



The Creative Curriculum from the West to the East:A Critical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports part of the literature review of an ethnographic study (Alothman, 2017). The current paper aims to provide an overview of the creative curriculum in terms of theoretical principles, content, teaching resources, with a particular focus on early literacy component in this curriculum. This paper also sheds the light on the Arabic version of the creative curriculum that has been implemented in the Saudi educational context. In addition, a critical review of the extant literature on importing educational curricula is discussed. Recommendations and implications for policy maker, curriculum designer, and preschool administration are presented.

Keywords: Early Childhood Curricula, Creative Curriculum, Importing Curricula.



المنهج الإبداعي من الغرب إلى الشرق: منظور نقدي

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المستخلص:

استعرضت هذه الورقة جزء من مراجعة الأدبيات لدراسة إثنوجرافية (Alothman, 2017). قدمت الورقة لمحة عن المنهج الإبداعي، إحدى مناهج مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة، من حيث الإطار النظري والمفاهيمي الذي يقوم عليه المنهج، محتواه، مصادر التدريس، ومجال المعرفة المبكرة بالقراءة والكتابة المبكرة في هذا المنهج. كما تناولت الورقة النسخة العربية من المنهج الإبداعي والذي تم تطبيقه في السياق التعليمي السعودي. إضافة إلى ذلك، سعت الورقة إلى الوقوف على ظاهرة استيراد المناهج التعليمية في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة من خلال استعراض وتحليل الأدب البحثي في هذا المجال. واختتمت الورقة بتقديم عدد من التوصيات والمقترحات لمتخذي القرار، مصممي المناهج، والقائمين على إدارة رياض الأطفال.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مناهج الطفولة المبكرة، المنهج الإبداعي، استيراد المناهج.

A glance at the Creative Curriculum: theoretical principles

The Creative Curriculum is an early childhood curriculum that was created by Diane Dodge in 1978. She is the founder of *Teaching Strategies* in the United States, a company that publishes, distributes and runs teacher-training programmes. Her curriculum is based on research findings and key principles of theorists such as Maslow, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, Gardner, and Bronfenbrenner. The Creative Curriculum underwent several stages of development through five editions in 1978, 1988, 1992 and 2002. The most recent edition was published in 2010 (Gestwicki, 2012).

According to *Teaching Strategies*(2013a), documentary data stated that the Creative Curriculum endeavours to achieve 38 objectives in a child's growth and learning. These objectives cover social-emotional, physical, language and cognitive development. In addition, the Curriculum set a number of objectives in six areas of learning: literacy, mathematics, science and technology, social studies, arts, and language acquisition.

According to *Research Foundation: The Creative Curriculum* (Teaching strategies, 2010b), this Curriculum was built on five basic principles. Each principle reflects at least one educational theory. These principles were as follows:

- Positive interaction between the child and adult: this principle stems from John Dewey's theory (1897) that perceives education as a social process. It also reflects Lev Vygotsky's theory (1978) of social interaction and learning.
- Children's social-emotional development: this principle relies on Erik Erikson's theory (1950) that emphasises the important role of social and cultural aspects in a child's growth and learning.
- Purposeful play: this belief emerged from both Jean Piaget's (1972) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories that underline the crucial role of play in children's social and cognitive development.
- Physical environment: both Piaget and Dewey emphasised the vital role of a stimulating environment in a child's development.



- Effective partnership with families: the theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) turned attention to the importance of learning settings such as home, community and preschool in a child's growth and learning.

The content of the Creative Curriculum: the Study approach

The Creative Curriculum was organised in the form of studies that the Curriculum authors defined as follows: "A method of integrating content learning through children's in-depth investigation of a meaningful topic. Children raise questions about the topic and find answers to their questions" (Teaching Strategies, 2011, p. 2). According to the authors,

- in the "studies approach", selecting a topic for study should emerge from the children's interest,
- whereas in the "thematic approach", topics are determined by the curriculum or the teacher (Teaching Strategies, 2011).

The Creative Curriculum contains five studies, with one teaching guide for each: Balls, Clothes, Trees, Buildings and Recycle. Each study has three main stages:

- the beginning of the study, where teachers and children identify the web of investigations which determine areas of exploration;
- this phase is the heart of the study, where the investigations take place through first-hand experiences, through site visits inside and outside the preschool, and through visits from experts;
- this phase is called "celebrating learning"; mothers are invited to visit the classrooms and see how their children have learnt and are learning and admire the work they have produced during the study (Teaching Strategies, 2011).

