'we got our heads together and came up with a plan': young children's perceptions of curriculum development in one Canadian preschool

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated young children’s perceptions of their role in curriculum development in one Canadian preschool. There is no consensus that children have a role to play in developing curriculum. However, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) confirms children’s right to be listened to about all aspects of their lives. Based on interviews with 34 children and three teachers, this study demonstrates the children feel they play an active role in curriculum development and implementation, but teachers make the final decisions about curriculum content. The children expressed a desire to influence the curriculum in new ways, but their ability to do so may be constrained by structural factors within and beyond the preschool.

KEYWORDS children’s perceptions, curriculum development, intergenerational inequality, participation rights, young children

introduction
There is not a consensus about what young children should learn and who should decide this (Miller et al., 2003). This is evidenced by the wide range of curricula adopted for young children and the fact that even a definition of curriculum is ‘hotly debated’ (Mac Naughton, 2003: 113). In attempting to create an overarching definition of curriculum, Mac Naughton (2003) characterizes curriculum as a living process that includes educational philosophy and goals as well as approaches to time, space, resources, content, materials, and assessment. Her definition recognizes children’s agency, regardless of the explicit level of
influence granted to children within the curriculum model. In this article I will focus on young children's views about their role in determining curriculum content specifically.

One aspect of the debate over curriculum for young children focuses on whether children can or should have an explicit role in developing curriculum. The involvement of children can be supported from a rights perspective. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) states that children – independently from their families and communities – are the bearers of human rights. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (Committee) (2005) confirmed that the UNCRC applies to young children and identified participation rights as one of the four general principles in the UNCRC (1989). Participation rights are specifically referred to in Article 12 (UN, 1989). This Article states that children have the right to voice opinions and that their views must be taken seriously in accordance with their evolving age and maturity. The Committee (2005) suggests that participation rights should be imbedded in children's daily lives including in their places of education and care. This implies that children have a right to voice their views about, among other things, the content and method of their curriculum. In addition to a rights perspective, Moss (2007) suggests that collective decision-making about the aims, content, and organization of a preschool not only builds skills but is a way to engage in democratic practice. According to him, this is important because democracy is a fundamental part of active citizenship, a way to resist injustice and oppression, and a positive promotion of diversity among people, perspectives, and paradigms.

In reality, implementation of the UNCRC (1989) in regard to participation rights – often referred to as implementing a participation agenda – has taken place with older children. Implementation of the UNCRC (1989) for young children has focused on protection issues rather than participation rights (Liwski, 2005). Based on a review of international early years' literature, Mac Naughton et al. (2007) argue that the concept of children's rights has had little impact on early childhood curriculum and there have been few efforts to include children in curriculum development. The situation in Canada reflects this overall pattern. While Canada is a signatory to the UNCRC (1989), the only area of Canadian policy that has explicitly incorporated participation rights is youth justice (Stasiulis, 2002). My study aimed to make a contribution to the debate over young children's role within curriculum development given their right to participation as outlined by the Committee (2005).

Alongside developments in the arena of children's rights over the past two decades, there has been an increasing interest in soliciting young children's perspectives about their preschool experiences. For example, Clark and Moss (2001) developed the Mosaic approach as a method for listening to children. The approach includes data collection strategies which incorporate visual and
verbal ways for children to express their views. These data are then compared to interviews with parents and teachers and are the basis of reflexive discussion and meaning-making among all participants.

Two studies in particular look at young children's views about decision-making, including about the curriculum, within their preschools. Einarsdóttir's (2005) study focused on Icelandic children's perceptions of their playschool – including how decisions get made. Sheridan and Samuelsson (2001) aimed to address how 39 Swedish children perceived their opportunities for decision-making in preschool. Children in Iceland reported that they made decisions about where to be and what to play with during 'choice time'; however, they were aware that they did not make decisions about the overall curriculum content, organization, and rules of their preschool (Einarsdóttir, 2005). Children in the Swedish study had similar perceptions. Further research amongst children from other regions may contribute to a broader perspective about children's views of decision-making about what happens at preschool, including curriculum.

