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Dewey: a panacea for the 'schoolification' epidemic

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ABSTRACT

High quality early years' education is associated with providing a child-centred curriculum based on a knowledge of how young children learn. The global 'schoolification epidemic' has led to an increasing focus on prescribed curricula and presents as a serious threat to the quality of children's early years' experiences. Findings from research in Ireland confirm this shift towards 'schoolification' and the association of school readiness with a child's age and the acquisition of academic skills. Revisiting Dewey's writings provides a much needed impetus for a return to child-centredness and a re-conceptualisation of early years' education as a process of forming fundamental dispositions.

KEYWORDS

School readiness; early years' education; schoolification; emergent curriculum; dispositions

Introduction

The benefits of high quality early years' education continue to be articulated in terms of the social-emotional, cognitive and academic aspects of learning and development for children and the wider benefits for families and society (Melhuish et al. 2015; Whitebread and O'Sullivan 2012). High-quality early years' provision has been identified with reference to five key dimensions: the quality of the adult-child verbal interaction; knowledge and understanding of the curriculum; knowledge of how young children learn; adult skills in supporting children in resolving conflicts and assisting parents in providing learning interactions at home (Melhuish 2015). Two of these dimensions in particular related to the curriculum and how young children learn are at risk of being compromised by the 'schoolification-epidemic' (House 2011; PACEY 2013). The 'schoolification epidemic' refers to a global trend whereby in preparing children for primary schools, pre-primary settings are required to implement a prescribed curriculum and focus on the development of children's academic skills to the detriment of child-centred curricula and pedagogy (Brooks and Murray 2016; Ring et al. 2016). This trend is in danger of gaining unstoppable momentum through the influence of the global education reform movement, which promotes the standardisation of education; an emphasis on core subjects; low risk ways to reach learning goals; corporate management models; a reduction in teacher autonomy; curriculum prescription and intensive assessment and performance (Berry 2016; Hargreaves and Goodson 2006; Sahlberg 2006). The proposed introduction of the International Early Learning Study (IELS), focused on measuring outcomes for children aged 4½ to 5½ raises further concerns in relation to the ongoing 'schoolification' of pre-primary education (OECD 2017). The IELS, through including young children in international comparison data has the potential to become 'PISA for the early years' and create a situation whereby early years' educators are pressurised to prepare children to achieve optimal levels of performance with reference to the IELS assessment foci.

This paper explores the evolving 'schoolification epidemic' with reference to a national evaluation of concepts of school readiness among parents and educators in Ireland (Ring et al. 2016).

Implications for child-centredness and curriculum in the early years are discussed and Dewey's concept of the child and the curriculum presented as a panacea to stem this epidemic and its associated threat to the erosion of childhood.

An examination of concepts of school readiness among parents and educators in Ireland

The Irish Research Council commissioned a national research study to examine concepts of school readiness among parents and educators at pre-primary and primary levels in Ireland (Ring et al. 2016). The study included an extensive review of national and international literature related to school readiness and employed a two-phase sequential exploratory methodological approach, comprising both a qualitative (Phase 1) and a quantitative phase (Phase 2). An examination of the literature suggests that school readiness is a multi-faceted concept influenced by, and located within an ecological framework (Ring et al. 2016). School readiness emerged as a concept dependant on the specific historical, cultural, socio-economic and political ecosystem within which pre-primary and primary education had evolved. Consonant with the ecological framework suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and adapted in Figure 1. Below, three overlapping spheres of influence on school-readiness were clearly identifiable.

At the macro-level, policy-makers shape the rationale for school readiness through prescribing early years' curricula and pedagogy, while at the micro-level early years' educators implement these directives. The meso-level indicates the interrelationships between home/community/pre-primary and primary education, which continue to impact on, and shape the experience of school-readiness for all stakeholders.

