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CULTURE AND PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA AND CANADA

Abstract

This comparative and qualitative study-in-progress focuses on two early childhood teacher education (ECTE) programs in contexts where the participants are undergoing rapid social and personal change: a program in Namibia and a program for immigrant childcare educators in Canada. The objective is to provide in-depth understanding of the ways in which differing ideas about ECTE are reflected in practice. It is important to ensure that ECTE programs prepare teachers to dovetail children's preparation for school with meaningful connections to the culture and language of the home community, since more and more children spend their preschool years in early childhood (EC) centres that are becoming increasingly westernized in character. The data will stem from analysis of early childhood care and education and ECTE curricula; policy and other documents; focused observations in ECTE classes; and interviews with teacher educators and students. The results are expected to illuminate issues and strategies which are most likely to be effective for ECTE programs, with implications for teacher education in a range of settings in both the majority and minority worlds.

Objective and Context of the Problem

This comparative and qualitative study-in-progress is carried out in an early childhood teacher education (ECTE) program in Namibia and in a worksite-embedded training program for immigrant childcare educators in Canada.[1] For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on describing the conceptual framework of this study, the methodology, and the research sites. The primary objective of the study is to provide in-depth understanding of the ways in which differing conceptions of what children need in the preschool years are played out in teacher training programs in social contexts where the participants are experiencing rapid social and personal change: in Canada, the 2006 census indicates that 1 in 5 people are foreign born while, in Namibia, 35% of the population live on less than $1 a day and about 57,000 children have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS (Statistics Canada, 2006; UNICEF, 2012). The selection of this African site will allow insights into historical, linguistic, and cultural differences that too often are ignored in loose generalizations about Africa. Previous studies suggest that, in such settings, Western and local cultural norms relating to the preschool years may conflict in ways that compromise the oft-stated aim of preparing children for school, thus putting children at increased risk for later school failure and drop-out. It is of note that academic discourse confirms the need for the kind of up-to-date research on ECTE that we propose (LeVine, 2003; Pence & Nsamenang, 2008).

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[1] The programs have an integrated approach to childcare, development, and education led by adults who are variously called educators or teachers.

Trends in ECTE and in early childhood care and education (ECCE) seem to be moving in two directions at once. In an apparent move away from psychological theoretical assumptions about the universality of child development, there is increasing recognition of the validity of local ways of knowing and a greater value placed on linguistic and cultural diversity (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). At the same time, the legacy of colonialism in countries such as Namibia continues to discourage the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and activities in ECTE programs (Abdi & Cleghorn, 2005; Goduka, 1997; Gonzales, 1999; Serpell, 1993; Shizha, 2006; Swadener, Kabiru & Njenga, 1997). A comparable situation is found in Canada, where language barriers and a lack of recognition for foreign experience and qualifications (Statistics Canada, 2006) channel many newcomers into work with children which are not seen as professional. The percentage of immigrants (15%) employed as EC educators in Canada is higher than for any other occupational sector (Service Canada, 2012). In order for immigrant EC educators to be construed as professionals, they must detach themselves from their experiential, tacit, and intuitive ways of knowing (Jipson, 1991). Thus the privileged position of Western child development knowledge leaves no space for teachers to bring in their own understandings of the sociocultural contexts in which they, and the children with whom they work, live (Stott & Bowman, 1996). These apparently opposing patterns are thought to impede the establishment of ECTE programs that are broadly effective and locally adapted. In fact, it seems that, despite efforts to recognize local cultures as valuable resources for planning appropriate education programs, it is still the case that ECTE planners "are taking their cues from imported models that reinforce value shifts towards the individualistic, production oriented cultures of the west" (Myers, 1992, p. 29).[2] We ask whether this is the most desirable direction for all.

Conceptual Framework

This research builds on preliminary studies in Zimbabwe, India, South Africa, and Canada, where a range of interpretations was observed among EC teachers and teacher educators about the meaning and application of key concepts such as *best practice*, *child-centred approach, developmentally appropriate practice,* and *play-based curriculum* (Cleghorn & Prochner, 2003; 2010). Cleghorn and Prochner (2003) used a conceptual framework drawn from LeVine et al. (1994) to provide insight into Western and non-Western visions of childhood via two distinct models of childcare, the *pediatric* and the *pedagogical*.[3] Although the LeVine et al. models refer to the features of infant child care in only two contexts – one African and one middle-class North American – they point to very different conceptualizations of early socialization that tend to persist into later teaching-learning situations, whether formalized or not. We have found their respective features to be manifested in

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[2] Culture is defined here as the ways of thinking, speaking, seeing, believing, and behaving that characterize the members of a social group (Geertz, 1975).