Neither of these studies specifically examined children's perceptions of their role in developing curriculum. The responses elicited from the studies focused on decision-making about individual goals or asserting individual choices. For example, one child stated, 'If someone else chooses this, then you cannot decide and choose it also' (Einarsdóttir, 2005: 482). In the Sheridan and Samuelsson (2001: 179) study, the authors explain that the vast majority of the children define deciding as 'to do what you want to do'. This view of decision-making as an individual matter may have been the result of the particular interview questions, the classroom cultures surrounding decision-making, or other contextual factors. However, implicit in curriculum development is not just individual interests but group goals for all the children attending the preschool. Therefore, the results of these studies indicate that an important area for consideration is how children understand the views of others and conceive of decision-making in terms of collective, rather than merely individual, goals.

Connected to this is the question of whether children desire an active role in curriculum development. Einarsdóttir (2005) and Sheridan and Samuelsson (2001) do not tackle this question directly, but they surmise that children do like making decisions, at least on an individual level. Einarsdóttir (2005) found that the children enjoyed times when they could play the best. They recognized this as a time when they could make their own decisions. Children in the Swedish study felt the same: it was amongst peers that the children most often perceived they make decisions on equal terms. Research with older children indicates that they desire a role in curriculum development. For example, based on interviews with 133 students from three primary schools in Ireland, Devine (2003) demonstrates that the children believe their views should be given equal weight to the interests of the teacher in relation to curriculum development. My study aimed to make a contribution to the discussion about how participation...
rights can be implemented with young children and specifically whether young children would like to participate in curriculum development.

methodology

This was an exploratory study in which I sought to address the questions: what are four- and five-year-old children's perceptions of how curriculum is developed in one preschool in British Columbia (BC), Canada? Do children think they have a role in developing curriculum at this preschool? Do they want to influence the curriculum and, if so, how?

I chose this preschool as a site of study because teachers at this preschool – myself included – strive to include children in developing the curriculum. As there is currently no statutory early years' curriculum in BC, this preschool offers a particularized example of curriculum development where teachers observe children; reflect on and document these experiences; and, discuss these reflections with the children as the basis for developing the curriculum. In the teachers' opinion, this includes determining directions for explorations and investigations and developing rules and routines for the preschool. The teachers at this preschool refer to their approach as 'Reggio-inspired'. In the municipal preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, children are viewed as having a central role in developing the curriculum. New (2007: 7) describes the Reggio Emilia approach as a 'pedagogy of collaborative inquiry'. She defines this as the way curiosities and interests of both children and teachers – and often families – are explored in order to collectively develop new hypotheses, knowledge, and ideas. Curriculum content and outcomes – referred to as progettazione or contextualized curriculum – are not predetermined but are continuously negotiated by the participants (Rinaldi, 2006). This understanding of curriculum proposes that all participants should be able to influence each other and their learning. Determining whether curriculum development at the preschool in my study is unique or even similar to the Reggio Emilia approach was not the purpose of this study. Instead, the emphasis of this research is how the children view their influence over the curriculum. This is a question that the teachers have never explicitly discussed with the children.

The preschool itself is located in the suburbs of Vancouver, BC, Canada. It is a multi-ethnic community: many of the children speak more than one language and some of the children do not speak English as a first language. The majority of the parents in the preschool have paid employment, although some work part-time. Parents are employed in a range of jobs and represent a cross-section of income levels. However, usually only one or two parents per year receive childcare subsidies available solely for low-income parents. The children attend preschool three days a week for two hours per class.
I elected to use a multi-method approach in this study, a decision informed by other studies conducted to investigate children's perspectives of preschool (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Sheridan and Samuelsson, 2001). My methods included a review of preschool policy documents and pedagogical documentation; interviews with three teachers; and, interviews with 34 children. While these methods allowed for triangulation, the study results would have been richer with the increased participation of the children in the research activity. For example, a number of researchers advocate involving children in developing research questions, data gathering, and analysis (Clark and Moss, 2001; Hill, 2005; MacNaughton and Smith, 2005; Morrow, 2005). However, my study was limited by time and resources. Thus, I prioritized a method – interviews – that at very least would directly solicit children's input.