Internationally pre-primary education emerged as being increasingly influenced by primary education and school readiness pre-dominantly measured by a child's age, cognitive skills and social and behavioural dispositions. The variation in practice across countries in relation to compulsory school

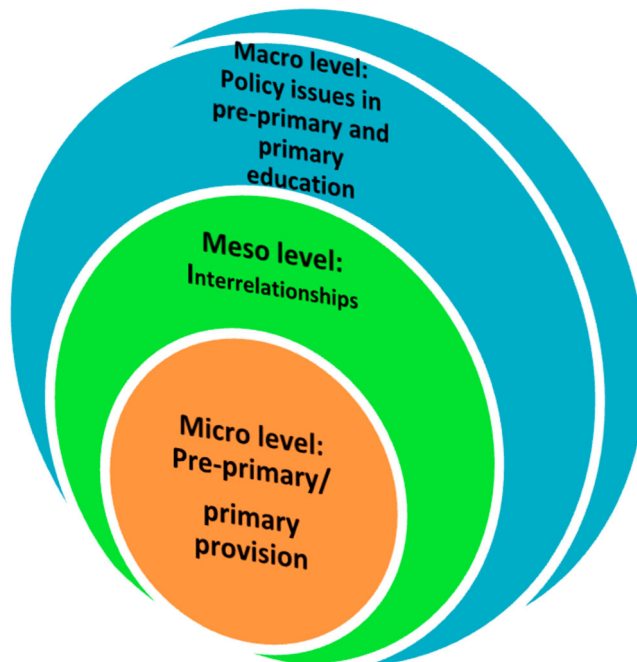


Figure 1. An ecological framework for school readiness adapted from Ring et al. (2016).

starting age in [Table 1](#) demonstrates clearly the relationship between the concept of school-readiness and the child's specific education ecosystem.

Custom and practice in specific contexts appear to be the key influences on school starting age. In Ireland, while the school starting age is officially six, children may enrol in primary school from age four and almost all-five-year olds and half of four-year-olds in Ireland are enrolled in reception classes in primary schools (Ring et al. 2016). The principles of pre-primary education in countries such as Finland reflect a playful and more unstructured approach to early learning, while the experiences of children the same age in Northern Ireland, England and Ireland differ significantly in this regard. The role of macro-level policy development in prescribing curriculum and pedagogy consistent with children's developing cognitive skills and social and behavioural dispositions at the school starting phase becomes critical in this context.

Research methodology

Phase One of the research focused on exploring the perspectives and experiences of 30 parents and 32 pre-primary and primary teachers through semi-structured interviews. Fifty-seven pre-school children, aged between three and four, also participated in 10 child conferences (Clark and Moss 2011). In order to ensure that identifiable sub-groups were represented in the data, a stratified random sample (Gideon 2012; Gravetter and Forzano 2012) was selected from the list of primary schools

($N = 3,299$) in Ireland using the grouping criteria detailed in [Table 2](#).

Each primary school provided the names of two feeder pre-primary settings, with 10 settings finally agreeing to participate in the study. In Phase Two of the study, an online survey was disseminated to 500 pre-primary settings (response rate: 29.6% ($n = 148$)) and 500 primary schools (response rate: 23.8% ($n = 114$)) based on a probability sampling technique, related to the stratification criteria outlined in [Table 2](#). The online survey was administered using the PsychData® online survey development and hosting application (Locke and Keiser-Clarke 2014). Qualitative data were analysed through the use of Nvivo (QSR International 2013) and quantitative data were exported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences computer programme for analysis (IBM 2014). The research was conducted with reference to stringent ethical principles and guidelines related to the protection of children in research were prioritised (DCYA 2012).

Research findings

Consonant with the literature reviewed, the concept of school readiness as understood by the research participants emerged as a complex multi-faceted concept influenced by policy at the macro-level and participants' direct experience at the micro-level.

The importance of a child's cognitive skills, such as maths, reading and verbal ability in addition to a child's social and behavioural maturation were referred to by all participants as key elements of the concept of school readiness. Pre-primary teachers considered it 'very important' for children to be able to recognise numbers and letters and to be able to count, match and sort, while they considered it 'important' for children to be able to write letters prior to commencing primary school. Primary

Table 1. Compulsory school starting age internationally adapted from Eurydice (2014).

School starting age	Country
4 years	Northern Ireland
5 years	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales
6 years	Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey
7 years	Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Sweden

Table 2. Sub-groups included in stratified random sample of primary schools.

