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The pre-school education curriculum in Finland: How is the social development of children included in the curriculum?

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This paper will clarify how the social development of six-year-old children is addressed in the Finnish national curriculum. The paper both examines the pre-school curriculum and describes some results of research conducted at the Department of Teachers Education in Rauma.

In Finland a law relating to the pre-school education of six year old children was passed at the beginning of the year 2000. Pre-school education is voluntary for children, but the local municipality must arrange and offer it to all wanting it as from August 2001. It can be integrated into the day care or primary school systems. The national curriculum for pre-school is to be planned by teams established by the National Board of Education. An important area of pre-school education is the social development of six-year-old children. There is one major question - how is it possible to offer the support and development that every child needs personally? One solution is personal planning for everyone, the other solution is through the content of both national and local curricula.

The Department of Teacher Education in Rauma undertook research on the opinions of kindergarten teachers, parents and officials about the current local pre-school curriculum and how it works in practice in pre-schools. Most kindergarten teachers and parents identified social development as the most important area in pre-school education.

The pre-school curriculum for six-year-old children in Finland

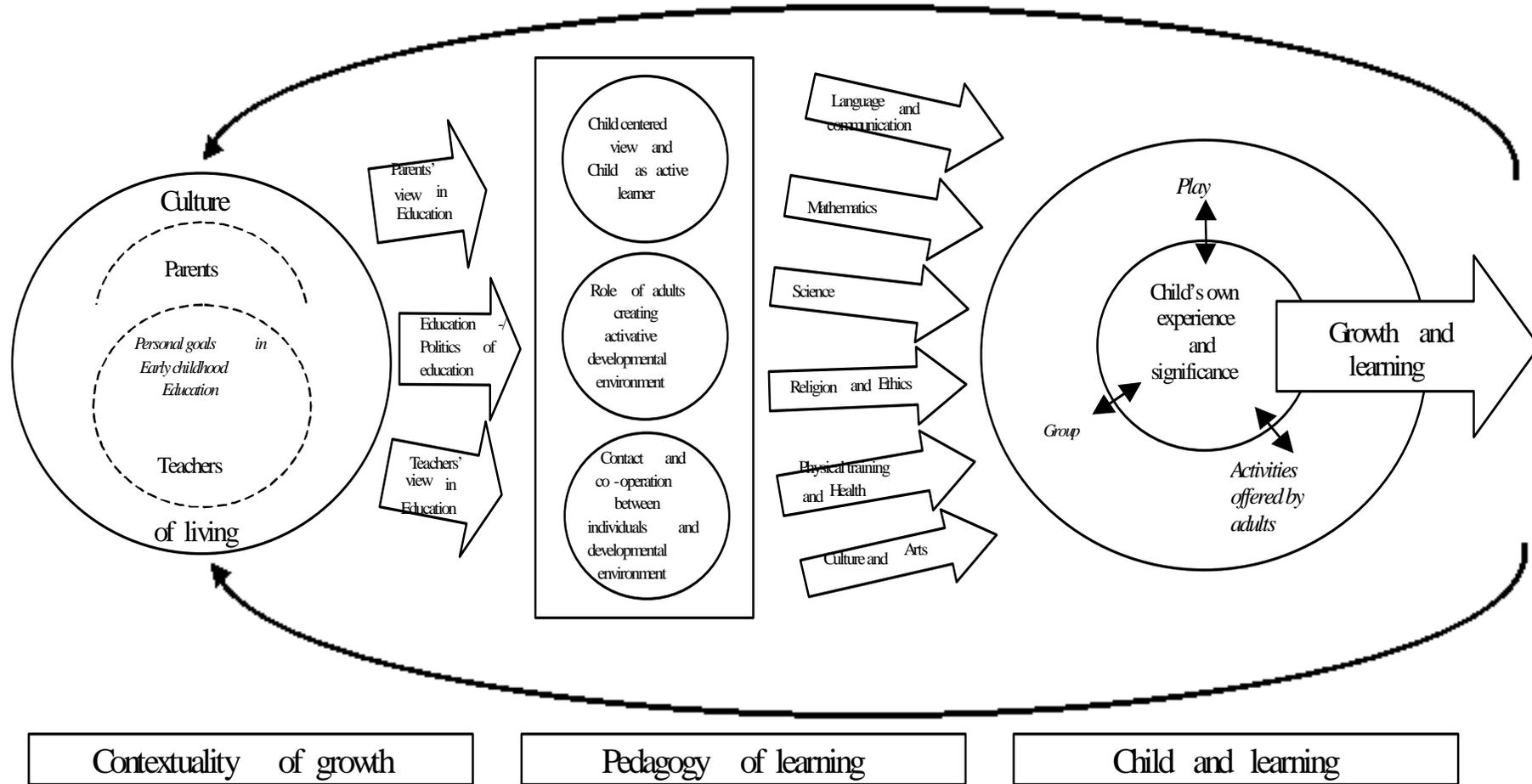
The pre-school education of six-year-old children in Finland was previously the responsibility of the social administration, but with the 2000 law now comes under the education administration. This new situation changes many aspects of pre-school education - the curriculum, the contents, the methods and the teachers. After some years these changes are expected to have an influence on primary school education, especially the beginning of the learning process.

