Introduction: Early Childhood Education and Care

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Introduction

Since the first version of the Encyclopedia, this section has increased in scope and now addresses early education as well as "child care." In so doing, it seeks to go beyond an earlier conceptualization of children's services which saw them as "child care for working parents" and which adopted a predominantly economic view of the sector focused on the needs of the service economy rather than on the development of the young child. Influenced by the growing body of research on brain development and on the critical consequences of the first years of life, the section underlines the importance of ensuring the development of the child's language, cognitive development and school readiness, whatever the child's age or whether placed in a "child care" or "early education" setting.

The range of authors has also been expanded to include three new European contributions. One would have wished – and this can perhaps be a goal for the next edition of the section – to achieve a more balanced representation of views from all parts of the world. Studies from the developing regions and from the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) have yet to be included, though the great majority of the world's families and children live in these countries. For a number of reasons, early childhood research is still dominated by the OECD countries, in particular, by the United States and other English-speaking countries.

Though diverse in their approaches and contents, the nine articles included here present two main focuses. The first four articles – written by Jay Belsky[1] (United States), Lieselotte Ahnert (Austria) & Michael E. Lamb[2] (United Kingdom), Margaret Tresch Owen[3] (United States), and W. Steve Barnett (United States)[4] – present research on the impact of child care services on young children. As expressed by Barnett,[4] "the greatest hope has been that child care may significantly improve the lives and development of young children, especially those most at risk of poor outcomes … The greatest fear has been that child care may disrupt parent-child relationships and damage children's social and emotional development." Despite a certain cacophony in early childhood research – due often to faulty design, special interest and the fragmentation of research by specialization – all five

researchers are optimistic about the positive effects of high quality services on the development of young children, in particular, young children from deprived backgrounds. Tresch-Owen writes, for example, that the positive linkages between child care quality and a variety of positive outcomes in the first two years of life are among the most pervasive findings in developmental science. Higher-quality child care (in the form of responsive and stimulating care) is associated with better cognitive and language development, positive peer relations, compliance with adults, fewer behavior problems, and better mother–child relations.

By high quality is meant, according to Ahnert and Lamb,[2] ensuring that "care environments are developmentally appropriate… (and) adult–child ratios in child care kept low. Group size and composition also need to be considered as mediators of the quality of individual care provider-child relationships." It is also important to keep in mind the dynamic of child care - infants depend, for example, on a caring dyadic relationship with a parent or a parent figure whereas for older children, the relationship of the carer with the whole group becomes more important. "Because caring for others' children (in groups) requires different care strategies than caring for ones' own children, care providers need to be valued by society, well compensated, and enriched by careful education and/or training."

Belsky[1] warns, however, that placing children even in an average (American), non-maternal care facility for long hours, "does seem to be associated with some (modest) developmental risk, especially with respect to the mother-child relationship (through first grade for white children), problem behaviour (through first grade), social competence and academic work habits (by third grade) and, in adolescence, by impulsivity and risk taking." Belsky[1] notes that according to the NICHD Study, such adverse outcomes are not merely by-products of low-quality child care but stem rather from stress caused by separation. For this reason, he underlines – as the OECD Starting Strong policy studies from 2001-2006 also recommended – that "from the standpoint of public policy, the NICHD Study results, along with those of other studies, provide grounds for recommending that:

- Parental leaves be extended (and preferably paid) to match the duration provided for in some Scandinavian countries;
- Tax policies support families raising infants and toddlers in ways that afford them the freedom to make the childrearing arrangements they deem most appropriate for their children, thereby reducing the economic coercion that pushes many to leave the care of their children to others, against their wishes;
- Given the clear benefits of high-quality child care, more of these services are called for.

Margaret Tresch-Owen remarks, however, that measuring the effects of early child care is an extremely complex task. Not only should the research design be reliable, but many facets of the care experience need to be taken into account: the quality of child care provided, the age at which care was initiated, issues of stability in care-giving, the characteristics of individual children and their families, etc. For example, longer hours of child care during infancy or more changes in care may be harmful for children with certain temperamental characteristics, but beneficial or benign for others. In short, to measure the quality of care and caregivers, researchers must rely largely on non-experimental, correlational designs that disentangle the true effects of early child care from differences among the families who use child care services.

