A comparison of the early years curriculum in England and France

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Abstract

In this paper I compare the early years curricula in England and France to identify their possible similarities and differences. Prior to looking into both curricula's aims and principles, this work explores the early years education history of both countries in order to understand how early years education developed and how these two curricula came into being. When looking thoroughly into both curricula's main principles and approaches, this work highlights that both have been inspired by well-known early years educationalists such as Piaget, Montessori and Bruner but that they differ greatly in their approach to learning. With a play-based approach applied in England and a more didactic one used in France, it can be assumed that the two curricula have different visions of what early years education is for. However, this work shows that, despite those many differences, in both countries the early years curriculum appears to hold similar purposes, that is to prepare and educate children for living in society and answer the country's economic needs in the global world.

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Introduction

The curriculum is at the heart of the education system: it is crucially important to the success of the whole education process (Bartlett and Burton, 2007), and designing a curriculum involves looking at the ‘social, political and cultural context’ (Dewey cited in Freedman (1998), p258). It therefore can be argued that the English educational system and therefore the curriculum is bound to be different from the French one as both countries have experienced different historical, political and social events that shaped their actual societies. Moreover, it appears that hegemony, ‘the leadership or dominance of a state or a social group over others’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2005), holds an important...
role in designing the curriculum. Roth claims that the curriculum is the means by which political leaders can ‘force’ their values and ideologies upon children, young people and their parents (Hollins, 1996). Earle and Kruse (2009, p109) add that cultural hegemony is easily transmitted through the curriculum, ‘the knowledge in the curriculum is passed off as tradition’. The 3Rs are a good example of cultural hegemony being transmitted through the curriculum; in fact the emphasis put on the learning of the reading, writing and arithmetic started as early as 1825 and nowadays these are still considered as crucial as demonstrated by the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy and the National Literacy Strategy in 1999.

An interpretivist and a social constructivist approach will be taken when looking at both curricula. It is important to understand that the research will be based on assumptions and will therefore be subjective. In an attempt to clarify the research and find out what make both curricula different from one another, it is important ‘to understand the complex and often multiple realities from the perspectives of the participants’ (Lodico et al. (2010) p14-15). This work therefore looks into the social, cultural and political backgrounds that surround both curricula, in order to ‘understand the meanings behind the actions’ (Burton and Bartlett (2009), p21).

The Early Years Foundation Stage and the Progamme de l’école maternelle differ in many ways with one resulting from educational research and another being more deeply rooted in the country's educational history. Even though both curricula appear to have the same outcome for children they differ very much in their structure and implementation with one applying a play-based approach and the other applying a more didactic one. And even though they were both influenced by the same educational pioneers such as Piaget and Bruner they appear to have different ways of applying those theories. However their differences, it is striking to notice that early years education in both countries holds an economic purpose, that aims to develop skilled workers that will thrive to develop and improve each country’s economic outcomes.

Some key questions will be answered in this work, such as how deeply rooted the different education ideologies are in each country’s history? Did key educational reforms occur at a similar time in both countries? Who or what triggered those changes? Moreover which features of each curricula are emphasised and why?

**The Early Years Foundation Stage (England)**

In the 1900s, early years education in the UK was not the main focus of the government and policy makers therefore it was not given much attention. Palaiologou (2010) notes that, what led the government to make changes and develop Early Years education was the issue of poverty. The major focus on education goes back to 1976 and James Callaghan’s speech at Ruskin College, the latter called for ‘the maintenance of proper national standards’
and better relations between education and industries’ needs (cited in Hamilton, 1988, p33). In 1997 the Labour Government followed in the footsteps of Callaghan and showed their intention to make education a priority with their famous motto ‘Education, Education, Education’. Early years’ education was no longer considered simply as a preparation for school but rather a place where all children, no matter what ethnic, religious or economic backgrounds they were from, were offered the best possible start in life.

