



Preschool and kindergarten in Hungary and the United States: A comparison within transnational development policy

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to compare early childhood education (ECE) in Hungary and in the United States within the context of transnational development policy, where ECE initiatives have gained momentum and priority globally. Developmental trends aligned with the conceptual framework of ECE from a global perspective are included. A description of the main characteristics of the two countries' approaches to kindergarten and preschool are presented. Approaches to assessing school readiness, initiatives to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and lessons learned are included. Identification of differences in priorities between countries, which have varied cultural contexts, informs the ECE community.

1. Introduction

A growing focus of international educational research is on four primary areas including: (1) ways to expand access to early childhood education, (2) identifying the characteristics of national education systems, (3) identifying quality standardization processes, and (4) strengthening the transnational education sector (Ritzer, 2007). This relates to the growing attention on early childhood education evident in transnational education politics (Schweinhart and Fulcher-Dawson, 2009). The infusion of policy to increase access, quality, and equity for Early Childhood Education (ECE) aims to achieve improved outcomes for societies. Such experiences for children and families have shown to ameliorate generational problems (Contreras and Gonzalez, 2015). In this paper, we first discuss and explore the expansion and transnational coordination of ECE. We also argue that cultural context and implications for individual systems are important to explore. While it may seem unlikely, we present a description of similarities and differences between ECE for 3 to 6 year olds in the US and 3 to 8 year olds in Hungary; two very different contexts from one another. This work is a result of a collaboration that occurred when a Hungarian Scholar visited a US university. The research team came together to leverage expertise to create an assessment that would be used in both countries. Weekly meetings focused on developing the assessment resulted in an opportunity to share and develop understanding of each other's individual educational systems. Both contexts were being heavily influenced by policy as well as efforts to expand ECE. Exploring the two contexts and

the results of politicized efforts illuminated how similar goals (e.g. increased access and quality) can vary in impact, implementation, and structure.

This paper presents transnational development policy followed by a description of the Hungarian and US ECE contexts. The transnational perspective presents the overarching goals and context of ECE. Then similarities and differences between two very different settings are shared. This information can increase ECE stakeholders' understanding of what potentially could be as well as how the ECE sector could eventually achieve desired sociopolitical outcomes. This paper aims to add some new aspects to the international knowledge of the Early Childhood Education (e.g., Ahi and Kildan, 2013; Huang, 2013; Mtahabwa and Rao, 2010; Šlaus et al., 2004; Zhou et al., 2017).

2. Expansion and transnational coordination of ECE

2.1. Universal developmental principles in the field of ECE

The subsystems that support modern societies, including the education system, are constantly changing (Luhmann, 1998). Internal and external entities influence educational shifts (Adam et al., 2005). An example of an external international organization is the European Union, which is considered a supranational organization. A transnational organization refers to something beyond national boundaries or interests e.g., Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The outcomes of such influences are manifested as (a)

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interstate cooperation, (b) transnational development and education policy initiatives, (c) evaluations and recommendations issued by international organizations (country reports), as well as (d) professional studies and scientific analyses which inform the given country's education system (Wahlström, 2014). Additionally, a country's internal operations in their education system are impacted by changes such as (1) demographic changes, (2) professional qualifications and educational attainment of teachers, (3) labor supply trends, and (4) restructuring and financial preferences that influence the functioning of the institutions. Educational research focused on analyzing transnational processes, has found that the transnational and supranational environment influence nations' educational development (Ritzer, 2007; Vandenbroeck et al., 2010). Furthermore, the internationalization of our systems that continues to increase provides the opportunity, almost everywhere, to rethink certain functions of the local education system, to seek the optimum role of the state, and to identify areas of focus to better serve early childhood education (OECD, 2012a). Examining various models and perspectives, can inform the process to achieve desired outcomes for ECE.

2.2. The human resources economic model

The human resources economic model is a crucial factor for the development of ECE. Human resource models quantify knowledge, skills and socialization, and are recoded either into payment instruments used in an economy or into performance points acquired by competence measuring tests in education (OECD, 2015a). Goals often identify a need to improve outcomes for students in disadvantaged circumstances. As such, ECE often appears in public politics as a tool to encourage investment and funding for disadvantaged student populations (Malik, 2014; Mundy and Verger, 2015). This is shown by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) influential conceptions for ECE developments (e.g., Starting Strong program), which are, in most cases, based on economic conceptions in connection with investment in human resources (OECD, 2006). A 2012 study by the OECD showed that one year of participation in ECE can be associated with 10 performance points according to 2009 PISA test data from 15-year-old participants (OECD, 2011). Brain-based research findings also support the overall benefits of ECE. Studies that examined children's language environment and vocabulary, in connection with ECE, identified success in school later on (Burchinal et al., 2015; Stiles et al., 2015).

