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Proposal for:

Paperpresentation at the ReconECE conference in Arizona January 2003.

Title: Early childhood curricula in New Zealand, Norway and Sweden.

Abstract:

Norway and Sweden adopted recently national preschool plans for children ages one to five years old. When comparing the two plans, the first noticeable difference is that the Norwegian approach gives teachers a detailed framework for their work with suggestions on content, methods to be used, and expected outcomes. In contrast, the Swedish plan is goal directed with a short introduction on the perspectives and values of children's learning and development, and it contains almost nothing about the methods to be used. In this paper findings in an empirical study of eight Norwegian and eight Swedish preschool teachers understandings of the two national plans in relation to practice, will be presented, compared and discussed. The paper the preschool teachers understandings are presented on the three aspects, strategy, substance and structure. Also empirical data material from New Zealand are to be collected, analysed and discussed in relation to these and other aspects, and presented preliminary in this paper.

Proposal:

This is written in collaboration with Prof. Anne B. Smith, New Zealand and Prof. Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson Sweden.

This paper presentation will be held by Marit Alvestad on some of the central parts in this proposal.

An early childhood curriculum should provide a basis for the goals and philosophies of early childhood practice. It is usually assumed that curriculum models encourage shared understanding and language, and a basis for the planning and operation of programs, reflective practice and assessment procedures. However, little is known about the relationship between official curricula and how these are put into practice, how early childhood educators construct and interpret the official curriculum, whether the curriculum becomes part of the discourse of early childhood centers, and how it is reflected in the activities and interactions of administrators, staff, children and parents (Alvestad 2001). There is clearly a difference between the official curriculum and the curriculum 'in action' or what children actually experience (Haggerty, 1998). It may be that curricula alter the discourse of early childhood education but do not effect actual practice. According to Carr & May (1993), however:

A national curriculum is by its very nature a source of tension: it attempts to protect diversity and quality, to provide direction without prescription, and to be helpful to a wide range of age groups, communities, cultures and philosophies. It may be that one of the greatest contributions of a national curriculum to improving the quality of early childhood programmes is the discussion and reflection that accompany its development (p17).

Initial reaction to the introduction of an early childhood curriculum in New Zealand was suspicious, as early childhood teachers feared it would result in the loss of their unique early childhood philosophy, and emulation of a more formal school curriculum (Cullen, 1996). Nevertheless the consultative way in which *Te Whāriki* was developed and introduced and its sociocultural basis, has apparently encouraged a sense of ownership in it in New Zealand (Carr & May, 1994). The introduction of *Te Whāriki* is assumed to support the development and improvement of high quality early childhood programmes in New Zealand. Similar intentions lie behind the Swedish and Norwegian curricula. They are intended to support quality improvement (Ministry of Education, 1998, Barne- og Familiedepartementet, 1996). In Sweden and Norway, most preschool teachers and staff to day have warmly welcomed the new plans. They believe the respective plans will help them in their work with children, as well as contribute positively to the status of preschools in the countries (Alvestad & Pramling 1999). But the fact that the countries have national curricula does not mean that the plans are being implemented consistently. The implementation of national curricula is a very complex area, raising varied and difficult questions (Alvestad 1996, 2001). Studies show that the staff in preschool perceive that the curriculum has increased the status of early years education, but they also claim either that the curriculum supports what they already are doing or that it challenges them to think and reflect (Johansson, 2002, Alvestad 2001).

The development and implementation of early childhood curricula are also influenced by the sociopolitical and sociohistorical contexts in different societies. How differing contexts influence the adoption and implementation of curricula is another focus of interest in this study. New Zealand, Norway and Sweden all have long histories of state support and provision of early childhood education, and all were influenced by the ideas of Froebel in the

nineteenth century. The current early childhood curricula of the three countries are also grounded in sociocultural perspectives on children's development (Alvestad, 2001; Carr & May, 1991; Smith, 1996; Smith, in press). There are, however, major differences between the three countries. For example, Norway and Sweden provide more substantial government financial support for their early childhood services; children start school later than in New Zealand; their early childhood centers constitute a more homogeneous early childhood sector; and there are variations in the structural components of centers (such as staff training, ratio and group size) among the three countries. New Zealand places considerable emphasis on implementing the Treaty of Waitangi and support for and respect for the language and culture of Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand. The New Zealand curriculum document was developed in partnership with Maori and emphasizes a bicultural and bilingual approach (Carr & May, 1993). Also in Sweden, as well as in Norway, today there is a heavy emphasis on special language preschool for immigrant children. In Norway sami language and culture is given emphasis in the Framework plan (Barne- og Familiedepartementet 1996, p.89).

