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**Epistemic foundations of a preschool level curriculum and its impacts on the attitudes requested on the part of the teachers working with low socioeconomic status children and their families**

Larose, François (Uni. of Sherbrooke, Faculty of education)  
Bédard, Johanne (Uni. of Montréal, Faculty of educational sciences)  
Terrisse, Bernard (Uni. du Québec à Montréal, Dept. of education)  
Couturier, Yves (Uni. of Sherbrooke, Faculty of education)

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# Short history of Québec's preschool education system

## ➤ **Before 1963:** No Department of Education

- ✓ Some religious kindergartens
- ✓ No formal curriculum for the preschool, primary or secondary education
- ✓ The family is considered as the only responsible entity for socialization and basic learnings of the child

## ➤ **1963:** Foundation of the Québec's Department of education

- ✓ First formal curriculum and constitution of a public schools network
- ✓ Opening of the kindergartens (5 years old) as a voluntary measure compensating the effects of the province's sociological and economical evolution on the families child rearing practices

## ➤ 1979: First curriculum reform

- ✓ Behaviourist foundations (Bloom Mastery learning)
- ✓ The kindergarten program is not integrated within the formal curriculum but structured in the same way
- ✓ Compensatory mission (Centration on observation and prevention of inadequate social and cognitive competences development)
- ✓ Extension of the services to 4 years old coming from low SES
- ✓ **Parents as clients**

## ➤ 1997: Second curriculum reform

- ✓ Socioconstructivist or constructivist foundations
- ✓ Modification of the Education Act: The school must be directed by the «Conseils d'établissements» where teachers' and parents' votes are equally weighted.
- ✓ **Parents as partners**

## Parents' role and teachers' role: Partners or "helpers"?

- From 1979 to 1997:
  - ✓ Parents are perceived as helping resources within the education system (participation to school committees; receiving «instructions or report card» four times a year)
  - ✓ They are contacted when the child encounters behavioural or cognitive problems (eg: school readiness for the Kindergarten level)
  - ✓ Unformal knowledges (socially based) are not taken in consideration or are seen as obstacles for school learning (eg subject or pre-subject matters)
  - ✓ Low SES or «underprivileged» families are considered by school staff as a source of problems

➤ **Since 1997:**

- ✓ Parents are officially identified as partners within the school system
- ✓ Essentially at kindergarten and primary level, parents are resources that should intervene within the school and the classroom
- ✓ Unformal knowledges (socially based) is supposed to be the basis of an authentic learning, therefore project based teaching (or learning) is recommended
- ✓ Still, the low SES families are perceived as “at risk” environments for the social and cognitive development of their offsprings, therefore special measures and programs specifically addresses these “milieu”

## Teachers epistemic beliefs: Possible impacts on the perception of children's social knowledges

- Epistemic beliefs refer directly to the rapport that the subject, in this case the teacher, holds with regard to the relationship with knowledge. It can be conceived:
  - ✓ As an absolute given, a certitude, exterior to the subject;
  - ✓ As a body of relative representations as evolving in a certain way, indefinite at time of a social nature and private (*Schommer, 1992, 1993*).
- Teachers have beliefs on the nature determined or not of the learning subject as well as learning itself (Walton, 2000).
- Learning can be conceived as mechanical, predetermined and planned sequentially or progressively consequently relative to the relationship that each individual holds with a learning universe which is defined in a contextual manner (Watson, 1999).

# Some exploratory research results

- Source: data collected during a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (1999-2002) granted research
- **Objectives:**
  - ✓ *Define the socio-educational competencies desired for front-line interveners with young children (0-6 years old) and their family, in low socioeconomic milieus*
  - ✓ Circumscribe the needs of these front-line interveners
  - ✓ Determine if the competency profile desired by interveners and parents corresponds to the socio-educational competencies required by the symbio-synergetic model of intervention actually put forth by governmental organisms



➤ Method:

- ✓ Semi-structured interviews; Survey

➤ Sample:

- ✓ 370 socio-educative child and family interveners (Teachers, Social workers, Day-care centers educators, Psychologists, etc.)

- ✓ 310 corresponding parents

➤ Sub-sample: 51 Pre-K/Kindergarten teachers

- ✓ 67% worked in a low SES school environment

- ✓ Gender mainly feminine (N= 50)

- ✓ 96% French Canadians

- ✓ 39% may be considered in insertion (having less than 5 years of professional experience)

- ✓ 31% are in an active career phase (6-19 years of seniority)

- ✓ 20% are at the end of their career

# Teachers' epistemological beliefs effects

- Measurement: 3 scales integrated within the survey questionnaire
- Results (Mann-Witney U / Kruskal-Wallis Anova):
  - ✓ **Higher scores on the behaviourist orientation scale:** those who attribute the least importance to orienting their intervention, while bearing in mind the needs, interests and specific characteristics of the child and his family, especially when they come from underprivileged areas ( $X^2 = 8,53 (3) ; p < 0,036$ ).
  - ✓ These are also the ones who grant the least importance to the need to create contexts and use instruments that allow for the assessment of individual characteristics, familiar or environmental, that influence global development as well as the social and school adaptation of the child from a low socioeconomic milieu ( $X^2 = 14,84 (3) ; p < 0,002$ )
  - ✓ **Teachers who favour a constructivist type of epistemology** are those who grant more importance to taking into consideration the effect of socio-demographic and socio-cultural conditions of family environment as factors of risk or protection on child development ( $X^2 = 7,92 (3) ; p < 0,048$ ).

## Impact of teachers' experience

- The recourse to resources in formal and informal networks of the children and their families seems to be a very important practice, essential even, for young teachers in professional insertion
- The degree of importance attributed varies depending on whether they intervene with children from low socioeconomic or mostly with middle class milieus
- For the experienced teachers, especially when they intervene in low socioeconomic environments, **establishing a relationship with the parents** is essential for the exercise of their teaching function
- For the novices, this relationship is also very important particularly when the population is “regular”

# Conclusions

- The orientation of the new Québec school curriculum which integrates preschool and primary school programmes emphasizes the importance of taking into consideration the experience and common sense knowledge particular to the child and his family for learning to be more meaningful
- Major part of the actual kindergarten teaching personnel has been trained to work within a neo-behaviourist curricular framework which do not consider these type of knowledge
- Neither were they trained to consider parents as partners
- Young teachers learn the essential of their professional skills by modeling during their pre-service internship and still do it in their early career
- Implementing the reform's epistemic orientations is a key to the attitudinal change of the teachers towards children social knowledge
- Changes in the discourse or in the structure does not grant changes in practices.