

## TOPIC: CURRICULUM

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The problem with the topic of curriculum is that if it's defined broadly – that is, as the child's experience in an early childhood program – then just about every session at the World Forum related directly or indirectly to the topic. The environment, health issues, relationships between parents and professionals, issues about peace and reconciliation, beliefs and understandings about children – not to mention sessions on curriculum – came under our team's umbrella. So the comments that follow represent only a small sample of information that relates to our topic.

### ***Things that matter.***

The unacknowledged curriculum has a powerful influence. One of the keynote speakers, using Northern Ireland as an example, made the statement that “children pick up the habits and mind sets of people around them”. They can learn to hate without understanding much about why”. In contrast, they can learn to respect diversity and to be inclusive. Context is critically important – if children live in a divided community or live with violence they may learn to hate if they are not helped to learn other attitudes. What an important message this was about priorities in our programs, what matters most. It is so important that we address what really matters most in children's lives in our programs.

This point was highlighted in the moving presentation by Dr. Michael Kelly on AIDs and children, when he set the challenge of dealing with sexuality in children between the ages of 0 and 8. How do we do that in early childhood programs? He also quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, who said “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”. Do we deal with the things that matter in our curricula?

The plenary session “The Power of Early Childhood as a Force for Reconciliation - Working Team Belfast and Members” contained powerful and provocative messages about curriculum. During the Plenary Felician Ntakiyima from Chad said that our challenge is “Shall we let children caught in armed conflict fall?” This is our curricular challenge for children living in conflict zones. The challenge for those fortunate to live in peace is to support those who are not.

Paul Connolly talked about three year olds internalizing a mind set, although not yet really understanding with it was about. Soon, the mind set becomes an identity, and young children develop a sense of who they are and at this age already learn to hate others. He shared research on curriculum developed to support young children living in violent areas that showed that even in three weeks media messages and curricula make a difference in children's relationships with and attitudes to others. They learn to get along.

As a response to violence there are five key questions for curriculum:

1. How do we help and support when families are disintegrating?
2. How can we give effective support?
3. How can we build peace, not react?
4. How can we begin to address families and communities?
5. How can we be effective advocates for children?

### ***Infants.***

Ron Lally reminded us of the uniqueness of infancy, meaning that “the downward extension of what works with older children is almost always not what is supposed to happen”. Curriculum for infants and toddlers should begin with the skills and inclinations of the children. Infants are genetically wired to move towards certain skills -- walking, communicating, for example. They are internally driven, and have their own learning agenda. The younger they are the more their nature is and should be driving the content of their learning. Lally said, “It’s almost like infants have a curriculum wired into them”. Curriculum for infants should be based on the three Rs: responsiveness, respect, and relationships.

Pam Schiller spoke about the first two years as a “window of opportunity to affect brain development”. The first years of life are critical in affecting the structure of the brain. If a young child’s neurons are activated valuable connections in the brain are connected. It is during this period that people become “wired” for important life skills such as impulse control and problem solving.

Schiller also asserted that 75 per cent of what we know we knew by the time we were five or six years old! She warned against over stimulation. Too many choices cause stimulus overload and the child cannot focus on what is important. Allow learners time to reflect on learning. Active learning is better than passive processing -- children need to touch and move things around. She warned against teaching children before they are ready to learn, which results in learning becoming a chore, something they grow to hate. For one participant this brought to mind young children who have been condemned to long lists of sight words given out of context, thus ensuring that they would surely struggle to gain a love for the richness of reading. However the child who is held comfortable and safe on a lap and read to over and over will view reading as pleasurable and something that they want to do over and over again.

A team member’s comment about the session on brain development follows: “What an important role caregivers play in creating the future by assisting the children in their care. We can help provide rich opportunities for children to lay down the very cognitive structures within their brains that will dictate the sort of adults these children will become. We want to support children to become socially sensitive adults who will have the ability to be creative empathic problem solvers and effective communicators. And to think some people say we are “only babysitters “! I think perhaps a term that is more accurate would be future insurers!”

A session that focused on the Pikler Institute in Hungary and its philosophy and practices provided some interesting messages:

It is important for babies to be told repeatedly that they are important and the importance of hands.

Caregivers need to foster the children's self-awareness by encouraging them to be active participants in whatever is going on. This helps them to know themselves as people. A child is never treated like an object. This results in children trusting themselves and adults, forming safe attachment relationships with adults, and feelings of security that arise out of trust of self and the adult.

One remarkable thing is to see the babies' ability to cooperate. This arises out of predictability. Every baby is picked up exactly the same way. Babies can cooperate because they know what to expect.