As a practitioner-researcher, I clearly had a biased perspective (Robson, 2002). I attempted to address this through critical reflection. For example, I continued to reflect on how I responded to children's suggestions and dealt with emerging data: was I negating ideas because I thought they were impractical? Did I emphasize positive rather than critical data? Second, Clark (2005) explains that when conducting research with children, they may feel compelled to give a correct answer. This pressure could have been compounded by my status as the children's teacher. To address this concern, I took time throughout the research process to build rapport and trust with the children and informed the children that there were no correct answers to my questions. Despite these limitations, it has been argued that the lack of objectivity associated with practitioner-researcher can be offset by the benefits (Robson, 2002). For example, being a practitioner-researcher offered advantages in terms of ease of implementation. Dockett and Perry (2007) suggest that when a researcher has built a connection with a child, it is less likely that children will give responses that they believe will please or satisfy the interviewer. Rather, children will reply with more openness and their responses will be more trustworthy.

Ethics are of concern in any research project, but particularly where children are involved. Roberts (2000) suggests that ethical guidelines for research cannot provide answers, but they can pose the right kind of questions. A key question is to consider what impact a study may have on the participants (Alderson, 2005; Hill, 2005). The child participants in my study did not experience any direct benefits from participating; nonetheless, I aimed to make the process as interesting, enjoyable, and empowering as possible. The main benefits I anticipated from the study were for the teachers and future children at the preschool and more broadly to the debate about appropriate curriculum and participation rights for young children.

I received consent for conducting the study and interviews from the preschool executive board, the teachers, the families, and the children. As part of the written and follow-up verbal consent process, I assured the participants of confidentiality.
and anonymity. An essential ethical concern in research interviews is whether a researcher maintains or intensifies her/his powerful position in relationship to the participant (Roberts-Holmes, 2005). This is magnified in relations between adult researchers and child participants due to children's marginalized social status (Punch, 2002). In an attempt to minimize the power differential between myself and the children, I asked the children to choose where to be interviewed, whether to be interviewed alone or with a friend, and when to be interviewed. Furthermore, a number of researchers recommend holding conversations – rather than interviews – with children to give children control over the pace and direction (Dockett and Perry, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2005; Mayall, 2000). Therefore, I chose to use a topic guide consisting of potential open-ended questions. The questions were used to provoke conversation as opposed to dictating the interview content or process. Based on analysis of pilot interviews, I used the terms ‘decide’, ‘figure out’, and ‘plan’ what happens at preschool in reference to the less familiar term ‘curriculum development’.

In total, 22 children chose to be interviewed alone. The other 12 were interviewed with a friend. The interviews ranged from 2.5–22.3 minutes. On average the individual interviews were 8.6 minutes and the paired interviews were 11.2 minutes. 17 boys and 17 girls participated in the interviews. At the time I did the interviews, 20 children were four years old and 14 children were five years old. Four children did not give consent to participate and one family did not give consent for their child to participate.

I analysed the data using an ‘editing approach’ (Robson, 2002: 458). This refers to a type of coding that is determined after, rather than before, data collection. I reviewed the children’s responses to each interview question for substantive statements and used these as the basis for generating themes (Gillham, 2000). These themes were compared to the teacher’s interviews and preschool documents. I maintained an ‘audit trial’ and used this as a basis for providing information about my research activities (Robson, 2002: 175). This is an accepted practice for achieving reliability in qualitative research studies (Dockett and Perry, 2007). The use of multi-methods for triangulation not only provided different perspectives on the research questions, it contributed to the study's internal validity.

results

children’s perceptions of curriculum development

The children’s discussion of curriculum development can be divided into three categories: who had the idea for the curriculum content, who decided if the idea would be implemented, and how the idea was implemented.
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having an idea

