

NORDISK BARNEHAGEFORSKNING 2013

Nordisk Børnehøveforskning
Norrænar Leikskólarannsóknir
Nordic Early Childhood Education Research

Pohjoismainen Varhaiskasvatustutkimus
Nordisk Förskoleforskning
www.nordiskbarnehageforskning.no

ISSN 1890-9167

VOL 6 NR 28 SID 1-7

SPECIAL EDITION:

IS THERE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW TO HANDLE CHILDREN UNDER THREE IN ECEC?

Constructing practice on evolutionary knowledge in ECEC

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Abstract: This article provides a discussion on the importance of knowledge in early childhood education and also the role of knowledge dissemination process in the field. From the question of giving more freedom of movement, knowledge about this topic used in a Belgian curriculum, the article illustrates the importance of considering practice not as an application of theory, but as a co-construct and complex process that combines it with other resources in context. It illustrates the importance of going further than the production of knowledge to create appropriate practice in service.

Keywords: Children under three; Freedom of movement; Knowledge; Practice

Peer-reviewed seminar contribution 8th December 2011. Oslo University College, Department of Teacher Education and International Studies together with the European Society on Family Relations.

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Prepublished 27 October 2013

The debate about knowledge in early childhood education is very important for all practitioners, trainers and researchers worldwide or internationally. It contributes to a professionalization process of this sector in which the instinctive and female ideas aren't considered anymore as sufficient to ground a professional educational approach (Miller and Cable, 2008). Early childhood education can nowadays be founded on specific and validated knowledge as with any other field of education. The educational function of care services could be developed in response to Crahay (2009, p.132) who asserts that "provision for under-3s ... has still not been recognized by society as a fully-fledged level of education".

Different kinds of events can be underlined as indicators of a knowledge development. Next to conferences, articles and PhD thesis, we can un-

derline the recent production of special issues about early childhood education in the scientific literature (Johansson, 2010; Rayna Laevers, 2011; Oberhuemer, Brooker, Parker-Rees, 2012) and the development of curricula for day care services (for the under three years of age), in Belgium for example.

If the importance of knowledge is recognized nowadays, more debates should be centered around its links with practice. How can we use new scientific knowledge in practice? How could this scientific knowledge be related to other kinds of knowledge? How might researchers work with practitioners and improve together the quality of the provision of services?

It is clear that producing scientific knowledge is not sufficient to change practice rooted in the past with the aim to develop the quality of child-care services in an ecological, inclusive and ef-

fective approach (Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2002; Dahlberg, Moss, 2005) with all the stakeholders (families included). Knowledge is a resource that has to be mobilized in complex processes in which it comes into opposition from traditional values and practices.

This thesis generates a new way of thinking about training processes, a new culture of education (Barbier, 2005), especially in the field of early years education (Pirard & Barbier, 2012). Training is not only based on the hypothesis of the transformation of identity through the appropriation of pre-defined knowledge (in a “culture de l’enseignement” or culture of teaching) and equally is not only based on the hypothesis of the transformation of identity through a process of transfer of new skills (in a “culture de la formation” or “culture of training”) but is based on the hypothesis that action and actors can be jointly transformed, together and at the same time (in a ‘culture de la professionnalisation’ or “culture of professionalization”).

This shows the importance of an action-training-research process in which researchers and practitioners analyse together the actions and their effects to identify new possibilities of acting and thinking about practice, and to co-construct new knowledge for educational practice in context. It shows also the importance of accompaniment, a term very often referred to in French literature (Paul, 2005; Pirard, 2007; Beauvais, 2008; Barbier, 2011), but very difficult to translate into English. Often associated with coaching, mentoring and counselling functions without being substituted for those concepts, accompaniment considers the process in which the activity of one person (the accompanier) is combined with the activity of another (the accompanied practitioner) in order not only to develop professional competencies, but also to transform daily educational practices.