The Canadian and European contributions focus on wider public policy issues: John Bennett[5] (Ireland) on the issue of the governance of early childhood systems; Ferre Laevers[6] (Belgium) on what constitutes an

appropriate curriculum for young children; Rianne Mahon[7] (Canada) on the increasing globalization of the childcare sector; Michel Vandenbroeck[8] (Belgium) on diversity in early childhood services; and Peter Moss[9] (United Kingdom) on democracy as first practice in early childhood education and care.

According to John Bennett,[5] the type of governance structure in place strongly influences the coverage and quality of early childhood services within a country. The experience of the OECD reviews suggests that the splitting of “child care” and “early education” into two different systems often leads, on the one hand, to a weakly regulated child care sector and, on the other, to a “junior school” approach in early education. In the child care sector, the quality of the learning environment is often poor because of weak state investment, low staff qualifications and stressful work conditions. The quality of provision for young children is further put at risk by the lack of regulation of for-profit and informal providers. In Europe, almost all children, from the age of three years, are in regulated early education services, but in too many countries, the sector follows a primary school model characterized by high child:staff ratios, an academic curriculum and a neglect of the child's natural learning strategies, such as free play, active learning and exploration. The integrated systems of the Nordic countries offer a more balanced approach to care and education. These countries provide remunerated parental leave of about one year; affordable and comprehensive early childhood networks for all families needing services; and their approach to child development and learning is respectful of the young child's age, strengths and needs.

In his entry, Ferre Laevers[6] identifies what is important – from the child’s perspective – in an early childhood curriculum. Experiential Education focuses on two process dimensions: the “emotional well-being” and the “level of involvement” of the child. “Well-being” indicates that the basic needs of the child are satisfied and refers to the degree to which children feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and self-confidence. “Involvement” is evident when children are interested and fascinated, concentrated and focused, and operating at the very limits of their learning capabilities. To facilitate the measurement of these indicators and ensure inter-rater reliability, Leuven University has developed a five-point scale, known as the Leuven Involvement Scale. This scale includes a methodology and a range of applications, for example a screening procedure through which practitioners assign scores for both well-being and involvement based on their observations over a period of several weeks. This group screening is the starting point for a further analysis focusing on children with lower levels of well-being or involvement, in order to understand why these children do not feel good within the setting or do not engage in activities. This analysis forms the basis for improved interventions toward individual children, toward the general context, and/or to teacher approaches.

Taking a comparative perspective, Rianne Mahon[7] underlines that decades of comparative research have led to a general agreement on the basic requirements for child care systems and on the need for government supervision and support. Specialists largely agree on the main features of a high quality, inclusive child care system, namely that it should be accessible to all and implement high quality programs, including: healthy, safe, and stimulating physical environments for young children; integrated care and learning; appropriate staff:child ratios; appropriate pedagogical programs; well-educated staff who receive fair wages; and, in present circumstances, a recognition of diversity that includes respect for the cultural and linguistic diversity of populations. The achievement of these goals requires the development of effective governance structures to meet the challenges of integration, coordination and local diversity.

How have different countries responded to the governance challenge? Studies identify three patterns of

provision:

1. The laissez-faire approach, typical of the Anglo-American countries and characterized by the co-existence of several systems, partially age-related, with auspice often proprietary or voluntary;
2. the dual system, based on an age break (crèches for infants and toddlers, preschools for those three-years-old to school-age), typified by France and Italy; and
3. the integrated system pioneered in the Nordic countries. Comparative policy analysis suggests that the Nordics come closest to the ideal, although in other countries, there are also "islands of excellence," as, for example, in Emilia Romagna in Italy.

Globalization is also having an impact on child care policy, notably through the development of global care chains. Recent research suggests that this practice is not confined to "liberal" Anglo-American countries. In Western Europe the combination of immigration policies and new forms of support for in-home child care actively promotes the recruitment of migrant care providers.[10] While this may provide an inexpensive solution to the growing demand for care in the North, it creates in turn a different set of relations governing the respective roles played by states, families, and markets in both North and South.

The issue of diversity and the growing education gap between immigrant and mainstream children is taken up by Michel Vandenbroeck.[8] A fundamental principle here is that children from disadvantaged environments need services tailored to their backgrounds and specific needs. For many of these children, their enrolment in an early childhood service represents a first step into society. It presents them with a mirror reflecting how society looks at them and thus how they should look at themselves, since it is only in a context of sameness and difference that identity can be constructed. In this public mirror, every child is confronted with a critical existential question: Who am I? And is it OK to be who I am? A positive self-image is closely linked to well-being and the capacity to succeed in school.[11] Because of this, a child-centred curriculum needs also to be a family-centered curriculum.