There was not a consensus among the children about which specific individuals came up with the idea for different activities available in the preschool. However, most children felt that their ideas influenced the curriculum content. For example, in the year I conducted the study, the children participated in a long-term project about travel and transportation, including the construction of a life-size airplane in the classroom. Fifteen children said that building the airplane was the children’s idea and two said they did not know. The other children did not discuss the airplane. The children travelled to ‘a Mexican beach’ located in the preschool loft. Three children said that the beach was the children’s idea. Three said it was the teachers’ idea. One did not know. The teachers identified the beach and the airplane as children’s ideas. However, it was the teachers who set up the beach while they worked with the children to plan and build the airplane. The teachers emphasized that in general, the curriculum content was based on their observations of and discussions with the children. They confirmed that the topics of travel and transportation were not preset curriculum themes. Nor did the teachers plan to construct a plane in the classroom. Instead the topic and related activities were the result of the children’s ideas as well as their questions.

Two of the teachers commented that the longer the children were in the preschool the more the children initiated curriculum content:

Marivic: It starts with us asking that question: ‘What else do you want to use to paint with?’ Then they [the children] understand that we value what their ideas are. And that if they give us an idea then we will try it out. That’s a little tester for them. Hey, I said a block and now we’re painting with blocks. This is so cool. Ok, now I have a voice.

The written material in the preschool supports this perspective. The schedule in the Parent Manual 2007/2008 states that group time includes discussion and planning for the next day. Preschool documentation also highlighted children’s contributions to an exploration of painting and the travel project.

decision-making power

A key distinction emerged between having an idea for curriculum content and making the final decision about using this idea. Almost all of the children agreed that it was the teachers who had the final authority over the curriculum content. This distinction has also been found in studies undertaken in Iceland (Einarsdóttir, 2005) and Sweden (Sheridan and Samuelsson, 2001). In my study, some of the children described having an idea for something, but having to get approval from the teachers before moving forward. They did not feel that it was necessary to get approval from the other children:
Interviewer: When you have an idea, what do you do?
Beatrice: Tell the teachers.
Interviewer: Then what happens?
Beatrice: They say yes or no.
Mable: They think about it. See if it’s a good idea or not.

Many (but not all) of the children commented that if they told the teachers their idea, it would be implemented. However, a few of the children commented that they would expect a more positive response from their families rather than the teachers.

Decision-making power was also associated with setting up for the preschool day and introducing new activities at the daily meeting. The *Parent Manual 2007/2008* supports this analysis. It states that the programme is planned by teachers but is based on children's interest. The teachers did not all explicitly state that they make the final decisions; however, their discussion of using the children’s interests and ideas to develop the curriculum implicitly defines them as the final authority. Phillippa, a veteran teacher at the preschool, commented that the role of teachers in making the final decision might need to change:

I think that they [the children] must feel some sense of involvement because we are asking for their input. But as far as decisions, I think they see it as us. They give us the idea and they see us as making the decisions of what ideas should be used. Which is maybe something that we should fix . . .

**implementing the decision**

Many of the children were able to describe in detail the process they went through to plan and implement their curriculum ideas. Their descriptions often highlighted their personal contribution to the group's success. For example, Marnie described how the children learned to make an airplane: ‘I have went on one. I drawed the picture of the airplane, and then bringed it here so they can make it.’

They were able to provide detailed descriptions of the implementation process including how they grappled with and resolved challenges. For example, Natalie described the collaborative research and planning process the children went through to make their airplane:

Interviewer: You had an idea to make an airplane. What did you do?
Natalie: First, we had to make a plan how to make it. Then we builded the chairs. Last week.
Interviewer: How did you know how to build chairs?
Natalie: But first, we didn't know how to build a chair.
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Interviewer: What did you do to figure it out?
Natalie: We got our heads together, and then we came up with a plan.
Interviewer: Once you had a plan, what did you do?
Natalie: First, we needed a book. Then we made the chairs as fast as we can.

Nicola described the problem solving the children went through as they were making the airplane chairs. She stressed the importance of designing the chairs so that all the children could use them:

Nicola: We decided that we had to make an airplane. And then the teachers helped make it. The chairs. They helped. Peter's the tallest one so we measured him and then we lift it [the chair back] that high.
Interviewer: So it's tall enough for the tallest person.
Nicola: And for the short persons.

