

EDUCATIONAL REFORM AT THE EARLY

CHILDHOOD LEVEL : COMPUTERS OR CARE?

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## ABSTRACT

Education at the early childhood level is in a state of flux; the great debate of "education versus care" has been resurrected at a time of political, economic and social upheaval as the educators of young children struggle to understand and apply research relating to "quality" programs which purport to ensure the well-being of children. This paper will attempt to look at some of the most pertinent research, including adult/child interactions, "school readiness", group size and the qualifications of early childhood workers. The notion of a national curriculum at early childhood level requires consideration also.

## Introduction

Early childhood education, in Australia at least, is in a state of flux. Debates continue to absorb the hearts and minds of early childhood workers, parents of young children, bureaucrats and educators involved in assisting those

working with  
young children, political analysts and hopefully politicians about the  
definition of  
early childhood education; whether or not it includes the notion of care,  
subsumes  
care or excludes care, whether or not all early childhood workers need to  
be trained;  
after all "anyone can care for children", what constitutes a quality  
program, and  
possibly most importantly, the effect of some form of early education and  
care on  
the child's later development in terms of financial outlay.

In the last two decades early childhood education and care has moved to the  
forefront of the political debate. The Child Care Act of 1972 was overt  
recognition,  
on the part of the federal government, of the changing work-force  
participation of  
women with young children in need of care outside their home. Prior to  
this time  
the federal government had not concerned itself with children of preschool  
age and  
had left it to the various states and territory governments to provide  
financial  
assistance, often on an ad hoc basis, to organisations and committees which  
operated  
preschool programs. These programs were usually sessional and restricted  
to those  
children who would be attending school in the very near future. However  
the  
changing social, economic and political scene of the 1960's and 1970's  
changed this  
process, possibly forever. By 1991 some 207,482 preschool aged children  
were  
enrolled in child care programs financially supported by the federal  
government.  
This was in response to the fact that, at that time 46% of mothers with  
children aged  
0-4 years were employed in the workforce, either full time or part time.  
Although  
the recession may have changed the proportion of full time and part time  
jobs held  
by these women, the percentage is probably very similar at this stage.

Notwithstanding the fact that this trend for mothers to work outside the  
home is not  
new, and that not all children have been cared for solely in their own  
homes in any  
society at any stage of history, this massive financial commitment of  
taxpayers'

moneys has served to concentrate interest on the role, and value of, early education and care in an unprecedented way. The cost has been astronomical, and continues to rise at an alarming rate although only about 60% of parents' demands for care will be met by 1996 if the projected increases occur. To this end a great deal of research has focussed on two issues surrounding early education and care; firstly, the long term effects of programs and secondly, the characteristics of programs which ensure a quality service. The economic rationalists' argument has been somewhat deflected by people such as Naisbitt who predicted in his farsighted work *Megatrends* (1982) that one of the major trends of the future would be "an increased demand for quality in all items we purchase". (p96)

There appears to be general agreement that the preschool years are an important

stage in a child's development, in terms of social, emotional, physical and intellectual development. There appears also to be agreement on the importance of the mother/child (or primary caregiver/child) relationship in terms of the child's development. In addition, two decades of research on child care have served to allay our worst fears that non maternal care is inevitably harmful to children. (Phillips 1987). Much of our fears about the possible negative effects of non-maternal care on preschool age children stem from various interpretations of Bowlby's work in the 1950's. This work considered the importance of mother/infant bonding and attachment and the detrimental effects of separation from mother. Although Bowlby's work was confined to infants and young children who were brought up in hospitals and institutions, his work has been generalised to cover all prolonged separations by primary caregivers and their young children, hence the concern raised about the efficacy of leaving preschool age children in child care for prolonged periods:  
"To start nursery school much before the third birthday is for most children an undesirably stressful experience." (Bowlby, 1973:54)

A few contemporary researchers such as Belsky (1987, 1988) have argued that there is evidence to suggest that children who enter outside home care prior to developing a secure attachment to their primary caregiver can suffer long term consequences. However in spite of the "evidence" of people such as Belsky, other researchers such as Fien and Fox (1988) refute these arguments: "It seems clear that current studies, even those set within attachment theory, have too many methodological problems and constraints to serve as a basis for alarm or negative conclusions about the consequences of early non-parental care. In the near future, the aim of systematic research will be to devise measures of important attributes of parents, children, caregivers and settings."  
(Fien and Fox, 1988:233)