The introduction of the Foundation Stage Curriculum (QCA, 2000, in Smidt, 2007) intended to make early years education more credible in the eyes of parents and more accessible; it set out early learning goals that the child had to reach prior to entering formal education and was based mostly around the child and its development (Pugh, 2006). It later led to the introduction and implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage in September 2008, which itself was highly influenced by the findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project carried out in 2004. The Early Years Foundation Stage sets up a set of learning requirements that comprises all the skills and knowledge that children should have acquired by the time they reach the age of five (DCSF, 2008, p11). Those Early Learning Goals cover six different areas that are: Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Communication, Language and Literacy; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development and Creative Development.

These Early Learning Goals are part of a bigger framework where partnership with parents and play prevail (Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2004). Personal, Social and Emotional Development is one of the most essential areas of learning for children’s well being and development. It appears to be linked directly with one Every Child Matters outcome, ‘Make a positive contribution’; children learn to belong in the early years’ environment and wider community as well as learning to behave according to the community’s values and expectations. According to Moylett (2010, p137) within Personal, Social and Emotional Development adults teach children how to behave appropriately by ‘modelling’ behaviours that are ‘socially acceptable’. From this point of view, it can be argued that children are conditioned from an early age to behave a certain way that is suitable for the community and wider society, and therefore that they are in a way compelled to conform to the status quo (Walker, 2008). Walker appears to be suggesting that this can be seen as an example of cultural hegemony in that the government is using the curriculum to instil certain values in a very subtle way to get people to conform to them. Personal, Social and Emotional development is not only about young children learning to behave socially, but also about ‘emotional intelligence’ (Beckley, Elvidge, Hendry, 2009, p164), about interacting with other people and respecting them whatever their cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds (DCSF, 2008). This area of learning is therefore very much embedded within the children’s social environment. It can be argued (Moylett, 2010) that it is very much at the foundation of children’s good development, and in order for them to be able to
develop other skills such as literacy or numeracy they have to first and foremost feel at ease in the setting and be aware of their own and others’ needs.

Considering play as the main trigger to learning and development emerges from Frederich Froebel’s theory of children’s development. However, there is a slight difference between what Froebel believed was considered as play and what the EYFS documents define as play. On one hand, the EYFS document states that play can be either ‘child-initiated’ or ‘adult led’ (DCSF, 2008, p11). Froebel however believed that only activities initiated by children could be considered as play; if the activities were initiated or led by the teacher with a particular educational objective resulting from it then Froebel saw it as ‘work’ (Bruce, 2009, p19). However, he strongly advocated the importance of adult in triggering children’s learning by providing them with the support and material needed for their development and learning (Waller, 2005), and this idea is very much in evidence in the EYFS. Two of the principles of the foundation stage listed by Smidt (2007, p54) state that ‘well planned, purposeful activities and appropriate intervention by the practitioners will engage children in the learning process and help them make progress in their learning’ and ‘the learning environment should be well planned and well organised to allow children to have rich and stimulating experiences’. Those two statements support Froebel’s vision of the adult being ‘a careful gardener’ (Lindqvist, 1995, in Follari, 2007, p25) who carefully prepares the environment to respond to and support children’s needs.

Like Froebel, Maria Montessori was a strong advocate of providing children with a prepared environment that would nurture their development and learning; the environment, she believed, was an ‘extra teacher’ (Johnson, et al., 2005, p252). According to Montessori ‘play is the child’s work’ (Johnson, et al., 2005, p252), but both she and Froebel believed in children learning through purposeful activities. In a Froebel or Montessori setting, children become their own teachers; learning comes naturally to them, therefore the different materials made available to them become the children’s guide to certain skills’ proficiency (MacNaughton, 2003). Within Froebel’s and Montessori’s approaches, the adult has a role of facilitator and observer who only intervenes when the child encounters difficulties or in order to challenge his learning when the latter seems cognitively ready for it (Follari, 2007). In the EYFS, the practitioner is in charge of ‘monitoring children’s progress’ (Curtis and O’Hagan, 2009, p155) during activities and prepares a suitable environment that answers children’s developmental needs, but also challenges them. Within the EYFS the practitioner is expected to intervene more in children’s learning than in a Montessori setting, and is in fact welcomed to join in children’s play at any time to encourage them in their thinking process (Moylett, 2010).