***Messages across different curricula.***

A session that provided an introduction to three ways of looking at curricula (Reggio Emilia, the Creative Curriculum, and High Scope) highlighted similarities and differences. Some interesting points made in that session were:

- The teacher plays a vital role, in that curriculum should be based on the teacher's deep knowledge of children.
- The notion of participatory education appealed. It was suggested that it is based on conversations, what two people have when they respect each other.
- Empowerment of children is an aim.
- When you are planning for infants and toddlers, you are planning for possibilities.
- The environment is critical in its impact on teaching and learning.
- Teachers, families and children are researchers together working in collaboration and partnership.
- Two phrases that stood out were the "pedagogy of listening" and the "worthiness of work".

In another session on Global Trends in Early Childhood Education, the challenge of developing new models for new nations was raised. Participants questioned the relevance of Western models for non-Western countries. Curriculum needs to fit the context in which it happens and address the context. We must always keep in mind the diversity within cultures and support that.

Speakers in a session on “What guides the development of a curriculum?” agreed that education policies in some countries contain a “hidden curriculum” and are often driven by a political agenda. For example, is education for everyone? In some countries apartheid practices are buried and curriculum has a powerful role to play in reinforcing equality.

The absence of regulations or quality assurance, reliance on direct teaching methods, lack of teacher training, the professional culture of education, a view of preschool as no more than preparation for school and inadequate funding impact greatly on the curriculum.

Key issues identified included the following:

- the complex nature of curriculum implementation (partnerships/collaborative development)
- the impact of professional culture on teacher practice
- the understanding of adapting curriculum. What does it mean to ‘borrow’ from another curriculum?
- teacher training.

It was agreed that where teachers have not been involved in the development of a curriculum (document), what is actually implemented in classrooms has little connection to the actual document.

Teachers work in a professional culture involving a complex web of past experience (what has worked will work again), values and beliefs about children and learning. Teachers do what makes sense to them when they have had no involvement in the development of a curriculum. Things are more complicated when they have no training in how to implement the curriculum. In situations where teacher education consists of 12 months of training, the educators do not necessarily understand the complexity of the language of a curriculum document.

Where curriculum is developed in collaboration with classroom teachers, they accept ownership for the implementation process.

Curriculum development involves a complex set of variables

- Research
- Curriculum development
- Teacher training/ongoing training.
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Successful implementation involves an integration of these parts to a whole

All speakers in this session affirmed that children’s learning needs are best met when the teacher acts as a facilitator and child is active within the whole learning process. All speakers advocated strongly for quality well researched teaching programs.

***The family’s role in curriculum.***

A number of sessions dealt explicitly or implicitly with the connection between curriculum and families. The critical importance of establishing a strong link between the family and what happens in programs was stressed. Wonderful examples were given of programs that provided opportunities for children and families to learn together in order to help families appreciate the role they can play in nurturing children's curiosity and learning. It is crucial that community culture and knowledge are tapped. In some programs there is a balance between maintaining traditions and encouraging change.

An inspiring and beautifully written account of a program in Mexico was given by Olivia Gonzalez Campos. Excerpts from her handout follow:

*This is a curriculum design experience for small rural and indigenous communities in Mexico. The objective is to establish a strong link between children's and adults' education.*

*Community Workshop activities try to increase the passion for knowledge, joyful reading free thinking, practices of reasoning and questioning, as well as trying to increase the joyful artistic expressions, in order to obtain a better understanding and knowledge of the world, to know about its beginnings, its functioning, its changeable complexity; to know the world's richness and its cultural diversity as well as the interaction among different knowledges.*

*In an activity named "The hunting of black spots on your feet", girls and boys from the community hide behind a curtain being careful that the others can only see their shoeless feet. Adults guess which ones are their own children's feet. After that, they talk about difficulties and strategies to recognise their sons' and daughters' feet, and each family draws its children's feet in a big mural. Then they talk about their memories of their children's first steps. This whole situation creates rich talk between parents and children.*

*From a curriculum design point of view, Community Workshop activities have basically three main purposes which are:*

- 1. We want to create an atmosphere of friendship among participants. In this moment we want to support a disposition to be involved in the activities. It includes greetings, welcome and a dynamic to gain motivation.*
- 2. In this moment we want participants to talk, listen, read, write, count, measure, draw, model, act, perform, look, feel, express around an interesting topic that we observe in everyday life.*
- 3. To close the activity, participants share and make a demonstration of what they have learned or have produced. This moment includes agreements about activities to be performed in the future and farewell.*

*Community Workshops activities apply a diversity of languages, for example:*

*Participants always have to use the library, doing a creative and analytical reading, and making their own texts.*

*Frequently, Community Workshops apply the strength of music, oral and written word, oral tradition, drawing, painting, embroidering, knitting, sculpture, handcraft, video, radio, theater, dancing as languages which help to communicate and to reflect among the participants in order to make a strong self identity sense and help to develop abilities and competence.*

*Participants always talk, argue, debate and express feelings and emotions as an excellent tool for an intercultural education.*

Rebecca New said that “Early childhood services are links to rather than substitutes for family”. She added that “Sometimes the best way to be professional is to not show what you know and allow others to show you what they know”.

