

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Welcome to the third edition of *Early Childhood Curriculum*. It has been lovely to know that the early childhood sector finds our thinking about young children and curriculum valuable and that we have been invited to update the book again. Before we start, we will introduce you to a fictional scenario from a tertiary classroom. We think that this scenario sets the scene for the issues we will explore in the book and we will revisit the scenario as we explore different aspects of curriculum.

### CASE STUDY 1.1: EXPLORING UNDERSTANDINGS OF CURRICULUM

**Setting:** A university tutorial room

**Timing:** The first class for the year

**Participants:** An international group of third-year BEd (Early Years) students and their lecturer

**Subject:** Curriculum in the early childhood setting

**Lecturer:** We've spent some time talking around the idea of a **curriculum** and I think we all have some ideas about what a curriculum is. In your reading today, Peter Moss argues that curriculum development is a political act. He says it is constructed – reflecting the values and beliefs of those involved at a particular point in time. He also says it is contested – there is no one agreed idea of curriculum, but rather multiple views of what it should be. What I'd like you to do in your groups is talk about what you think a curriculum is and what

**curriculum** the aims or objectives, content or subject matter, methods or procedures, and assessment and evaluation associated with a program of teaching and learning for a specific group of learners

you think an early years curriculum should achieve for children. Take about 15 minutes to discuss this and then we will discuss it as a group. Get someone from your group to record your ideas, so that we can share them.

*Students move off into groups of about six people and begin the task set by the lecturer.*

**Daniel:** I hate it when she asks these sorts of questions! I feel like there is never a right answer.

**Jacob:** Yes, it is annoying – hard to see what relevance this has to what happens in the reality of the classroom, but I suppose we'd better have a go at answering the question or she's bound to pick on us for an answer.

**Kiri:** I don't see what all the fuss is about really, as we have two curriculum documents in my country that dictate what we should be doing: the revised *Te Whāriki* and the *New Zealand Curriculum*.

**Hui Lee:** In my context we only have one: *Nurturing Early Learners*. It's the framework for the kindergarten curriculum in Singapore.

**Daniel:** We have a national early years learning framework for Australia too: *Belonging, Being and Becoming*. But each of our states and territories has its own curriculum as well.

**Kiri:** Most countries have some type of written curriculum document. Surely the people who wrote those documents knew what they were on about?

**Gemma:** But aren't those documents just a guide to what we do in the classroom? Although *Te Whāriki* has been revised and there is a stronger indication of what children should be learning, it is not very specific about the actual stuff I will do with children every day.

**Jacob:** Isn't the curriculum how you plan the environment, and sort of based on your own national curriculum and the sorts of things it says that children should experience?

**Michael:** But on my last teaching practice, my Associate Teacher told me that the curriculum was in her head and that she didn't take much notice of the curriculum she was using. She said that she just uses the curriculum as a source of ideas and then the real curriculum is designed on the trot as she interacts with children and as the children have new ideas for play.

**Arohia:** Yes, that's right. If you use the definitions in our curriculum – *Te Whāriki* – the curriculum is the sum total of the child's experiences. So isn't everything that happens to the child what the curriculum is?

**Gwendolyne:** In Malawi, our curriculum is a guide to help the carers know more about children's development and what concepts they should be teaching.

**Kiri:** But what about this idea of it being constructed and contested? How does that work if we have a written curriculum?

**Gemma:** Isn't that when you talk to parents about what they want in the curriculum?

**Michael:** I don't know and I don't understand how it fits with curriculum planning. How can you plan curriculum if you are using the **emergent curriculum** approach that some teachers use?

**emergent curriculum**

a curriculum based on the emerging interests of children enrolled in an early childhood setting

**Jacob:** I guess that's part of the curriculum design stuff, isn't it? That you work out what it is that you want children to be able to do and therefore you plan activities and work out in advance what you think they will achieve, so that you can assess whether it worked or not.

**Arohia:** But how does that fit with all these ideas around co-construction that our practicum lecturer has been talking about? How can I plan in advance if I am trying to work with children to plan the curriculum?