[3] These models are *ideal types* in the sociological sense, that is, seemingly dichotomized concepts made up of essential characteristics that are used in the social sciences for the purposes of analyzing and understanding social phenomena (Max Weber, 1946, cited by Babbie, 2002).

various ways in teachers' attitudes and approaches in EC programs in India and in eastern and southern Africa; they also bring attention to shifts in practice that coincide with rural-to-urban migration, decrease in child mortality, increase in access to preschool and regular schooling, and increase in the formal training of EC teachers (LeVine, 2003).

To elaborate, the foregoing can also be considered with regard to social change and development (Hsueh & Tobin, 2003). On the one hand, ECTE program planners may equate beliefs about universality in child development with trends in global development (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Kagitçibasi, Sunar & Bekman, 2001). On the other hand, ECTE and EC programs may be expected to reflect local community values and approved behaviours while responding to social change by, for example, educating teachers in the still dominant theories of child development, "best practice", and the like (Lubeck, 1996). However, while social, economic, and technological change can be rapid, culture tends to change slowly. It is in this regard that the pediatric-pedagogical models may also be discussed in terms of the cultural values that tend to change over time; e.g., interpersonal relatedness to independence, emotional interdependence to autonomy, material interdependence to material emancipation, and, collective to individualistic identity (Kagitçibasi, 2007).

Keeping in mind the seemingly dichotomized nature of the concepts under consideration, it is important for EC teacher educators to understand how each model may relate differently to a group's needs for economic survival,[4] the pediatric model to a rural, subsistence economy and the pedagogical model to the highly differentiated economy of urban North America, for example. That is, when the home environment is relatively impoverished, non-literate, and non-Western, as in rural and semi-rural Namibia, the prevailing pediatric model of child care will likely emphasize health and physical survival; the teaching of moral and other values may occur through oral storytelling, with little use of language between adults and children for encouraging or answering questions, reading stories, or vocabulary building – the kinds of discourse patterns found in schools. Beyond infancy, one may observe a shift in focus to children's mastery of specific skills through observation and imitation, via the respect-obedience model (LeVine et al., 1994), a model that suggests a culturally shared vision of the adult-to-be as one who can function within a hierarchical society where the authority of a parent or other adult (such as a teacher) is not to be questioned (Shumba, 1999).

In contrast, the pedagogical model of early socialization is adapted to the social and economic structure of societies such as Canada, where the dominant group's vision of the adult-to-be is of a person who values individual competition and achievement and is ideologically oriented towards democratic ways of doing things – within families as well as in school and society at large. Typically, the child-rearing methods of middle-class educated parents dovetail with the kinds of interaction patterns that the child will encounter in school (LeVine, 2003), for example, extensive listening, speaking, reasoning, explaining, asking, answering, comparing, labelling, and counting. We ask to what extent this model fits with the experience of immigrant families and immigrant childcare educators. Does the

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[4] Social and economic change can bring a loss in cultural values along with a need for cultural survival or revival.

immigrant child find school a familiar place, as would a middle-class Western child? What do EC teacher educators need to know about the borders such children cross between home and school?

The researchers' earlier studies thus suggest that, especially in social contexts undergoing rapid social change, an ECTE program may reflect a number of transitions and possible discontinuities: societal change in terms of economic and other aspects of development; conceptual change among ECTE students in terms of shifts in thought towards more Western or globalized notions of how children are to be socialized in the preschool years; home/school language and cultural differences, and so on. Similar transitions and discontinuities are also reflected in the history of immigrants' experiences in Canada where accounts describe the effects of a sharp discontinuity between early socialization in the home community and the culture that is encountered at school (Kirk, 2004). Thus, if it is the case that one of the main functions of preschools is to prepare children for formal schooling, then EC teacher educators may need explicit knowledge about the kinds of boundaries that they and young learners are expected to cross (Giroux, 1992). If some EC educators wonder about the meaning and application of such Western-generated concepts as child-centred approaches, developmentally appropriate practices, and play-based curriculum, it is not surprising then if the early school experience is also unfamiliar and seemingly irrelevant for the young children in their charge (Jegede & Aikenhead, 1999).