The basic planning of the national pre-school curriculum is under way, and will be completed by the end of June 2000. It will be monitored during the next school year and some pilot groups will test it in practice. On the 1st August 2001 the new curriculum will be ready, and all pre-schools must plan their programme according it.

Contextual learning as a model for pre-school education

The theory behind the national pre-school curriculum is based on cognitive psychology and constructivism, and the contextual learning model. The social development of children is included within this contextual learning model. Hujala (1998, 214) has described the learning process in pre-school education in a model of contextual learning illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The contextual view of the learning process in pre-school. The model created by Hujala (1998, 201)



The whole living environment - home, pre-school and everything surrounding the child - are important supports in the learning process. The pedagogy of learning is integrated with the whole environment. Approaching learning and pedagogy in this way allows the possibility for children to learn many different things and gain experiences of a real social life. This kind of model addresses a child's learning and development holistically. The care of the child and its safety are essential, and form the basis for all other elements of the learning process.

This approach guarantees that a child receives support in the learning environment and his or her self-confidence and emotional life can develop without disturbance. This kind of learning environment gives a child the chance to know his or her own culture and identify with it. Children can learn social rules together, and create their own play and social culture. Teachers and parents have the responsibility for arranging activities and providing a good learning environment for children. Child-centred education is good, but teachers must recognise what constitutes a good balance between child-centred and teacher-directed education.