**Michael:** And how does all this fit with what the Education Review Office, our overarching policy and assessment group, expects to see when they come in to do a review? Aren't there things that I have to do if I am in a licensed centre?

**Sam:** In Canada we have a similar group, and because our curriculum is so prescriptive in terms of content, it is a plus, but also a minus – so much paperwork!

**Lecturer:** Can you come back into the whole group now? First, can you tell me how your group defined what a curriculum is?

## Unpacking the elements of an early childhood curriculum

This brief scenario shows how hard it is for people in the field of early childhood education to work out exactly what a curriculum is.

- Is it a model?
- Is it a document?
- Is it the way the environment is organised?
- Is it the way that people plan for children's learning?
- Is it the day-to-day decisions that teachers make about children and their learning?
- Is it what is negotiated with parents, the community and external agencies?
- Is it what external evaluation agencies want to see?

All these questions are approached at some level in this book; we hope it will help you identify your own understanding of what a curriculum for early childhood is or can be.

### REFLECTION 1.1

We all have different understandings of what a curriculum for young children should involve. Before we start to talk about early childhood curriculum in earnest, take a moment and think about what you understand by the term 'curriculum'.

*(continued)*

Once you've thought about this, take another moment and write a few notes about what you think a 'good' curriculum for early childhood would involve.

How does your definition of a 'good' curriculum relate to your own personal philosophy of teaching?

We will return to these questions as we move through the book. For now, we hope you are starting to think about some of the issues and complexities involved.

## The early childhood curriculum

Educational acts are social acts. As social acts, they are reflexive, historically located and embedded in particular intellectual and social contexts. So knowledge about education must change according to historical circumstances, local contexts and different participants' understandings of what is happening in the educational encounter. And it is clear that the knowledge will to a very great extent be rooted in local historical and social contexts. (Carr & Kemmis 1983, p. 47)

This seminal statement by Carr and Kemmis about teacher knowledge, made many years ago, has been validated in an enormous body of research on the influence and importance of social, cultural and historical context on children's learning and development. Lingard (2012) further argues that decision making about curriculum is a cultural, social, economic and political act. As he states, 'From all that could be taught, selective decisions are made about what to include at what stages and for whom' (p. 7). Early childhood teaching therefore involves wrestling with some of the following issues:

- How can early childhood educators effectively plan curriculum for all children?
- How will the changing needs and interests of infants, toddlers and young children be met?
  - How can children's domain knowledge be supported within a **holistic curriculum**?
  - How do teachers know what children are learning through play?
  - How can teachers effectively observe and assess children's learning if all children bring different social and cultural knowledge to their learning?
  - How can teachers plan to support the learning of children who come from many different countries and cultures, speak different languages and are used to learning in different ways?

### **holistic curriculum**

a curriculum that is broadly framed around the physical, cognitive and socioemotional strengths, needs, interests, and social and cultural backgrounds of children

The answers to these sorts of questions are the purpose of this book. The subject of this book is current approaches to curriculum for children in the early years, and its overall purpose is to provide a comprehensive introduction to the curriculum issues that student teachers and emerging practitioners will face in the decisions they need to make to promote children's learning, and to explore current approaches to curriculum for children in the early years. We seek to work through the confusion that was shown in Case study 1.1 (Exploring understandings of curriculum) at the beginning of this chapter, as that conversation was typical of what can be heard across many countries, countries in which 'curriculum' is still a highly confused and confusing term.

In most countries, some form of curriculum has been designed by a government agency or the private sector. So why is it that the concept is so confusing and why is what is contained in the various curricula around the globe so different and highly contested? As Kiri said in Case study 1.1, 'Surely the people who wrote those curriculum documents knew what they were on about?' Designing a curriculum document is a complex task and involves the use of a robust curriculum model that has been built upon a particular theoretical perspective. When you read through Chapter 2 you will be introduced to a range of curriculum theories and curriculum models. That chapter will help you as you think about and solve the issue of what a curriculum document is – at the macro level. In that chapter you will notice that there are indeed very different views on the theories that guide curriculum writers, and you will see that each writer selects a curriculum model – like a skeleton – that they use to frame how the content is introduced to the user.