The children also discussed the strategies they used to come to common decisions. These included writing letters to the other classes to share ideas, testing different children's ideas, and negotiating with each other:

Interviewer: Did everyone want the [airplane] chairs to be black?
David: Yep.
Carlo: I want them to be light blue.
Interviewer: Who wanted them to be black?
David: Me! Ivan wanted them to be dark red.
Interviewer: How did you figure out what colour to make them?
David: We talked about it.
Interviewer: What did people say?
David: OK.

Many of the children in my study expressed confidence in their ability to take part in such negotiations. This involves an ability to understand and reflect on the point of view of others. Based on contextualized versions of Piaget's perspective-taking tasks, Donaldson (1987) argues that preschoolers have the capacity for far less egocentric thought than suggested by Piaget. The qualitative work of Tizard and Hughes (2002) supports the argument that young children have the capacity to understand another's viewpoint even at three years old. In their analysis of children's conversations with adults, they found numerous occasions when children would not only try to understand another's point of view, but were able to make reasonable inferences about what other people might know and feel.

The teachers and the pedagogical documentation in the preschool in my study suggest that children participate in planning, problem solving, and implementing curriculum content once a focus is determined. However, the children did not
express this level of influence over all the curriculum content. For example, they mentioned that some activities are already set-up and determined when they come into the classroom. However, they still perceive that they can make their own decisions about how to use the set-up. Over half of the children spoke about making decisions on their own and with friends about what to do during free choice time and how to do it.

**children's desire to influence the curriculum**

Some of the children explicitly stated they like to influence the curriculum. They said they enjoy giving their ideas and are happy when their ideas are used. Other responses implied a desire to influence the curriculum. For example, a number of children stated that they tell the teachers their ideas because they believe that will ensure it will happen. One child remarked she wants to be teacher in the future so that she can make decisions about what happens at preschool. The teachers' comments support this. They spoke about the children's excitement upon seeing their ideas implemented and their increasing comfort, ability, and motivation to share their curriculum ideas.

Some of the children were able to discuss aspects of the curriculum they would like to influence. For example, one child commented that she would like to decide what is set-up each day. A number of children wished to influence the types of toys available at the preschool; for example, they wished the preschool had ponies or Star Wars Lego. Playing outside – at the playground, soccer field, or in local nature areas – was a topic of discussion in a number of the interviews. It was something children enjoy doing but did not typically do at preschool.

The children also indirectly identified a gap in the current curriculum development process at the Preschool: family involvement. Although I did not ask any questions explicitly about their families, almost all of the children mentioned family members in their interviews. The teachers also spoke about the importance of relationships with families. According to Melissa:

> I think it's [the preschool] something that really needs to be formed as a community, and everyone needs to be on the same page cause if not then it's just not going to work. It's [important] having your parents, your teachers, and your children involved.

Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) argue that families are extremely important in children's learning, whether through parental involvement in preschool or at home. English children achieved higher cognitive outcomes in settings that sought to develop shared and consistent educational goals between the home and preschool. However, in my study, there was little sense (either from the children or teachers) of the involvement of families in the preschool curriculum. Marivic, one of the teachers, noted this discrepancy: 'I think our relationship with the families can be different. So that they're a part of what's happening in
the classroom. This study did not aim to elicit the families’ perceptions, so more research could be conducted with the families about their views on curriculum development as well as their desired role within it.

