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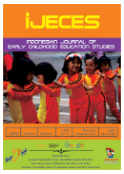

Quality Preschools: Commonalities and Uniqueness across Nations

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Abstract

This paper explores how different forms of pre-school education have developed in various countries on different continents. Particular attention is paid to European traditions of pre-school education and how their roots differ in post-communist countries and in traditional western European countries. It is drawn primarily from experience of one particular post-communist country – the Slovak Republic. Doubt is cast on whether there is such a thing as a universal European tradition, and contrasts are made between "aesthetic" and "craft" approaches to pre-school education. The paper highlights the historic roots of centralised national programmes that take the form of prescriptive documents concerned either with the inputs or outputs of education and which differ from a traditional, open, framework-based curriculum. It draws attention to the issue of a "culturally relevant pedagogy" in the search for appropriate pre-schooling models for developing countries. The paper is based on the author's personal experiences as the head of a team tasked with creating and implementing a new pre-school education programme in the Slovak Republic and as an academic performing comparative research on pre-school education in different cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper stems from, and relies on, two inseparable academic opportunities I have had. The first was my involvement in and responsibility for creating and implementing the current national pre-school curriculum in the Slovak Republic. The second is my academic work in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and my research interest in the forms it takes internationally, in different countries and cultures, and the comparisons that can be drawn between them. The two academic strands are inseparable and closely interconnected: I find it is much easier to bear responsibility for developing the national curriculum than for building knowledge on the various different directions that ECEC has taken internationally, what these directions determine, where they culminate and where they swing round. In academic terms, contrasting domestic traditions with international experiences also allows one to better understand one's own traditions and the place they occupy in international developments.

My aim is to highlight where my domestic ECEC intersects with the international one. This is despite the fact that, from the global perspective, it is not very easy to say what "domestic tradition" means to me: domestic could mean Slovak, central European or today even European[1]. This last (the European tradition) would apply most if we were to accept that the global development of ECEC is being influenced by a kind of general European conception of pre-school education. Regardless of whether this is the case or not, my view and interpretation are based on the fact that I have had the opportunity to familiarise myself, to varying degrees, with the pre-school education in around 20 different countries on five different continents. Most of these countries are of course European but also include, in Asia, India mainly, and in Africa, Kenya, and also a few states in the North American continent.

International Constant

Familiarising myself with ECEC in different countries has primarily meant visiting pre-school facilities/institutions and studying the conditions under which they operate. On first sight, these facilities varied tremendously. They ranged from those existing in the most modest of conditions, in simple buildings or spaces, to nursery schools and classrooms materially equipped with all the facilities and aids the developed world currently has to offer. Yes, the visual and material sides of pre-school education differ substantially across the world as do the conditions under which education is provided. Nonetheless, in these very varied conditions, I always found and saw something that was the same all over: happy, cheerful smiling children, in whom one could see the joy of life and happiness that they were, and could be, together to learn and play together. This was the constant in all the pre-school facilities I was able to visit. It is perhaps a constant that could form the starting point for pre-school education, a central point from which to discuss the quality of pre-school institutions. Yes, I am talking about ECEC in its institutional form. I am talking about children who already have guaranteed access to pre-schooling and to a specific form of education and care. By highlighting the happiness of children as a constant, I wish to emphasise that the institutionalisation of ECEC appears to be a good way of supporting the child's world without taking into particular regard the conditions under which it is provided. Key support for this kind of ECEC is provided by caring teachers who have a warm relationship with the children and who are sincere in their attempts to give them the most in the conditions they find themselves in. My own personal experience is that the vast majority of pre-school teachers are very much like this.

However, under no circumstances would I want to suggest that ensuring quality ECEC can be done simply by having sufficient institutional facilities in place, in whatever material form. Other factors also come into play, such as teacher qualifications, curricula, how the institution is run, and regional and national ECEC policies. These are historically rooted, geographically distinct, developing and undergoing change. The original distinctiveness is now undergoing globalisation and being influenced by converging trends in conceptions of pre-school education. The question is whether these globalising trends are beneficial, whether they are not dismissive of local traditions and whether they are not wrenching pre-school education away from its local roots.