In this book, we briefly introduce you to a broad range of theories and curriculum models. However, the focus of the book is on the use of cultural-historical theory for guiding curriculum design, implementation, **assessment** and **evaluation**. As such, more space has been devoted to this theory, as it is a relatively new and contemporary theory for guiding curriculum development in early childhood education. In Chapter 5 we specifically introduce you to how to interpret a curriculum, and Chapter 6 shows you a **cultural-historical curriculum** in action. These chapters will help you understand what a curriculum is and what a curriculum looks like when it is being implemented through teachers' programs.

Chapters 9 to 11 give working examples of curriculum in relation to the following content areas: science, technology, engineering and mathematics; languages and literacies; and the arts and health, wellbeing and physical activity. By the time you have read through these chapters, we hope you will feel you have answered Kiri's query about curriculum writers knowing what they were on about!

Michael raised an issue that faces many professionals in the field: the assessment and evaluation of a centre or classroom. He

**assessment** the range of methods used by teachers to monitor whether children are achieving learning aims and objectives and gaining new knowledge of content and subject matter

**evaluation** the range of methods used by teachers and other stakeholders to monitor whether the curriculum is effective in promoting children's learning and is using the most appropriate methods of teaching, learning and assessment

**cultural-historical curriculum** a curriculum based on Vygotsky's theory and neo-Vygotskian research, which recognises the social, cultural and historical influences on children's learning

asked, 'How does all this fit with what the Education Review Office expects to see when they come in to do a review?' Different countries have different expectations, of course, and different processes for reviewing how things are going in a centre or classroom. Basic requirements focus on whether or not the teacher or the school uses the curriculum documents for organising their teaching and learning, through to a comprehensive review that leads to a licence (or accreditation) to operate the early childhood education service. In Chapters 7 and 8 you will be introduced to the nuances between assessing children and assessing the outcomes of a curriculum through an evaluation of what is happening during children's play in a school or centre. In Chapter 8 you will read about how one curriculum leader evaluates the school's implementation of its curriculum. There you will see specific references to the issue identified by Michael about the relationship between what a teacher does and what a system expects in relation to the implementation and evaluation of a curriculum.

Finally, the confusion expressed by Jacob, Arohia, Gemma and Michael – is a curriculum the environment, is a curriculum what is in the teacher's head or how they plan, or is a curriculum something that emerges in relation to children's interests – is addressed specifically in Chapters 2 and 4. Together, these chapters show that although there is a robust theoretical and modelling process used in curriculum design, what content is located within curriculum – and how decisions are made about 'what goes in' and 'what goes out' – is highly contested. This is also evident in Chapter 3, where the concept of curriculum is discussed in relation to various theories of development. There it is argued that progression in curriculum is closely tied to what people believe about child development and their valuing of the importance of play in children's learning.

Through reading this book, you should come to understand what a curriculum is. You will then be able to resolve the issues raised by the student teachers in relation to curriculum.

We will return to these questions in the final chapter, where you will compare the reflective comments made here (Reflection 1.1) with what you have come to understand as a result of reading this book. Whilst the chapters have been separated out, you should think about them as related to each other.

## How to use this book

### Connecting to the Early Years Learning Framework and *Te Whāriki*



Throughout the text, the curriculum icons encourage you to draw connections between curriculum theory and national curriculum documents: the EYLF (DEEWR 2009) and *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, NZ 2017b). When you see this icon, you are encouraged to revisit this documentation and reflect on the principles, the learning outcomes and your own educational practices.

## Online resources



The *Early Childhood Curriculum* companion website provides links to videos and additional resources to expand on the content of the book. Throughout the text, the ideal point at which to view these resources is identified with this icon.



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What influences early child development?  
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