Addis Ababa Early Years
Setting

Connecting Philosophy to Programme

A Research Report
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Impact of Play-based, Early Learning Curriculum Policies in Six Global Contexts

Summary

The past 20 years have seen a focused attempt by national governmental agencies across the globe to address the needs of young children in early childhood contexts. Many of these national policy documents have led to new curriculum developments, guidelines, and frameworks for the early years. The objective of this research study has been to address to what extent policies have been enacted within childcare facilities in six international contexts, as well as to examine the impact of the policies on early childhood education and learning.

This project draws upon the expertise of members of the Child Research International (CRI) team based in the Faculty of Education, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada. CRI spearheads collaborative, interdisciplinary, community-based research focused at the intersections of early learning, play, health and well-being, cognitive and social development and family and institutional learning environments for children aged 0-8 years. Research initiatives are drawn from international contexts, and reflect global perspectives on children in the early years. CRI initiates research projects which serve to develop and promote innovations in early child care and education, while contributing to the development and mobilization of new knowledge aimed at informing and influencing public policy and affecting programmes and initiatives for young children living in international communities.

This study used a team of co-researchers to work with participants in six different countries to examine early years policies, implementation, and impact. A modified case study approach utilizing mixed methods was used for this study as it allowed the research team and our international participants to collect a wide range of data, in order to effectively investigate these six international contexts.

This study extends previous research where early learning curriculum policies from 18 countries were reviewed and analyzed for common themes leading to specific directions for practice in early learning classrooms (Arias de Sanchez, Doiron, & Gabriel, 2012). Several themes uncovered in that research indicated a requirement for research to examine the impact these policies are having on daily practice, and how play-based learning principles are being implemented. To conduct this study, we approached co-researchers in each of six countries (Argentina, Canada, Ethiopia, Japan, Malta and New Zealand) to assist in examining the impact these policies are having. The research questions that guided our study included:

a) What is the extent to which existing early learning curriculum policies have been implemented in six global contexts?
b) What impacts have these existing early learning curriculum policies had on early learning programmes in six global contexts?

c) What examples of excellence in play-based learning can be identified in these early learning programmes?

d) What gaps/refinements need to be addressed in current early learning curriculum policy implementation in six global contexts?

This document represents findings from an early childhood education programme in a privately-funded school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (its name remains anonymous) where our local co-researcher Dr. Tirussew Teferra, a professor at Addis Ababa University led the research process. His doctoral student, Seifemicheal Tsegaye, under Dr. Teferra’s guidance, visited the school, where he interviewed the Director and one early childhood Educator (ECE), collected photographs of the facilities, activities, play and work spaces, physical layout and outdoor surroundings of the centre; he also collected documents used for programme planning, information to parents and general information on professional development and ongoing programmes development. The names and faces of participants were not used in order to protect the anonymity of the children, the adults and the centre itself. All the data material was supplied to the research team at CRI in Canada where an initial analysis was conducted; that analysis was subsequently verified by the co-researcher in Malta.

The summary of findings included here is organized around the four main research questions used to guide the study.

The Context for the Addis Ababa Early Years Setting

Data were collected from a privately-funded, co-ed centre in the urban environment of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The centre was opened around 2007, and is situated in a rented space that its director describes as a 50-year old house. 192-193 children, ranging from three to six years old, were enrolled at the time of data collection. The children were sorted into three age brackets: Ages 3-4 (63 children), Ages 4-5 (69 children), and ages 5-6 (60 children). Most of the children come from middle-income families of diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

The centre employed about twenty workers at the time of data collection. Six were described as ‘main teacher Educators’ and another six were described as ‘assistant Educators.’ Three ‘caregivers,’ two ‘sanitarians,’ and two ‘centre guards’ comprised the support staff. The centre is run by a director, and provides an adult-child ratio of about one-to-nine. The director holds a diploma in Information and Communications Technology and a certificate in kindergarten education. Of the six main Educators, only two have diplomas in teacher training. The other four
were described as having unrelated professional backgrounds in purchasing and secretarial sciences.

At the time of data collection, the director stated that the centre’s playground was unsafe. The national early years curriculum prescribes play-based Montessori methods, but the crowded centre interior and the dangerous conditions of the surrounding outdoor environment have dissuaded the staff from fully embracing the learning-through-play approach. Instead, the staff has opted to deliver traditional classroom teaching. The centre director notes that children need to play, and that lecturing the children is stressful for them.