A final note is that while the children indicated a desire to influence the curriculum, it is unclear whether they would like to make the final decision about the curriculum. Thomas (2007) identifies this as an ongoing debate surrounding the aims of a participation agenda: namely, should the goal be joint decision-making or handing power over to children. In my study, both teachers and children raised concerns about children being the lone decision-makers. These challenges ranged from feasibility to a need for history and information. Research with older children and young people on participation rights in various arenas suggests they want to be listened to, not that they would like to be the sole decision-makers (Morrow, 1999; Smith, 2007). In my study, the teachers’ emphasis on building community and the collaborative perspective put forth by the children suggest that perhaps they do not view decision-making as a dichotomy between children and teachers. Instead, the process of developing curriculum – including relationships being built and negotiations taking place – may be of primary importance.

discussion

Six principle themes can be drawn from the results of this study. First, I would argue that this study demonstrates young children are capable research informants about their lived experiences. The children who participated in this study were able to discuss aspects of curriculum development in a detailed and thoughtful manner. Furthermore, certain methodological and contextual factors contributed to the children’s ability to do so: familiarity with the researcher, methodological attempts to address power differentials, and the children’s previous experience in reflecting on experiences and sharing ideas in preschool.

Not surprisingly, the use of interviews was not as effective for less verbal children or children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). In my study, seven out of the 34 interviews I conducted did not yield significant data in answer to my research questions. Two of these children spoke EAL. Five of these children were among the youngest in the study. Either these children were not interested in discussing the topics or were not able to understand or respond to my questions. Language abilities make possible a theory-of-mind (Flavell, 2000). Sharing a language with the interviewer enables children to convey this understanding.

Second, my findings indicate that young children are able to think about collective curriculum goals, rather than just individual goals. This can be evidenced in a number of ways. A significant feature of the interviews was that the children spoke about ideas for curriculum content emerging from children as a group, rather than individuals:
Interviewer: How about stuff like this airplane – whose idea was it to make this?
Beatrice and Mable: Everybody's!
Beatrice: And the teachers.

A few of the participants identified the role of particular children in initiating or implementing the curriculum, but they tended to focus on an individual's contribution to the group's overall understanding. For example, Peter described how the children figured out what the airplane seats should look like:

Because I bring that [a poster of the inside of a cockpit] so that they know what the seat looks like. And it's teached. Then when we already knowed it, then we did it.

The teachers also highlighted the importance of common interests when deciding on curriculum content.

The emphasis on collaborative goals was unexpected given that Canada is recognized as one of the more individualistically oriented nations (Hofstede, 2001). Additionally, Moss (2008) argues that the importance accorded to individual choice in many preschools actually impedes the ability to make collective decisions. Therefore, the expectation would be that the children and teachers in this preschool would have emphasized children's individual needs and independence over that of the group. More research could help to identify if the opposite results were a product of the particular preschool culture, a reflection of the children's various cultural backgrounds, or other factors.

A third theme emerging from my study is that the children and teachers demonstrated a remarkably common understanding about how the preschool curriculum is determined and implemented (Figure 1). I would suggest that several factors contributed to this sense of intersubjectivity: the use of dialogue among children and teachers particularly during large and small group time, revisiting of pedagogical documentation by teachers and families with the children, and communication between the classes handled primarily by one teacher. Furthermore, all three teachers felt their pedagogical approach was more effective than other approaches. Nuttall (2004) argues that when teachers believe their preschool is better than others – whether or not this is accurate – it can help to develop a sense of intersubjectivity.

However, there was not agreement between the children or the children and teachers about all aspects of curriculum development. A possible reason for discrepancies is that memories of what has happened are narrative reconstructions rather than objective accounts. Therefore, people's memory of an experience will never be exactly the same nor will there be 'one-to-one correlation between “what happened” and people's memory' (Lyle, 2000: 52). Another possible reason is the children might not have seen who initiated or implemented a particular area of the curriculum. With four classes contributing to the same curriculum, this happens fairly frequently. Furthermore, the main difference between the children's and teachers' perceptions was that the children did not seem to be
aware of the teachers' discussion and debate as a teaching team. This dialogue happens after the children leave the preschool and may not be communicated to the children. If an individual child isn't generally part of making curriculum decisions it may be even more difficult to infer what happened when s/he was not present. Hatano and Inagaki's (1992) work highlights that children who have developed conceptual knowledge from direct experience are able to use this knowledge to make predictions and inferences more effectively than children who have not had direct experience. In my study, some – but not all – of the children appeared to be aware of adults and children who influenced the curriculum even if they did not witness this first hand:

Interviewer: Whose idea was it to make the airplane?
Karen: The other class.
Interviewer: The kids or the teachers?
Karen: The kids. The other kids. The other 4-year-old and the other 3-year-old.
Interviewer: What did you think about that idea?
Karen: It was perfect!