Methodological Approach

Research Questions

Although Namibia and Canada share connections through their colonial histories, they differ in significant ways, not the least of which is Canada's place as a "developed" (minority world) nation. Thus the central question of this research asks the extent to which, and in what ways, the above-described dimensions and varied conceptions of young children's preschool needs are played out in each ECTE setting in light of the economic, political, social, cultural, and linguistic differences between them. In this we also ask if the increasing globalization of thought in the field of early childhood education may be found to undermine sound, locally appropriate ECTE practice. To explore this multifaceted matter, the following sub- questions provide initial direction with emergent findings and tentative explanations providing more precise foci:

1. What do policy documents and curriculum guides say about ECTE practice in each setting? What is the possible intersection/influence of both the pediatric and pedagogical models depending on the context and what is occurring at that particular time?
2. How are local ways of doing reflected in the organization of space, the use of materials, and the scheduling of activities?
3. What theories of childcare and child development are EC student teachers exposed to?
4. What are student teachers'/teacher educators' views about "best practice" in ECE, the use of a child-centred approach, developmentally appropriate practice, and the role of play in learning?

5. How does the ECTE program's orientation to child learning dovetail with the experience to be encountered in primary school, as described in policy documents and by local teacher educators?

Brief Description of the Research Settings

Namibia. The first African site is the University of Namibia (UNAM), which offers a Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Development and a Master of Education in Early Childhood Development (ECD). The four-year undergraduate program prepares teachers for pre-primary and grades 1-4 (University of Namibia, 2012). This is a professional degree designed to meet the learners' needs, potential and abilities. Graduates will be able to teach in one Namibian language as well as in English, learning also how to ease the transition from an indigenous language to learning via English, the official language. A learner-centered approach is to be used which presupposes that teachers have a holistic view of learning, valuing the learner's life experiences as a starting point for their studies (Sibuku, 1997).

Canada. The Canadian ECTE site is a worksite-embedded training program for immigrant childcare educators in a large city in western Canada. All twenty-two students in the program are currently working in child care centres or family-based care and originate from Africa, Latin America, or Asia. They attend class for three hours a week during their regular workday. In contrast to conventional ECTE programs, which compartmentalize learning into discrete subjects and courses, this program has an emergent, integrated curriculum whereby discussions during one class determine the content for the next. Students are encouraged to incorporate their cultural practices, beliefs, and expectations into their weekly assignments. It is through these assignments and the discussions held in class that differences are identified along with some possible tensions between cultural beliefs and practices and the Western conceptualization of appropriate ECE practice.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative methods represent a growing trend in early childhood research (Hatch, 2007) due to the need for "more ethnographic research which can paint in the fine-grained reality of educational processes within early childhood settings" (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001, p. 194). Qualitative methods permit in-depth understanding of already-identified broad issues and require a sustained time on site to bring the importance of culturally linked patterns of thought and practice into focus (Aubrey, David, Godfrey & Thompson, 2000).

Fieldwork in the two sites is taking place over two years, following student teachers from the first day in their program. As in all ethnographic work, attention will be paid to repeated, regular events as well as to exceptional episodes, since these can bring to light matters that are out of the participants' "line of vision" (Carspecken & Wolford, 2001). Data-gathering strategies include: analyzing documents pertaining to ECTE philosophy, curriculum, and policy; and reconstructing the cultural meanings of educational processes from the participants' perspectives through observations, video and audio recordings of coursework and practice, and follow-up interviews with teacher educators and student teachers. Organization and analysis of qualitative data will involve: identifying overarching themes and ideas in the data sources, categorizing and coding, summarizing and

interpreting findings to arriving at tentative explanations, and building theoretical insights connected to the literature and theory that generated the study.

Importance of the Study

It is increasingly important to ensure that ECTE programs prepare teachers to dovetail children's preparation for school with meaningful connections to the culture and language of the home community. Current academic discourse points to the need for more qualitative/ethnographic research which describes the specifics of educational processes that foster learners' engagement with schooling. Such in-depth knowledge can be incorporated into ECTE programs so that identifiable problems in the early years are less amenable to cultural bias and superficial remedial responses. The results will also illuminate issues and strategies which are most likely to be effective for ECTE programs, with implications for the policy and practice of teacher education in a wide range of settings in both the majority and minority worlds.

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