Curricular resources

This section discusses the teaching resources of the Creative Curriculum. The Creative Curriculum consists of five components; (1) foundation, (2) interest areas, (3) literacy, (4) maths, and (5) objectives for development and learning. The Curriculum provides teachers with

resources that support their daily practices. A full toolkit of the Creative Curriculum consists of (Teaching Strategies, 2013a):

(a) Teaching Guides: six teaching guides provide teachers with detailed plans for creative activities and meaningful learning experiences. These teaching guides consist of one guide for the beginning of the year and five guides for each investigated study.

(b) Intentional-Teaching Cards: these cards are used for activities that took place during large and small group times. The Curriculum has 63 cards that address objectives concerning; (a) language and literacy, (b) mathematics, and (c) physical, social and emotional development.

(c) Mighty Minutes Cards: these cards are intended to encourage children's learning through activities that fit into very short periods, such as the transition times, for example through songs, rhymes and games.

(d) Children's Books: the book collection includes 79 children's books, including four big books.

(e) Book Discussion Cards: these cards are linked to some of the children's storybooks. They are designed to help teachers plan their reading-aloud, stressing new vocabulary and asking helpful questions.

Early literacy in the Creative Curriculum

Because of the generally recognised importance of early literacy development, the authors of the Creative Curriculum decided to create a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy at preschool level. They tried to provide precisely targeted language and literacy activities based on play. These were incorporated into a daily routine and covered different areas of interest (Heroman & Jones, 2010).

According to *The Research Foundation: Language and Literacy*, published by Teaching Strategies (2010a), literacy in the Creative Curriculum has five components; (a) literacy as a source of enjoyment, (b) vocabulary and language, (c) phonological awareness, (d) knowledge of print, letters and words, and (e) comprehension, books and other texts.

Documentary data obtained from the above-mentioned document showed that literacy principles in the Creative Curriculum can be described as follows (Teaching Strategies, 2010a, pp. 6-14):



- Expose children regularly to their names and to alphabet books to increase their awareness of letters through sensory exploration.
- Integrate phonological awareness activities (songs, rhymes, language games and the sharing of books) into all interest areas and into all parts of the daily routine.
- Increase children's knowledge of print by exposing them to shared writing and reading aloud.
- Create a print-enriched environment by having meaningful, functional and interesting literacy activities all over the classroom's interest areas.
- Develop children's comprehension skills by providing opportunities for discussing books, asking questions and interactive reading.
- Take children's individual needs and their prior knowledge into account when planning literacy activities.
- Cultivate children's identities by maintaining their home language and culture.
- Provide literacy-enriched play centres as a natural context in which meaningful and functional writing activities can take place.
- Practise spoken language through natural everyday activities such as conversations, play, reading aloud, story retelling, and dramatic play.
- Use teachers as role models for social language functions and let them explore the children's culture and prior experiences by building partnerships with families.

In the light of the above key principles for promoting language and literacy which complement the basic principles of the Creative Curriculum mentioned earlier in this paper, a number of theoretical notions can be deduced:

(a) The Curriculum views the teacher as a social model of language and literacy and as a mediator for learning (Neuman & Wright, 2010; Scull, Nolan, & Raban, 2013).

(b) The children become literate by interacting with literacy materials, adults and peers (Jessel, Kenner, Gregory, Ruby, & Arju, 2011; Wang, Bruce, & Hughes, 2011).

(c) Social and cultural aspects of learning are important; therefore the teachers have to build partnerships with the children's families and maintain their culture.

The Creative Curriculum in the Saudi educational context

In Saudi Arabia, a partnership formed between one of the Saudi Arabian educational companies and Teaching Strategies International in the United States. This partnership aimed to introduce the Creative Curriculum to preschool education in a number of Arab countries. Since the Creative Curriculum assumes that professional development of early childhood educators is a key element in building a high-quality child care programme (Teaching Strategies, 2013b), the partnership aimed to provide in-service training for preschool teachers. This was done through workshops, some of which were run by Saudi trainers and others by western trainers. The training programmes aimed to; (a) introduce the Creative Curriculum, (b) help teachers apply the Curriculum, and (c) make them more skilled in observing and assessing the children's development and learning.