Fourth, my research suggests that the preschool approach respects children's participation rights in terms of curriculum development. However, these rights are embedded in practice rather than occurring within an explicit discourse of children's rights. Nonetheless, children are viewed by teachers and appear to view themselves as competent and capable – a view that underpins a children's rights approach. Furthermore, from the perspective of the children and teachers, the preschool approach involves the four general participation procedures suggested by Skivenes and Strandbu (2006). They suggest that children must be given the opportunity to make informed decisions based on adequate information. In my study, children and teachers spoke about doing research to gain further information and dialoguing to find out about other perspectives.

Second, according to Skivenes and Strandbu (2006), there must be time and space for children to share their opinions and decisions. In my study, children spoke about telling teachers their ideas both informally during play and in more formal discussions during group time. Third, Skivenes and Strandbu (2006) argue that children's views must be respected and included in the final decision. Many of the children in my study discussed how their suggestions and ideas were reflected in the final decisions about the curriculum; however, they were not always certain about how final decisions were made. This relates to Skivenes and Strandbu's (2006) fourth point: children must be aware that a decision has been reached and how. In my study, many of the children were able to articulate what decisions were made about their curriculum. However, the fact that they were not always aware of the process the teachers went through to make a final decision indicates that this is a less developed area of the participation process.

The children's interviews suggested there is another crucial element in a participation agenda: children's enactment of their rights. In other words, how do children express and put their decisions into practice? Children's active role in claiming their participation rights was evident in terms of sharing their ideas and negotiating decisions explicitly about the curriculum content. But it was also evident in how children did or did not use provided materials. For example, the children spoke readily about making decisions about what to do individually and with friends while at preschool. For example, Beatrice said, 'We think before we play. [Then we] go somewhere that we really, really want to go.' Decision-making with friends was based on balancing wanting to be together with (sometimes) conflicting interests. The children discussed a number of strategies for making decisions with friends. These included asking friends if they wanted to play something specific; letting their friend decide what to play; playing with different friends; taking turns making decisions; playing 'Eeny, meeny, miny, moe' to
see who would decide; or, taking their friend by the hand to a new activity. Children's implicit decision-making about curriculum content was also noted by the teachers. Phillipa said, 'If you put something out and you notice nobody's going nowhere near it, that's pretty obvious.'

Despite the surprisingly similar perspectives – among the children and teachers – about children's participation in the curriculum development process, this is not a definitive indication that children actually have a high level of influence over the curriculum. For example, it was not clear from the interviews whether the teachers and children were aware of how time, resources, and other organizational features affect their ability to influence the curriculum. Unbiased naturalist observation could help to highlight some of the more general constraints on children's and teacher's influence over the curriculum.

This leads to my fifth point: there are a number of significant obstacles to individual children's participation. The participants demonstrated some awareness of these barriers. For example, a number of children said that they had difficulty sharing their ideas due to being shy or fearful. The teachers also identified the importance of confidence and the ability to verbalize ideas. As well, one of the teachers wondered about the impact on a child if s/he gave an idea that wasn't accepted. Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie (2006) question whether certain children and their families are silenced with the implementation of the participation agenda as it tends to favour individuality and verbal expression. They argue that this approach is culturally specific and favours white, middle-class educational practices. To ensure that already marginalized children are not further excluded, they assert that it is necessary to consider inequalities not just between adults and children but also between children based on class, ethnicity, and gender. However, aside from the aforementioned points, the data from this study did not reveal any clear inequalities between groups of children – such as between boys and girls – in terms of their perceived ability to exert influence.

The distinction among groups that emerged in this study was intergenerational. Both children and teachers had a strong group identity and referred to the group they belonged to as ‘us’ (e.g. children) and the other group (e.g. teachers) as ‘them’. This group identity was central to the discussion about curriculum development: nearly all of the children and the teachers commented that it was the teachers who made the final decisions about the curriculum. Intergenerational inequality is the sixth theme emerging from this study.

