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Iram Siraj-Blatchford
University of Wollongong, iram@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

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Understanding the Relationship between Curriculum, Pedagogy and Progression in Learning in Early Childhood 了解幼兒學習中課程、教學與進度的關係

Iram SIRAJ-BLATCHFORD
Institute of Education
University of London

Abstract

This paper provides mutually reinforcing definitions for the terms 'Curriculum' and 'Pedagogy' are applied in an attempt to provide further clarification of the learning processes involved in 'Co-construction' and 'Sustained Shared Thinking'. The implications for pedagogic progression and for understanding early childhood practices are also identified. The theoretical model is then applied in support of the English Early Years Foundation Stage against charges of inappropriate 'schoolification'. The paper also provides in outline a new typology of early childhood educational practices..

摘要

本文界分了課程與教學法的定義及肯定其相互的關係。文章指出幼兒的學習過程是透過與成人的共同持續思考 (Sustained shared thinking-SST) 及共同建構 (Co-construction) 而進行；這種理論模式不但給予循序性的教學及予以理解幼兒的習性上帶來啟示，且為 English Early Years Foundation Stage 被評為不恰當 "schoolification" 的做法作出平反。

Defining 'Pedagogy' and 'Curriculum'

Different definitions of the term 'pedagogy' and 'curriculum' have often been applied throughout the world and this has at times led to confusion. At times pedagogy and curriculum are even applied synonymously or appear indistinguishable. The easiest way to understand the concept of 'pedagogy' may therefore be to start by differentiating it from what is generally understood by the term 'curriculum'.

In New Zealand the Te Whāriki curriculum guidance and framework defines curriculum broadly as; "the sum total of the experiences, activities and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). Such a broad definition seems particularly apt in the case of early childhood education and care although it may sometimes be important to recognise that some

sort of learning and development happens whether we consciously design the environment for that purpose or not. Young children are learning all the time, and however implicit or hidden it may be in some settings, the content of this learning (the 'curriculum') is nearly always determined by the adults who care for them. The notion of a totally 'free' play environment may therefore be considered either an ideal or a myth. The material resources (toys, furniture, and props), the activities, the social interactions, and the environments that we offer children, define both the opportunities and the limitations for their learning. The linguistic and cultural context that they are immersed in, even more fundamentally, influences what it is that they learn. Practitioners are therefore faced with the option of simply acknowledging all of these influences or making the choice of actively managing them. In the UK today, most professional early childhood educators choose the latter option. They apply their knowledge and skill to the best of their ability in passing on all those capabilities,

knowledge, understandings, and attitudes that they consider to be especially shared and valued by our multicultural society.

The definition of pedagogy that we adopted in the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford, et al, 2003) was based on the work of Gage (1985), who argued for a 'scientific basis for the art of teaching'. Gage argued that we should distinguish between knowledge that is general (nomothetic knowledge), and knowledge that applies to the understanding of particular events or individuals (ideographic knowledge). He argued that teachers creatively apply their nomothetic knowledge to the ideographic problems posed by the unique groups of children that they are faced with; with all of their specific needs, socio-cultural status and cognitive and affective demands. Pedagogy was therefore defined broadly to refer to the full set of instructional techniques and strategies that enabled learning to take place in early childhood settings, which provided opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions. This definition was considered wide enough to take in such indirect teacher behaviours as the provision of constructivist 'discovery' learning environments, and the encouragement of parents providing educational support at home.

Pedagogy and 'Sustained Shared Thinking'

Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) was first identified in a qualitative analysis carried out in association with the EPPE research project (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2002; 2003). The qualitative case studies provided detailed accounts of the learning and teaching that was observed (400 hours of adult observations and 254 episodes of child observations) in the most effective settings, and the transcriptions of episodes of SST were subsequently found to provide valuable (concrete) examples of the kind of effective pedagogies that were needed to develop practice. Sustained Shared Thinking featured in the Key Elements of Effective Practice (KEEP) (DfES, 2005) that was distributed to all English pre-schools settings, and it has

now been included in the national Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) a curriculum framework and guidance for England (DfES, 2007).

