

Anne Glover

Over the past two decades, throughout the Pacific region, there has been a dramatic increase in enrolment of young children in early childhood education (ECE) programmes. In Fiji, for example, the number of children attending preschool programmes rose from 5000 in 1985 to 7500 in 1995.

In Kiribati, since 1980, more than 40 preschools have been established on South Tarawa alone.

The growth of early childhood programmes is seen as a positive development, for there is general recognition in the region that the period from birth to six years is the most important period of development of the human being (Guild 1995). As stated in the UNESCO document, ECCE: Basic Indicators on Young Children (1995), 'proportionally that period is the richest in terms of learning outcomes as well as physical and mental development.' Additionally, there is a growing body of research which demonstrates that of all educational investments, early childhood education achieves the highest rate of social return both in developing and industrialised countries (UNESCO, 1995).

Recently, however, a number of Pacific early childhood educators (ECEs) have expressed concern that the focus of the early childhood curriculum is changing and that these changes may not be in the best interests of the child. From a focus on providing a curriculum which supports the holistic development of every child, i.e. while promoting cognitive and social development, programmes are also concerned with children's physical, emotional and creative development, there is a shift in some sectors to an almost exclusive focus on cognitive development. Kindergartens and preschools which look like poorly equipped, miniature schools and in which children spend most of their time sitting, listening, learning to read, write and count, are emerging. In a few instances what was once taught in first grade is now being taught in preschool and some teachers are being pressured by parents to provide an 'academic only' programme.

Curriculum change is to be expected. As with all other curricula, the early childhood curriculum is

influenced by demographic, social, political and economic factors, as well as traditions and ideologies (Kessler, 1992). It, too, is vulnerable to the social and political influences currently affecting primary and secondary education in the region. Like other curriculum, it is dynamic, ever-changing.

At the same time, since ECE is not financed or controlled by government in most countries (exceptions include Nauru) early childhood educators have a good deal of autonomy in developing a curriculum. Without the restraints of government syllabi, individual preschool teachers largely determine both content and methodology i.e. individual teachers or staff teams decide what is to be taught and how. While many ECEs would agree that it is desirable to have national curriculum statements to assist them in their planning, currently such documents do not exist and teachers enjoy both the freedom and responsibility of developing appropriate curricula.

The growth in programmes and the current shift towards a more academically-oriented curricula suggest that it is timely to reflect on early childhood programmes generally, and the development of the early childhood curriculum specifically.

Perhaps a good starting point for reflection on the curriculum is to ask some questions - to make the issue problematic, rather than assume that we have all the answers. Thus it seems timely for all those involved, either directly or indirectly, in the education of young children to ask:

1. What is early childhood education for?
 - To what, and to whose ends is it directed?
 - Is it only a preparation for school or is it, as Bruce (1987) believes, valid in itself?
 - Is it an agent of social reproduction or social transformation?

2. How should the learning environment be structured? Should play remain the dominant teaching/learning method?
3. What should young children be learning? What, as Evans (1996) asks, is worthwhile knowledge for young children?

(Questions of purpose, aims, methodology and children's learning are obviously not readily disentangled from a consideration of curriculum content. Nor should they be, since the ECE curriculum, in its broadest sense, is about all of these.)

One clear message that has already emerged from the field is that, despite the diversity of ECE programmes in the region (even the names differ e.g. kindergarten, preschool, early learning centre etc.), most ECEs share some principles and values and some mutual understandings of the purposes which programmes serve. At a recent regional ECE Coordinators' workshop, attended by participants from Vanuatu, Tonga, Kiribati, Western Samoa, Tuvalu and Fiji, participants espoused the following principles:

- ECE programmes serve young children and their families
- Each child is respected and treated as an individual
- The centre environment is an extension of home - it is a relaxed, secure learning environment
- Play is the main teaching/learning method
- A close link between the centre and the parents is important
- The curriculum is based on child development
- The programme is flexible, allowing the children freedom of expression and choice
- Respect for diversity is promoted
- Child-centred and child-directed activities are important

Current practice throughout the region suggests that purpose is related to (1) supporting parents in

providing for the holistic development of children, (2) educating parents and (3) preparing children for school. Activities which allow children to develop their abilities in the areas of language and communication; to develop their physical skills (both fine and gross motor); to develop their social skills; to extend their knowledge of the environment; to grow emotionally; to engage in early mathematics, reading and writing; to express themselves creatively; and to extend children's cultural knowledge are provided in most centres. Parents and communities are encouraged to participate in programmes, in management and in fund-raising activities, and are recognised as the child's first and most important educators. Many centres run parent/community information and education programmes, which range from informal talks to on-going seminars with guest speakers.

Before too much more growth occurs, and prior to any external specification of curriculum content, early childhood educators in the various island nations must stimulate debate which has, at its heart, an exploration of the questions raised above. Without debate and reflection, ECE cannot effectively withstand challenges from those pushing for more academically-oriented programmes, (and the risk of having) to adopt a 'push-down' curriculum. Such debate and reflection will ensure that ECE moves forward with confidence, building on the foundations laid by early pioneers such as the Pacific Preschool Council, responding to the tensions and growing into a strong, viable educational enterprise, which truly makes a difference to young children's lives.

References

- Bruce, T. (1987) *Early childhood education*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Evans, R. (1996) *Professionalism in early childhood education: Towards the year 2000*. Paper presented at the Regional Conference on Towards Excellence in Early Childhood Education: Policies and Practices in the 21st Century, Faculty of Education, University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.
- Guild, d. (1995) *Evaluation of the early childhood care and education programme - Kiribati*. Suva: UNICEF.

Kessler, S. (1992) The social context of the early childhood curriculum. In S. Kessler & B. Swadener (eds). *Reconceptualising the early childhood of curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press.

UNESCO (1995) ECCE: Basic indicators on young children. UNESCO education sector.