A few of the children discussed their understanding of the process teachers used to make the final decision about the curriculum. Stephen suggested teachers' decisions are based on their observations: ‘The stuff we do they think we're going to do again.’ Jonathan wanted a particular kind of Lego at the preschool, but he identified safety as a basis for teachers' decision not to have it: ‘Because the [Legos] are not good and not safe for the little ones here. Or for the 3-year-old in here.’
While these children accepted the teachers' reasoning and ultimate authority, other children expressed a sense of frustration:

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to do at preschool?
Natalie: Yes, play soccer. But first you have to run around.
Interviewer: Do your teachers know that?
Natalie: Yeah, I told them. And they never let us.
Interviewer: How do you feel about that?
Natalie: Sad or mad.

The children had a number of theories about why it was the teachers' role to make the final decision. Sandra identified the importance of the teachers' knowledge:

‘[The fiesta was] Melissa's idea. Melissa had all the words so we can fiesta because we never been to a fiesta before.’ Nicola identified the difficulty of having too many people involved in making decisions. She felt this was a reason the final decisions were made at the end of the day when the children had gone home. A number of children commented on the value of teachers' ideas in comparison to children's. For example, Jonathan commented, ‘Teachers' ideas are smarter than 4-year-old ideas. And mom's ideas are smart too. As smart as teachers. Because they use their brain and something it is unusual and hard . . . ’ These children were conflicted about whether children have important ideas:

Interviewer: What kind of ideas do teachers have?
Suzanne: Important.
Interviewer: Do kids ever have ideas at preschool?
Suzanne: Yeah, I guess.
Interviewer: What kind of ideas?
Suzanne: Playing ideas.
Interviewer: Are kid's ideas important ideas?
Suzanne: Yeah, sometimes they have to do chores.
Interviewer: So chores are important?
Suzanne: Yeah.
Interviewer: Is playing important?
Suzanne: No. It's just fun.
Interviewer: Are important things fun?
Suzanne: No. Important things are sometimes fun. But not really fun. Just a little fun sometimes.

This raises a question about whether the children's possibilities for exerting influence are constrained by intergenerational inequality. For example, Trina articulated her belief that certain things are acceptable at preschool while
others aren’t. Trina and Emily were discussing their gymnastic skills and Trina commented: ‘You don’t do this at preschool, right Emily? Because here is not to do this. It’s to play like this what is here.’ While one child imposed this limitation on another, her comment suggests she may feel that children do not have the power to make fundamental changes at preschool. In general, children have low status and power (Qvortrup, 2000). Their lives tend to be constrained by decisions made about them, rather than with them. My study raises questions about how children perceive generational power, if and why they identify certain ideas are more important than others, and how this affects their ability to achieve and willingness to assert participation rights and contribute to the curriculum.

conclusion

The picture that emerged of curriculum development in this Canadian preschool was one that corresponds with a children’s rights approach where children’s input has a real affect on decisions about their lives, including their curriculum. In many ways, the preschool offers participants – adults and children – the possibility to collaboratively determine the purposes, practices, and environment of the preschool and engage in critical dialogue about ideas of curriculum, education, and childhood.

However, while the children in this study expressed a sense of influence over the development and implementation of the curriculum, their participation may be constrained by a number of external factors including time, resources, and a general perception among Canadians that there are few opportunities for meaningful democratic engagement including within schools and government (Stasiulis, 2002). A most notable obstacle is the issue of intergenerational inequality. While some of the children interviewed articulated the differential status accorded to children and adults, it is not clear if they were aware of how their participation may be constrained by this inequality.

Respecting children’s participation rights and implementing democratic practice in preschool is, therefore, not merely a matter of asking children for their ideas and opinions. Moss (2008) suggests that implementing democratic practice in preschool goes beyond implementing certain structures and procedures. He argues the importance of creating an everyday culture of democracy. This culture necessarily includes critically analysing and challenging broader societal disparities including intergenerational inequality.

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