Rethinking the concept of school readiness: towards being and becoming global citizens

Conceptions and insights from Denmark and New Zealand

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This study engages with conceptions of childhood citizenship in an increasingly globalised educational milieu. It focuses specifically on educational conceptions of "school readiness" in Denmark and New Zealand, and what this means for child-citizens and citizenship. In Denmark the notion of school readiness has only relatively recently found its place in the educational discourses, while in New Zealand it has been a concern for a number of years, and from a number of perspectives (Peters, 2010; Thrupp & Irwin, 2010).

The study examines different understandings of curriculum and formation/Bildung, of democracy and of citizenship, for young children's education and life skills. It proceeds from the premise that school readiness can be conceptualised in many diverse ways, as related to children's wider milieu, and to what is required in their educational settings to develop what we might call 'life readiness', considering the past, present and the future.

In Denmark, there are two major themes in relation to early childhood education settings: integration and school readiness. The Danish school tradition has emphasized the aspect of developing democracy, as a form of "Bildung" ('dannelse') focused on taking part in and learning about Danish society (Telhaug, Medieås & Aasen, 2006).

The preparation of educational curricula in early childhood settings was established by law in 2015. The curricula should address the following themes:

- Versatile personal development
- Social skills
- Language development
- Body and movement
- Nature and natural phenomena

- Cultural forms of expression and values[1]

The educational curriculum should include objectives and any sub-objectives for the development of skills and experiences, and it should also consider particular learning objectives, methods and activities in relation to children with special needs. Early childhood settings are required to "give children participation, joint responsibility and understanding of democracy. Day care must thereby contribute to the development of children's independence, ability to engage in community contexts and integration into the Danish society."[2] (Lov om dag-, fritids- og klubtilbud m.v. til børn og unge §7 stk. 4 og 5)

New Zealand has a long tradition of considering 'school readiness' as an educational outcome. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) for schools embraces this aim, as it seeks to develop "young people who will be confident connected, actively involved, lifelong learners" (p. 8). At the early childhood level, the national curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), has a strongly relational and collective focus on experiences of belonging, community connectedness, empowerment and of holistic development.   Its aspirations are for children to:

> grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society (p. 9).

The framework encourages teachers to draw on children's links and relationships with diverse cultures, literacies and different ways of seeing the world.

In both countries there are different kinds of early childhood services and institutions. And in both countries there are few tests. There are no tests or formal assignments in New Zealand's early childhood education system. Instead, teachers use photos, 'learning stories' and work samples to show parents and other teachers

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[1]Lov om dag-, fritids- og klubtilbud m.v. til børn og unge, jf. lovbekendtgørelse nr. 30 af 22. januar 2015): § 8..
Stk. 2. Den pædagogiske læreplan skal beskrive dagtilbuddets mål for børnenes læring inden for følgende temaer:
1) Alsidig personlig udvikling.
2) Sociale kompetencer.
3) Sproglig udvikling.
4) Krop og bevægelse.
5) Naturen og naturfænomener.
6) Kulturelle udtryksformer og værdier.
[2] Lov om dag-, fritids- og klubtilbud m.v. til børn og unge, jf. lovbekendtgørelse nr. 30 af 22. januar 2015): § 7
Stk. 4. Dagtilbud skal give børn medbestemmelse, medansvar og forståelse for demokrati. Dagtilbud skal som led heri bidrage til at udvikle børns selvstændighed, evner til at indgå i forpligtende fællesskaber og samhørighed med og integration i det danske samfund.
Stk. 5. Dagtilbud skal i samarbejde med forældrene sikre en god overgang til skole ved at udvikle og understøtte grundlæggende kompetencer og lysten til at lære. Dagtilbud skal i samarbejde med skolerne skabe en sammenhængende overgang til skole og fritidstilbud..

how children are progressing. Consequently most ECE centres have digital cameras and/or web cams and children can choose what to take pictures of and parents can see what has been happening throughout the day. ECE services collect examples of children's work and play (eg. in a book or portfolio) and write regular summaries about what each child has been learning, which enable parents to see and talk about their child's progress with teachers. Children can take their portfolios with them when they leave the early childhood setting to go to school, and can share it with their teachers in primary school.

Conceptions of the purpose of early childhood education crucially influence orientations towards child-citizens and the meaning of 'school readiness'. It is relevant, then, to study the common and different aspects of perspectives in these two countries, to gain insights into diverse cultures, experiences and understandings of such concepts as democracy, diversity/difference, bias/inclusion, and how they affect children's educational experiences and outcomes. The project will focus on teachers' and children's voices about the nature and purpose of early childhood education, and what it means to be 'school ready'. To do so, we are interested in how children participate in, are heard and included in early childhood settings. We will seek children's perspectives on school readiness and on what it means to them to be a citizen, of their local communities, in Denmark and in New Zealand. We will also enquire about teachers' identification of the concept of 'school readiness' and how they see children as citizens.

The project aims are to:
- Develop an international exchange of knowledge and experience in relation to understandings of school readiness
- Investigate inclusion and democracy in early childhood education, as an examination of what it means to be child-citizens, and to be ready for school.
- Elevate critical engagements with and understandings of the nature and purpose of early childhood education in children's childhoods and learning.
- To disseminate our findings and thinking widely, to foster further pedagogical and research/academic engagement within the ECE and primary school sectors in both countries.

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