

A New Look on Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) as Joint Responsibility

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Improving the quality of Early Childhood Education has been a priority in Brazil, but it is still a challenging issue to be faced. The fact that an indefinite number of institutions exist on the borders of the educational system, the lack of systematic supervision, and incomplete official statistics are only a few of the challenges. The Millennium Fund for Early Childhood Education has been developed to directly improve the quality of educators who work with Brazil's most socially vulnerable students. An innovative model of joint responsibility utilizing public and the private sectors in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, has resulted in the implementation of a social technology called Educational Board. This experimental model has been carried out in municipalities of four southern states of Brazil for the past five years. This article addresses the approach developed at the Educational Boards (which focused on in-service professional development and network capacity building), the program's impact on improving Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) in Brazil, as well as the lessons learned so far.

Scientific evidence has shown that the child's early years demand adequate protection, care and stimulation as the foundations for his or her well-being and development (UNESCO, 2006). In other words, fulfilling the child's well-being and basic needs both in terms of nourishment and nurturing, particularly from pregnancy to six years of age, recurrently demands not only technical but also more skillful human knowledge of what a healthy and happy childhood actually means to everyone as both a right and an absolute priority to be praised and guaranteed in any community or society.

As claimed by Clouder (2008), "whoever works with children has got to recognize within himself/herself his/her own childhood so as to promote the child's well-being. If we forget our childhood, we lose our humanity. We no longer see each other as humans". In addition, the ability to pick up the child's social signals of happiness, well-being, or anger, does require from both parents and caregivers high-quality knowledge on early child care and education. More and more, the development of relational competences through playing and through the joyfulness of playing requires not only updated knowledge or guidance from solely specialized literature, but should go beyond that when it comes to daily routines in adverse education and poor care conditions of daycare centers—whether the centers are philanthropic, communitarian or public.

On top of that, if the child belongs to a family in social vulnerability, and he/she is regularly being attended by child practitioners who are not professionally qualified to guarantee his/her well being from the very beginning, local authorities from both public and private sectors should be both sensitized and mobilized to invest in professional qualification on Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) involving the whole staff of those centers. That is to say that giving these children the right start should be a commitment not only for those who interact with them, but also for those in charge of enacting public policies or deeply engaged social responsibility actions, large companies and corporations included.

Brazil is the ninth largest economy in the world, with an area of 8.5 million square km. However, the disparity between the rich and the poor is quite dramatic: out of 190 million people, the richest 10% hold 45.3% of all national income, whereas the poorest 50% receive only 13.9%. More than 23 million people are from 0 to 6 years old (13 million from are 0 to 3 and 10 million are from 4 to 6 years old). In relation to ECCE, the enrollment rate of children from ages 0 to 6 in daycare centers is 43% (compared to 27.9% in 1996), of which only 15.5% from ages 0 to 3 and 76% from ages 4 to 6 are enrolled in preschools in 2006 (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2007).

Serious problems of quality in professional development have become a great challenge in ECCE. Young children constitute the weakest and most defenseless age segment in regards to adverse education and care conditions—not to mention the indefinite number of institutions that still run at the margin of the regular educational system, working apart from any official supervision and, consequently, not included in the official statistics.

Another important indicator of quality, teacher development, also points out some problems to be taken into consideration. As an illustration, in 2002, 64% of preschool teachers have completed secondary education and only 23% of preschool teachers have completed a higher education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2006). The situation is even worse for daycare centers because they have not been clearly represented in the statistics. Despite the legal changes introduced in the decade of 1990, serious problems in the access and the quality of early childhood education in the country still remained (UNESCO, 2005). In other words, communitarian daycare centers, which take care of the poorest segments of the population, are exactly those that show the worst working conditions, and many count only on the few resources provided by the community. Too little diversified playing activities with children, rigid and stuck to weak routines, either idleness or little stimulation of children's motor cognitive, affective, cultural and social development, and the lack of a well-designed curriculum on child education and care were some of the points highlighted by the commission.

In December 2003, The Brazilian Millennium Fund for Early Childhood Program was launched in Porto Alegre, state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Over the last few years it has been established in 15 local governments located in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and, more recently, in São Paulo and Minas Gerais. The Program aims at improving the quality of ECCE services provided by communitarian, philanthropic or public daycare centers by enhancing the quality of training for child professionals. It encourages innovation by providing a well-equipped room with materials such as toys and books for professionals to share or reflect upon their daily experiences in ECCE through playful and recreational activities similar to children's games and toys. These rooms/spaces are called the Educational Boards. Designed and implemented as a permanent space for learning, the pedagogical work developed at the Boards focuses on professional development and institutional changes by means of (de)constructing different perceptions/beliefs related to ECCE, while strengthening institutional collective work. The respect and the promotion of diversity, while focusing on individual narratives and experiences, is the starting point of all the work in order to achieve high-quality professional development. Consequently, training Early Child educators—principals, educators, supervisors, administrative and work staff—who perform directly with children in social vulnerability, has become the main goal of the in-service professional development and network capacity building as strategically pedagogical tools.

