

CULTURE

Culture and Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

“Cultural sensitivity” is common advice in the field of early childhood learning and development, and few would argue with it.¹ But are we willing to take this advice to the point of yielding to culturally-based understandings of how children learn and how to promote optimal developmental outcomes? On the contrary, there is a great deal more rhetoric about responding to cultural diversity than evidence that we really mean it when we say, as most developmental psychologists and many educators do, that culture is embodied in the ways that children are raised and the environments where they grow and develop.^{2,3,4,5,6,7} Many educators, researchers and international development specialists acknowledge the geographic and cultural limitations of the research base that informs current child development theory, learning assessment tools, and program models. However, this recognition has not prevented the proliferation of brand-name programs touted as “best practices” based on the authority of Euro-western science or simply on persuasive marketing of training, toys, tools and teaching techniques.^{8,9} Standardized tools, such as the Early Childhood Environment Ratings Scales,¹⁰ used to characterize the adequacy of early learning environments, and the Early Development Inventory,¹¹ used to characterize the school readiness of groups of children, are playing an increasingly instrumental role to set government agendas, plan policy, and justify the transfer of early learning program goals and models from more to less developed countries.^{12,13} Expediency, along with assumptions that theory and research on child development developed from Euro-western perspectives are universally valid, tends to be used to justify the transport of “best practices.” It is common to hear that where there are no readily available, locally developed tools or programs, there is no need to “re-invent the wheel” when an existing tool or program can be imported. While there are many commonalities across cultures in goals for children’s early learning, researchers and educators must work to identify cultural distinctiveness in developmental trajectories and expectations.¹⁴

Research Context

The concept of “best practices” may once have been meaningful, designating early learning measurement approaches or program models identified through experimental and quasi-experimental research as capable of

delivering, comparatively, the best outcomes with respect to a particular aspect of development within a particular population of children. Today, however, declaring an approach a “best practice” often signifies little more than that a measurement tool or program model is favoured by a particular stakeholder group, such as the originators of the tool or program, and that a government agency, program advisory board or funding/donor agency would like to promote the practice based on its intuitive, theoretical, or financial appeal, or the fact that the practice worked well in one particular setting. All too often there is a lack of peer-reviewed research reports substantiating the claim of “best” through comparative studies that have established the predictive validity of standardized early learning measurement tools or the effectiveness of curricula for culturally diverse young children.

Key Questions

What developmental norms and goals for children’s learning and development and whose cultural values and methods for socializing children and transmitting knowledge drive the creation and choice of curricula for early learning programs exported from a (usually Western) source country to a receiver country or cultural setting?¹⁵ And what is at stake?

Exporting early learning measurement tools and programs created in Euro-western countries where European-heritage norms and approaches to development predominate can interrupt the transmission of locally-valued cultural knowledge and practices and undermine the diversity of voices, knowledge sources, ways of life and supports for raising children in local conditions in receiver countries and communities.^{16,17,18} Cultural knowledge and positive parenting practices constitute the very resources that community development programs such as those operated by many non-governmental organizations aim to preserve and capitalize in order to promote community-based, culturally resonant supports for children’s learning and development.¹⁹ Programs built on these local assets are likely to garner high demand and participation from parents, grandparents, and local leaders and are most likely to be adapted to local conditions and sustainable.⁸

Recent Research Results

Four examples from the author’s program of research, Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships,²⁰ illustrate the usefulness of “re-inventing the wheel” to ensure an approach tailored to local conditions and destinations for children’s early learning. In a study of the views of Indigenous parents, Elders and early childhood practitioners about assessing young children’s cognitive development and readiness for school, participants emphasized the importance of building self-esteem as a foundation for learning.²¹ In addition to opportunities to enhance oral language, emergent literacy and numeracy, they described key curriculum content focusing on community history (how children are related to the land), genealogy (who children are related to), and cultural participation (preparing for roles in ceremonies and sustenance using natural resources). They disagreed with mainstream definitions and standardized measures of school readiness promoted by public schools, arguing that schools need to be ready to receive children who have a rich understanding of who they are and their cultural identity, even if they are not acculturated to the forms of teaching and learning emphasized in dominant culture classrooms.

