Early Childhood Development Education and Care:
The Future Is What We Build Today

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Abstract

Early childhood development, education, and care (ECD/ECEC) has become a priority for governments and international bodies. ECD/ECEC is explicitly included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4, 4.2), underlining the global consensus. In 2018, the Group of Twenty (G20) acknowledged the key role of ECD and, in their Leaders' Declaration, announced a G20 ECD initiative. Access to high-quality, early childhood development, education, and care programs is unequal among and within countries, and this remains a major cause for concern. However, in the context of local and global sustainability, a new focus on the purpose of ECD/ECEC should become a complementing priority of the G20 process.

Challenge

ECD/ECEC has become a policy priority for governments and international bodies. There is a broad consensus between policy makers, ECD/ECEC professionals, scholars, and advocates on the importance of ECD/ECEC as effective means to ensure individual and collective well-being and achievement, and to addressing wider societal issues including social cohesion, equality and inclusion, and persistent inter-generational cycles of poverty. Having ECD/ECEC explicitly included in the SDGs (SDG 4, target 4.2)[1] underlines the global consensus. Moreover, the G20 acknowledges the key role of ECD and in the 2018 Leaders' Declaration announced a G20 ECD initiative.[2]

At the global and local levels, an emerging 'systemic turn' (Urban) has brought about a broad consensus that policy frameworks should address early childhood from a holistic perspective. Examples include the integrated policy framework 'De Cero a Siempre' in Colombia and the Irish 'whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children, and their families'. Adopting whole-systems approaches to developing ECD/ECEC policy and practice ('Competent Systems') is key to providing quality ECD/ECEC for all children (Okengo 2011; Urban et al. 2011, 2012).

The ECD/ECEC policy brief adopted by T20 in 2018, *It Takes More Than a Village. Effective Early Childhood Development, Education and Care Services Require Competent Systems* (Urban et al. 2018), outlines concrete policy recommendations that should be taken by G20 governments collectively and individually.

However, there has been little attention to questions of the purpose and content of ECD/ECEC in the context of sustainability. "Yesterday's solutions" continue to be supported by policy makers and donors alike:

■   Focus on deficiencies rather than the capabilities of children, families, and communities.

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[1]   ECD/ECEC is included in Goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"; specifically mentioned in target 4.2: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education."

[2]   The T20 Communique handed to former G20 leaders includes ECD/ECEC as a priority in its proposal 4, based on the promotion of equal opportunities for quality education.

■ Focus on (externally) predetermined models and outcomes rather than culturally and locally appropriate approaches.

■ Focus on decontextualized and "borrowed" education practices and approaches (e.g., Reggio, Montessori, HighScope, Project Zero, etc.) rather than culturally appropriate and locally developed sustainable solutions.

■ Focus on narrowly defined "early learning" curricula (literacy and numeracy), extending from countries in the global north to the global south; backed up and promoted by the democratically unaccountable: soft power: of international organizations, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and increasingly extended to and imposed on countries in the global south, e.g., Africa.

■ Focus on narrow and unsustainable notions of "development"—at the individual, collective, country, and global levels—that originate in supremacist and colonialist thinking.

■ Naïve extrapolation of today's socioeconomic contexts into the future, including the assumption that, for instance, "digital," and AI, are both the main challenges and the solutions to development and education.

Proposal

ECD/ECEC for Sustainable Development

■ Background and context

Undeniably, every child has the right to access and meaningfully participate in high-quality, early childhood development, education, and care programs. Pre-primary education is, in fact, considered an important part of a holistic and robust educational system (United Nations, 2017: 24). Participation in "pre-primary or primary education in the year prior to the official entrance age to primary school" (ibid) has increased to around 9 out of 10 children in Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean and North America; the rate in the least developed countries remains much lower (4 out of 10).

However, effective early childhood ECD/ECEC does not start one year before compulsory school age. Children learn and make significant experiences from birth, long before they enter schooling. Early learning is embedded in children's holistic development, which comprises physical, emotional, cognitive, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects from birth.

In fact, ECD/ECEC practices, despite being of global concern, are inevitably local (Urban 2014). Caring for, teaching and bringing up young children comprises physical, emotional, cognitive, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects from birth (Cardini et al. 2017). This means ECD/ECEC needs to be shaped through democratic debate of all stakeholders within countries, and at all levels of government (Urban 2008, 2009).

Countries in both the global north and south are increasingly adopting policy frameworks that address early childhood from a holistic perspective. Examples include the integrated policy framework "De Cero a Siempre" in Colombia (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, 2015; Republic of Colombia, 2013) and the Irish "whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children, and their families" (Department for Children and Youth Affairs 2018). Adopting whole-systems approaches to developing ECD/ECEC policy and practice ("competent systems") is key to providing quality ECD/ECEC for all children (Okengo 2011; Urban et al. 2011, 2012).