The present paper aims at briefly describing and analyzing the Program as an innovative shared

partnership between some representatives of the public sector and private companies, on a *joint responsibility* basis, towards the promotion of a public awareness about the importance of a child's early years and the positive impacts of a qualified childhood education. The program generates an increased mobilization of local communities in favor of early childhood and high-quality in-service professional development. A new social technology will be briefly introduced and further analyzed—Educational Board—which focuses on in-service professional development. The target population involved comprised of eight staff representatives of each of the five daycare centers enrolled in each Educational Board settled in 15 municipalities of four southern states of Brazil.

By starting off from the participants' own childhood experiences, background and perceptions, some positive aspects related to changes in their ECCE practices in their original daycare centers are expected. Hopefully, in the long run, some significant benefits will result from the development of their relational competences with the children. Since launching the program in 2003 the Gerdau Group, a local steel corporation with international branches inside and outside Brazil, has been providing support and follow-up throughout the implementation of the Program, not to mention their commitment to nurturing strategies that promote the expansion of the Program to other Brazilian states. As the main partner and funding organization at the moment, Gerdau has been actively involved in favor of social policies and / or practices as well.

Therefore, thanks to the official agreement signed between three partners, namely UNESCO, Maurício Sirotsky Sobrinho Foundation (a broadcast corporation) and Gerdau, with the support of the local municipalities—the Municipal and State Secretariats of Education in particular—such joint responsibility has been mobilizing the active participation of local representatives from different segments within every community. These have acted as *co-managers* of the Program (i.e. the Local Council). The permanent supervision, capacity building and mentoring has been carried out by Technical Coordinators in charge of every Educational Board, under the coordination of an Executive Team that is permanently searching and mobilizing new partners from the private sectors for replication of the Educational Board as an effective social technology nationwide.

A Brief Overview of ECCE in Brazil

Dramatically low statistics in the 0 to 3 age group show that Brazil has not been meeting its constitutional obligation as stated in the Article 227 of the Federal Constitution which claims that:

It is the family, the society and the State duty, to ensure both children and adolescents, with absolute priority, the right to life, health, nourishment, education, leisure, professional training, culture, dignity respect, freedom and family and community life, as well as to guard them from all forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression.

In addition, in the National Educational Act (*Law of Directives and Bases of National Education - LDBEN, 1996*) Articles 29 and 30 deal specifically with They point out that, as first levels of basic education, ECCE should promote children's whole development from ages 0 to 6 years old, covering different dimensions such as cognitive, social, physical, psychological and emotional development from *crèches* to preschools. Internationally, the World Declaration on Education for All has been influential by recognizing the paramount importance of the child's early years in relation to not only the extreme vulnerability of these children, but their tremendous potential for which adequate protection, care and stimulation are essential to provide the foundations for the child's well-being and development (UNESCO, 2005).

Likewise, ECCE professionals in Brazil, in general, and caregivers from philanthropic,

communitarians and/or public daycare centers, in particular, seem to lack knowledge and training as well as demand to update their expertise on concerning quality teaching and learning experiences, particularly for children aged 0 to 6. At present, 37,000 thousand ECCE educators, out of over 300,000, do not fulfill basic teacher education requirements to perform their duties with quality, as announced by the Ministry of Education on October 20th, 2008. In order to better overcome such demanding issues, the Minister of Education has recently provided funding for basic education by means of a fund called the National Fund for Development and Sustainability of Basic Education (FUNDEB) which is to be altered in order to also include ECCE as a beneficiary. All of the current initiatives may be viewed as follow-ups to the Dakar Forum on Education in 2000 and to the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All (EFA), which was signed by Brazilian representatives, and is in favor of the implementation of high quality education for underprivileged children through 2015 (Objective 1 of the Dakar Framework). Another follow-up worth mentioning here is the Brazilian nationwide movement called “Everyone for Education” which aims at improving basic education and professional development, eradicating illiteracy and providing access to school for all children from the ages of 4 to 17 years old by the year 2022.