Other aspects of the EYFS are considered as very important such as Communication, Language and Literacy Development and Problem Solving,
Reasoning and numeracy. Both areas introduce children to skills that are very much at the centre of the National Curriculum introduced in primary school, but because the EYFS is a play based approach practitioners have to teach children in a playful way. However, Wood (2004) would argue that sometimes there is a lack of ‘synchronicity between the policy initiatives’ and what actually happens in practice where practitioners are very much focused on reaching a certain objective, so that activities turn out to be more didactic than play-based (Alexander, et al., 2009). For example, the National Literacy Strategy (introduced in 1998) was aimed at improving English children’s literacy attainments as they appeared to be falling behind their international counterparts (Riley, 2006). Since then a great emphasis has been put on introducing young children to some basics of literacy during their pre-school experience. The EYFS Communication, Language and Literacy strand therefore promotes a print and communication rich environment (DCSF, 2008).

Similarly, the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy in 1999 was a way for the government to indicate to schools the skills that were considered most important for pupils to acquire while in primary schools. Apple (1996, in Bell, 2003, p56) argues that the National Numeracy Strategy represents ‘the dominant economic and political elite intent on ‘modernising’ the economy’. This argument is another illustration of cultural hegemony and a government response to the pressure of globalisation. Therefore the government, being so determined to produce better educated workers, took the initiative to implement early numeracy skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage. However this initiative contradicts Piaget’s belief that children should not be introduced to mathematical concepts until they reach the age of six. In fact, according to Piaget prior to six, children are in the preoperational stage and are in an egocentric stage and cannot yet understand abstract concepts (Bee and Boyd, 2007). Therefore, the goals that children are expected to reach by the end of the foundation stage do not fit with their actual cognitive development.

This aside, Piaget’s work has very much influenced the way the EYFS is being implemented. By adhering to Piaget’s active learning theory, practitioners agree that children learn best when actively involved with objects rather than passively being fed information about the world (Anning and Edwards, 2004). In fact, the 4.2 Principle into Practice card entitled ‘Active learning’ (DCSF, 2008) shows that children in early years setting are involved in a constructivist approach to their learning and development. Therefore, the EYFS promotes an approach where children are in control of their learning through exploration and interactions with the objects and people from their surrounding environment. The process of active learning involves children in communicating with the adult and their peers therefore as well as being constructivist, it also involves a sociocultural approach to learning, such as that advocated by Vygotsky and Bruner, who suggest that learning involves a high level of reflection through discussion and questions (Beckley, Elvidge and Hendry, 2009). The 4.3 Principle into Practice card entitled Creativity and
Critical Thinking (DCSF, 2008) encourages to use the process of sustained shared thinking in order to help children develop their thinking and discuss ideas with each other. Through open-ended questions and discussion the adult scaffolds children’s understanding to a higher level, a level that they might not have been able to reach on their own (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005).

It appears that the EYFS very much seeks to promote and offer a nurturing and safe environment where children can thrive, development and learn with the support of adults around them. The many influences from educational pioneers found in the EYFS guidance prove that the Government has sought to develop an early years curriculum that would suit young children and their development. However, behind its implementation there may have been specific political and economic objectives. In a world controlled by globalisation, knowledge, therefore education is considered crucial to the country's well-being in the world’s economy (Spring, 2009, Brown and Lauder, 1997). For that reason, from an early age, children are already considered as ‘citizens, future workers and consumers’ (Yelland and Kilderry (2005:1).