1 The Slovak Republic has been an independent country since 1993. Prior to that, it was part of a common state of Czechs and Slovaks – Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia was created in 1918 following the collapse of Austria-Hungary. After the Second World War Czechoslovakia found itself under the influence of the Soviet Union and was one of the communist bloc countries of Eastern Europe. The bloc collapsed in 1989, when Czechoslovakia had its "Soft" or "Velvet Revolution", becoming a democratic country.

Distinctions in Europe

It is said that the globalised view of pre-school education is Eurocentric, that the European model of pre-school education is taken to be a universal model (Nsamenang 2009). As a European, however, I am not at all sure that there is such a thing as a universal European model of pre-school education. In the current era, it is possible to talk of a common European policy framework for ECEC; historically, however this universal model did not apply. As I have said, although to me "European" is "domestic", in defining the European traditions of pre-school education, we have to be more sensitive and differentiate more. Even within continental Europe, one can perhaps distinguish between all four corners of the globe: north and south, east and west.

Thus I shall begin with my own domestic context and answer the question of what domestic actually means internationally and globally in my case. Of course, the context is primarily Slovak, since not even the EU, of which Slovakia is a member, can dictate education policy directly to its member states; instead decisions are taken at the national level. Bearing in mind, however, the wider historical and social context, the Slovak pre-school tradition belongs among the traditions of central and eastern Europe. It is a tradition which we might today refer to as being post-communist, with its own particular history of pre-school education, its own particular experience of ECEC and its own specific position, not only in Europe but also in the world. In Europe, this tradition of ECEC has its own particular position and represents one strand of development in pre-school education on the continent. Let us now state what is characteristic of this particular strand of development.

"Golden Era" of post-communist countries

Post-communist countries are the countries in central and eastern Europe with decades of communist rule behind them and which fell under the influence of the Soviet Union. It was an era of centralised regimes, the non-existence of private property, the ideological dictates of Marxism and atheism, and universal state control. It was an era of the centralised control of human existence, of the illusion of social equality, of a collectivist mentality, of banishing unemployment and of ensuring artificial full employment. It was an era in which a unitary state model of education was introduced, in which the goal was to educate the very youngest members of society and provision was to be ensured by a single administration. The communist era really did create the conditions for the rapid development of institutional pre-school education in the countries concerned (Trubíniová 2009), and so today we sometimes now perceive this era as the "golden era of pre-school education". Institutional pre-school education and centralised support for ECEC in Europe were in fact one of the main resources in former communist countries, particularly, the Soviet Union. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Soviet Union saw the expansion of state-controlled pre-school education with a keen emphasis on ensuring equality between men and women in economic production and public life. The state also sought to provide public education from a very early age (Taratukhina 2006).

Particular emphasis should be placed on the fact that post-communist countries have a unique decades-long experience of centralised state (national) pre-school education programmes. These programmes began to emerge in the 1950s. They developed over time and, by the 1970s, in Slovakia, had become detailed national centralised education programmes for children aged between 6 months and 6 years. Despite the lack of standards in pre-school education, the national curriculum found in former communist countries consisted of detailed standardised educational content broken down specifically for all the different age groups. This tradition of detailed pre-school education programmes continues in post-communist countries today. The education programme from the communist era was still in place in Slovakia until 2008 (i.e. almost 20 years after the fall of communism), and remains popular among nursery school teachers today because it provided them with detailed guidelines on what, when and how to work with the children. In 2008 an entirely new pre-school education programme was adopted, even more detailed than the previous one, and this detail remains highly regarded by the majority of teachers. This new programme is based on defined standards for pre-school education, just like those found in current global mainstream pre-school education policies. Curiously, this global mainstream seems to have copied the style of the pre-school education programmes typically found under the communist regimes, and whose negative consequences we are now aware of (especially restricted teacher freedom and uniform models of child development). Whether the key element in the education programmes is the detailed defined educational content (inputs) or the performance standards (outputs) is not important.