Yet, despite the strong efforts and commitments of the Brazilian federal government with sound investments on ECCE both nationally as well as internationally, demands have not yet been fulfilled, which has generated the need for finding other effective alternatives to back up and help overcome the problem in a shorter time—hopefully by 2015, as officially agreed in Dakar. In the following sections we will describe the design and joint responsibilities of the Program between public and private sectors which may help both state and local governments (municipalities) to deal with ECCE in a more effective way, particularly with philanthropic, communitarian and public daycare centers and preschools.

The Millennium Fund for Early Childhood Program in Brazil

According to Brazelton & Greenspan (2002):

A child experiences in the first months and years of life determine whether he or she will enter school eager to learn or not. By school age, family and caregivers have already prepared the child for success or failure. The community has already helped or hindered the family’s capacity to nurture the child’s development.

The Millennium Fund for Early Childhood Program seeks to promote in-service training and capacity- and network-building for coordinators, principals and staff of previously selected daycare centers and preschools, as well as to improve the infrastructure of those institutions by purchasing quality instructional materials and equipment. It aims to engage and mobilize local partners from the private sector, municipal department staff and NGOs, on a joint responsibility and commitment basis. The leading questions underpinning all the work are: What sort of quality in the daycare centers do we aim to achieve? How can we achieve that? How long does it take? What risks are to be faced? How much can be gained from network capacity building?

Based on such goals and objectives some strategies have been outlined such as the establishment of Educational Boards, training and supervision by qualified Technical Coordinators appointed by Municipal Secretariat of Education. The next step is the mobilization of companies as strategic partners (fundraising), or local partners (as suppliers or financial supporters to local Educational Boards or ECCE institutions). The third and very important initiative is the mobilization of the whole community to develop initiatives and undertake social commitments towards public policies that not only meet local demands for enrollment but mostly for better quality of the ECCE

services currently provided.

The Program has been designed to encompass five major components, namely daycare centers and preschools (staff development), the Executive Team, the Educational Boards, the Local Council and the Advisory Council. The Executive Team, committed to the whole management of the Program (sensitizing/ mobilizing, in-service training, implementing, working, monitoring and evaluating the Program), has as its members representatives of UNESCO, Maurício Sirotsky Sobrinho Foundation and Gerda (the latter being the financial supporter of the 2008-2009 edition of the Program) and the Technical Coordinators in charge of the Program in the four Brazilian states involved. However, the core coordinating team is locally settled at the UNESCO office in Porto Alegre, having one Senior Technical Advisor (who coordinates the whole team), a Technical Advisor and an Administrative Assistant. Every fortnight there is a teleconference meeting in which all the decision-making process and courses of actions are discussed and planned together.

As for the Local Council, they are considered the “joint managers” of the Program in every municipality. Its members are public government representatives (Municipal Secretariat of Education and other departments), NGOs, private institutions, Municipal Councils and the media. Finally, the Advisory Council is a consultative body whose main duty is to follow up and legitimize the implementation of the Program. It has among its members representatives of UNESCO, Mauricio Sirotsky Sobrinho Foundation and Gerda representatives, State Secretariats of Education, Health and Social Welfare, Municipal Chamber of Commerce and other child/ adolescent institutions.

The dynamics of the Millennium Fund for Early Childhood should be perceived as a series of concentric circles. Qualification of ECCE professionals is both the core issue and the starting point. To implement it, the design of a tool has become the priority. That tool is the Educational Board. With the implementation of Educational Boards, ECCE professionals become the protagonists of their own professional change and development. In turn, such changes in their understanding and behavior towards ECCE issues are expected to be gradually incorporated into their daily routines at the daycare centers and preschools. High quality ECCE classrooms and outer spaces are expected to positively interfere into a better child whole development process. As a consequence, both family and community will become more committed to ECCE, having the active and effective support of the Local Council, in order to guarantee both the continuity and sustainability of the Educational Boards—now already institutionalized and perceived as a public space for permanent in-service training and other educational events to be held in the community. In the long run, a new social model/ culture of local governments on the issue of ECCE is expected to be implemented as a guarantee of a future, democratic generation characterized by solidarity and well-being.

Educational Boards: A New Social Technology

Educational Boards have been designed as ECCE classrooms with thematic corners and enough room to hold around 40 participants from five most socially vulnerable daycare centers appointed by the Municipal Secretariat of Education. It should be envisaged as a strategic tool to improve ECCE, since it is specially equipped to encourage professional sharing of experiences and learning. The target group for the Educational Boards are those from either philanthropic/ communitarian or public daycare centers and preschools that work with children from the ages of 0 to 6 years old. Professionals meet every week, for 4 hours, bringing to the Educational Board their recurrent or recent demands/ conflicting practices to be shared and experienced with the group. For the first three months the whole planning is focused on the educator as a person and then on the