In a second study exploring early identification of learning difficulties, Indigenous parents and Elders asked why standardized and globally disseminated early learning tools such as the Early Development Inventory²² and

screening tools such as the Nipissing District Developmental Screen²³ do not assess young children's strengths, but seem more focused on identifying deficits.²⁴ One Elder in the study commented: "They don't ask whether children know their Indigenous language or what children know about how to behave in different social settings or in ceremony. Schools aren't interested in children learning their culture so they don't ask about it." A First Nations community leader in the study asked: "Has anything changed since the government first designed their education systems to take the Indian out of the child?"²⁵

In a third study focused on roles for speech language pathologists, 49 out of 70 speech language pathologists who had worked with First Nations children for two or more years reported that their standardized measurement tools did not yield valid or useful information and their best practices for early intervention were not helpful in their practice. They overwhelmingly called for "an altogether different approach" – one that is responsive to local goals and conditions for young children speech-language development and that actively involves parents and other caregivers as primary supports for children's early learning.²⁶

A fourth study found that many Indigenous parents and some non-Indigenous teachers were concerned that standardized tools for measuring speech and language development and school readiness may lead to misinterpretations of speech and language differences such as First Nations English dialects or vernaculars as evidence of deficits. Low scores on tools assumed to be universally valid likely contribute to the alarmingly high rates of diagnosis of First Nations children as cognitively and linguistically delayed or impaired.²⁷ There is ongoing debate about the possibility of developing standardized tests for First Nations languages and for Indigenous child development overall. The extreme diversity among First Nations and other Indigenous children, families, and communities in Canada, with over 60 language groups and over 600 culturally distinct, registered First Nations, has been raised repeatedly as an obstacle to creating tools that would be valid or meaningful across more than a handful of communities.

Rather than relying on standardized tools, the most useful and culturally appropriate approach may be for educators and other practitioners to rely upon members of cultural communities to describe and explain optimal and normative development and developmental supports and to identify indicators and exemplars of development that represent deviations from normative expectations within the child's cultural context.²⁸ These within-community standards can be discussed with reference to developmental norms based on research, and decisions about the goals for early learning programs and interventions can be guided through a negotiation of culturally based reference points and by external considerations, including considerations of the task demands that children will face in the school they will attend, as well as child rights.²⁹

Research Gaps

Examples of the kind of co-generated, culturally situated approach described above would be valuable contributions to the literature on early learning research and practice. In particular, research is needed to develop and test measures of early learning and program effectiveness that are culturally relevant but that also are not entirely idiosyncratic and reliant upon unwieldy phenomenological or public opinion, survey type research. The past decade has seen a growing recognition of the value of collaborative approaches to research whereby investigators, policy makers, and program designers can compensate for their cultural blinders by collaborating at every step with skilled members of cultural communities to develop the research base for culturally appropriate policies, tools, and interventions (e.g., Community Based Research Canada,³⁰ Community

Campus Partnerships for Health,³¹ Living Knowledge Network,³² Society for Participatory Research in Asia³³). In Canada, for example, a federally funded research project involved more than 20 community-university partnerships over five years to examine environmental impacts on young children's development.³⁴

Conclusion

This article calls for us to curb our enthusiasm for promoting uniform methodologies for international comparisons and exporting so-called "best practices" to cultural and national contexts that are fundamentally different from their source. Bi-cultural, co-constructed interpretation of development and early learning action plans has the potential to avoid the imposition of a singular, dominant cultural lens and insistence upon unidirectional assimilation that has been the hallmark of colonialism.

Implications

What roles can we play in supporting children's development in ways that protect and build upon culturally based assets and goals? Governments should ensure quality early learning opportunities for all children whose caregivers seek support, but funding need not be tied to one-size-fits-all curricula or learning goals.³⁵ In Canada, the federal government's investment in Aboriginal Head Start is a powerful example of a program mandated to stimulate children's development across six domains, including culture and home language, using methods and curriculum content that are chosen, elaborated and delivered by each host community.³⁶

Open-ended, dialogical engagement with communities can illuminate how to bring knowledge and tools from research together with local knowledge and approaches to address culturally defined goals for children's early learning and development. There are many examples of participatory, co-scripted approaches to early learning program development.^{37,38,39,40,41} In addition to supporting early learning and preparation for success in school, these programs are working to protect cultural heterogeneity in the face of the overwhelmingly homogenizing forces of globalization.

Cultures are always changing: goals and approaches to children's early learning and how we measure it embody these changes over time. As investigators, policy makers and practitioners, we need to leave room for culturally diverse families to re-invent themselves in their own image and not, through the absence of choice, in the image of English-speaking North American middle class cultural constructions of the child.^{42,43}

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