Early Childhood Policy in Ethiopia

Responding to innumerable challenges

Ethiopia is considered one of the strongest emerging economies in Africa. In spite of an ever-growing population (over 90 million), issues in food productivity, systemic poverty and limited educational resources, the country has invested heavily in new infrastructure, agricultural productivity, health initiatives and new technologies. This is giving rise to an emerging middle class who expect better services and more support in education for their children. In fact, education has been recognized as the key to forging a stronger economic future for the country. Educational initiatives have been heavily influenced by the Education for All document from UNESCO, landmark literacy initiatives supported by USAID and others, as well as financial investments in the country’s growth by China, India and several western countries.

In the midst of these changes, early childhood care and education (ECCE) has only recently been recognized as an essential component of education. Previously, the cause of ECE was spearheaded, and lobbied for, by strong leadership from university researchers and key local educators. In 2010, the Ministry of Education (MoE) in its Educational Sector Development Program IV (ESDP) stated that “inviting children to the pre-primary education helps them to be prepared for primary school and successful in the early grades.” The MoE also proposed the establishment of ‘further feasible modalities’ to support the majority of marginalized urban and rural poor (Teferra & Hagos, n.p.).

Included in this policy initiative was attention to ECCE. Mulugeta (2015) states that this policy “focuses on enhancing the quality, accessibility and equitable distribution of services through more efficient partnerships and capacity-building programmes…” (p. 137). This policy framework is built around four pillars: 1) parental education; 2) health and early stimulation programme (birth to 3 years); 3) preschool community-based kindergarten (4-6) years; and community-based, non-formal school readiness programmes (MoE, 2010). One result was the instigation of the O-Class programme which is “basically a nine-month school readiness program attached to the government primary schools for children aged 5 to 6.” (Teferra & Hagos, n.p.). The pre-primary education program (ages 4-6) is designed to present an environment where
“children develop healthy mind through constructive activities and informal learning experiences.” (City of Addis Ababa, n.p.) Once again the emphasis is on creating an environment to prepare children for later primary education by enabling them to experience classroom environments and gain confidence outside their homes.

**Impact of Current ECE Initiatives**

*Focused on school readiness & preparation*

The early childhood programme that was the focus of this examination of one setting in Ethiopia is guided by the curriculum guideline provided by the City of Addis Ababa Education Bureau. The founder of the school introduced the Director to the guidelines and then she held short meetings with the staff to review the contents of the document. There is only one copy of the document on site which is kept in the Director’s office. There was no formal professional development or support offered to the staff. In the words of the Educator who was interviewed for this study: “I had no professional development training. I am trying to teach them what I think is useful.” This implies that a gap in professional development may be hindering any success that the curriculum guidelines are intended to achieve.

Most programmes in Ethiopia are hindered by serious shortages of appropriate resources to create an effective early childhood environment (Mulugeta, 2015; Teferra & Hagos, 2016). The Director said it this way: “I do not think that the environment and the available resources are designed in such a way that it reflects the curriculum policy”. In addition the stated curriculum policies have little effect on the Centre’s scheduling, planning, or ratio.

The Educator said some resources were in the classroom that can useful for the children, but she emphasized that “the classrooms are crowded and with partial light. The structure is not attractive.” It would not be uncommon to see over 50 children in one classroom with four sharing one desk. The Educator stressed the need for children to have safe environment and suggested “the Centre should restructure its physical set-up or need to rent another one so that children might have good experiences of early childhood.”

In their study of the O-Class environment (ages 5-6), Teferra and Hagos (2016) saw that the emphasis is on “identifying letters and numbers, playing, ordering letters and numbers” (n.p.).

**Examples of Pre-school Activities**

*Training needed to implement play-based learning*

While the curriculum guideline provided by the City of Addis Ababa Education Bureau mentions play as important for young children, and as a way to help them learn, implementing play-based
activities in this school is a formidable challenge for staff. According to the Director, “Some of the ideas mentioned in the document are impractical in our context. We have serious shortage of playing resources. So, how are we going to implement play-based experiences for our children? It is challenging for us”. Play is limited to outdoor times where children engage in typical physical and social interactive activities. The Director feels, “We are letting children play as they prefer. We do nothing other than caring [for] them”. The break time is the time for child-to-child interaction and play either in the outdoor yard or on the way to home. (Teferra & Hagos, 2016, n.p.). The outside play space is covered with fine gravel. There is a set of swings, and benches placed against the building where the children can sit down. There is also a circular go-round, and a slide for the children.