School	Location	Grouping
1	Urban	Area of socio-economic disadvantage
2	Urban	Irish language kindergarten
3	Urban	Mainstream kindergarten
4	Urban	Special provision for children with disabilities
5	Rural	Mainstream mixed-gender kindergarten
6	Rural	Mainstream kindergarten in an Irish language speaking area
7	Rural	Mainstream single-sex

teachers’ expectations focused on children’s ability to take turns, share, be independent, engage in social activities, employ correct pencil grip and demonstrate early writing skills. Parents expressed concern in relation to children’s social and emotional maturity when starting school, while also referring to the importance of the acquisition of academic skills. The need for children to know letters, numbers and sounds and to be able to hold a pencil and write, before starting school was referred to by 20 of the 30 parents interviewed.

An analysis of the child conversations indicated young children’s pre-occupation with the curriculum, the limited availability for play they perceived to be a feature of primary school and the requirement to do ‘homework’. They persistently referred to the scale of the primary school and seemed to be pre-occupied with entering this ‘grown-up’ and less play-focused world as noted by one child: ‘[The school is] big ... bigger than any school in the world ... bigger than a giant [and the children would need] help finding their way around by the teacher ...’. These pre-occupations were also reflected in children’s drawings as detailed in [Table 3](#).

The research findings confirm the influence of the global schoolification trend and the associated move away from child-centred curriculum and pedagogy towards a focus on prescribed outcomes and traditional pedagogical approaches. Concentrating on academic skills and prescribed curricula in the early years ignores key principles of child-development and increases the danger of creating an expectation that all children should reach identical measurable outcomes at the same age. Conversely it has the potential for children who do not reach those outcomes to experience failure at tasks for which they simply require more time to be able to engage in successfully. Revisiting Dewey and combining his theories with more recent research in this area presents us with a panacea to both stem the ‘schoolification epidemic’ and ensure child-centred curricula and pedagogy rather than extrinsic accountability systems underpin all young children’s early education experiences.

The child as the starting point, the centre and the end

The concept of school readiness evident both in the research findings and in a range of international literature reflects a maturationist-environmental approach that promotes a biological view of development and attributes failure to demonstrate readiness to the individual child rather than the quality of the experiences provided for the child (Dockett and Perry 2002). The environmental concept

Table 3. Drawings of children at pre-primary level in Ireland representing their concept of primary school.



identifies readiness with knowing the letters of the alphabet, colours, and shapes, counting and conforming to social behavioural norms. Viewing a child's readiness for school through a maturationist-environmental lens is incompatible with Dewey's concept of the aim of education as the development of individuals to their utmost potential and the ideal of education as being informed by a knowledge of how the child develops (Dewey 1902, 1934a). According to Reay (2016) Dewey would view the contemporary quantification of education as contributing to the learner's passivity and counter to his conceptualisation of education as a process rather than a set of outputs. Dewey's concept of child-centredness was consistent with his rejection of dualisms in education. While he considered that the child's individual development and growth should be the idea to which educators and society aspired, he remained hostile to the principle of unrestrained individuality, believing that some systematic organisation of activities and curriculum were necessary to achieve individuality (Dewey 1934a, 1934b). The authors suggest that Dewey's concept of child-centredness is consonant with the elements of quality isolated by Melhuish (2015) in terms of its reliance on systematic curriculum planning and the guidance of experienced and knowledgeable teachers.

For Dewey, play was central, rather than peripheral to the education process. According to Dennis (1970, 235) Dewey saw play as contributing to education through 'providing the locus for the development of the playful attitude'. Dewey's conceptualisation of play has renewed relevance in light of a growing research base, which provides evidence that young children's engagement in learning, and subsequent performance are enhanced when they perceive learning activities as playful (Howard 2010; Whitebread 2010). Dewey makes an important distinction between the manifested activity of 'play' and the internal 'playful attitude' (Dennis 1970). While free-play affords children the ultimate opportunity to focus on means over ends, which is believed to remove fear of failure and ignite a range of creative and problem-solving processes, creating conditions which nurture playfulness across the curriculum is of particular pedagogical significance (Howard 2010). A number of experimental studies investigating children's problem-solving performance under playful and more formal conditions clearly illustrate that children in playful conditions solve problems more efficiently (Sylva, Bruner, and Genova 1976; Thomas, Howard, and Miles 2006). Playful conditions appear to enhance feelings of control and reduce concern with outcomes. Gray (2013) reviews a range of intriguing research on the effects of evaluation on performance. The findings from this research suggest that the more highly skilled one is at a task, external evaluation and rewards seem to improve performance. On the other hand, for novices, pressure to perform impacts negatively on overall performance. As our concern in early childhood is with nurturing knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions which are still in the process of developing, an emphasis on predetermined outcomes and extrinsic evaluation is likely to be detrimental to this playful attitude which is prerequisite to new learning (Dennis 1970; Gray 2013). Given that a range of studies now lend support to the effectiveness of a child-centred approach, which motivates a commitment to the process of learning in itself, any measures which serve to relegate play to the fringes of the curriculum are unlikely to be in the best interests of children's achievements in their journey through the education system.