The Curriculum was translated into Arabic and some modifications were made in order to adapt the Curriculum to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. The first Arabic version of the Creative Curriculum was published in 2011. As noted, the Arabic version, was based on the 5th edition of the Creative Curriculum, published in 2010. The first pilot implementation of the Arabic version was under *Tatweer* as part of the King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Public Education Development Project, and was implemented in 10 public preschools in Ha'il city and the Eastern Province. In September 2012, another pilot implementation took place in three public preschools in Riyadh.

In addition to the 38 objectives that covered six areas of learning (extracted from the English version of the Curriculum) as mentioned earlier in this paper, the Arabic version addressed an additional learning area related to religious and moral education in order to adapt the Curriculum to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture (Teaching strategies & Obekan, 2011, p. 1). The additional five objectives were:



1. Express faith and spiritual feelings.
2. Acquire Islamic behaviours.
3. Perform Islamic values and morals.
4. Listing the five most basic forms of worship in Islam.
5. Affirm that prophet Mohammed is the messenger of God (Allah).

In addition, the books and stories which are part of the teaching resources of the Creative Curriculum were not literally translated but their contents (text and pictures) were adjusted to make them acceptable to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. It is worth noting that some original Arabic stories were added to the collection in place of the English stories that were considered culturally inappropriate (Alothman, 2017).

Importing educational pedagogies across different cultures

A number of educational notions such as child-centred curriculum and play-based pedagogy have become widely known among early childhood educators (Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010). In this respect, it has been argued that although standards such as the developmentally appropriate practices and quality criteria that are stated by the NAEYC are widely known, it is crucial to consider that these notions cannot be applied directly to other contexts that have different social and cultural features (H. Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011). In addition, although early childhood curricula were influenced by Piaget's notion of "child-centred" which emphasises a child's individuality, it is important to consider that the child also belongs to a social and cultural group (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004).

Despite the significance of 'cultural borrowing', the concept must be treated with caution, as teaching and learning are mediated by social and cultural contexts (David, Gooch, & Jago, 2001; Gregory, Ruby, & Kenner, 2010). Existing literature indicated that with the spread of this concept of importing educational ideas, maintaining a national's identity has attracted debate from educators (Wong, 2008). Recently, there is a notable tendency towards applying quality criteria which were developed in the Western societies to early years settings

(Korkeamaki & Dreher, 2012; H. Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). For instance, early years education in China has been described as a combination of Western and Chinese pedagogies (Rao et al., 2010). Socio-cultural theories of learning have highly stressed the importance of the social context in the case of importing educational pedagogies (Wong, 2008).

The review shows that only a few studies have focused on the notion of importing educational pedagogies. In Europe, an ethnography study investigated the notion of sharing pedagogical practices in two early childhood centres in England and Ireland. The study found that cultural values have a crucial influence in shaping the educational practices in each context. (Arnold & Brennan, 2013). In Asia, most of the studies in this area were carried out in China (Cheng, 2006; Grdeshaber, 2006; H. Li et al., 2012; H. Li et al., 2011; Y. L. Li, 2004; Vong, 2005; Yuejuan & Yan, 2008). This line of research argued that borrowed pedagogies need to be adapted contextually, and educators need to consider a number of factors that are related to culture, language, parental expectations and educational system.

The study of Cheng (2006) showed that importing educational theories is a challenging issue due to the complex correlation between theory and practice. Vong (2005) found that the concept of creativity, which was adopted from Western cultures and implemented in the Chinese kindergartens, was reconstructed when applied by Chinese practitioners influenced by the Chinese culture. She also found that the Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's learning were influenced by their historical, social and cultural backgrounds. Another study from this line of research (Yuejuan & Yan, 2008) revealed that although educational reform in Chinese kindergartens has achieved its objectives in terms of physical learning environment, little change has been made in teachers' beliefs and practices.

In the area of early literacy, a study explored the adaptation of Western pedagogies for Chinese literacy instruction in preschool education using a qualitative approach with case studies from Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Singapore preschools. The study findings showed that although Western pedagogies were applied in these classrooms, the Chinese traditional pedagogy was still the predominant method of teaching. Findings suggested that linguistic, social, and cultural appropriateness need to be taken into account to a great extent when planning for educational reform. (H. Li et al., 2012). Indeed, Li et al.'s study provides more insights into socio-cultural perspectives in early childhood pedagogy.