educator's professional skills and competences on early child education. It follows a Socratic approach of questioning and an "action-reflection-action" strategy to improve the pedagogical practices already incorporated. Participants are requested to write on their notebooks at least six lines a week about their learning experiences as reflective narratives to improve their reflective skills. Boards are learning centers of multiple languages, in which professionals and staff from, at least, five different ECCE institutions gather once a week under the supervision of a previously selected and trained Technical Coordinator, whose expertise is on Early Child Development (ECD). For 12 months, on a weekly basis, totaling 360 hours of studies and professional practices, principals, educators and staff members experiment, share, reflect upon and design/propose new daily socio-interactive activities to be carried out with children aged 0 to 6 years old. The Educational Boards resemble, therefore, an ECCE classroom (with books, toys and different equipment) with different thematic spaces / corners such as the fantasy corner, the theater corner, the fine arts corner, the baby / toddler corner, the story-telling corner and the playing corner so as to guarantee better ECCE from the start.



Educational Board

Some advantages of setting up an Educational Board are:

Customization: through the methodology of the Educational Board the process of learning takes place closely or in accordance to the daily ECCE routines in the schools enrolled, in the hope of better qualifying all the participants.

Synergy: a networking of cooperation and shared learning is built in through playing, which unlocks potentials of the local protagonists involved in the Program (i.e. the Technical Consultant, the ECCE schools, enterprises, municipal public sectors and other representatives from the local community), so as to both praise and improve the quality of the ECCE school representatives enrolled.

Optimization: the human resources have their potentials developed, without leaving aside their profound spirit of cooperation.

Local autonomy: the more local partners are involved with The Millennium Fund for Early Childhood, the less the dependency upon the Program itself (or even upon UNESCO technical support) is envisaged.

A standard of quality: The Educational Board seeks to implement a standard of quality that imprints the Program identity as an innovative social technology to be institutionalized as such in the community on long-term basis.

Each Educational Board takes into account, as part of its methodology, a vast array of materials and events such as extramural seminars, personal experiences, the reading of theoretical and technical ECCE instructional materials, classroom observations, case studies, guided visits to museums, attending local shows scheduled, dramatization, guided studies, and the implementation and monitoring of ECCE school projects to be carried out in the schools involved. The main focus is on the qualification of all services offered to children from the ages of 0 to 6 years old, as a guarantee of a more democratic and humanizing education.

Besides the technical and fictional literature on ECCE available in every Educational Board, the Program has been designed together with a series of four books as supporting instructional materials^[1] covering the following topics: a) a new look on Science upon Early Childhood (book 1); b) Children discovering, interpreting and acting upon the world (book 2); Legislation, Policies and Pedagogical Influences upon ECCE (book 3); and On the daily routine at the daycare centers and preschools (book 4). Although it is a book series, it is strongly recommended not to follow them in a sequence but in alternation, according to the educators' needs or expectations. An array of texts, activities, topics for research, reflection, and debate is also provided. Another supporting instructional material to be highlighted is the website, <http://www.fundodomileneo.com.br>, which is currently being redesigned and updated to include topics and materials not only in Portuguese, but also in English.

Final Considerations

The Millennium Fund for Early Childhood Program in Brazil, as a joint responsibility between UNESCO, Maurício Sirotsky Sobrinho Foundation and Gerdau, besides the partnership with the public sector, has provided evidence so far that it can contribute to improve quality in professional development through the kind of approach implemented in the Educational Boards—an alternative and effective tool towards both institutional transformation and social mobilization in favor of better ECCE—at least in the 15 municipalities enrolled in the Program. In addition, as a promoter of professional development by investing on in-service training and on network capacity building, it has generated better outcomes on social commitment to ECCE through the partnership and networking of local public and private sectors, daycare centers and preschools, families and the community members. As a “win-win” strategy on ECCE, equity, rather than

equality, in early childhood education has become the major focus, which has considerably facilitated the incorporation of different perspectives on human resources throughout the implementation of the Program.

As its added value, the Program in Brazil has envisaged to bring about a new look upon the ECCE educator, particularly those from philanthropic, communitarian and public daycare centers and from preschools, and a new look upon issues related to ECCE in the Brazilian context. New educational spaces for debate/reflection and cultural clashes as active components of self-criticism and self-education have opened up. The possibility of better overcoming the dichotomy between education and care in favor of an intrinsic, interrelated conception of both has emerged, not to mention the reinforcement of the need towards more socially committed public policies focused on the promotion of Early Childhood Care and Education in Brazil.

Endnotes

[1]. All the four book series provide a very thorough list of references on ECCE both nationally and internationally that have not been included here due to word limit.

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