Going East in Pursuit of Aesthetics

Apart from the centralised pre-school education policies typically found in former communist countries, the long-term experience of centralised education programmes and the pre-school education programmes developed from the former Soviet Union model, there is also another unique element that is ideologically or politically neutral. The well-known cultural pride Russians have in their arts (music, dance, theatre) is strongly reflected in the content of pre-school education, which is far more oriented towards art and aesthetic values than it is elsewhere. The strength of this tradition has made its way into children's educational activities, and is notably present in the emphasis on the aesthetic (and also hygienic) environment of the nursery school and is strongly reflected in nursery-school teacher training. Music, the creative arts and aesthetic development are all a very important part of preparing teachers for their future vocation. For decades, it was the case that when applying for nursery-school teacher training, applicants had to first of all provide evidence of their talents for the creative and musical arts (and for the art of exercise) and success in these areas was a very important condition for being accepted onto nursery-school teacher training courses. It is still the case today that when you visit a teacher-training academy (historically the strongest group of schools that prepares teachers to teach in nursery schools and equivalent to high schools), the sound (musical instruments can be heard being played everywhere) and the atmosphere of the school creates the impression that you have entered into an art school and not a teacher-training one. An inclination towards art is firmly embedded in the professional identity of the nursery-school teacher. Their informal teaching method groups, where they advise and inspire each other, are full of ideas about artistic activities, creating artistic artefacts for children, working with art materials and so on. Their pride is seen in the way they ensure the environment in nursery schools is aesthetic, with great emphasis being placed on personal cleanliness and hygiene. This emphasis on hygiene is another element specific to pre-school education in this region of Europe, and is associated, on the one hand, with the focus on the aesthetics of the environment and, on the other, with the long-term influence exerted by the education ministry on the healthcare system and in developing pre-school education.

The pre-school tradition in post-communist countries led to the emergence of a particular internal perspective of what quality pre-school education means. Conceptually, and in terms of policy, the required quality was sought through a prescriptive, detailed type of education programme, where the detail was designed to guarantee the immediate transfer of the anticipated outcomes into pre-school practice. In terms of content and values, the emphasis was, as previously noted, on aesthetic values in education content and in the environment, including a strong emphasis on hygiene. These values are also embedded in notions about the quality of pre-school teacher training and are part of the pre-school teacher identity and a typical feature of pre-school education in central and eastern Europe today. Here I will just point out that this long-term tradition of prescriptive national education programmes has now become a barrier to the future development of pre-school education in these countries. The stress on aesthetics and hygiene in pre-schooling has positive potential and corresponds to the nature of the cultural values in the countries emphasising them. Under certain circumstances, however, they can also lead to it becoming closed to new stimuli.

Contrasting Direction of the West

The western European pre-school tradition differs from the one I have just described. The differences I will highlight are ones we encountered when we accompanied selected Slovak pre-school teachers on trips to nursery schools in western European countries (Belgium, Sweden, Finland) as part of an EU-funded project, on which we were naturally Presented with opportunities to compare our own traditions (and teacher identities) with other ones. The most visible and universal response of our teachers to the different methods used and the circumstances under which pre-school education was provided was one of evident shock. Their reactions always had a common denominator: the first thing they response was "chaos, disorder, lack of organisation". Yes, it was the environment in western European nursery schools that most struck the Slovak teachers, used to careful organisation, environmental aesthetics and regular regimes, and the predictability of events governed by a centralised programme. The mentality of the post-communist teacher was confronted with this alien custom of working in an open environment with a flexible programme where improvisation and not having the situation firmly under control prevailed. The "openness" that is the principle behind this kind of pre-school education is also part of another European preschool system typically found in northern, i.e. Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Finland, Denmark). It is a pre-school tradition and direction

that places great value on a high degree of autonomy (teachers, schools), on minimising centralised control and on a high degree of flexibility in everyday practice that takes account of the child's momentary interests and communicational and relational needs. Thus it is a tradition that has little in common with the notion of prescriptive education programmes or programmes where pre-school education is determined according to detailed performance standards for children. The conceptual basis and feeling of this particular European direction is comparable to the pre-school tradition built up in New Zealand as part of the Te Wh□riki programme. It is more concerned with establishing the basic direction and the value principles on which the education should be based than with setting curricular inputs or outputs. It is not a programme based on strictly defined content, nor on performance units of pre-school education, but is one that seeks to coordinate the value settings of the environment within which the education is provided and of the teachers providing the education. In these different traditions, then, the teachers have different bases of identity and of professionality. The tradition of building a framework, an open, flexible national pre-school programme is one that values the autonomy of its teachers (and therefore also a high degree of professional responsibility). It requires its teachers to have professional skills that lead to a reflexivity in pre-school activities and to a detailed assessment of pedagogic practice and the development and individual progress made by each child.

