ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Diversity in Early Childhood Services

Michel Vandenbroeck, PhD

Gent University, Belgium

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Introduction

Issues of diversity and equity have gained a solid footing in the hearts and minds of researchers and practitioners alike. There is a general consensus that children learn in context and that context includes diversity in ethnicity, culture, gender, family composition, ability etc. In parallel, the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results showed a marked social gap in educational achievement in most OECD countries, yet the gap differs substantially from one country to another.[1,2] This gap seems to run along socio-economic and ethnic-cultural lines: children from ethnic minorities and children from poor families (and these are often – but not always – overlapping categories) generally perform less well at school.[3,4,5,6,7] In short: education tends to (re)produce social inequality and, in turn, social inequality threatens social cohesion and the economic future of nations.

Challenges

Consensus about the fact of diversity does not imply, however, any consensus on how diversity is perceived or treated.[8] In fact, the discourse on diversity has become so prevalent in education that it risks becoming meaningless. In a modest attempt to reconceptualize this issue, I will

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analyze the concept from three dominant paradigms, namely from economic, educational and social perspectives.

The economic perspective

The economic crisis of the late 1970s began a process of de-industrialisation and globalization, accompanied by a growing awareness that the intellectual capital of a nation may be crucial for its economic welfare. This evolution led to a growing focus on lifelong learning and on early childhood as a particularly fertile ground to make a “head start” in life. Many studies show the positive impact of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on children’s development, especially for children at risk of educational failure through social disadvantage.[9] In the U.S. the most renowned example is the NICHD-ECCRN study showing beneficial effects on different domains of cognitive and language development.[10] In the United Kingdom, the extensive, longitudinal EPPE (effective provision of preschool education) study also showed that children, accumulating several risk factors, thrive well at school, when they have attended high quality ECEC.[11,12]

In short, from an economic perspective, early childhood education is perceived as an important tool to overcome disadvantage. The return on investment is high, leading to better social and educational outcomes for at-risk children and later, better adjustment to the requirements of school, the workplace and society. However the problem with this perspective is twofold. First, the economic paradigm may help to identify quantitative needs in early childhood education, but does not help us to address qualitative questions, including the following major questions: What is early education for? What kind of early childhood education do we need? Second, it reduces the child to the status of a future adult, and therefore may disregard the well-being of the child here and now, as well as the parents’ perspectives.

The educational approach to children from disadvantaged backgrounds

A fundamental principle here is that children from disadvantaged environments need services tailored to their backgrounds and specific needs. For many 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.[13] 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.[14,15] Denial of diversity suggests 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.[16,17] This may easily lead to what is sometimes labelled as "racism by omission," as suggested in the ongoing research study "Children of Immigrants in Early Childhood Settings in Five Countries: A Study of Parent and Staff Beliefs".[a] The French part of this study shows, for instance, how an attempt to treat all children the same – considered in France as "good practice" toward classroom diversity – often fails to provide the differentiated teaching that some children belonging to specific groups may need.[18]

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 and children shape their own multiple belongings or multiple identities.[15,19] One cannot simply assume that a child from North African origins loves to eat tajine, refuses to have pork or that her parents wish the staff to address her in Arabic. A summary of guiding principles for a respectful curriculum is provided by the European Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET) network.[a] ECEC centres need, according to DECET, to be places where:

Every child, parent and staff member should feel that he/she belongs. This implies an active policy to take into account family cultures and preferences when constructing the curriculum.

- Every child, parent and staff member is empowered to develop the diverse aspects of his/her different identities. This implies that the curriculum fosters multiple identity building and multilingualism by building bridges between the home and the institutional environment as well as with the local community.
- Everyone can learn from each other across cultural and other boundaries
- Everyone can participate as active citizens. This implies that staff should develop an explicit anti-bias approach and take appropriate action to involve all parents.

- Staff, parents and children work together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination. This includes a critical study of availability and access policies, as well as of structural discrimination, as explained below.

The social perspective

A third possible approach to diversity in early childhood education is more social in nature. In this perspective, early childhood education is seen as an integral part of the social welfare mechanisms that states have put into place to ensure social justice, equal opportunities and the redistribution of wealth. However, many scholars have demonstrated that children from ethnic minorities and children from lower-income families are to be found more often in lower-quality care than those from middle-income and higher-income families.[20,21] Their situation is further acerbated as education is downplayed in child care services because of the splitting of the early system into social welfare programs and early education. In this regard, the EPPE study[11] has made it clear that only high quality ECEC makes a difference. For this reason, policy-makers and administrators must ensure that high quality services are available to all children. Average or even equal standards are not enough: children from poor ethnic backgrounds need the best equipped centers and the best personnel available, either free or at an affordable cost.

The effect of for-profit services

The access of low-income children to high quality services is even less likely to happen when early childhood services are largely private. The logic of for-profit services is to cater for more affluent districts and families. In addition, different studies show that market-oriented services tend to hire lower qualified staff to reduce costs.[22,23,24] Extensive research in the Netherlands has shown that the quality of Dutch child care has dropped dramatically since its recent privatization. Whereas in 2001, 6% of child care groups had insufficient quality, this number increased to more than one third in 2005.[25]

Conclusions

Diversity and equity are central concerns in early childhood education. However, different approaches to these issues are possible. A comprehensive view would aim to integrate economic, educational and social perspectives rather than favouring one paradigm only. A narrow focus on the economic returns from early childhood services may disregard parental and child

perspectives and the wider purposes of education.[23] In turn, treating early childhood services as a purely welfare concern can lead to poor quality, with weakly qualified staff unable to meet the educational needs of young children. In similar fashion, a narrow educational perspective may lead to a "schoolification" of early childhood services that fails to take into account broader dimensions of access and curriculum that immigrant and ethnic minority children may need to succeed.[26] Focusing on simply extending existing educational services, for example, through market means, without asking questions about "whom do they serve," is often counterproductive from a diversity and equity point of view. These critiques are not presented to dismiss economic, social or educational approaches per se, but rather to suggest that in diversity situations, public policy needs to be complemented by analyses from different perspectives.

Implications

Administrations need therefore 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. Over the last decades, there have been extensive discussions on the issue. 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 ethnicities attach importance to good quality services, but parental choices for a specific type of service are greatly influenced by environmental 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.[27] Wall and Jose[28] have shown, for instance, 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 neighborhoods where enrolment criteria generally favor double-income, white, middle-class families.[27] 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.

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Note:

[a] See also the Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training website. Available at: http://www.decet.org/. Accessed May 30, 2017.