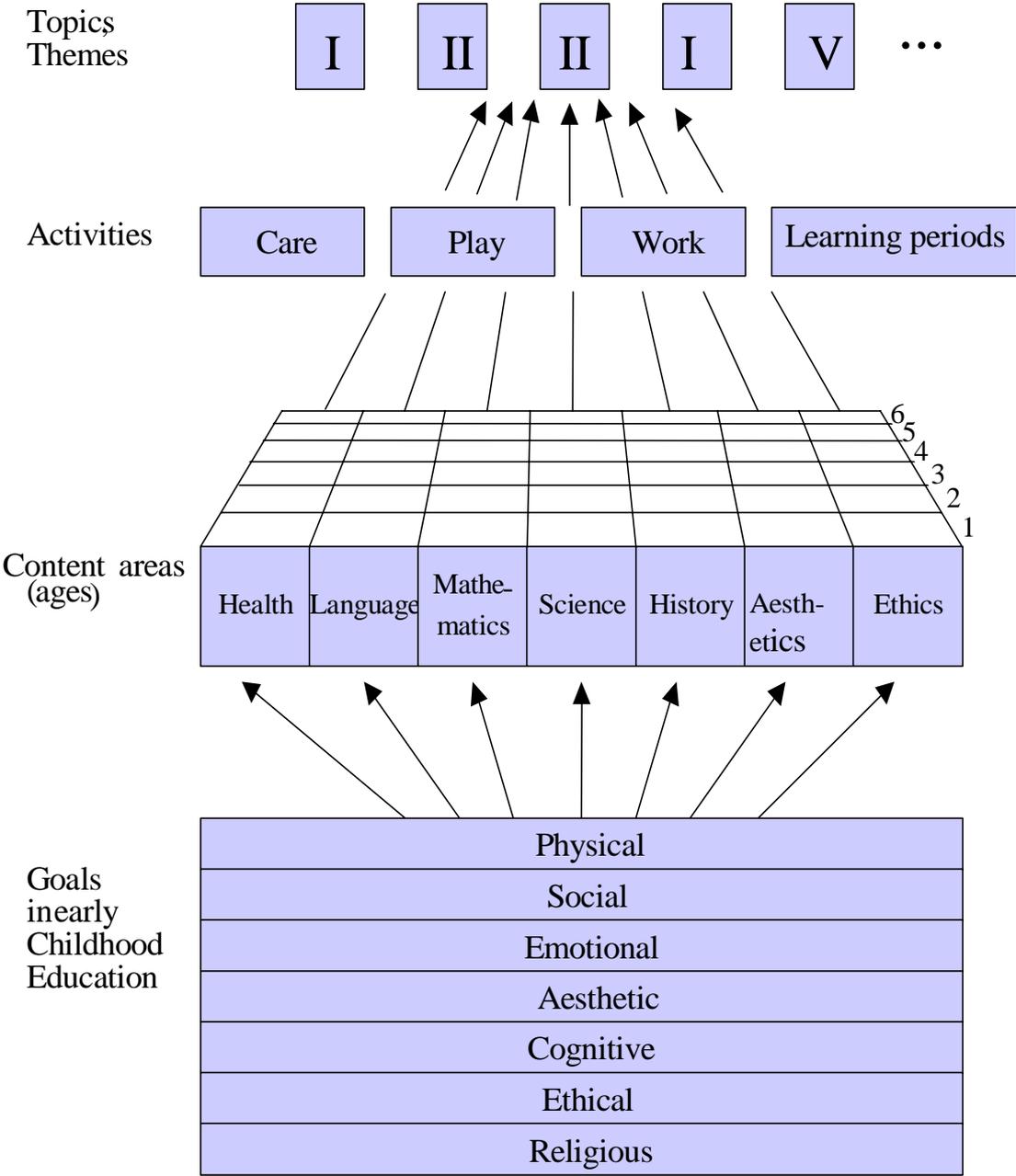
The integrated model of the pre-school curriculum

The plan for the pre-school curriculum is based on the idea of integrating subjects. There are not different subjects, but only learning and developing areas. Behind this approach are the educational goals of day care, which combine both caring and learning. Hujala (1998, 4) calls this combination 'educare'.

In this model all those factors to be included in the curriculum are collected and planned with an integrated curriculum in mind. The main principle is to include a range of topics with which children can gain experience of different kinds of learning activities. These must have at least two essential functions. The first is that the theme must be adapted to the contents and the second is that the learning must be continuous and progress from the concrete level to the abstract. One of the most important areas is that of social development. The goals of early childhood education are physical, social, emotional, aesthetic, cognitive, ethical and religious education.

How should we develop the curriculum so that it is suitable for six-year-old children? It ought to increase children's motivation to learn, and support their natural development in language, social skills and thinking. According to much research, the curriculum of six-year-old children's education should not be a separate-subject curriculum but an integrated one.

Figure 2: The integrated model of the curriculum in early childhood education (Brotherus et al. 1994,70)



Children’s activities in groups

Understanding the meaning of the group, and the company of other children of the same age, is very important for a child’s social development. In a learning environment of this kind children have the opportunity of playing and talking together and of working together in many ways, for example in co-operative learning and various group activities.

