A VISION FOR THE EARLY YEARS CURRICULUM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.

Linda Miller
University of Hertfordshire
United Kingdom

***********

Cet article presente un point de vue strictement personnel d'un programme pour les enfants d'école maternelle en UK. Il décrit brièvement les influences historiques qui ont touché la position actuelle. Quelques-uns des principes généralement acceptés sont expliqués brièvement. Ces principes sont examinés en fonction des menaces actuelles, par exemple, en introduisant un programme légal. Il fait le rapport des possibilités offertes par la recherche en cours et les nouvelles possibilités de formation des travailleurs.

En este artículo se ofrece una perspectiva personal sobre una visión para el desarrollo de un plan de estudios para los primeros años (hasta los 8 años) en el Reino Unido. Se describen brevemente las influencias históricas sobre la situación actual. Unos principios generalmente reconocidos que respaldan el plan de estudios de los primeros años se replantean. Estos luego se investigan en relación a amenazas corrientes, por ejemplo, en la forma de marcos establecidos por la ley y oportunidades surgidas por unos proyectos investigativos en curso y nuevas posibilidades de formación.

***********

Introduction.

In her privately owned day nursery two year old Grace is carrying out her task during work time. She is meant to follow the dotted outline drawing of a mouse, then colour it in. I would guess that the intended learning purpose is to help to develop fine motor control. In a chapter entitled Look at Me I'm Only Two Brenda Griffin (in Abbot and Rogers (eds)1994) questions what it is like to be “properly two” in a group setting. To be fair to Grace’s nursery, work time is a short time in a long and busy day. Grace is happily involved in other activities such as talking and playing. Her colouring attempts were proudly presented to me by her parents - they did not have a problem with it. Nevertheless I question whether tasks like this enable Grace to be “properly two”.

Two more examples illustrate my point and set the context for this article. The Quality in Diversity Project based at Goldsmith’s College, London is exploring curriculum practice with practitioners in a wide range of early years settings in the United Kingdom (UK). In a recent workshop, a project researcher working with the 3-5 age group, showed an example of a detailed labelled flower diagram, underneath which was written “This is how photosynthesis happens.” I’m not sure if the three year olds who were given the worksheets were meant to read them, colour in the flower or make paper aeroplanes with them - but I hope it was the paper aeroplanes!. A similar example was shared by the project researcher for the 5-8 years of age phase, of a task given to five year olds in the reception class, which was to colour in a map of the British Isles. The efforts were very similar to Grace’s. They did not manage to stay within the lines!. I assume this task was linked to the National Curriculum Key Stage 1 Geography work, which requires the children to become aware of the world beyond their locality. Similar points to these have arisen from Drummond’s (1995) investigations of provision for four year olds in reception classes in some Local Education Authorities in UK.

I could of course, recount many examples of good practice, but, the point I wish to make is that for some children in early childhood settings in the UK, this is what it can be like to be 2, 3, 4, and 5 years of age. This raises the question of why it has to be like this.
In my work as a Teacher Educator, I was recently required to review what we know about some of the key underpinning principles relating to young children's learning, with reference to current research, and to put this into the context of my vision for the early years curriculum. Moss and Penn (1996) describe a vision as an expression of values or beliefs. This suggests it is about having a forward looking view of what we think should be happening, based on what we believe to be right for young children and their families; a view which recognizes the cultural and social diversity of family life. I also took from Moss and Penn the notion of a *gradualist* vision, based upon what is happening now and where this might be taking us in the UK. My vision does not take great leaps forward.

**Taking stock - the historical perspective.**

In the UK there are many imprints from the past on our current provision for early years education, on our ideas about the curriculum and our understanding of how children learn. The way the provision is organized and the content, i.e. the curriculum, are historically closely intertwined, yet remain covered by separate legislation. Nursery education in publicly funded nursery schools and classes remains at the discretion of local authorities. Publicly funded day care is limited to a small percentage of children defined as "in need" (typically less than 1%) (Audit Commission 1996). The gap in provision has been filled by private nursery providers, the voluntary sector in the form of playgroups and creches or by childminders, nannies and au pairs, providing a mix of home based care and education; services financed largely by parents and caregivers (Ball 1994). This leaves us with what the Government calls *diversity* and what Hevey (1986) calls an "*Under 5's Muddle*"

There are implications here for the quality of the curriculum and the adults who offer it, however well intentioned they might be, as some forms of provision are considerably under resourced. The introduction of a *nursery voucher scheme* in 1995, in which every parent of a four year old child receives a voucher, which they can exchange for, or use towards a place in a preschool centre of their choice, is unlikely to move us on here. Although recognizing that education *can* take place in a range of settings, vouchers are more likely to work against collaborative working, inducing competition between providers.

As in other countries (Rodd, 1996) we are left in the UK with a philosophical and structural divide between care and education, both in terms of provision and curriculum content. This has implications for staff training, the status of early years workers and the curriculum. This divide between care and education is a major and continuing barrier to developing a curriculum which combines both these elements, despite the growth of combined nursery centres which attempt to combine both. Numerous reports have stressed the need for this to happen. The report *"Starting with Quality"* (DES, 1990) - commonly known as the *Rumbold Report* after the author - and the *Start Right Report* (Ball, 1994) endorse the notion of *educare*, based on the view that care and education are inseparable and that young children need both. We are therefore in a position in the UK where we have no agreed curriculum framework common to both settings, which is acceptable and workable amongst a range of practitioners with diverse backgrounds of training and qualifications.

**A Curriculum for the Early Years.**

In the UK we have a legacy of play as a vehicle for learning derived from such pioneers as Froebel and Susan Isaacs. From Piaget, comes an emphasis on the central role of concrete experience, discovery and exploration (Bruce, 1987). Therefore,