

Early Education



Volume 68 Autumn 2023

- *Reo Rua Pukapuka Pikitia: Strategies for developing Te Reo Rangatira*
- *Talanoa, vā and picturebook pedagogy to support Pacific identities in a kindergarten setting*
- *Using social stories as an intentional teaching strategy*
- *Children's mental health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic*
- *Exploring the current climate of mathematics in early childhood education*
- *A data-informed look at sustained shared thinking*





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Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are
welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
- Research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords.
- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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Letter from ... Nordic ECE students in a global online discussion

Fannie Johansson, Anna Barabanova and Sara Hansson

The global discussion

We are three of a larger group of Nordic early childhood student teachers; two from Sweden and one from Finland. During November 2022 we participated in a 3-week online global discussion involving student teachers from courses in Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Japan Poland and Sweden, with some contribution from Spain. The purpose of the activity was so that we could share and learn more about various aspects of education internationally, directly from student-student discussion. While it is wonderful to be able to travel and visit new places, internationalisation@home (internationalisation at home) is a way for us all to be able to build global connections in safe and sustainable ways.

One of our tasks was to contribute responses to the various questions that student teachers in all the other countries asked us (on various topics including language learning, disability, parent involvement and refugees). We also had the task of collating responses to a question which was about early childhood education (ECE) into a simple poster that we shared back onto the platform. This global discussion was simply managed using Padlet but is part of a bigger suite of activities referred to as 'The International Project' (IPC). You can read more

about IPC at this link <https://www.klaudia-schultheis.de/international-project-ipc.html>

Global perspectives on ECE structure and organisation

The overarching question that our group asked others was 'how does early childhood education (preschool) work in your country?' We used the two terms 'early childhood education' (ECE) and 'preschool' because although we know that ECE is used internationally, in our own Nordic countries the term preschool is used by government agencies and in our national preschool curriculum. We invited the other student teachers to tell us different aspects of their ECE service, such as the age of children attending, group size, funding, hours, routines and philosophy. We noticed that some of the students in other countries initially interpreted our question about 'early childhood' to mean the early years of primary or elementary school and did not necessarily know so much about the prior-to-school years. Perhaps this is an interesting point to reflect on. In this 'letter from ...' we share with you what we learned about ECE from the student teachers in the various countries participating in the global discussion. Note that these are the perspectives and comments from the student teachers participating in the project, not necessarily how ECE officially is, nor representative of all regions of each country. Quotes are from

student teachers as shared on the project website.

The student teachers from Poland told us that kindergarten is from 3 years of age. Before that, babies and toddlers attend nursery. The group size in the nursery is about eight children, but there are about 25 in the groups of older children. The Polish student teachers shared that there are many challenges with public kindergarten and so many parents choose to pay for private kindergartens, but this costs a lot. They noted some differing ECE areas of philosophy, including Montessori and religious ECE, and differing areas of specialisation including sport, languages, artistic or vegetarian services.

The student teachers from Japan described three options of ECE: kindergarten, nursery and certified centres for early childhood education and care. They reported that kindergarten had a goal of supporting children to 'learn basics before entering elementary school' and it is accountable to and the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Nursery schools are the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, with more of a focus on childcare as 'there parents can leave kids for as long as their job lasts'. The third option of certified centres for early childhood education and care represents a hybrid between nursery and kindergarten and are the responsibility of the Cabinet Office. Kindergarten is for ages three to five years. Other services are for children aged from birth to five years.

The student teachers from Germany described that kindergarten is from three years of age, with attendance being the parents' decision. The year before primary school, children attend preparatory classes. They are required to attend school from the age of six years. Children can attend school half day (8.00 am to 1.00 pm) or all day with afternoon care (8.00 am to 3:30 pm). The students noted that primary school is for four years, with group sizes of about 25 children, which is financed by the state and does not generally involve charges to families. However, the German students did not give

further details about ECE group size or financing.

The student teachers from Finland shared that children can go to kindergarten as early as four months of age, depending on their parents' work situation, but most children start kindergarten at two years old. ECE groups are organised by age: birth to three years, three to five years, and six-year-olds, with group sizes varying from 15-25 children. In preschool, at the age of six, the children spend at least two hours studying things like the alphabet or workbook assignments. Preschool attendance can last from 8.00 am to noon, or 8.00 am to 4.00 pm depending on family schedules. At the start of preschool, the teacher must write a document called 'Vasu'. It means a plan for early childhood education and includes children's strengths and things they need more practice with. This document is later forwarded to the elementary school teachers.

The student teachers from Sweden shared that in Sweden, children can start ECE (preschool) the day they turn one year old, and they stay until the year they turn six, which is when they start 'preschool class'. Every child has the legal right to attend ECE if their parents want them to, and the fee is based on household income. The national fee for ECE is a maximum 3% of income, but never more than 1572 SEK (143 EUR, 236 NZD, 216 AUD) per month for one child's full-time place. If families have more than one child attending preschool, the fee is lower for the second and third child. Preschools are mostly funded by the municipality through taxpayers. As the student teachers commented, 'In Sweden, we believe preschool is a way for children to learn social skills and interact with others and by being part of a meaningful context they learn about themselves, their strengths and abilities, democracy and how everyone has equal value. They own the right to express themselves in many ways, be included and influence their education'. Sweden has mostly public preschools but there are some private ones. Sweden's preschools are inspired by different philosophies, including Reggio Emilia and Montessori.

What about curricula`?

In Sweden, the curriculum for preschool has two parts. The first part is about basic human rights and all teachers and other professionals in any school in Sweden are expected to act according to these values. The second part is about what abilities each child has the right to develop and what experiences they should be given the opportunity to have. Several other documents are also taken into consideration by ECE teachers, including the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) which became Swedish law in 2020. ECE teachers are taught about UNCROC in their university courses. The curriculum is however open to interpretation by each teacher and the issue of *how to teach* is left up to the individual ECE centres to decide.

In Spain, each autonomous community makes its own decisions in relation to education, but is always respectful of official government and community policy documents regarding early education. Each ECE centre creates its own educational project (PEC in Spanish). The PEC document incorporates the specifications of the curricula previously established by the educational administrations. The PEC incorporates the distinctive hallmarks of the centre and expresses the preschool education that the centre wants to develop.

In Germany, there is no curriculum for ECE. Instead, developmental goals have been developed for children aged 2.5 years and older and targeted programmes are required to implement specific curricula that foster early child development. The curriculum for elementary school differs from state to state, but the Ministry of Education decides what the curriculum should consist of. For example, in Bavaria, the curriculum for primary schools is focused on developing competencies, which allows teachers to have freedom when it comes to how they want to teach. There is no compulsory material that allows for more individual teaching opportunities, based on students' abilities. The student teachers did not share any specific curriculum information about ECE.

Reflection

While some of the student teachers engaged in the global discussion for course credit, the Nordic students all participated voluntarily, without any credit. We did so because we have an interest in internationalisation and want to learn more about how to support the diverse children and families that we will encounter in our work as EC teachers. Maybe one day we will physically travel to some of the countries we learned about, and then we can write you another 'Letter from'.

Note

If you think that student teachers at your university or higher education provider might like to participate in the Global Discussion, please contact Prof Dr Klaudia Schultheis at klaudia.schultheis@ku.de

References

United Nations. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child.
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>