Alvestad & Pramling (1999) have already carried out an extensive analysis of the differences between the Norwegian and Swedish curricula. Alvestad has written three articles (see Alvestad, submitted) and completed her doctoral thesis (Alvestad, 2001) on early childhood teachers' understanding and use of the national curriculum in Norway and Sweden. When she compared the values underlying Swedish and Norwegian curricula, she found that the Norwegian curriculum put more emphasis on the care and upbringing of the child than the Swedish curriculum, which focused more on learning and knowledge formation. She describes the Swedish curriculum as more cognitive oriented than the Norwegian curriculum. She argues, however, there is still much yet to learn about curriculum implementation in Sweden and Norway. Some of the issues to be explored in the proposed study will include the following questions which she has raised.

Is funding sufficient? Do staff members get enough time to discuss the content of the plan and the different implications the plan can have for their practical work? What does the plan mean to the preschool teachers and their teaching assistants? How do they use the plan? What is their understanding of the concept of learning in the plan? And what is the relation to their practical work with the children individually and in groups? (Alvestad & Pramling, 1999, p.15)

It should be interesting to find out how preschool teachers' understanding and implementation of *Te Whāriki* in New Zealand compares with Alvestad's findings in Scandinavia. In New Zealand they have put a strong emphasis on integrating care and education for young children, the provision of sensitive and nurturant care which promotes learning and development (Smith, in press), and a rejection of specific subject coverage (Carr & May, 1994) in favour of a more holistic approach.

There have been several New Zealand studies which have evaluated the implementation of New Zealand's National curriculum *Te Whāriki*. Haggerty (1998) carried out an action research project using video as feedback for staff to help them reflect on their implementation of *Te Whāriki* in five early childhood centres in Wellington. The aim in her study was to look at the curriculum through the definition offered in the 1993 draft of *Te Whāriki* as "the sum total of children's direct and indirect learning experiences in early childhood education settings" (p. 68). Haggerty found that using a video 'text' of centre practice was a useful means of helping staff to engage with and reflect on the curriculum framework. There was

some variation, however, in the degree to which centres were perceived to be supportive of reflective and critical practice.

Podmore, May & Mara (1998) carried out focus group interviews with key informants to address the question of which strands and goals of *Te Whāriki* should be the focus of evaluation practice. The focus group findings were used as the basis for developing a preliminary framework for the analysis of ethnographic observations in seven early childhood centres. The ethnographic work provided rich descriptions of the child, adult and learning environment, which expressed the particular philosophy and focus of each centre. These case studies became the basis for the development of a new method of assessment, Learning Stories (Carr, 2001). In relation to this it is also interesting to find out what kind of assessment procedures are in place, and in what way evaluation and assessment are used in the three different countries.

In Norway there have been a few studies evaluating the implementation of the Framework plan (Retvedt, Skoug & Aasen 1999, Tiller 1999). Their findings among others at that preschool teacher's especially stresses the social interplay as a central content from Framework plan. It seems according to findings in one study, that the Framework plan more states the existing educational tradition and practice than gives opportunities to see new challenges in the educational work with young children (Fredriksen Aasen 1999, see also Sandve 2001, Jacobsen 2000). Some of these studies was carried out at approximately the same time as the Framework plan was implemented, and there should of such reasons be interesting to do some research on the staffs work on implementation further on. It will also be interesting to see the Norwegian national plan in relation to implementations of curricula in early childhood education and development of educational quality in a national as well as an international perspective (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 1999- 2000, Utdannings- og Forskningsdepartementet 2000-2001, 2001- 2002).

The present study will examine national curricula and their implementation within New Zealand, Norway and Sweden, within their wider sociopolitical contexts of government support, government control, monitoring, community involvement, and cultural awareness. In our view a comparative study of the influence of national curricula in different social contexts will illuminate the complex relationship between official goals and the discourse and practice of early childhood education. This research will have important implications for determining effective ways to improve the quality of early childhood practice, and encouraging full implementation of the ideals and philosophy underlying national curricula.

Methodology

All research has an ontological and epistemological ground. To make these explicit is a prerequisite for one's own working process and in relation to questions of validity and reliability. In this study a qualitative analysis is chosen in order to try to answer the above-mentioned issues. Both document analysis and in depth-interviews are planned as tools for collection of data. To bring out preschool teachers' understanding of central aspects of planning and practice, in depth-interviews with groups of preschool teachers are seen as relevant. The analysis is inspired by ethnography, and Hammerley and Atkinson (1983, 1996) among others point out that a scrutiny of official documents provides important data. The qualitative analyses will be carried out in an analysing and working process that is close to the

hermeneutical tradition (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1994, Gadamer 1992, Gilje & Grimen 1994, Kvale 1997, Larsson 1993, see also Alvestad 2001).

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I do hope this subject and paper (in progress) will be of interest for the conference. I am looking forward to hear from you.

Yours sincerely Marit Alvestad