To illustrate this argument, the article proposes a case study based on an action-training-research project conducted in the Federation Wallonia – Brussels (the French Community of Belgium) over « giving more freedom of movement » for children in childcare services (0–3 years), action-training-research connected to the implementation of a new pedagogical Curriculum Framework in the Federation (Pirard, 2011). In this country “freedom of movement” has become a central piece of knowledge and a quality criterion for all childcare services. It would be showed here how the knowledge over

freedom of movement has been considered as a resource mobilized in action-training-research grounded in a culture of professionalization.

SOME KNOWLEDGE OVER FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

The fact of giving more freedom of movement to babies, toddlers and children in childcare services has been studied by several authors for the last ten years. Main results considered as reference in Belgium can be summarized briefly.

Pikler (1979, 1984, 2006), the paediatrician who created the *Institute Loczy* in Budapest (Hungary) showed several important aspects for practitioners of childcare services:

- Every child is able to move by themselves on their own rhythm of development (this competence can’t be taught), Each individual development goes through intermediate stages: there aren’t any huge and spectacular steps as described by the classical literature and commonly valorised (to sit, to stand up, to walk, etc.),
- A child chooses the position and the posture they want to be placed in except the first position (a little baby has to be laid on his back (on supine); later he chooses themselves their positions),
- An adequate environment and educational conditions are needed, in which little ones can move, experiment their posture and positions without difficulties. Among others: to be able to stay with bare feet, to wear ample clothes, to be placed on a hard carpet where they can experiment movements without “sinking into” a too soft carpet, to have at one’s disposal simple material to manipulate, time to experiment movements and so on);

For Pikler (1984), giving children enough freedom of movement does not only mean to recognise their motor competencies, but also to contribute to the development of their self confidence or their feeling of competency.

Other authors have also studied freedom of movement. Let us refer to Coeman, Raulier and de Frahan (2004) and Aucouturier (2005) who have also showed the importance of freedom of movement from birth with another practical, and theoretical approach. Pikler, Coeman and Aucouturier’s approaches are now reference points for professionals during their initial train-

ing and in-service training sessions in the Federation Wallonia-Brussels. Until now, it would be incorrect to think that all the teachers and practitioners of childcare educational field appropriate this knowledge or that practitioners consider motor competencies of young children as essential in the daily life of a childcare service.

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT: A QUALITY CRITERION IN A PEDAGOGICAL CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

Before 2002, in the Federation WB where the childcare system is divided (EACEA, 2009), the practitioners who worked with children under three years of age (from two or three months in the Belgian childcare services) didn't have any curriculum (Bennett, 2004; Rayna, 2009), any guidelines about what was considered essential knowledge and values contrary to the preschool teachers who have had educational curricula for several years. The practitioners had to find for themselves the best way to act and to think in their context drawing only from their own experiences and knowledge.

The problem is complex because the initial training of Belgian practitioners doesn't fit with international recommendations (OECD 2006; EACEA 2009; Penn 2009; Bennet 2010). In the Federation WB, the training is organized at a secondary school level and the knowledge taught is still focused more on health and sanitary than on social and educational aspects of care (Pirard, 2009).

In the nineties, a university action-research in the field of early childhood education led to the production of a pedagogical curriculum framework for professionals who took care of youngest children. This framework has been widely disseminated in the field from 2002: "*Accueillir les tout-petits, oser la qualité*" (ONE-Fond Houtman, 2002)¹. It focuses on childcare and family services for children 0 to 3 years. Its elaboration took over two years, during which researchers and a variety of key stakeholders (childcare professionals, representatives of ONE (Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance²), initial and further training institutions – some twenty

people in total) worked together. The objective was to define, on the basis of different experiences and knowledge, educational options considered as essential for all childcare services (family day care services included) in the French Community of Belgium (Pirard, 2009). The curriculum Framework provides official orientations to management staff who currently still lack specific training, adjusted to the new requirements of their function; to help elaborating educational projects in childcare services became nowadays compulsory in reference to a new law, the "Code de Qualité de l'accueil" from 1999, revised in 2003 (Pirard, 2011).