In this respect, an appropriate early childhood curriculum needs to balance between two pitfalls: denial and essentialism.[12,13] Denial of diversity implies that one treats "all children the same," implying that the educator addresses what she (or occasionally, "he") considers to be an "average" child. Most often this average child is constructed as a middle-class, white child, living in a traditional nuclear family. This may easily lead to what is sometimes labeled as "racism by omission," as the ongoing research study "Children of Immigrants in Early Childhood Settings in Five Countries: A Study of Parent and Staff Beliefs" suggests.

The other (and opposite) pitfall is essentialism. This implies that a child is reduced to her family, ethnic or cultural background. It is common practice, for example, in some "multicultural" programs to assume that there is such a thing as "Muslim practices" or "African culture," denying not only the huge diversity within these cultures but also the agency with which parents as well as children shape their own multiple belongings and multiple identities.

Administrations need to think beyond stereotypical notions that particular social categories or ethnic families do not value education enough or are so possessive of their children that they will not send them to early childhood services. Whereas initially some scholars thought that culture may explain the weak enrolment of diverse

groups, it is now clear that the reality is much more complex. Parents from all classes and ethnic groups attach importance to good quality services, but parental choices for a specific type of service are greatly influenced by environmental and economic constraints. Differences in preferences often reflect restricted child care options and in this respect, one needs to criticize the notion of "choice." To put it simply: parents can only "choose" what is available to them and generally resign themselves to that (restricted) choice. Studies from across Europe show that quality care is hardly accessible for immigrant families in Finland, France, Italy and Portugal. Similarly, in the case of Belgium, quality child care is more readily available in affluent neighbourhoods where enrolment criteria generally favour double-income, white, middle-class families.[14] In short, while early childhood care and education may be viewed theoretically as a central plank of inclusive policy, the reality is that these services serve, in too many countries, to widen the education gap.

In a final entry, Peter Moss[9] examines the central importance of democracy in early childhood and education systems, a theme greatly valued by major educational thinkers of the last century, such as John Dewey, Paolo Freire and Loris Malaguzzi. Today, the discourse of democratic education is in danger of being drowned out by two other discourses, that of "quality" and that of markets. The discourse of quality is strongly managerial and understands education as a technology for delivering predetermined outcomes. It is concerned to bring children, teachers and institutions into conformity with expert-derived norms. By contrast, the discourse of markets favours deregulation but understands early childhood education and care as a commodity for sale to parent-consumers. Neither discourse values democracy in the practice of early childhood education and care. In a democracy, individuals do not only express personal preferences; they also make public and collective choices related to the common good of their society.

Democratic practice in early childhood education and care must operate at several levels: not just the institutional, that is, the nursery or preschool, but also at national or federal, regional and local levels. The task at national level is to provide a national framework of entitlements, expectations and values – and the material conditions to make these a reality – that express democratically agreed national entitlements, goals and values, including democracy as a fundamental value. At the level of local government, democratic practice may mean developing a "local cultural project of childhood."[15] This term captures the idea of political commitment, citizen participation and collective decision-making to enable a community to take responsibility for its children and their education (understood in the broad sense). Responsibility not just for providing services but for how they are understood. Several Italian communes (including, but not only, Reggio Emilia) have undertaken such collective, democratic ventures. Bringing democratic politics into the nursery – or the crèche, preschool, kindergarten, nursery school or any of the other terms we use to describe early childhood education and care services – also means that citizens, both children and adults, should be engaged in decision-making about the purposes, the practices and the environment of the nursery, addressing John Dewey's principle that "all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them."[16]

An important implication of this approach is the need to reexamine the values framework of early childhood and education systems. One cannot be content with identifying "what works;" one needs also to examine constantly the purposes of education, not only the literacy and science skills necessary for the development of our economies, but also the fundamental values and attitudes that our children will need to sustain open, democratic societies. The nurturing of democratic practice in early childhood institutions – such as the involvement of parents and respect for the natural learning strategies and agency of young children – needs

also certain material conditions and tools that government should provide. Examples include: adequate and stable public funding, a well qualified workforce educated to be democratic professionals; appropriate pedagogical practices; and critical support structures, such as ongoing professional development.

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