The influence of parents and children are difficult to ascertain due to confounding elements so most contemporary and recent research has concerned itself with isolating variables which influence the quality of early programs. A more contemporary phrase would be determining "best practice". The first of these large scale pieces of research was the National Day Care Study of 1979, initiated by the U.S. federal government to guide the development of national child care standards. The task of the study was to identify key provisions that best predict good (for "good" read positive) outcomes for children, and - and here's the rub - to develop cost estimates for offering these provisions. The study revealed that group size and specialised caregiver training were the significant elements in programs for children of preschool age, while in programs for infants and toddlers a third element was an important component of quality care, that of high adult/child ratios. (A high adult/child ratio implies a small number of children per adult, such as 1:3). (Ruopp et al, 1979). Since these three components of group size, staff training and high adult/child ratios are all costly variables, researchers have worked to confirm these

initial findings, extend them to other preschool settings and identify other elements of quality care and education. As a result, some elements of the original research have been confirmed, others contradicted and new areas of inquiry investigated.

At the present time the Australian Institute of Family Studies has undertaken a longitudinal study of the relationship between different caring contexts and preschoolers' competence. This study, which began with a group of eight and a half thousand mothers and children in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, has been reduced significantly in size but it has yielded interesting data already, including arrangements parents make for their sick children and the response of the community to employer-supported child care. More importantly, possibly, is the review of the literature surrounding early care and education and the quality components of these programs. This as yet unfinished review is now well over one hundred pages in length and has the potential to serve as a seminal reference for future research. (Ochiltree, 1992: personal communication).

However it is clear that if the National Day Care Study gave us evidence of certain regulatable variables of programs which are related to positive child outcomes, namely group size, caregiver training and adult/child ratio, there are other non-regulatable variables that have been thrown up by research. These include the nature of the interaction between caregiver and child and child and child, and the nature of the physical environment.

A further variable that has been the subject of considerable debate is the possible influence of centre size. However, Kagan and Newton (1989) found no pattern of relationship existed between the capacity (size) of the centre and other quality variables.

### Quality Components of Early Childhood Programs

The most obvious and regulatable components of a quality early childhood program are adult/child ratio and size of group. While a high adult/child ratio does not, of itself, ensure quality care it is one factor, which seen in conjunction with other factors, including the personal and professional qualities of the caregiver, the grouping of the children and the physical environments to which the children are exposed, which contribute to the notion of quality programs. Kisker (1992) however argues that the relationship between adult/child ratios and developmental outcomes is inconsistent. The National Day Care Study (Ruopp et al, 1979) found that the younger the child, the more significant was the relationship between adult/child ratio and group size. High adult/child ratios in groups of infants and toddlers have been shown to enhance positive social interactions, foster a more positive emotional environment and promote secure attachments to caregivers. (Howes, 1983). However staff behaviour, in terms of the way they perceive their role, would appear to be a critical factor in determining the importance of ratios and group size.

Early research consistently showed that smaller group sizes in early care and

education settings are beneficial for a child's development. Smaller groups were associated with more positive interactions between caregivers and children with more favourable developmental outcomes. (Phillips, 1987). However more recent evidence has called into question the link between group size and positive developmental outcomes. (Kagan and Newton, 1989; Whitebrook et al, 1989).

So much for the regulatable components of a quality early childhood program; let us move on to the more nebulous components, such as adult/child and child/child interaction:  
"The quality of the relationship between caregiver and child is a dominant theme in the day care literature and is seen by most writers as the key element in a quality environment for young children."  
(L.G.C.C., 1987:8)

The research indicates that children can become attached to their caregivers, although the actual attachment is less intense than to their primary caregiver, that children evince a preference for stable caregivers in a day to day setting, that adult/child interaction depends on group size; the smaller the group the greater the opportunity for interaction (although actual caregiver ability to interact is a greater influence than actual group size), that adult/child verbal interaction is a significant predictor of overall centre quality, that caregivers need to improve their verbal interaction skills by using open-ended questioning and positive ego-boosting messages, that child/child interaction is affected by the physical environment, the way the children's day is planned and the way in which they are grouped, that a familiar setting, familiar caregiver and stable peer group are important factors in developing friendships, that pro-social behaviour and verbalisation is more frequent in multi-age rather than same-age grouping and that, unequivocally, prosocial behaviour can be promoted amongst children of preschool age. (Phillips, 1987).