This action-research project considered "educational practices as reflective options that is grounded on knowledge developed in different disciplines and which are considered part of both individual and social purposes" (Manni, 1999, p.12). So it considered educational practices not only as a "potential" application of knowledge, but also as a complex process articulated in relation to different kinds of resources: knowledge but also values that need participatory process and debates.

The framework looks like a book (170 pages) with reference texts and transcription of field observations. It starts with an introduction considered as an announcement that explains the meaning of the product: being a woman or a mother is not enough to work with young children under three years of age; it is necessary to reference the practice in terms of knowledge and values. A second part is composed of three chapters to develop the quality of family day care and childcare services in the French Community of Belgium: one is centred on the necessity to create time consuming links between practitioners and young children in the day-care services, continuity, confidence and to reach a clear sharing of responsibilities between adults (parents and professionals). Chapter III deals with the notion of socialisation. Chapter IV considers that being active represents for young children (not the activities organized by practitioners) not only a tool to understand the environment, but also to express their very existence. The next chapter develops the notion of educational project as a formal product and also as a process of reflection on the practice. The final chapter questions the notions of accessibility and equality of services as a part of the quality childcare services.

1. Literally: *Welcoming early years: Taking up the challenge of quality*

2. In English, Office for Birth and Childhood that is the public institution in charge of authorizing, financing, evaluating and accompanying childcare services.

The importance of giving children enough freedom of movement is developed in this curriculum framework in chapter IV focused on the activity of children. It is considered as an essential condition of childcare quality. Based on Pikler's research (Pikler, 2006), the Framework recalls that the:

... stages of psychomotor development are achieved by the initiative of children, without a 'teaching' intervention by the adult... Freedom of movement consists in leaving children free in all their spontaneous movements, unhindered and without teaching of any movement whatsoever... Control of their own motor development influences the development of the whole personality of these children and affects their mental development... (Framework, p. 104).

Even if the Framework tends to implement and legitimate a scientific knowledge, it is not sufficient to transform practice in day-care services. The orientation of freedom of movement for children is not so easy to understand and to practice in a world where effectiveness and quick learning are too often considered as quality criteria. It could be seen in several cases: for example, teaching movements without taking into account babies and toddlers' own psychomotor rhythm, or choosing complicate plays and objects to play that constraint to freedom of movements and limit the possibilities to explore.

GIVING MORE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT FOR CHILDREN, NOT ONLY KNOWLEDGE BUT ESPECIALLY RESOURCE MOBILISED BY ACTION PROJECTS

Producing knowledge and curriculum is considered in the Federation WB as necessary, but not sufficient to change educational practice. Accompaniment of practitioners is essential not only to sustain an appropriation process, but also to transform jointly practice, practitioners and the educational conditions in the childcare services (Pirard, 2007, 2010, 2011); to sustain a necessary reflective approach in a complex and evolutionary world (Peeters & Vandebroek, 2011).

From 2004, two years after the issuing of the framework curriculum, I've worked as an advisor in education with teachers and practitioners of a rural country to discuss conditions that could and should increase freedom of movement

for children in day-care services. In 2004, the criterion of freedom of movement for young children was fairly unknown by professionals in this province (region). The latter left complicated materials, objects and games at the children's disposal. Professionals were not familiar with asking such questions such as: How to sustain babies? How to think babies activity? How to accompany young children in their psychomotor development without teaching them postures? Observation and debate with professionals show a gap between what is identified as an essential condition of childcare quality in the curriculum framework and what is done concretely.

This led to conceptualize, organize, analyse, evaluate and regulate different kinds of actions undertaken with a global perspective (EADAP, 2011). Knowledge had to be transmitted not as a motor of change, but as a resource mobilised by action projects.

The project started with practitioners of five day-care services who were invited to participate in a number of projects over eight months. Monthly meetings were organised within each service and between services to develop, implement and adjust action projects that would improve the freedom of movement and so the experimentation of children under 18 months of age. All meetings between the services were conducted by the advisor in education and a coordinator, with the participation of a resource person known for her work on the subject (Pikler's approach).