Moss argues that the Labour Government had a specific interest in developing, improving and promoting early years education for all; (1999, in Sofou, 2010) and suggests that what pushed the Government to invest money in early years education was because, by providing more services for young children it allowed parents to go back to work. Therefore it can be argued that the Labour Government’s emphasis on early years education was not only about improving early years services but was also aimed towards a political and economic purpose (Sofou, 2010). Dahlberg et al. (1999 in Sofou, 2010, p232) argued that early childhood education is therefore a process which intended to produce ‘a stable and well-prepared workforce’ and that all activities undertaken with the children in early years provision have, as their ultimate purpose the goal of getting them ready for their future life in a competitive society and economy rather than genuinely offering the children diverse opportunities to develop socially and emotionally. Moreover, Heckham (2006; in Van Der Kooy-Hofland, Kegel and Bus, 2011) argued that early intervention in literacy is more cost-effective than later intervention. The aims of early years’ education seem therefore to have shifted from a preparation for formal schooling to a form of social engineering. The Government’s stated intentions can be questioned, and it can be argued that the main driver is enhancing the country’s economic growth in the competitive market rather than the social aim of helping all children and their families to thrive in modern society.

Le programme de l’école maternelle (France)

Early Years provision in France has shifted, since the end of the Second World War from providing care services for children to providing pedagogical services (Hall, 1976). From 1825, early years providers were known as ‘salles d’asiles’, from the latin ‘asulon’ meaning refuge (Oxford Dictionary, 2005), and
catered mainly for children from poor backgrounds. There, children were introduced to literacy and numeracy but the curriculum was mainly about learning practical skills, such as knitting and sewing and religious education (Dajez, 1996). In 1881, Pauline Kergomard, inspector of the écoles maternelles, initiated many changes in early years provision. She introduced the ‘école maternelle’ which replaces the earlier ‘salle d’asile’ and with this name change came a total reconstruction of educational methods (Bascou-Bance, 2002). She was the pioneer of a play-based approach in early years’ provision in France, and she believed that children should be free to enjoy the environment and be involved in activities that come naturally to them.

It was the ‘Loi d’Orientation’ of 1989 that set out what the écoles maternelles are now; it was the first law that introduced a pedagogical programme for the écoles maternelles and primary schools (Goigoux, 1996). This Law divided the French educational system into three cycles, two of which make up the école maternelles, Cycle 1 for children aged two to four years of age (first two years in the école maternelle) and Cycle 2 for children aged five to seven years of age (last year in the école maternelle and first two years in primary school) (David, 1998).

From then on, the école maternelle was considered as a school with educational purposes rather than a place where children were taken care of (Doly, 1996). The curriculum 2002 set out its pedagogical purposes and learning goals that children have to reach by the end of the nursery years (Ministère de l’Education Nationale). This idea corroborates (over 100 years later) what was declared in the 1887 decree where nursery school was considered as the place where children get their first education and where they can develop physically, emotionally and cognitively. This idea – that it is a school in the formal sense, does not really fit with what Pauline Kergomard tried to instil when setting up the école maternelle. While she would not deny the fact that the école maternelle prepares children for their entry to primary school, she refuted however the idea that children should be taught through direct instruction (Norvez, 1996). Therefore, it can be argued that the original purposes of the école maternelle introduced by Pauline Kergomard have been diluted over time. The introduction of the curriculum in 2002 and the prescribed domain of activities that had to be taught through mostly teacher-led activities is a long way from Kergomard’s ideal but however corroborates with the early Napoleonic code of 1804 where education was centralised and highly structured (Magone, 2011).

Therefore the Government in 2002 held onto the idea of Pauline Kergomard in relation to the école maternelle but adapted it to the current demands of society as they saw them. The actual Programme de l’école maternelle was implemented in 2002 and is divided into five fields of activities, S’approprier le Langage et Découvrir l’Ecrit (Acquire language skills and some writing skills); Devenir Elève (Become a pupil); Agir s’Exprimer avec son Corps (Act and express himself with his body); Découvrir le Monde (Discover the world);
Percevoir, Sentir, Imaginer, Créer (Perceive, Feel, Imagine and Create) (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, n.d.).