These kinds of results have obvious implications for trainers of early childhood personnel; it is generally agreed in the literature that years of schooling and specialised training bear a positive relationship to children's development; that is, early childhood workers who are trained in early education and/or child development exhibit more helpful behaviour and spend more time with the children than their untrained colleagues, provide greater social and intellectual stimulation, foster better intellectual and language development among young children. (Whitebrook et al, 1989).

A corollary of the impact of trained, as opposed to untrained staff, is the need for stability in caregivers. Phillips (1987) has argued that young children in programs for prolonged periods do form attachments to their caregivers and the loss of an

attachment figure can be very painful for a child who requires a predictable environment. Work in N.S.W. in particular has pointed to a high turnover rate among caregivers (over 50%) and this is a cause of considerable concern. In U.S.A. Whitebrook et al (1989) report that child care staff are leaving their jobs now at a

rate three times higher than a decade ago; an increase from 15% to 41% in the period 1977 to 1988. Staff stability or lack of it, has become one of the crucial discussion points in the early childhood area.

The physical environment, the place where the quality program occurs, has been the subject of very little research in terms of its influence on the quality of the program. Early work in the U.S.A. in the 1960's and 1970's has not been followed up and the most recent statements on the subject suggest that high standards need to be maintained in terms of space, equipment, health, safety and "nutritional" facilities. (Wangmann, 1991). While the jury is still debating the reliability and validity of some of the available research, it would be appropriate to suggest that a young child's social skills, verbal and other communication skills and cognitive development can be enhanced by a "quality" early childhood program.

Although the various dimensions and components of quality have been examined separately, it is important to recognise that the overall quality of an early childhood setting is defined by the configuration of all these dimensions. The higher quality settings are those which combine small group size, high adult/child ratios, well qualified and stable staff and program activities which allow for both structured and child-initiated learning rather than large amounts of unstructured free play time. (Phillips, 1987). But we should recognise that the PCS Data (Profile of Child Care Settings) as developed by Kagan and Newton (1989) shows that quality along one

dimension, or in one component, is not highly correlated with quality along another dimension. Therefore we cannot make a conclusive assessment of the overall quality of a program from looking at individual quality indicators, although the highest correlations among these quality components, as determined by Kisker (1992) are those between group size and adult/child ratio (.64). By definition, smaller groups tend to have higher adult/child ratios, but these ratios fall as the size of the group increases.

A final reminder is timely:

"Research on child care quality has accumulated a vast collection of results during the last ten years ... this literature has driven home the true complexity of child care and the real challenges faced by those who seek to assess its effects on children. (One of the complexities is) other factors, particularly aspects of the family environment, that affect child development and may interact with, compensate for, or operate completely independently of the influence of child care quality."  
(Phillips, 1987:15)

#### School Readiness

In U.S.A. in particular, researchers and educators have progressed beyond the somewhat blanket statement in favour of early childhood programs mentioned previously by Phillips to suggesting a much more precise, and detailed reason for quality programs for young children. Kisker (1992) quotes the following: "Children who enter school ready to learn are those who enter with the

knowledge, disposition, and skills needed to succeed in school. They are healthy, immunised against disease, well-nourished and well-rested. Their early experiences have given them a start in learning to co-operate, exercise self-control, articulate their thoughts and feelings, follow rules. They are trusting and have a feeling of self-worth. They explore their environment actively and approach tasks with enthusiasm. They are motivated to learn."  
(US Dept of Ed 1991)

School readiness in U.S.A. is a growing national concern, due to the increasing numbers of children being raised in families that are poor, unstable, limited in their

English, lacking in social supports and/or disabled. If we were to consider the long term effects of our current economic recession, we may feel similarly disposed to look more closely at the research relating to school readiness, age of entry to school and grade retention. The current national objectives of the U.S.A. may even become the basis for our national education program; America hopes that by the year 2000:

Objective 1:"all children in America will start school ready to learn; all disadvantaged and disabled children will have access to high quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school."

Objective 2:"every parent in America will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day helping his or her preschool child learn; parents will have access to the training and support they need."

Objective 3:"children will receive the nutrition and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and the number of low birth weight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems."

While the success of implementing this national goal depends on the availability, quality and affordability of early education and care, it is timely to look at some of the research on the topic of readiness, age of entry and grade retention in the early primary years, as change in any of these areas will ultimately affect early education and care programs, e.g. a raising of the age of entry to school implies an older, possibly more mature cohort of children in preschool programs.