In a first phase, practitioners developed action projects to promote the possibilities of movement and experimentation by children (the layout of spaces, the choice of games and objects to manipulate, etc.). In a second phase, they filmed and analysed the use of space and materials by the children; then assessed and evaluated their own actions, both in teams of each childcare services and in teams between childcare services. This self-regulating participatory assessment, inspired by the work of CRESAS (1988, 2000; Ballion et al., 1989), allowed them to adjust their actions and to have a better understanding of their effects. In a later phase, they shared – through these video and photos – the results of their research with the other professionals and families of services.

Later, a discussion of other theoretical and practical approaches had begun, approaches that were not mentioned in the framework (Co-

eman, Raulier & de Frahan, 2004; Aucouturier, 2005). These approaches were extended to other care services and other actors, including family daycare, training professionals and training institutes, and to physicians concerned by the effects of a prolonged supine position on the development of young children (Cavalier, 2008).

The debate with physicians has been interesting to reflect upon the relationships between knowledge and practice in the early childhood education field. The importance of giving more freedom of movement and to let the baby lie in a supine position (as first position) has now been recognized by educational research. But some medical researchers give another point of view, still in debate. The recommendations to reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome have led professionals to place babies on a more prolonged supine position (to sleep). Some further medical researches discover that this prolonged supine position could have an effect on the development of young children (positional and deformational plagiocephaly). However, other medical researchers (Cavalier & al., 2008, 2011) showed that plagiocephaly wasn't observed if babies were able to live with freedom of movements. Despite of these opposite results, the medical recommendations suggest now to professionals not to choose the only supine position when babies are awake and to keep the supine position to let them sleep (primary care to struggle against "sudden death").

Practitioners are, therefore caught between two "opposite knowledge" positions: educational and medical ways forward. They have then to decide what to do with babies, in particular which first position to choose (how to let the baby be on the carpet or in bed): In a position that makes them lie on their sides? On their belly? Or on a supine position? They have to make a choice from opposing research results, but also from their observations of babies in the childcare services and also from the habits of babies at home that could be different from their practice.

TO CONCLUDE: THE NECESSITY OF AN ARTICULATION BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE TO CO-CONSTRUCT FOR DAILY PRACTICE

The topic of freedom of movement shows the complexity of using opposing knowledge positions in the practice of professions involved in

cares for young children. The practitioners grounded their practice not only on their experience, but have to learn and adopt opposing knowledge from different disciplines. What is considered today as true can be invalidated later, what they learn now can change. They have also to listen to the families' points of view without imposing their practice as a model; to recognise the behaviour of babies at home and to ensure continuity between the different living environments. They have to construct (to co-construct an "action knowledge" from all these resources to decide what to do in each situation not because it's considered as the universal and best way to do (in a normative approach), but because it's seem the best way to do in a specific context in reference to the last produced knowledge of different disciplines and to observations of the different points of view. They have to co-construct shared criteria to regulate their educational practices (Vial, 2001), not just to apply external standards imposed by a curriculum in order to reach a meaning in a complex and evolutionary world where the norm becomes instable. As showed by Peeters and Vandebroek (2011, p. 63), "the reflective practitioner moves towards becoming by questioning taken for granted beliefs and by understanding that knowledge is contestable". He hasn't only to think about "doing the things right" but "doing the right thing".

In fact, the area of freedom of movement for children shows the importance of recognizing different kinds of knowledge. Literature on this subject (Pikler for example) communicates some scientific knowledge or some predefined knowledge to be applied in practice and to be analysed within the complexity of day-care services. It generates very often some recommendations for the development of the quality of services (for example the Belgian pedagogical curriculum framework). It is essential to be aware that practice is not an application of scientific knowledge. Practitioners have to create their original knowledge, "a strategic knowledge" (Vandermaeren, 1995) oriented by scientific knowledge, practical knowledge and their praxis. They have to create a contextualised and shared meaning of the concept. In the presented case, "freedom of movement" could mean perhaps something else for specialists than it does for the practitioners of childcare services. Strategic knowledge is not easy to construct and generates conceptualisations of different kinds of training associated

with different kinds of cultures of education (Barbier, 2005).

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