A curriculum open to possibilities

In *The Child and the Curriculum* a dualism is suggested between a curriculum that focuses on the transmission of knowledge and a curriculum connected to children's thinking, experiences and interests (Dewey 1902). This dualism persists today in education discourse with the former in danger of being considered superior to the latter in terms of promoting children's academic outcomes. Pring (2014, 94) cautions against this interpretation and refers to the creation of 'false dualisms', which Dewey was opposed to. Instead Pring suggests that Dewey's concept of curriculum was represented by a reconciliation between the two positions.

Continuing to provide children with experiences based on a maturationist-environmental concept of school readiness represents a return to the concept of the 'traditional school' where a pre-ordained body of knowledge is transmitted by the teacher in the form of a prescribed curriculum with children

being tested for mastery. Instead Dewey advised that a child should be allowed to first express his/her impulse and the teacher through questioning and suggestion bring the child to a consciousness and understanding of what has been done while simultaneously signalling the potential for further development (Dewey 1915).

Dewey's ideas are consistent with those of co-constructed learning and sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva 2004). Rather than leading children to finding out what teachers already know, these approaches encourage teachers to work more collaboratively with children to create new meanings. Findings from the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years data in the UK identify pedagogical interactions characterised by sustained shared thinking as a key component of high quality pre-school provision (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva 2004). Transmission models of instruction are quite obviously incompatible with a pedagogical approach, which views teachers and children as collaborators in the learning process.

Dewey's ideas in relation to the role of the teacher in promoting conscious understanding resonates strongly with more recent research which has found that supporting articulation of learning is an important pedagogical strategy in effective teaching interventions (Whitebread, Pino-Pasternak, and Coltman 2015). According to Whitebread, Pino-Pasternak, and Coltman (2015, 99) 'effective teaching interventions are those that make explicit to students the processes through which they learn, and engage students in activities which oblige them to think and talk about their learning'. When the focus shifts exclusively to outcomes, insufficient attention is paid to the process of learning which tends to impact negatively upon children's growth as self-motivated and competent learners.

Dewey's concept of curriculum is compatible with an 'emergent curriculum', which is co-constructed by the children and the adults and naturally individualised and responsive to children's development. Crucially this concept of curriculum reflects an increasing body of research on how children learn most effectively (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 2012; Fortunati 2016). An emergent curriculum increases the likelihood that tasks are relevant and meaningful to children. This is another reason why play creates conditions conducive to learning as when children play, they are in control of their activities thereby creating the likelihood that such activities are meaningful to them. Studies carried out by Istomina (1977) and Mistry, Rogoff, and Herman (2001) have found that children perform better on memory tasks when remembering serves a meaningful purpose. These studies found that children were more competent at recall when asked to remember a list of items to buy when playing shop (Istomina 1977) or when remembering a list of items needed to make lunch (Mistry, Rogoff, and Herman 2001) rather than when simply asked to recall a list of items by an experimenter in a lesson like scenario. The key message here is that tasks need to have a clear purpose for young children. In more traditional models of education, children are often presented with tasks in which the goals are intangible or inaccessible to them (Dennis 1970; Mistry, Rogoff, and Herman 2001). Children's interests, therefore, provide the means through which all learning is achieved. The acquisition of new knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions become endogenous to the authentic and meaningful activities which inspire and excite children's interests.

