

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: WORLDWIDE CHALLENGES AND PROGRESSES

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Editorial Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education: Worldwide Challenges and Progresses

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There has been a heated debate over the last several decades about when the education of young children should begin, with many researchers claiming that growth and development starts at birth or even during the prenatal period. Regardless of the earliest starting point, scientists who carry out brain development research have at least concurred with one key finding: learning during the early years is critical. The consensus seems to be that early exposure to learning experiences in a stimulating environment will lead children to perform better in primary schools. In time these individuals become more productive, healthier citizens in democratic society. Researchers have determined that the long-term effect of early learning and education can be observed in all children with varying abilities, including those with or at risk of developmental delay.

This movement in education has been almost universal. Many developed countries have begun to turn their attention to “very early” education of children from birth to pre-primary ages. By drawing on a variety of funding resources, efforts have focused on generating and choreographing various early childhood education programs. The introduction of universal preschool programs in North American and West European countries is one example. In addition, more early childhood professionals have involved families and communities in order to improve quality care and development of young children especially from birth through age three. Due to the proliferation of the variety of such programs it has become critical to ensure program quality and administration.

In accordance with the recent change in the climate of early childhood education, this trend seems to be spreading to developing countries as well. According to UNESCO the global pre-primary gross enrollment ratio grew from 33% to 40% between 1999 and 2005. (UNESCO, 2008). The data confirms that more countries are advocating the compulsory pre-primary education programs of 5-year-old children, specifically before their entrance into formal primary education. In addition, these developing countries have further expanded their public childcare, family, and social and welfare services. These services target lower-income families and working parents, as well as private early childhood programs in urban cities for families with more resources.

Focused development of early childhood education programs is now in demand. The general disposition is that the age-scope of early childhood education should be extended from preschool and pre-primary ages to *all* young children from birth (Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004). Due to the wide gap among these young children’s development and learning, a variety of childcare and educational models has been proposed in all countries. Bearing in mind the importance of family involvement in this age group, there is an ongoing reification of programs that are family-based, community-based, or parenting education programs versus traditional center-based

preschool programs. Furthermore, instead of replicating the program models from developed countries, these developing countries' programs tend to consider the individual families' culture and background. For example, it is acknowledged that families in many Middle Eastern and Asian countries particularly favor home-based childcare services rather than center-based services until children are provided with compulsory primary education (UNESCO, 2008). Thus, the great need of early childhood care and education programs should not overshadow the method used. Actual implementation should be carefully planned based upon each country's culture, rather than counting on the idea and belief projected by developed countries' research.

Although much research has been done, concerns and issues in early childhood education exist throughout the world. Most importantly, the quality of these early childhood education programs needs to be examined. Although the development and expansion of early childhood programs has greatly increased (Barnett, 1995), there have been only a limited number of instruments to monitor their implementation and measure their overall quality (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000). It remains unknown how these early childhood programs are operated and if they are truly offering learning experiences and environments for young children's growth and development. Improved and systematic program evaluation and monitoring are needed. As a result, professional teacher training and development programs have been targeted for analysis. Secondly, more support and advocacy in the field of early childhood education and development is needed in today's political climate. In order to promote early childhood programs and their quality, it is necessary to provide a policy framework of standards and norms that serve as the foundation of those programs. Based on this framework, then, increased government budgets or other alternative financial resources may in due course become available. Lastly, within the international context of early childhood education, a greater attention to diverse, particular populations should be given. These groups include indigenous populations, low-income families, rural communities, HIV/AIDS patients, and groups from non-mainstreamed cultures, among others.

This issue of *Current Issues in Comparative Education* contains four articles that address early childhood care and education from a comparative and international perspective, particularly with respect to early childhood policy, increasing educational access and quality, serving vulnerable children, and teaching quality. The first two articles focus on early childhood education in Africa, while the last two articles focus on early childhood initiatives in Brazil.

In Early Childhood Care and Education in Zambia: An Integral Part of Educational Provision? Carolyn Thomas and Matthew Thomas investigate the increasing attention being paid to early childhood education in Zambia, and question whether such focused attention on one area of Zambia's educational system will draw too many resources away from parts of the system that are already faltering. **In Incorporating indigenous knowledge and practice into ECCE: a comparison of programs in The Gambia, Senegal and Mali** Alicia Ranck Soudée examines the implementation of early childhood development programs that contain emphases on indigenous knowledge and evaluates their potential to serve as models for programs in other African countries.

In The Better Early Childhood Development Program: An Innovative Brazilian Public Policy authors Alessandra Schneider, Vera Regina Ramires, Maria da Graça Gomes Paiva, and Leila Almeida report on the implementation and effects of a program focused on family and culture. **In The Brazilian Millennium Fund for Early Childhood Program: a new look on Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) as Joint Responsibility** authors Maria da Graça Gomes Paiva, Alessandra

Schneider, Maria Lúcia Salle Machado, Pollyana Vilela Duarte Perinazzo focus on an examination of attempts to improve teacher education for early childhood education and the role of private and public partnerships.

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