The open/detailed dichotomy of traditional European pre-school education programmes is one that can be noted in our context. The forms of pre-school education currently in place in Europe also lead us to note a second dichotomy – one of "aesthetics" versus "crafts". On one side, we have the already noted aesthetic tradition found in post-communist pre-school traditions and, on the other, a focus in western European countries where the value is placed on educational activities such as experimenting, investigating the surrounding environment, exploring natural science and learning technical skills. Western European nursery-school classrooms frequently resemble technical workshops, children's laboratories or craft corners, in sharp contrast to the eastern European nursery school, with its clear emphasis on aesthetic organisation. It was this difference in emphasis in the two pre-school traditions that prompted feelings of "disorder" in our teachers when they visited the western European schools.

The "aesthetic/craft" dichotomy evident in the two different European approaches to pre-school education is not associated with a shift from open to structured education programmes. It is still present despite the ongoing global standardisation and tendency towards more centralised national programmes in pre-school education in Europe. Nonetheless, central European educational policies are leading to a decline in the "aesthetic" tradition and the generalised model of pre-school education is now one of "craft" and "exploration". For teachers in post-communist countries this represents a challenge in which they must cast off their previous identity in favour of another one. In this sense, the globalisation of pre-school education is affecting the original distinctions in European pre-school traditions, and it is being encouraged by the neoliberal, economically motivated educational policies of the EU as well as other influential global institutions (Dahlberg, Moss 2005).

Difficult Challenges for ECEC in Developing Countries

At the point where the different European traditions of pre-school education meet stand countries known as developing countries, which, aware of the importance of ECEC, are seeking suitable models that they can use to strengthen and design pre-school education to best meets their needs. As examples, I will discuss the countries that I have professional experience of – Kenya and India.

The first country, Kenya, is a country that has great interest in developing its pre-school education (Mbugua 2004). It is the only African country to run a national pre-school education programme and where pre-school pedagogy is beginning to achieve more important status in academia. Both in terms of structure and content, the national pre-school education programme corresponds to programmes found in Europe – from which they took their inspiration – and tend towards a more prescriptive curriculum. India also recently adopted a framework pre-school education programme, which truly is a framework programme, but nonetheless developmental standards for pre-schoolers are currently being developed which correspond to the western image of the mental development of the child (Hwang, Lamb, Sigel 1996). The interest in both countries in ensuring quality in developing pre-school education is evident and is embedded conceptually in the same structures and concepts currently used in the Western world. The strengthening of pre-school education is accompanied by the centralisation of ECEC administration

and the use of across-the-board controls, and the model for these controls are countries in which pre-school education became a traditional part of education culture and where the centralisation of pre-school education emerged first as a product of the communist regime and then of neoliberal ideology. There are no other sources than countries in the developed world and there is no conceptual framework for pre-school education other than those found in the Western world. Yet building programmes on these resources may distance ECEC from the cultural context of the developing world and from the very different needs of the community (Kaul, 2013), even when it is done to build local capacity. Yet these countries are faced with the need to provide a culturally relevant pedagogy and to link pre-school education with the local culture and its values.

If the idea is that quality ECEC is linked with the centralised administration of pre-school education, then the question is whether there might not be different models of pre-school education models from those found in the European tradition (or American culture). For European experts there is no more difficult task than ascertaining how to help pre-school education in cultures that differ from our own. The notion of transferring "good practice" to other environments may appear attractive, but it has little in common with cultural sensitivity and appropriacy. Trying to establish what form a quality and, above all, a culturally relevant ECEC should take in a cultural environment one is unfamiliar with is almost impossible. Yet even for the local expert defining what a "culturally appropriate" early years education might be is not easy, if it is to be the outcome of ongoing and anticipated social and political reforms. If we are currently faced with the fact that the originally very different European pre-school traditions are being homogenised and that their original roots are being stripped away, then implanting ideologically homogeneous requirements into very different parts of the world is a parallel rejection of the notion that respect should be paid to the social context of the child developing within its own environment and for that environment. This very same issue is also felt in European countries where for decades unsuccessful attempts have been made to resolve the almost unresolvable: how to educate Roma children living in extreme poverty in socially excluded communities.

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