Gullo and Burton (1992) suggest that the literature supports the notion that readiness for so-called "real" learning is an important predictor of a child's successful or unsuccessful adaptation into school life, and as such has long-term consequences for future social, emotional and cognitive development. They argue that age of entry to school, prior preschool experience and risk factors such as economic poverty, are important determinants when considering readiness for school, whereas the child's sex does not. This flies in the face of much previous research, which highlighted sex

as an important determinant of school readiness, and much has been written about the disadvantaged male child entering the female dominated primary school. Gullo and Burton argue that using measures which take account of knowledge and skills derived from prior maturation, socialisation and experience negate differences in sex.

This finding has profound implications for teachers in the early years of school in terms of treating each child as an individual, with individual knowledge, skills, needs and interests. The notion of "readiness" becomes an individual measure for each child, rather than a score or grade generated from a standardised or norm referenced test. Gullo and Burton suggest that if we think about the objectives of the US Department of Education, we cannot assume all children entering school are "ready" to learn what most schools want them to learn. The question that needs to be researched, as a matter of urgency, is how can schools respond effectively to the wide range of individual differences in background, development and prior experiences that "differentially equip children to adapt to their first school settings?" (Katz, 1992). Children are more likely to cope successfully with their initial school experiences if they have had an extended period of time in a group situation away from home in which they have had ample opportunity to interact with peers and, as a result, develop social skills including turn taking, making compromises, knowing when to be a leader and when to be a follower, and approaching unfamiliar children. While many of these skills may be practised and honed within the family context, the family does not provide a single environment and parents may have concerns about one or more children whereas others will exhibit a broad range of social competencies. The preschool group experience then becomes the secure environment in which all children, on an even footing, can develop social competence which will be needed in the new group situation, school.

Katz (1992) has pointed out the need for learning in the early years of school to have "horizontal relevance"; that is, what is learnt is relevant to the

child at the present stage of development, as opposed to "vertical relevance" which implies learning which is designed to prepare children for the next lesson or the next grade in some future experience. She argues the need for younger children to be exposed to more learning which is horizontally relevant than vertically relevant. The implication is that there is no test which can be devised to ascertain "readiness" for school, as all children are at different stages of learning and possess their own store of knowledge, so chronological age is the only viable criteria for admission to school. de Lemos and Mellor (1991) reported on a study of school readiness in Victoria. This state is ripe for such a study; there have been no less than four enquiries on the age of entry to school in the last twenty years. Responses from a sample of nearly six hundred Victorian parents indicated that while there is very little difference between parents' preferred age of entry to school and family background parents see a clear relationship between age of entry to school, the importance of various policies for improving the quality of schooling for young children and subsequent performance at school. Parental differences related to their perceptions of development and the extent to which "readiness" relates to previous experience and the school program to which their children are exposed on entering school.

#### An Early Childhood Curriculum

This parental perception of "readiness" for school, together with Katz's (1992) notion of horizontal and vertical relevance of programs, leads on to a consideration of the

curriculum offered to young children at the early childhood level. There are four areas worthy of consideration; firstly a philosophy for an early childhood curriculum; Audrey Curtis has used the ideas of R.S. Peters as the basis for an early childhood program. Peters in his *Ethics and Education* (1966) argued that we have to include

in our program anything and everything that is "worthwhile", that is anything in which the child is totally absorbed and the activities are "infinitely extendable". The involvement for the young child is in the process, that is, in the activity itself, rather than the product.

Curtis argues three main premises, namely that early childhood education is about challenging children and encouraging them to develop into worthwhile learners and thinkers, full of curiosity about the world around them; that there is a recognisable curriculum for children of preschool age based on skills and competencies to be developed in a flexible, child-centred environment and that there exists ample material with which to extend and challenge children of this age without offering them a watered down primary school program. Curtis lists seven skill areas which she believes can be appropriately developed through play with the teacher acting as the facilitator in a supportive environment; self-awareness skills, social skills, cultural skills, communication skills, perceptual and motor skills, analytical and problem solving skills and creative/aesthetic skills. Several of these skills areas deserve further explanation.

Self awareness skills include feelings about self, body and sensory awareness and body control, while cultural awareness presume a growing understanding of the children's relationship between themselves and the environment including an understanding of similarities and differences among all groups of people including one and two parent families, extended and blended families, life in towns and country and jobs within a small community.