In promoting democracy as a valued component in education, Dewey highlights the importance of including and responding to all voices (Dewey 1916). Mirroring the role of democracy in education, Article 12 of The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that children have the right to have their opinions taken into account and their views respected in decision-making that affects them. However while including the voice of the child is articulated as a key principle in international policy contexts, including and responding to the child's voice remains a challenge for education systems (Ring and O'Sullivan 2016). The findings of the research study confirm that young children can provide valuable insights into how they perceive their early years' education experiences and underline the importance of embedding a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening for children from the beginning.

Re-conceptualising early childhood education

The maturationist-environmental compromises Dewey's concept of education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions both intellectual and emotional (Dewey and Dewey 1915). Most disturbingly, it is potentially detrimental to children's achieving their full potential through impacting negatively on the development of dispositions such as initiative, curiosity, risk-taking, self-confidence, engagement, persistence and enthusiasm, as children experience failure in completing tasks they are not developmentally ready for (Ring et al. 2016; Ring and O'Sullivan 2016; Wilhelmsen 2016). It ignores current research which consistently demonstrates that the development of dispositions such as problem-solving, adaptability, confidence and curiosity, are closely associated with children's future personal, social and economic well-being (Maddalena 2016).

The current emphasis on academic skills is particularly problematic given that we now know that the development of the skills and dispositions involved in self-regulation, for example, are a crucial component of intentional learning (Whitebread 2010). Competent learners tend to be highly motivated, to demonstrate a tendency to apply existing knowledge in new situations, to plan, monitor and evaluate their performance and to demonstrate flexibility in strategy selection. As discussed elsewhere (Whitebread 2010) the disposition towards being a self-regulated learner emerges during the early years and is highly sensitive to context. A preoccupation with early drilling in academic skills such as reading, writing and counting ignores the fact that skills in the absence of a tendency to apply them are of little value in learning contexts. The skill of reading, for example, is very different to the disposition to be a reader (Katz 1993). The very methods designed to drill those skills deemed important by proponents of the schoolification agenda, tend to hinder children developing the dispositions needed to consolidate and apply them, which in turn leads to children being ill-prepared for the demands of formal learning. Moreover, rather than widening the achievement gap, as methods embedded in outcomes and external rewards tend to do (as they favour children who already have an advantage in a developing skill or domain), an emphasis on supporting all children developing the dispositions needed to learn have the unique potential to close this achievement gap as children enter formal schooling (Blair and Raver 2015). Rather than dichotomising dispositions and academic outcomes it is time to acknowledge the intersection between the two. The message from the research on effective early learning is unambiguous children will be better served when they are supported to develop the dispositions needed to learn rather than when they are forced to learn content which, developmentally, they do not have the prerequisite skills to access and through methods which largely ignore what is known about effective early learning.

Conclusion

At a time when there is no unanimous agreement internationally regarding the content and foci of early years' education, the need for an underpinning philosophy to guide our practice as early years' educators becomes increasingly more urgent if we are to ensure that all children are enabled to reach their full potential in accordance with their individual needs, abilities and interests. Rather than seeing early childhood as a time of 'becoming' it is time to recalibrate and recognise that early childhood as a time of 'being' will ultimately support children 'becoming' to a greater degree than sacrificing 'being' for the sake of 'becoming'. Dewey's writings related to curriculum, child-centredness and the concept of education provide a robust framework within which to locate early years' education. Allowing the 'schoolification epidemic' to propel early years' education globally seriously compromises children's earliest experiences and places undue demands on young children. Identifying school readiness as the key rationale for early years' education may potentially be counterproductive if children's individual needs, abilities, interests and development are side-lined in favour of prescribed curricula and inappropriate pedagogy. In this climate of accountability, the need for us as educators to articulate a philosophy of education becomes more urgent. Dewey's words resonate and remind us of the need to be ever vigilant in our role as the custodians of democratic ideals for our children and for future

generations: 'Get rid of the ideas that lead us to believe that democratic conditions automatically maintain themselves or that they can be identified with the fulfilment of prescriptions laid down in a constitution' (Dewey 1939, 34). We as educators must continue to be alert to the impact of the intensification of children's early years' experiences promoted by neoliberal policy makers, which may potentially be damaging and lead to alienating more children from school (Wilhelmsen 2016).

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