The qualitative analysis revealed a general pattern of high child achievement associated with sustained adult-child verbal interactions along with a paucity of such interactions in settings achieving less well. 'Sustained shared thinking' came to be defined as:

"...an effective pedagogic interaction, where two or more individuals work (often playfully) together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative!" (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2003)

In so far as adults consciously engage in SST it can be considered a form of 'pedagogy' in the sense that it is something adults consciously do to support and engage children's learning. But it is also important to recognise that sustained shared thinking involves some curriculum content as well, it always has a contextual object or objective, deals with a particular problem, a concept or activity. Learning has content as well as form, and whenever learning takes place we can say that a 'curriculum' is involved (however implicit or hidden that it might be). Pedagogy and curriculum may therefore be considered two sides of the same coin, every learning episode has both.

So what is it that children are learning in the early years? - What is the curriculum? In infancy, in the earliest years, the most significant learning tends to be about the body, safety, and about affection and aggression. In the school curriculum, more formal literacy and numeracy, and any other National Curriculum subjects will be emphasised, and much later the learning will be concerned with the world of employment and citizenship. Curriculum progression here is about initially developing strong foundations and a breadth (of knowledge and understanding), and later introducing a degree of specialisation. In a recent paper I applied Vygotsky (2004) to elaborate upon this and clarify the relationship between pedagogic

and curriculum progression further (see Siraj-Blatchford, 2007).

In terms of pedagogy, in the earliest years the child's individual needs and concerns dominate the curriculum as they first exchange 'significant gestures' with others. This is a form of sustained shared thinking/communication that provides a means by which the child develops a conscious awareness of 'others' and of the 'self'.

This is further extended in sustained shared thinking associated with improvised play with others; collaboration in increasingly structured activities and games; and then later in life in disciplined collaborations (with strongly defined subjects). In terms of competence, progression goes from at first mastering in the early years the very informal and strongly improvised interactions to later developing capability in the more highly structured and much more formal interactions demanded by adult life.

The adult educators role in sustained shared thinking, is to 'co-construct' the curriculum, as both the adult and the child collaborate or take 'turns' in influencing its direction. Arguably, in SST the question of who (adult or child) 'initiates' any particular activity of dialogue may therefore be considered less important than in other pedagogic contexts as long as the adult doesn't dominate the process too early and that it is based on experiential and play oriented activity.

Alongside these developments in social interaction young children learn, in their pretend play, to manipulate objects symbolically; to let them 'stand in' for each other. This object substitution is extended to objectify the behaviour (and roles) of other people (or animals etc), and supports the child in learning to control their own behaviour in response to these roles. It also ultimately provides the foundations for learning the more sophisticated symbolic systems of literacy and numeracy.

Whenever play partners communicate they do so building upon their own prior learning, which includes their understanding of the perspective of themselves constructed by the other participant

in the communication. Forman and Cazdan's (1998) research shows that children's problem solving improves in collaboration, as the partners alternately provide scaffolding for each other within what Vygotsky referred to as the partner's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). That is, the 'zone of capability' that extends beyond what the partner is capable of doing on their own to include those activities they may successfully do with the support of their peer.

The developments of more sophisticated levels of abstraction (and self consciousness) also facilitate the development of a wider metacognition (the knowledge and awareness that children come to develop of their own learning). This metacognition is important in learning to be a more effective learner (or learning to learn), and develops as the child finds it necessary to describe, explain and justify their thinking about different aspects of the world to others through actions and language. As the child's conceptual knowledge and understanding of the 'other', and of the 'self', continue to develop, learning 'dispositions' become more significant (most graphically illustrated in studies of gendered subject preferences).

Common confusions regarding curriculum and pedagogy

One of the most significant implications of the loose application of the terms curriculum and pedagogy in Europe may have been that they have supported an erroneous view that there are essentially two fundamentally different 'approaches' to early childhood education that are applied across Europe; a 'social pedagogy' approach where the curriculum is developed at a centre level, and an 'infant school' approach where the curriculum is provided by a central authority (Bennett, 2004, Bennett & Tayler, 2006). But as previously suggested it should be recognised that every early childhood interaction does (inevitably) include curriculum content (however inexplicit or hidden it may be), and all children grow up at some point to take an interest (mostly with great enthusiasm) in school curriculum subjects. What should be recognised as important here is not the curriculum content itself but rather the pedagogic

differences between settings where some may be seen to offer curriculum co-construction through SST and others either dominate in their interaction with children, or leave them much more free and to their own devices. The evidence that we gained through the REPEY study suggest the need for a balanced approach Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; 2003).

