



A theoretical framework for analysing preschool teaching: A cultural–historical science perspective



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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a theoretical framework for analysing preschool teaching as a historically-grounded societal practice. The aim is to present a unified framework that can be used to analyse and compare both historical and contemporary examples of preschool teaching practice within and across national traditions. The framework has two main components, an analysis of preschool teaching as a practice, formed in relation to societal needs, and an analysis of the categorical relations which necessarily must be addressed in preschool teaching activity. The framework is introduced and illustrated through the analysis of one of the earliest recorded examples of preschool education (initiated by J. F. Oberlin in northeastern France in 1767). The general idea of societal need is elaborated as a way of analysing practices, and a general analytic schema is presented for characterising preschool teaching as a practice.

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1. Introduction

This article introduces a theoretical framework for analysing preschool teaching as a historically-grounded societal practice. The presentation starts with a brief discussion of issues that motivate this framework, followed by a review of one of the earliest recorded organised efforts (ignoring examples of religious education) to give an intentional and general educational intervention for children under six years old. Analysis of this example is used to outline a general analytic framework for analysing preschool teaching. The article concludes with a brief evaluation of the framework.

The concept of societal need will be important in this analysis. An important assumption is that societal needs arise as a consequence of transitions in societal conditions and relations. Fig. 1 outlines a model of the relations among societal needs, preschool teaching practice, and societal conditions. The key idea is that changes in societal conditions are usually a precondition for change in societal needs, which are likely to be seen in changes in the practice that addresses those needs. From this point of view, practices are only seemingly static, and better understood as potentially in transition in relation to changes in societal conditions, where these changes are often occurring on a time-scale of years or decades. One implication arising from the model is that changes in practice are a consequence of changes in societal conditions, but mediated through changes in societal needs.

2. Motivation for the framework

The idea of preschool teaching and education is familiar within everyday experience. In most countries around the world, it is possible or common to find organised situations in which one or more adults are responsible for engaging small children in a variety of tasks and activities where the children's well-being and development are in focus. The basic problem addressed in this article is: how to conceptualise this phenomenon? For example, how does one compare preschool education between Denmark

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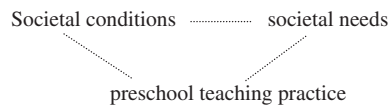


Fig. 1. Relations between societal conditions, societal needs, and preschool teaching practice.

and Brazil; or between different approaches within the same country? This general question is addressed by conceptualising preschool teaching as a practice, and elaborating a specific framework for analysing all historical forms of this practice.

There are several reasons for wanting to have a systematic theoretical perspective for conceptualising preschool teaching. Such a conception should be useful for practical efforts to develop preschool teaching and education, both through policy decisions and through extending professional competence in teaching activity. It should also be useful for research purposes, facilitating investigation and communication about contemporary preschool teaching (across and within different national traditions) by having a general conceptual framework that provides a way to analyse and conceptualise the practice. And because the framework is grounded partly in historical analysis, it is expected that the framework will also be relevant for historical investigations of the development of the practice.

3. Early instance of preschool teaching

In 1767, J. F. Oberlin started as a Lutheran parish pastor in a remote, mountainous region in North Eastern France; a modest hut served as a school building for children over six years old in his village. He persuaded the villagers to build a new school in this village, and subsequently in each of the other four villages in his rural parish. Oberlin noticed that younger children suffered, while their older siblings were in school and their parents were occupied with work (Atkins, 1829, p. 86; Sims, 1830, p. 41), and possibly inspired by a proposal from the priest who had served in the parish before him (Leenhardt, 1911, p. 59; Sims, 1830, p. 179), he also started an organised programme of activity for children from two to six years old. This school is one of the first recorded examples of organised activity for preschool children, which contrasted with popular views at the time that children under the age of six years should not be subjected to any organised activities.

Teaching activities, which were carried out by trained women, included a focus on teaching French with a focus on learning words and learning to speak French – the children spoke a patois, and did not know the French language. Others activities were motivated by beliefs that children could be taught to distinguish right and wrong, and trained to habits of subordination and industry (Atkins, 1829, p. 87). For example, the younger children were made to sit next to the five and six-year old children who were being taught to knit, spin, and sew. Because Oberlin was also responsible for organising school teaching for older children, he viewed this early intervention as facilitating the task of the school masters (p. 89).

Two main aspects to note in this example are: (a) there are definite goals or purposes being pursued (e.g., teaching French, teaching right and wrong, taking care of children), and (b) this is done in relation to particular material conditions (e.g., the children came from poor families, classrooms were built, knitting materials were available, maps engraved in wood were used to teach geography). Informally, these two aspects reflect the main components of the framework for analysing preschool teaching. The specific goals are assumed to index or reflect societal needs, while teaching actions are organised toward realisation of these goals, which produce outcomes that seek to satisfy those societal needs. In short, preschool teaching is trying to produce something needed societally.¹ The next section elaborates this informal idea more systematically, using this general framework to analyse this historical example of a preschool teaching practice.

4. Key ideas of the analytic framework

The main theoretical problem addressed in this article is how to conceptualise societal need in relation to preschool teaching. A specific model for analysing societal need and the product of preschool teaching will be presented, and used to analyse this historical example, but this model presupposes conceptual ideas about societal practice, which were introduced in Chaiklin (2011),² therefore it will be useful to first explicate the concepts of practice, societal need, and activity used in this analysis.

Practices arise historically in societal life as part of reproducing a particular form of societal life. This analytic perspective reflects a dialectical assumption that a practice is formed and maintained in relation to a societal need to produce and reproduce material requirements for a current life form. While the Oberlin example alone cannot illustrate this point (see footnote 1), it can be noted that subsequently similar ideas were taken up in Paris, Germany, and Great Britain (Rusk, 1933, Part II), where presumably this practice would not spread if it were not addressing particular societal needs.

¹ Several complicated conceptual questions are not addressed here, such as the criteria for establishing when a societal need is sufficiently embedded in societal life, such that one can be justified in identifying a practice in relation to that. From this point of view, one could object that Oberlin's activity may not be considered a practice (because the societal need was insufficiently established), but retrospectively this need can be recognised in part from the response to his efforts.

² This analysis is grounded in ideas from cultural–historical science where *societal practices* are manifest in historically-developed, societally-organised, usually institutionalized traditions of acting that aim to produce objects that seek to satisfy societally-generated collective needs (Chaiklin, 2011, p. 227).

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