children. One reason why these five curricula are highly valued for their good quality may be that none of them ever fell into the trap of making preschool into a primary school for young children, which is not unusual today (Olfman, 2003), and which many researchers fight against (see e.g. Elkind, 1988). It is obvious that their overall aim in these programs is to engage the children in life-long learning by focussing on qualities and abilities that help children to learn and develop in preschool, such as being critical, reflective, analytical etc. The programs are, in other words, learning-orientated, but not in a formal way. One other reason may be that the teachers are professionals working in specific profile programs, where the features are either theory-based or idea-driven, and share a common base which helps them to work in the same direction (Rye, Smedby & Hundeide, 1987). Finally, each program is logical and stringent when it is seen from its overall and taken-for-granted intentions. The programs' intentions for the pedagogical environment, activities and content in preschool, teachers' actions and interplay with the children are in symmetry.

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