First and foremost, the école maternelle is a place of socialisation where children learn to interact with other people and learn to belong. It aims at nurturing children's physical, emotional, social and intellectual development through different stimulating activities (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 1999). Children turn into social human beings and therefore will have to acquire the right behaviour and learn the rules and norms of living in this social world. This idea is very much represented through the area of learning entitled ‘Devenir Elève’. There is a sense of conformity that seems to come out of this principle; the fact that it is entitled ‘becoming pupils’ shows that the école maternelle is run very much like a primary school, where children are expected to conform to set rules and listen to the adults in charge. It can therefore be argued that through this principle it appears that the government wishes to ensure that from an early age children understand and learn the rules of good citizenship and learn to conform to them. It can be added that this aspect comes under cultural hegemony exerted by the government on schools. Teachers are in charge of ‘shaping’ children, from the day they enter the école maternelle and throughout their education, into educated and respectful citizens.

The didactic aspect of activities experienced in an école maternelle is embedded within the ‘consigne’, in other words, the instructions given to children prior to starting any activities. Brougière et al. (2008, p374) believe that the consigne ‘transforms the child into a student’. It has been shown, that young children appear to be more responsive and sensitive to learning and therefore, that it is essential to provide them with a well structured and demanding learning process (Meirieu, 2004). Meirieu (2004, p11) adds that ‘it is to match up children’s ability that the école maternelle must be a place where real cognitive work occurs’.

One aspect of the implementation of the French early years curriculum which might surprise many early years practitioners is the fact that it does not really apply a play-based approach to learning. Even though the approach used in the école maternelle is meant to be a ‘non-formal and play-like approach’ (OECD, 2004, p43), it appears that ‘play’ is used for different ends. Because of the didactic approach to learning free-flow play rarely occurs within the classroom, play is more often used as a medium through which some activities are conducted. This could be due to the government’s intention to prevent children from repeating years in later stages and activities that have an educational purpose rather than playful ones are prioritised (Goutard, 1993). Glutton (in Pillot, 2004) noted that toys are used for educational purposes rather than for enjoyment, leading children to link toys with work rather than pleasure. This idea of using toys and activities for educational ends, ties in with Montessori’s idea of play. In a Montessori settings children are free to go around the room and play with any toys made available to them;
however, all the materials available have been made for an educational purpose. This concept is also used in the école maternelle; however, what differentiates it from the Montessori approach is that the adult in an école maternelle guides the children learning whereas in a Montessori setting the adult has a passive role in children’s development and learning.

Similarly to England, France puts an emphasis on Literacy skills as shown in the principle entitled ‘S’Approprier le Langage et Découvrir l’Ecrit’. Therefore one of the priorities of the curriculum is to ensure that all children who attend the école maternelle acquire good language skills, that enable them to understand the writing process but also the meaning of various texts presented to them (Bentolila, 2009). It is important to be aware that the école maternelle does not aim at teaching young children to read but rather to ‘prepare its learning’ (Observatoire National de la Lecture, 1997). Gilabert (1992), a former practitioner in écoles maternelles, was a strong advocate of the introduction to literacy, reading and writing, in early years settings. She strongly believed that children were already capable of learning those skills and that this early learning would prove to be very beneficial throughout their schooling.

Because language development and communication is at the very heart of the curriculum, teachers tend to rely on verbal communication in their teaching process. This idea fits with Vygotsky’s social learning theory where the teacher offers support to the children through sustained shared thinking in order to guide them towards the desired answer. Moreover Bruner’s idea of scaffolding can also be identified in a French école maternelle where the teacher asks open ended questions to offer support or challenge children (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005).

Comparison

Throughout this work it has been shown that both countries’ history has shaped the way education is implemented nowadays. On one hand, England has been very much influenced by James Callaghan’s speech in the 1970s that highlighted the importance of linking education and industries in order to answer the country’s economic needs and therefore putting an emphasis on literacy and numeracy in schools (Hall, 2004). On the other hand, France’s educational influences go back to 1804 and the Napoleonic code where the whole system became highly structured and centralised, highly influencing the way education is implemented nowadays with a didactic approach prevailing in schools which might appear worrying to someone from England but which seems perfectly normal to people in France as it is deeply rooted in their history.
References


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