It is good for children to be together, to develop various areas such as altruism, helping and sharing. These and other important social skills must be learned during the early years, at a time when children are able to learn them in a natural way. Teachers must

recognise the importance of these skills, and need to arrange suitable activities for children in the learning environment.

Research on the local curriculum and educational content

Our research was conducted at the Department of Teacher Education in Rauma. Its general purpose was to clarify what kindergarten teachers, parents and social and educational administrators thought about the content and organisation of pre-school education. In this paper, their opinions relating specifically to the social area are examined.

The sample consisted of 54 kindergarten teachers, 145 parents and 14 administrators. The teachers were from local kindergartens and over 70 % responded to our questions. The research data was collected through questionnaires for the kindergarten teachers and parents, and through interviews for the administrators.

One of the objectives of this research was to discover what kindergarten teachers thought to be their most important educational tasks. They were asked to identify what, in their view, were the three most important areas or subjects in education and care. Over 70% of the answers mentioned the area of social development (to be with others, play with others, understand, be ready to help, to develop an identity by being with others, to grow without being selfish etc.). Kindergarten teachers also gave, as a second choice in importance, children’s emotional development and self-esteem. The questions were open and the classifications were made afterwards. The results are shown in Figure 3 (percentages are not absolute).

Figure 3: Kindergarten teachers’ opinions about the most important task in pre-school

	n	%
1. Developing social skills	38	72
2. Emotional area; self- esteem	30	57
3. Readiness of learning (language, mathematics etc.)	13	25
4. Learning environment; basic security	12	23
5. Nature and environment education	5	9
6. Culture and art	7	13

Almost all teachers indicated that the social area in children’s education was important. This was one of the most significant results. There are many reasons for this. Teachers had studied social development in depth during their own teacher education. Most teachers have had experience with children over many years. They had the ability to reflect on their teaching and activities with children. There have been courses arranged for teachers dealing with young children’s learning in language, reading and writing. Much has been talked about children’s awareness of learning, with often only reading, writing and mathematics mentioned. Despite this teachers think that the basic skills are social and emotional.

Teachers indicated what they thought should be the main features of the local curriculum. They were asked to give each feature a value in order of importance. The answers were listed and teachers were asked to mark them on a scale of 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5

the highest). The percentages are not in a relationship to each other, but express the volume of response to each question. These results are in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Kindergarten teachers' opinions (as percentages) about the main ideas in the local curriculum. (N= 54)

	%
1. Social life	98
2. Individualism	96
3. Responsibility for child's learning	91
4. Activities	87
5. Co-operation between pre-school and primary school	87
6. Making curricula	89
7. Evaluating	94

These results suggest that all the above are important, identifying what kindergarten teachers think are the main features to be contained in the local curriculum and are also suitable in practice. Social life and social development were considered the most important areas of the curriculum.

The parents' answers were almost identical, with only a few differences occurring. They also gave most importance to the social area and individualism. Differences occurred in the importance attached to 'responsibility for child's learning' and 'designing curricula'. This is easy to understand since parents' interests are different. The important point is that both teachers and parents see the social area in the same way. The opinions and views of the administrators were again almost identical to those of teachers and parents.

Conclusion

The most important factor in day care and pre-school is the quality of the educators and teachers. The success or failure of teaching or day care education is dependent on their personality, their relationship with the children and to education. A secondary factor can be defined as the social relationships between the children - the peer group itself acting as an agent of socialisation. Pre-school and day care offer the company of other children, the opportunity to learn to live together and to learn the social skills by means of which individuals are able to develop their humanity. Very large groups are not desirable and research has shown that children are overburdened by an excessive number of social relationships (Niiranen 1995). It is also very trying for educators to keep up with such oversized groups. In any case, a peer group for a toddler is very important in the development of his or her own identity.

Play is very important as part of this. Children learn about life and get acquainted with the social world on a child's level through playing. In play children can find their own place in the community and can test their abilities in their relationships with other children. Play is the basis of day care and pre-school pedagogy and staff are well trained to help children realise their potential and social skills through play.

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