Rather than specifying any pre-defined knowledge, skills or attitudes that children would require to achieve success in everyday life, the central aim of social pedagogy has been to empower children as active citizens, so that they can act to change their own lives. In practice this has generally been seen to focus attention on the nurture of children's identity and self-esteem. But these objectives actually say nothing at all about the curriculum content that is involved. The adults may take either a more, or a less, dominant role in determining the content and these may be influenced either more or less by school subjects and national frameworks. Children are not taught the psychology of identity and self-esteem, even if the pursuit of these wider objectives does lead many practitioners to adopt less dominant or co-constructive approaches.

Similar confusions have arisen in the UK where a diverse range of approaches has historically been developed to satisfy perceived needs for either 'care' or for 'education' in early childhood. In fact this has been a dichotomy encouraged by the development of separate state pre-school provisions administered by the social services 'care' sector, and by education departments. It has also stimulated ongoing controversies over the relative merits of 'child centred' and 'progressive' or 'traditional' methods of teaching in primary education. But recent years have seen a significant moderation of these extreme positions and a growing consensus regarding the need to adopt a more balanced approach (often expressed in terms of a commitment to 'educare' or a version of education that includes care).

Yet in Starting Strong II (Bennett & Taylor, 2006), Bennett contrasts the English early years

Foundation Stage (FS) with the social pedagogical approach, he argues that it provides an example of an 'early education' approach (also referred to by Bennett, 2004, as an 'infant school', and in Moss & Bennett, 2006 as a 'schoolification' approach), because it has a central specification of curriculum, it underplays the role of parents and the community, and because it focuses upon cognitive development, and school readiness. In terms of the English FS this might always have been an exaggeration but in terms of the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) that is being introduced throughout England in 2008 it may be considered demonstrably incorrect. The EYFS is organised around four broad principles related to: the Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments, and Learning and Development. While the EYFS does include 69 Early Learning Goals (the New Zealand curriculum guidance includes over 120), only 30 (43%) actually relate to knowledge content, and only 7 (10%) are concretely specified, the rest being of a very general nature e.g. "Extend their vocabulary, exploring the meanings and sounds of new words" – "Begin to know about their own cultures and beliefs and those of other people." Even where the goals do define very specific knowledge content it is often clear that they would in any event be prioritized in most emergent literacy or numeracy curriculum contexts e.g. "Know(ing) that print carries meaning and, in English, is read from left to right and top to bottom" - "Use language such as 'greater', 'smaller', 'heavier' or 'lighter' to compare quantities." In fact it could be argued that it would be hard to imagine any (socio-pedagogic) early childhood curriculum failing to include most or even all the learning goals directly specifying content e.g. "Recognize the importance of keeping healthy, and those things which contribute to this".

These Early Learning Goals may also be seen as, in many respects, similar to the objectives (for basic competencies and five broad learning areas) identified by Bennett in the Norwegian national curriculum, and those included in the six areas of the Danish 2004 curriculum. In any event, as Bennett accepts; "Research suggests that a more unified approach to learning should be adopted in

both the early childhood education and the primary school systems, and that attention should be given to transition challenges faced by young children as they enter school” (Bennett & Taylor, 2006 p13).

The challenge for early childhood is therefore to provide a transition that stimulates learning and development while avoiding any risk of regression or failure. This is in fact widely recognised by researchers and by policy makers. Efforts are being made throughout Europe to develop better curriculum progression and transition between nurseries, kindergartens and schools. According to Oberhuemer (2004) in Germany, following the publication of disappointing results in the 2001 OECD-PISA International Student Assessment of 15-year-olds, there has been wide recognition that the ‘long tradition of social pedagogy’ in kindergarten must be reconciled with emerging demands for school readiness.