In the Middle East, the notion of cultural borrowing has become a notable phenomenon. For instance, it has been reported that the educational system in the UAE is built on Western educational principles (Godwin, 2006). In Saudi Arabia, Al-Jadidi (2012) argued that the Saudi educational system has been influenced by Western educational models. Al-Jadidi also indicated that kindergarten teachers' education programmes in Saudi Arabia include theories that were developed in Western cultures; thus, it is crucial to consider how these Western theories will be implemented in a different socio-cultural context. In this respect, it has been argued that in the Gulf countries there is a common view of Western early childhood educational practices as a "best practice" (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016, p. 312).

Those who support this stance assert that through the importing of Western ideas, different experiences can be shared with the international community (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). Rao et al. (2010) argued that despite the agreement over the importance of sharing successful experiences, it is crucial that successful early childhood pedagogies are socially, culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Concluding discussion

The previous section discussed relevant literature in the area of importing educational pedagogies across different cultures. The above discussion showed that the large portion of these studies took place in China. In contrast, the reviewed literature showed that although there is awareness of the notion of importing educational curricula in the Middle East, this area has not received sufficient attention from researchers.

The above discussion raises a number of questions and concerns in relation to the process of importing educational curricula. From a socio-cultural perspective, teaching and learning are constructed socially and culturally; thus, the context of learning is crucial. Since preschools are cultural institutions situated in local and global contexts, importing educational pedagogies across different cultures poses a number of challenges at policy and practice levels.

At the *practice* level, one of the broad questions of concern is how imported educational curricula, will be implemented by educational practitioners whose practices were shaped by different

cultural context of education. In other words, it is important to consider in what ways the educational context will influence – directly or indirectly – these imported pedagogies. In particular, how the imported curriculum will be adapted and transformed as a result of a range of socio-cultural factors of the new context, practitioners' beliefs and cultural assumptions about teaching and learning, parents' expectations about preschool education, and children's own perspectives regarding learning. The theoretical principles underpinning these pedagogies also represent a challenge when borrowing educational pedagogies. Since theories frame educators' beliefs and practices about learning and teaching (Perry, 2012), it is crucial in the case of borrowing educational curricula to ensure that the practitioners in the new context have a good grasp of the theoretical aspect of the imported pedagogies to bridge any potential gaps between theory and practice.

At the *policy* level, the implementation of Western curricula poses other questions of concern. One question is what considerations should be taken into account at policy and practice levels when importing educational curricula? Another question is whether importing educational curricula is effective when seeking curricular development. If this is the case, what criteria did policymakers build on in importing a particular curriculum among other international curricula?

This paper argues that transplanting educational curricula from one linguistic, cultural and social context to another is complex and not a straight-forward process. In other words, importing the curriculum's teaching materials and providing training programmes do not necessarily assure that the curriculum has achieved its original intentions. This paper also argues that, in all social and cultural contexts, there are distinct cultural values, social beliefs, and valued educational practices which raise other concerns regarding cultural preservation when borrowing educational pedagogies. Taking into account these considerations may help the policymakers and the practitioners to better accommodate the progressive educational pedagogies that are developed in other socio-cultural contexts within the cultural uniqueness of their educational context.



Recommendations and implications

This section provides a number of implications for policy maker, curriculum designer, and preschool administration. This paper has provided clear evidence that, in the case of importing educational ideas, several considerations needed to be taken into account such as educational management system, teachers' education and training programmes, teachers' educational beliefs, and parental expectations. In addition, this paper not only encourages policymakers and curricula designers to reassess the value of importing educational curricula, but also may give them a better understanding about the significance of designing early childhood curricula and early literacy pedagogies in the light of their socio-cultural context and learners' cultural identity.

This paper also carries some important implications for preschool administration and trainers. In the case of applying a new curriculum it is crucial to provide well-planned training programmes that meet teachers' professional needs. However, in this paper, I content that these training courses not only need to focus on the implementation of the curriculum but also need to address the theoretical principles underpinning this curriculum and how they are implemented in daily practice.

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