

ANDREA WELZ

Early Childhood Education: An International Perspective



AS PART OF A STUDY TOUR TO EUROPE, planned to coincide with the Early Childhood Education (ECE) World Forum in Belfast and a Reggio Emilia study tour in Italy,¹ I was determined to learn more about some of the early learning programs in Europe. In the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) International Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care, Canada scored among the lowest of the 20 countries reviewed.² I was interested in visiting programs in countries that ranked higher than Canada and keen to experience first-hand how these systems differed from ours.

EARLY LEARNING IN SCANDINAVIA

Sweden and Denmark are often cited in literature when describing quality programming and universally accessible systems. Thanks to wonderful hosts, I was able to visit several programs in both countries, ranging from short tours to a week of active participation. As a part of these visits, I was also engaged in insightful discussions with people working in the field.

All of the early learning programs I visited were child-centred and play-based. The Swedish national curriculum framework focuses on an emergent curriculum, which is influenced by Reggio Emilia principles. This philosophy is based on a view of the child as competent and capable. It states that children learn through exploration and self-expression, in collaboration with peers, parents, and educators.

In both Sweden and Denmark, early learning programs receive public funding, so costs to parents are low compared to Canadian costs. These programs are available for children under the age of seven in Sweden; under the age of six in Denmark. In Sweden, all parents receive child support that basically covers the cost of early learning programs. Sweden also guarantees a regulated placement for every child, so returning to work or school for those wishing to do so is always possible. As a result, almost all Swedish children attend the preschool early learning program.

EN BREF Dans l'examen thématique international de l'Organisation de coopération et de développement économiques (OCDE) en matière d'éducation et de garde des jeunes enfants, le Canada s'est classé parmi les derniers des 20 pays examinés. Ce tour d'horizon des programmes d'apprentissage en bas âge souligne certaines des différences entre les attitudes canadiennes à l'égard de l'éducation et la garde des jeunes enfants (EGJE) et celles de la Suède, du Danemark et de l'Allemagne, en indiquant clairement comment ces attitudes sont manifestées dans les programmes. Tous les programmes visités étaient centrés sur les enfants et axés sur le jeu, mettant l'accent sur les jeux en plein air et l'harmonie avec la nature. Cette emphase sur la nature est plus prononcée dans les programmes préscolaires axés sur la forêt qui sont maintenant populaires dans de nombreux pays européens. En Allemagne, le programme à temps plein et lieu en forêt, sans clôtures ni jouets commerciaux. Tous les programmes semblaient plus enclins à permettre aux enfants de courir des risques que les programmes canadiens.

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In addition to providing direct support for the preschool program, Sweden supports families by allowing parental leaves to be spread out over a three-year period and by guaranteeing that parents can stay home from work, with pay, whenever their children are ill.

In my discussions with both Swedish and Danish educators and families, I noted a genuine feeling that it was important for everyone, including families and young children, to be looked after. I was repeatedly told that they didn't mind paying taxes (which are much higher than Canadian taxes) if the money was being used to ensure equity.

What struck me first about the Swedish and Danish programs was the physical layout. Each age group had a designated area that included several rooms through which the children could roam freely. A well-equipped art area with a variety of art materials was always central. A large outdoor play area also included a variety of play spaces. Most notable were little nooks, often made of shrubs or trees. When walking around the playground, you could sometimes hear a group of children playing in the shrubbery before you would see them.

Connecting children to nature seemed to be an important part of all the programs I visited. All the outdoor play spaces included natural features. Where possible, children visit their natural surroundings – such as forests, meadows, and beaches – as a regular part of their day. They are encouraged to play freely in these areas, climbing rocks and trees, balancing on fallen tree trunks, and playing with sticks. Children play outdoors, rain or shine. The week I spent in one centre, it rained every day – at times poured – with temperatures below 10 degrees Celsius. But, we were outside every day, either in the playground or in the forest, for hours at a time. The children and educators all had excellent rain gear and were well prepared for inclement weather.

Preschoolers whose parents requested a rest time slept on mats. Infants and toddlers had rooms set aside for sleeping. On two occasions, I saw outdoor sleeping areas where, I was told, the children sleep outdoors through all the seasons, including winter (up to -15 degrees Celsius).

I visited one interesting program outside a large Danish city. More than 100 preschool children were bussed from the city to this rural location, where they roamed freely through a large two-storey building and a spacious outdoor area. The entire perimeter of the property – where children were free to play – was thickly forested. I walked around this perimeter on heavily used trail systems, often stumbling upon small groups of children. The children also had access to a large farm area with both vegetables and animals.

Interestingly, I never noticed large groups of children. They played in small groups or independently, and educators were often engaged with them. They were obviously involved in various projects, both indoors and outdoors, but the atmosphere was relaxed and calm.

Based on my observations, child/adult ratios in Sweden and Denmark are the same or better than those regulated in Ontario. However, children are not always with an adult. They flow from outdoor to indoor activities, and at times might be in one of the rooms or outdoors on their own.