Similarly, in Denmark, according to Brostrom (2006), an Act on Educational Curricula was passed in August, 2004. This requires each preschool to implement six dimensions of aims and content which are expressed as general themes: (a) Personal competencies, (b) social competencies, (c) language, (d) body and movement, (e) nature and nature phenomena, and (f) cultural ways of expression and values (Socialministeriet, 2004):

“... the introduction of the concept of learning and the six curriculum themes are understood as a signal to move away from an extreme child-centered practice towards a practice where the child-care workers play a more active role”. (p393)

In focusing equally upon cognitive and affective socio-behavioural outcomes, the REPEY project may be seen as entirely consistent with a main stream social-pedagogic position strengthened by an awareness and concern for transition which has been emerging throughout Europe.

Understanding the relationship between pedagogy and curriculum

A typology of the most commonly applied

models of early childhood education has been provided by Weikart (2000) and is shown in Figure 1. The categories that are applied are broadly consistent with others developed by Weikart (1972), Kohlberg & Mayer, (1972) and Baumrind, (1971) and recent research carried out the UK by the Effective Practice in Preschool Education (EPPE) project suggests that as ‘ideal types’ they are applied just as much in the UK early childhood context as in the US context where they were first developed (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 1999).

The analytical difficulty with the typology is in the definition of curriculum that is applied and the way the term ‘initiative’ is used. According to Weikart the major organising principle to be considered is the role of either high or low curriculum ‘initiation’ on the part of the teacher/adult and the child (Weikart, 2000, p58). But in his subsequent elaboration of the various categories of ‘educational approach’, high teacher initiative is described predominantly in terms of the highly structured pedagogy, and high child initiative in terms of their control over the curriculum.

The major organising principles might therefore be better conceived in terms of pedagogy and curriculum (Figure 2). This would also be consistent with Bernstein’s (1981) elaborate analysis of pedagogic codes and their modalities of practice. While a comprehensive structural analysis of the various coding principles employed in early education lies beyond the scope of this paper, we can employ Bernstein’s (1981) formulation of classification and frame to distinguish between the different forms of early childhood practice. As Bernstein himself has noted, while this more limited use of the terms may not have been intended when he first coined them, it does demonstrate their analytical value (Bernstein, 1996, p.3).

Classification refers to the degree of boundary maintenance between curriculum subject contents. Where the curriculum content is clearly defined in terms of subjects we can therefore refer to that as strong classification. Framing is about whom controls what; who selects, sequences, paces etc. the learning. When framing is weak the child (or parent) has more apparent control, when strong it

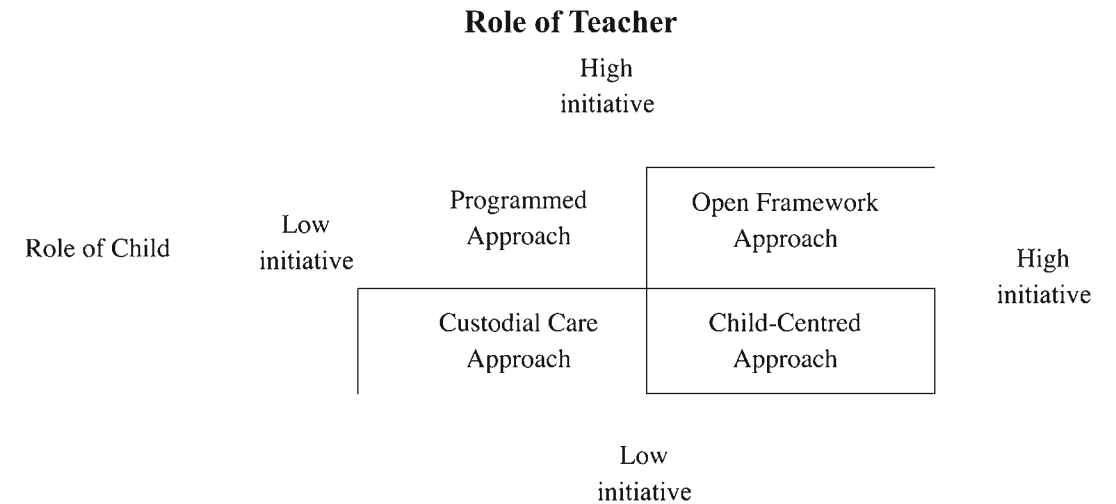


Figure 1

is the educator/professional who is most clearly in control. So for example, a collaborative, progressive and permissive classroom illustrates weak framing and a traditional didactic one strong framing.