The Educator reported that she understands “that these children ages (3 and 4) should be taught through play. However, it is challenging for me to implement it due to various reasons. I have no specific skill on how to implement play-based pedagogy for these children. Besides, I do not think that the Centre physical environment is favourable to implement it.” This suggests her understanding of play-based learning is growing, but issues of space, resources and training are hindering her attempts.

The Director believes that educators should be teaching the children common English words, and basic math operations. Children “need to be prepared for the subsequent levels” and the curriculum should include ideas about basic academic skills like counting numbers, writing their names.” The day for children in this Centre includes a one hour learning period, followed by a forty-minute breakfast, and then a fifty-minute playtime and then another one hour of lessons in the classroom in the morning. In the afternoon, children take a nap for one hour, followed by a one hour playtime outside, and then they go home.

Once they return home from school, children have many tasks such as “keep cattle, fetch water, collect firewood, take care of younger siblings; work other assignments.” (Teferra & Hagos, 2016, n.p.).
In terms of typical activities in this Centre, children are seen gathered in groups around the Educator who uses predominantly direct teaching methods. The Educator often stands at the front of the room with a blackboard as her primary teaching tool. Children sit four-to-a-desk (all in the school uniforms) and repeat after the teacher things like letters, numbers, songs or rhymes. Most classrooms have several booklets available where children can write directly in them or copy the information into their personal scribblers. Teaching resources are displayed at the front of the room (alphabet, Amharic words, etc.) and small shelves displaying found objects like rocks and figurines. The outside walls of the building have pictures depicting the human body, getting along with each other, indigenous animals, and the importance of literacy.

As for parents, they tend to leave the responsibility of education to schools and facilitators. This could mainly be because parents may not know the importance of putting time aside for their children to play and interact with them. They may lack the competence as they are from lower educational background”. (Teferra & Hagos, 2016. n.p). This suggests the pillar built around the need for parental education found in the 2010 MoE policy will need serious attention in the future.

**Challenges in the Current Situation**

In a country like Ethiopia with a large population, isolated rural communities, and low literacy it would be easy to let the obstacles to effective early childhood care and education overwhelm. However, educators continue to lobby for better opportunities for young children and as the stability of the economic situation improves positive change will happen.

When reflecting on the curriculum document, the Director sees that it provides “important ideas about children’s play and it focuses on the importance of play”. This is a sentiment that needs to be nurtured and supported throughout the ECCE community. When and how often English should be developed at this age is also a concern for the Director and she suggests that the City of Addis Ababa Education Bureau needs to provide clearer direction on what children should be
learning at this age and importantly how to use play for children’s learning. The Educator identified a ‘serious shortcoming’ in the document as “it gives little emphasis for academic subjects.” As an example she pointed to the fact they are asked to teach numbers 1-20, “but they need to learn more even at this level.” In a similar vein, the Director believes that “educators should be teaching the children common English words, basic math operations. Children “need to be prepared for the subsequent levels. The curriculum should include ideas about basic academic skills like counting numbers, writing their names.”

When examining the findings across the several studies cited in this summary, and by listening to the words of the Director and Educator who were interviewed, it is safe to say that similar issues face the ECCE sector. These include: 1) poor facilities (poor school sites; sanitation; crowded classrooms; 2) lack of resources and in many cases the ‘right’ resources; 3) inadequate professional training of educators and little ongoing professional development; 4) a widespread need for parental education; 5) a shortage of qualified educators; and 6) a need for stronger leadership at local/regional levels. Where to start in addressing these issues and how to be strategic in the changes needed is a challenge in itself. Educators and parents need to understand the role play in early child development and that if they shift their thinking slightly, they will find ways to harness the power of children’s play in their learning.
References


Note: There is no date on this study, nor the names of the researchers are not included. By examining the structure of the document and reading the content, I would suggest it could be a Masters thesis project?