However radical this may appear, I believe Curtis' piece de resistance is her notion of social skills. This is the most detailed skill area in Curtis' list and involves the young child in learning that acceptable behaviour within the family may be very

different from acceptable behaviour in the wider community. They learn ways of interacting effectively with adults and children outside the family - particularly their peer group. Curtis nominates four major subgroups of social skills in her program; affiliation skills, or the ability to co-operate and work with others, is a most necessary skill in our highly socialised society in Curtis' eyes. It involves the young child's being able to develop the ability to identify socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in themselves and others and to understand the consequences of such behaviours, e.g. if you take toys from other children then you become a social isolate; skills such as joining in groups, managing encounters and extricating oneself from a situation in an acceptable manner are skills included by Curtis in the area of affiliation.

Children who do not learn such rituals can very easily become a social isolate and

will require adult assistance. Another area of social skills in Curtis' program is co-operation and the resolution of conflicts; these are natural results of young children gaining entry into a group, as they will want to influence the behaviour of others. A child who is socially competent is adept at both leadership and followship roles, whereas a child who feels inadequate and feels that life is overwhelming and is unable to make or accept decisions made by others is likely to resort to aggressive behaviour in order to influence other children. Young children therefore need to learn skills to enable them to identify cause of conflict, understand reasons for rules, encourage sharing behaviour in a positive environment.

Curtis' third sub-group involves kindness, care and affection; the ability to display empathy, care and affection contribute to social skills (this ability to show kindness is made possible by the belief in our own worth, so if children perceive themselves as socially competent and respected by others, they are more likely to display

nurturant

acts). But Curtis is clear that children have to understand the difference between

"giving" and "sharing", e.g. you give a lolly but you share a toy. Pro-social behaviour

is relevant but other behaviour is not, such as saying, "I'm sorry".

Curtis' fourth sub-group is concerned with moral development. This is best developed by giving children an opportunity to understand principles and reasons

rather than by teaching specific actions which may be situation-dependent or

indoctrinating. The early childhood environment needs to be organised in such a

way that justice can prevail for everyone in that each and every child is given the

same opportunity to learn. Children should not be told not to run in the room but

should discuss this in the context of a wider debate on "concern for the safety of

others in our group".

"To try to impose values is immoral, but to fail to create frameworks within which

people can choose their own values is just as bad!"

Curtis is also very definite regarding the development of analytical and problem-

solving skills in the young child and she uses a quote from de Bono to emphasize her

point:

"Children can be brilliant thinkers ... a child enjoys thinking. He enjoys the

use of his mind just as he enjoys the use of his body as he slides down a helter-skelter or bounces on a trampoline ... If children can already think so

well at this age, then surely the long years of education must develop this ability to a high level. Not so, at the end of education there has been no improvement in the thinking ability of children, in fact there has actually been

a deterioration."

(E. de Bono, *Children Solve Problems*, 1972

Penguin, Harmondsworth, p8)

She argues that because young children have only limited experiences which causes

them to be limited in terms of perception, ability to conserve and reverse, they are

not deficient thinkers but thinkers who can explore, question, compare, contrast, label and form mental images in ways that reveal their individuality. Clearly Curtis' ideas do not fit in with the hothouse proponents but reveal an updated, contemporary version of the 1950's and 1960's concept of the early childhood educator who promotes individual growth and development through self-motivation.

I believe Curtis is correct but I believe her ideas need to be expanded or at least described in more detail in order to take account of three further skill areas. These are technological sophistication, ecological awareness skills and coping and caring skills.

A second area for consideration is the role of technology in the early childhood curriculum. Alison Elliott has suggested that the need to become technologically adept will become mandatory in kindergartens. She says: "As the first rung on the educational ladder, early childhood education has a unique role to play in preparing children for a technological world." (Elliott, 1985:3)

I believe that for early childhood teachers and young children alike, technological literacy is a matter of attitude but our lack of commitment as a nation to providing resources to make our children literate could turn us into a race of techno-peasants by the year 2000.

Greta Fien has taken up this notion of the effects of technology on the young. She has put forward the premise that there are two conditions which must prevail if an innovation is to survive; first it must be seen to be essential to the emotional, economic or political survival of the community, and secondly it must be transmitted to the younger generation. Technological advances such as computers should not be arbitrarily omitted from early childhood programs because they are "too advanced"; rather omission should follow (if at all) a concerted consideration of their value in

terms of horizontal relevance.

But combined with these two areas of curriculum will be the need to recognise severe and overwhelming limitations on natural resources and the need to preserve and conserve, rather than exploit, as was the ethos of the past century. We are all very aware of the pervading effect of the "greenhouse effect" which has been blamed for everything from the dramatic increase in the incidence of skin cancer to the mild winters we have experienced recently.