Human capital theory has also influenced the examination of ECE impact. Models based on the human capital theory that examined institutional education of 3 and 4 year old children who live in a low income family, identified a 2.5 times average level of return. Studies of various economic models, methods, and impact may establish a slightly different ratio, however, the cost-benefit analysis identified up to a 17:1 benefit ratio (Pascal and Bertram, 2013). Studies focused on children at-risk have also described high levels of return. Those findings indicated that education is the most likely factor to take children from disadvantaged backgrounds out of the inevitable poverty spiral (Carnoy, 2009). In the case of children from the highest poverty levels, the models created, based on an economic approach, have identified significant improvement in physical hygiene and nutrition, decrease of domestic violence, reduction of juvenile delinquency, and the reduction of school absence (Malik, 2014). Rates of return between 27:1 and 70:1 as they relate to ECE investments have been identified for children from the most disadvantaged circumstances (Bertram and Pascal 2002; Heckman et al., 2006; Pascal and Bertram 2013). These findings support the influence ECE can have on goals to improve outcomes for societies. While economics has been a part of the argument for the return on investment of ECE. Critics argue that – the seemingly exact – economic models that assume causal relationships overly narrow the interpretation of human behavior by putting aside psychological and educational conceptions and determining the significance of ECE solely through

economic models (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Porter and Webb, 2007). Therefore, we present transnational trends from an economic perspective and illuminate other areas of consideration from the perspective of two, diverse countries and systems who are working to achieve a common goal of improved ECE sectors.

2.3. Demographic trends

Beyond the aims of the economic model, the policy of expanding ECE services in a growing population is often combined with the intention of reducing unfavorable demographic trends. In such countries besides enhancing competitiveness (e.g., economic usage of the female workforce), they have socio-political goals such as increasing the birth rate. Studies have shown that in developed countries where more women are employed, the birth rate is also higher (OECD, 2001a). However, the role of cultural factors cannot be over emphasized. In some countries of the European Union (such as France, Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands) where it is simpler for women to return to the labor market after childbirth and where they are given support for career and child raising, the willingness to have children is more common (European Parliament, 2011). Regarding alternative forms of employment (part-time, telecommuting jobs) high quality ECE services can be considered an encouraging factor to have children. The public policy goal of ECE expansion may especially be justified where the ratio of children growing up in one parent families is high, and childcare options are a necessity – such as 23% in Latvia, 34% in the USA, and 12% in Lithuania (OECD, 2016b). The expansion of ECE is clearly essential to obtaining these goals.

2.4. ECE and funding for children in high risk

A foundational aspect of ECE developmental policy is the goal to fund and support disadvantaged student populations. In some developing countries, the conceptions of ECE expansions are in connection with ensuring predictable basic life conditions, and reduction of inequalities between persons and genders. Supranational associations (e.g., UNESCO, United Nations) identify a high mortality of infants, unfavorable health status, and general malnutrition as key reasons for expanding ECE benefits in the Globe's developing countries (Rao and Jin, 2010; UNESCO, 2015; United Nations, 2011). These problems also persist in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and in some countries of South-East Asia. In these problem areas, ECE expansion has had a primarily supporting role, and in some ways, it is lifesaving. In these cases, the services are only secondarily able to serve the children's cognitive and social development and later successful schooling (OECD, 2012b; United Nations, 2014). This is particularly true in cases of children living in war affected conflict zones who are at risk of exposure to physical and psychological aggression (Malik, 2014). Funding for ECE appears in more developmentally advantaged regions and countries largely due to the influences of supranational association on ECE public policy (OECD, 2015b; UNESCO, 2015). These countries, however, are also tasked with meeting the needs of populations of malnourished children and addressing the consequences of an insufficiently healthy lifestyle. The majority of the resources utilized for ECE are still used for children's socialization, emotional education, language and cognitive development (OECD, 2012b). Studies examining the possibilities of supporting equal opportunities for underprivileged children, besides showing high levels of return, pointed out that the amount of funding targeted for ECE is strongly associated with the quality of services. However, findings from a study conducted many years ago (Reimers, 1993) indicated that a decrease in expenditures following a debt crisis in Latin America and Cuba wasn't correlated to pre-school enrollments. In fact, on average enrollments increased by 10% (p. 309). This indicates that not only is funding important, determining ECE as a priority is also imperative.

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