In Figure 2 the model is inverted to reflect the common transition towards more structured teaching and learning contexts that children experience as they get older. The custodial (or basic care) approach described by Weikart (2000) has

also been omitted because no specified curriculum is usually intended in these programmes. In fact, for this reason, they might not be considered to provide an ‘educational’ approach at all.

As suggested earlier, the challenge for early childhood is to provide a gradual and supportive transition that stimulates learning and development while avoiding any risk of regression or failure. In the most extreme applications of the Child-centred approach the teacher responds entirely

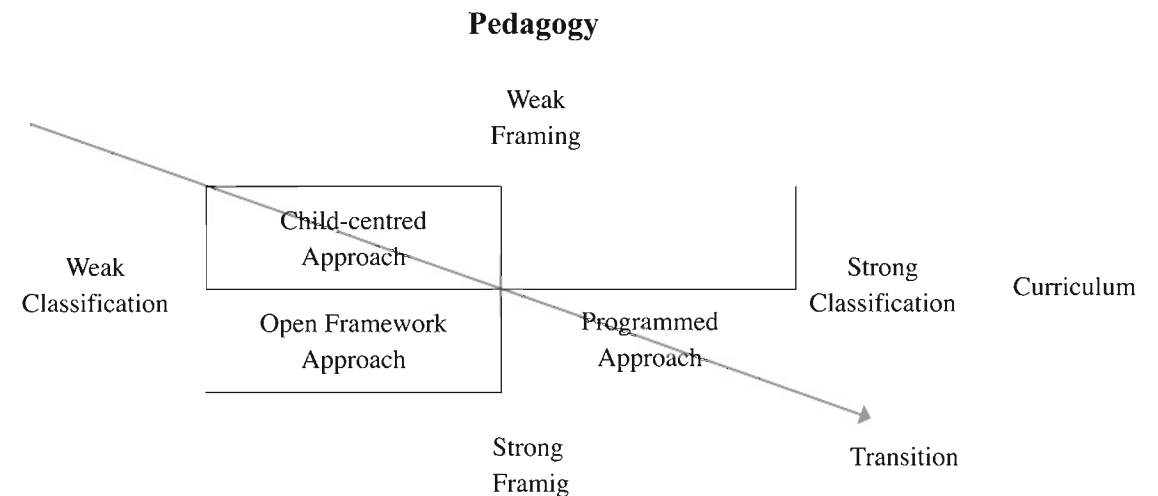


Figure 2

to the individual child's interests and activities. More often, topic or project themes are adopted that have been chosen especially to appeal to the children's interests. The curriculum emphasis is on encouraging children's independence, their social and emotional growth, creativity and self-expression. The classroom/playroom environment is often rich in stimuli, permissive and provides for open-ended exploration and discovery.

The Open-framework approach provides the teacher with a strong pedagogic structure (or framework) that supports the child in their explorations and interactions with, and reflections upon, the learning environment. In this model, the curriculum classification is weaker as the child has a good deal of freedom to make choices between the various learning environments that are on offer. But the optional environments (e.g. sand, water, block play, puzzles etc.) are often provided to achieve particular (usually cognitive or conceptual) curriculum aims; these may be more

or less identified by the setting. In some settings children's choices are carefully monitored and a broad and balanced curriculum is encouraged over the medium or long term.

The Programmed approach is highly teacher directed providing for little initiative on the part of the child. The rationale for this method is drawn significantly from theories of learning. This pedagogy is usually applied where curriculum objectives may be clearly (and objectively) classified and is likely to be most effective where learning involves the development of simple skills or memorisation. The curriculum content is often highly structured.

Of course each of these approaches remains 'ideal types' and the practices in many settings will still involve a combination of all three. However, it might be an interesting exercise for the reader to consider which approach/es dominate their own early childhood settings.

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