A further area of concern for early childhood education is the need to prepare individuals who are capable of rational decision-making and autonomous planning, that is, coping skills.

It is argued that the development of these skills early in life will help persons to adapt to and grow with the changes that are bound to occur in the twenty-first

century.

A third area for inclusion in the early childhood curriculum is "people" skills; because of the break up of traditional family groups, I believe that caring skills need to be developed in the young child. The traditional extended family group helped children to learn to care for those younger, older and less able than themselves. Now, however, in a period of zero population growth, an increasing number of children have no siblings, they have little or no contact with grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins in our very mobile society, nor do they interact with disabled persons outside of the kindergarten with an integration policy.

With these additions to Curtis's stimulating program, let me list the skills I believe should be emphasised in the early childhood program of the future:

\*intellectual skills, i.e. problem solving skills for appreciating other people and

things and the environment; cultural awareness, ecological awareness, creative/aesthetic awareness;

- \*decision-making skills, i.e. those skills concerned with making a decision in a complex situation where consequences accrue from that situation;
- \*general physical and mechanical skills, i.e. skills that allow the young person to deal with mechanical and physical problems that they will confront in the home and elsewhere but outside the work situation; using a computer as a tool, hand writing, spelling, using referenes, following oral and written instructions, e.g. using a screwdriver and other common tools, repairing and mending of house-hold objects;
- \*bureaucratic and organisational skills, i.e. knowing how to cope with free time, free choice of activities, knowing how to organise resources, knowing how to operte a keyboard; knowing when to be a leader and when to be a follower in a group;
- \*skill in the care of dependent persons, i.e. skills involved in caring for children (parenting skills), old persons and those who are sick;
- \*emergency skills, i.e. skills in knowing how to act in an emergency or an unfamiliar situation, including coping and stress-reducing skills, and
- \*verbal communciation skills, including inter-personal skills which would involve Curtis' conflict resolution, assertiveness, affiliation skills and co-operative skills.

Hopefully these proposals will meet Katz's (1992) criteria of a balance between horizontal and vertical relevance and could be built upon at the school level. As these criteria are not content-driven, the child's own experiences and interests could be the basis for the development of these curriculum components.

Halliwell (1992) has reminded us that the early childhood field is not wedded to the idea of using the term "curriculum" to describe its practice; she argues that early childhood workers have always perceived a different set of priorities in their day to

day work from those of their colleagues in other areas of education; early childhood workers have adopted a wholistic approach to learning, incorporating many

aspects  
of a child's development; their work encompasses children aged from  
babyhood to  
middle childhood, a stage of stupendous social, physical, emotional and  
cognitive  
development, in a variety of education and/or care-oriented contexts; they  
perceive  
curriculum to encompass the entire spectrum of interactions, routines and  
experiences which occur in a young child's day rather than accept a narrow  
band of  
planned cognitive experiences as "curriculum", they use children's  
interests, needs and  
abilities as a starting point for curriculum planning rather than a "need  
to know"  
baseline.

We, as early childhood workers, need to know more about our role as  
teachers and  
caregivers. We need to know as much about the basis for our decisions  
relating to  
our curriculum as we know about the quality components of our program.

However, it would appear that the differences which early childhood  
curriculum  
makers cherish may be vanishing. The following is an extract from an  
article by  
Fleer (1992)  
"Dear Colleagues,  
Early childhood teachers in England and Wales have been swamped with the  
dual task of teaching from the recently developed National Curriculum and  
conducting tests of all seven year old children. The observations ...  
point to ...  
many immediate difficulties and long term problems for early childhood  
practitioners (0-8 years) - problems that we do not wish to see appearing  
in  
Australia". (p17)

Fleer points out that the development of national curriculum statements for  
various  
subjects is proceeding rapidly in Australia, and although they relate to  
children in  
primary and secondary school (five years plus) the tendency in the United  
Kingdom  
has been for nursery teachers to take account of the nine areas of learning  
encompassed in the National Curriculum and Attainment Targets. Fleer notes  
that a  
Department of Education and Science document of 1990 states quite  
categorically:  
"The nine areas of learning and experience ... are widely recognised as  
essential for all children including the under-fives."

(Fleer, 1992:19)

Given that Australian education, historically, has followed the trends expoused in Great Britain and USA in particular, Fleer wonders whether early childhood educators in Australia will be following a national curriculum in the not too distant future; a Clayton's curriculum, of course, but these moves could herald the demise of those concepts of early childhood curriculum which may have contributed to a quality program. Who knows?

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