



ПРЕДУЧИЛИЩНА ПЕДАГОГИКА И ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ И ГРИЖА  
В РАЙНА ДЕТСКА ВЪЗРАСТ

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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STANDARDS.  
WHAT DO WE VALUE IN EDUCATING YOUNG CHILDREN?

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***Abstract:** Governments around the world have recognized that early learning programs can increase positive outcomes not only for the child but contribute to the success of their nation. This has led to nations to develop standards that identify what should be accomplished through early childhood education programs. By analyzing these standards, we gain insight into a country's priorities. Through comparing them we can identify similarities and differences. Most importantly, we can learn from one another.*

***Keywords:** international, early childhood education, standards, values*

**Introduction**

Why are the early years in a child's life especially important? From decades of research, we now understand that what happens in a child's earliest years lays a foundation for all future learning and well-being. A newborn baby's brain is about 25 % of its adult size. By age five, the child's brain is 90% of the size it will be as an adult. Not only is the brain growing physically, but the circumstances under which the brain is developing are critical. Positive, interactive, and engaging environments help children build strong brain circuits (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child Working Paper #1, 2004). These types of experiences help build the foundation for motor skills, vision, language learning, cognition, emotions, and the ability to solve problems. Experiences a child has in his or her earliest years provide the child with either a strong or weak foundation for these skills (Thompson & Stenbeis 2020).

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It is critical for policy makers and educators to understand the foundation for all later learning is built in a child's first years of life. (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child Working Paper #5 2007). An especially critical area of a child's earliest years is in social and emotional development. These skills influence the ways in which a person approaches life and interaction with others. Social and emotional learning can be thought of as the "*foundation to the foundation*". A child's positive experience of love and support provides a secure base from which he or she can confidently engage in exploring and learning. Being able to confidently explore provides opportunities for the child to learn in robust ways (Thompson & Lagattuta 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child Working Paper #2 2004).

What if the child is in a bad or negative situation? When children have repeated stressful or traumatic experiences, this can result in a phenomenon known as *Adverse Childhood Experiences* (Bhutta 2023) often referred to as *ACES*. Studies of children who experience *ACES* have found that as these children become adults, they are less likely to be successful in future employment, experience health issues and have even shorter life spans. Young children who experience negative care or deprivation can develop learning difficulties at school, which impacts their ability to be productive in the future (Knudsen, et al. 2006). *Adverse Childhood Experiences* research findings have motivated communities in the United States to focus on prevention of children having adverse experiences. This is in order to maximize the potential of citizens and lessen the need for expensive remediation programs (Brennen, Stavas & Scribano 2020). Special skills and approaches to teaching children who have experienced *ACES* are called *trauma informed practices* (Thomas, Crosby & Vanderhaar 2019). Trauma informed practice has become a critical area of professional development for teachers in Minnesota.

I have been a teacher of young children and later a faculty member of our preschool education department at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Early in my career I had international experience serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Jamaica for two years. This began my interest in continuing to learn about the teaching practices in other countries.

### **Methodology**

In 2018, I was awarded a sabbatical to study early childhood education in other countries. I was invited to be a visiting scholar at four universities: The University of Iceland and Queen Maud University in Norway, Dublin City University in Ireland and Roehampton University in the United Kingdom. My research methodology included analyzing each country's policy documents, conducting interviews with faculty who prepared early childhood teachers, and observing in kindergartens (programs that served children from ages 1 to 6). Specific words in the policy documents caught my attention as they identified the values and goals for young children's education in that country. The interviews clarified the priorities of faculty in teacher preparation. Observations allowed me to gain firsthand insight into how the standards/values were implemented. What I learned enriched content I shared with my students at Bethel University and enhanced my contributions to revising our Minnesota early learning standards.

### **Results**

My 2018 sabbatical led to an invitation in 2022 to join a research study specifically on values found in early childhood policy documents. Dr. Gunnestad from Queen Maud University in Norway led the study (Gunnestad et al. 2022). Early childhood professionals from thirteen countries participated in collecting and analyzing the data. These countries represented all continents of the world except Antarctica. For our study, we used the definition of value as described by Halstead and Taylor (2000:169). They defined values as the "principles and fundamental convictions that act as general guides to behavior, that is, the standards by which actions are judged to be good or desirable." We also acknowledged that, "The unspoken cultural underpinnings of these values cannot be ignored. After all, each country has its own history and societal philosophies, which have shaped their views of education and citizenship." (Gunnestad et al 2022: 580).

### Discusson

We found that the documents from all thirteen countries had value statements that suggested what the desired outcomes of educating young children should be. Most countries had value statements about love of country and cultural heritage. Some cited the value of rights of minorities within their country. Even though these thirteen countries represented very different histories and cultures, there were striking similarities which we attributed, in part, to globalization.

### Conclusion

I am honored and delighted to be in Bulgaria as a Fulbright Scholar from the United States to learn about early childhood education in Bulgaria. This is a quote I share with my university students from Johann Christoph Arnold (Arnold 2014) that emphasizes how significant our early childhood years are as we go through life: “For whatever may define childhood, one thing is constant, it is the gathering place of life’s first and most indelible memories. It is the unalterable frame for all the experiences that accompany us through life.”

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