### ***The importance of context.***

This theme was woven into a number of discussions. Perhaps it is best summed up by Rebecca New, who said “Curriculum reflects and contributes to cultural values, beliefs and goals”. Curriculum includes rights, rituals, norms, pleasures and prejudices. It reflects the norms and expectations of a society.

A session on adapting curricula to other cultural contexts came to the conclusion that the starting point for appropriate curriculum is asking six questions:

- What image of child do we hold?
- What is the context?
- What do we believe?
- What do we hope to achieve for children?
- How does this curriculum model fit?
- How can we see ourselves here?

A beautifully made film “Children First, First Nations” offered a powerful look at the hopeful, exciting work in the Head Start Programs in British Columbia. First Nations members are the subject and the stars. They tell their stories, and young families show delight in being able to help develop, be involved with, and support programs for young children. It was clear that the center staff with community weave curriculum and the culture into a whole. This film demonstrates the near destruction of family, self-esteem, language and culture that resulted from the practice for many years of children being taken away from their families to schools far from home. It underscores the courage, perseverance and determination that has led to the First Nation’s survival and the great delight the families take in what children are learning. Several generations participate to implement this curriculum. A participant commented: “Every early childhood professional should see this video and especially those working to help preserve indigenous cultures throughout the world. It was for me, perhaps the most important presentation at this conference. We can all learn from it.”

### ***Art and drawing in the curriculum.***

“Art is a universal language.”

The speakers in a session on the role of art and drawing each spoke about the importance of allowing children time and materials to express their ideas through drawing. One speaker reminded participants that “Art should not be a privilege for a few gifted individuals or for adults alone.... Art programs for children should be free of the bias of the adult world and the environment should be stimulating”.

In Bolivia where poverty dictates that many children do not have access to commercial materials, they work with stones scratching on stone or clay with sticks. They draw in the earth or use charcoal. Drawings are produced with crude tools made from rough little sticks of burnt wood. Some children in Bolivia, where paper and even water at times was not available, expressed ideas, practised and refined drawings in sand trays that could be wiped and used over and over.

Even in very basic settings parents and teachers can help children develop visual perception. Tools can come from the environment, colours can be made from natural materials like flower petals, and sand, clay and sticks can all provide the child the opportunity to draw.

Perhaps not all of us have the luxury of being able to provide children quality materials or have specially trained art teachers but we can all support children’s artistic expression. All the speakers reflected an image of the child as a powerful constructor of knowledge.

### ***Environments as part of the curriculum.***

One session focusing on natural environments reminded participants that childhood is changing and child lack direct contact with nature. This appears to be a global issue – all over the world, children are playing less outdoors. Jim Greenman put it cleverly: Children are losing ground – to the *pinched confines of the indoors*. The outdoors has become a passageway to the indoors.” This holds serious implications for children’s health and physical well being at the very least.

One presenter asked the question “How do children become wise (or spiritual, or sensual, or physical) without contact with nature?”

Vicki Stoecklin said that whenever adults are asked about their childhoods, they remember their experience with nature, the outdoor play they enjoyed...not the \$35,000 plastic climbing structure. We need to help adults (educators and parents) to remember the value of experiencing the outdoors/experiencing nature.

How can we expect children to save the world if they have no relationship, no connection with it?

A great photo image was shared showing children playing outdoors with the following quote: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and then along came lawyers and architects and children could no longer play like this.

***Curriculum has relationships at the center.***

A number of presentations emphasised that relationships are at the core of what matters in curriculum – relationships between adults and children, children and other children, teachers and families and the program and its communities.

As was said in the beginning, this is just a small sample of the wisdom shared at the World Forum on issues related to curriculum.

Perhaps the learning is best summed up in the words of a participant:

*Tears rose to my eyes many times during this Forum – spilling over in sorrow...and there was also profound celebration. Many stories, people, memories, and images touched me deeply. I was reminded often that curriculum is what we do all of the day with children – transitions, story times, activity times, changing diapers, eating, playing outside, doing science, consoling, limiting, listening, etc. Similar to the expression “you vote with your feet”, everything we do with children is curriculum.*