PRESCHOOL IN THE FOREST

The Forest Kindergarten program, popular in many European countries, is a unique nature preschool program. This approach has been a part of early learning programs in many European countries for two decades, but its popularity has grown phenomenally in the past five years.

The nature program I visited was a full day program (many are only half day) in Germany. The children were dropped off at a location just inside a large, forested area. They wore orange safety bands with whistles and carried backpacks with rain gear, drinks, and snacks. Once they had all arrived, we headed into the forest, following a well-trodden trail. We gathered around a decorated stump, sang songs, shared stories, and made plans for the day. The children decided as a group which area they would like to play in. Once plans were made, we headed even deeper into the forest, following less distinct pathways. As we walked, some of the children talked to me about the plants and animals we saw and heard. I was also told about the wild boars that lived in this area. They adamantly warned me about plants I could not touch because they were poisonous. Once we reached our destination, the children had a quick snack and then headed off to play.

There were no fences and no commercial toys. Children knew that they were guests in the forest and needed to ensure that they did not harm any animals or plants. I wandered about, observing their play: a large group of children building a structure with sticks and bark; another group playing house by creating rooms and dishes out of stumps and branches; one child observing a colony of ants for an extended time period; another child using little branches and some dead weeds to create a sculpture. Children whose parents had given permission were allowed to use their pocket knives, with specific safety guidelines, and within sight of the educators.



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My reaction was to alert the educators; their reaction was surprise at my reaction.

At lunchtime we headed back to a storage shed, which housed tables, mats, and sleeping bags. Lunch was served on picnic tables, and then the children had an outdoor rest time on large mats (in the winter they have access to another facility). After rest time, they continued to play until parents arrived to pick them up. In this program, children play outdoors in all types of weather.

I found this approach intriguing and would like to learn more about it. According to the discussions I had with the Forest Kindergarten educators, research suggests that children who attend this type of program are not as academically ready for school as their peers when they first start school, but quickly catch up. They were noted to be more focused, creative, and critical thinkers and healthier individuals overall.

RISK-TAKING

I was particularly interested in the attitude toward risk-taking in all the European programs I visited. On my very first visit, I saw a child standing on top of a play structure preparing to jump into a sandpit. My reaction was to alert the educators; their reaction was surprise at my reaction. We had a good discussion about our perspectives. These excerpts from Carter and Curtis' book *Reflecting Children's Lives*, sum up this discussion.

I strongly believe that taking risks is part of childhood, especially within the security of a child care program. If you don't get to take risks as a child, you aren't likely to have good judgment about risk-taking as an adult....

....My sense is that often an adult watches an exploring or adventuresome child and gets fearful. This quickly translates into the adult either stopping the child in the name of protection or passing along that fear to the child....

....We ask ourselves, "If a child tries to jump over a log and skins her knee, is that more dangerous than never understanding her body's capability as she grows and takes on more physical challenges?" I worry about a growing person's ability to self-impose needed limits if these limits have always been externally imposed by someone else....³

Anecdotally, I was told that the number of injuries is very low, lower than accident rates in the home. Educators I spoke with, who had over twenty years of experience, stated that they had seen no more than a single serious accident over their entire work experience.



CONCLUSION

The trip reaffirmed many of my beliefs and allowed me to make some shifts in my thinking.

My ongoing concern about our lack of connection with nature was fuelled by what I saw and by reading Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*. Experiencing the many ways the outdoor environment and an appreciation of nature are fostered in the programs I visited has strengthened my commitment to work at making change in our own system. The benefits were very evident to me. Since my return I have connected with a few people in our region who are quite actively involved in Nature Networks. The ECE World Forum's Nature Action Collaborative for Children is an excellent resource for anyone interested in starting their own Nature group.⁴

Risk-taking is certainly an area that has been curbed substantially in early learning programs in Ontario. The programs I visited made me rethink and question my perspectives on risk-taking, and I am looking forward to dialoguing about this with others in the field.

The big question for me is why there is such a vast difference in the values of Canadians and Swedes towards early learning and supporting families. Why would there be such a difference between two nations that are, in many ways, very similar? Hopefully, as people become more aware of the research that clearly identifies the benefits of supporting families and providing high quality, universally accessible, and affordable early learning programs as a way to build strong communities and a viable economy,⁵ we will see a change in Canadian attitudes. |

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Notes

- 1 For information on the World Forum, see www.worldforumfoundation.org; for information on Reggio Emilia, see <http://zerosei.comune.re.it/inter/reggiochildren.htm>
- 2 Early Learning and Child Care: How Does Canada Measure Up? See www.childcarecanada.org/pubs/pdf/BN_EarlyLearning06.pdf
- 3 Deb Curtis and Margie Carter, *Reflecting Children's Lives: A Handbook for Planning Child-Centered Curriculum* (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 2002), 43.
- 4 See www.worldforumfoundation.org/wf/nacc/index.php
- 5 *The Early Years*. (n.d.) Retrieved on Sept 12, 2006 from: wwwFOUNDERS.net/ey/communities.nsf/cl/fn-com-15