Based on the policy brief, *It Takes More Than a Village. Effective Early Childhood Development, Education and Care Services Require Competent Systems* (Urban, Cardini, and Flórez Romero 2018), policy recommendations adopted by the T20 summit 2018 spell out concrete actions to be considered by G20 governments at three interconnected levels:

- *At the national level*, make systemic approaches sustainable by providing leadership, resources, and support

- *At the G20 (international) level*, initiate and support cross-country learning with and from forward-looking systemic ECD/ECEC initiatives in countries in the global south and north

- *At the level of monitoring, evaluation, and research*, adopt whole-system approaches and all-stakeholder participation (including participation of children, families, and communities)

The majority of the initiatives have focused on increasing access to, and participation in, ECD/ECEC programs (as spelled out in SDG 4). In most regions there have been increases in access to ECEC/ECD programs (UNESCO 2014) Worldwide, half of all three to six-year-olds have access to ECD/ECEC programs (World Bank 2017).

However, access to high quality early childhood development, education, and care programs remains unequal. In the global South, just one in five children have access to ECD/ECEC (World Bank 2017). Furthermore, younger children from low-income families and children in rural communities have significantly less access to ECD/ECEC programs compared to their peers in more affluent and urban areas (Cardini et al. 2018).

Increased access and enrolment figures alone are not a sufficient measure for meaningful participation in high-quality programs that are effective in making a positive difference in children's lives. Even when more children access ECD/ECEC services, they enter and participate in very diverse and unequal programs. Quality of services, as experienced by children, families, and communities, varies widely and often continues to be inadequate.

Despite some encouraging developments (e.g., the emerging "systemic turn" (Urban et al. 2018) in most countries, fragmentation at all levels of the ECD/ECEC system remains a major challenge. For historical reasons, policies for the care and education of young children have often developed separately. This remains the de facto governance situation in most countries (Bennett 2008).

Hence, ECEC services are structured in different ways, and they embody diverse understandings of children, aims, and approaches (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010). This effectively prevents integrated service provision, inter-professional cooperation, integrated policy generation, and systemic evaluation of processes and outcomes.

However, ECEC/ECD services are, by nature, multi-sectorial and hybrid. Given the sectorial tradition of social policies, countries face difficulties in achieving coordinated and coherent approaches to ECEC (Cunill-Grau, Repetto, and Bronzo 2015).

■ Re-conceptualize ECD/ECEC in the context of existential global crises and develop a roadmap to integrated early childhood development, education, and care for sustainable development

The policy measures proposed in this brief address these shortcomings and build on the emerging broad international consensus on the importance of providing access to, and meaningful participation in, high quality early childhood development, education and care programs and services for all children from birth.

This consensus extends to all countries, in the global south as well as in the global north. It reflects the fact that critical issues facing young children and their families are no longer easily situated in naively defined "developed" versus "developing" country contexts. For instance, experiences of forced displacement, malnutrition, marginalization, and poverty are, unfortunately, shared by an increasing number of children in the poorest as well as the most affluent countries, with well-documented negative effects on their immediate and future life chances and individual and collective developmental and educational achievement.

This "blurring of boundaries between the centre and the periphery" (Braidotti 2011) is taking place despite the fact that marked differences continue to exist between countries, and within countries, in terms of children's access to ECD/ECEC. While country-level figures on access to ECD/ECEC show stark differences between, for instance, countries in Europe and Latin America (*high*) and sub-Saharan Africa (*low*), they tend to mask disparities *within* countries.

Children from vulnerable communities, children growing up in rural contexts, children suffering from forced (internal) displacement, and children with special educational needs often have significantly less access to appropriate ECD/ECEC programs compared to children from more privileged, affluent, or dominant communities.

A particular target group in a number of African countries are children whose communities are affected by HIV/AIDS, growing up without parents or in the care of grandparents or community members.

Taking this context into account, G20 governments can and should take concrete action in line with the 2018 Leaders' Declaration to initiate, orient and resource a major early childhood development, education and care initiative.

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The approach to the initiative should be three-pronged:

(i)   Continued and increased commitment to increasing access to, and meaningful participation in ECD/ECEC programs and services of high quality, in order to address unequal access within and between countries and regions

(ii)   Commitment to "whole-systems" approaches to developing, improving, resourcing, and governing early childhood programs in order to achieve the sustainability of programs and services

(iii)   Reconceptualize early childhood development, education, and care across G20 countries as societal, democratic realization of early childhood as a common good and collective responsibility, and contribution to achieving sustainability on a global scale, i.e., in the context of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

Strengthening the emerging international consensus on the need to take whole-systems approaches to policy and practice (competent systems) is arguably the most effective strategy to overcome the persistent, wasteful, and ineffective fragmentation of services and persistent silo-mentality at the levels of administration and governance.

Reclaiming early childhood as a public or common good entails recognizing the key responsibility governments have in relation to effective and sustainable ECD/ECEC provision. This is notwithstanding the indispensable role of a multitude of actors, including civil society actors and local communities in service and program development and delivery. However, reclaiming government responsibility also requires strategies and concrete action to reduce the influence of large-scale, for-profit provision, privatization, and the corporatization of program and service provision. Such a renewed public responsibility also addresses the democratically unaccountable exertion of "soft power" by actors as varied as international philanthropy or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

A concrete step to be initiated by G20 governments should be the phasing out of all public funding for services and programs that aim at returning a profit over an agreed time frame of five years.

Reclaiming public responsibility for ECD/ECEC in the context of local and global sustainability requires re-conceptualization not only of structures and governance of ECD/ECEC, but of the purpose, aims, and content of early childhood programs. Realizing the existential crisis facing humanity on a finite planet, the task is to initiate public, democratic debate leading to program review in the light of critical questions on content, values, and ethics to complement the necessary continued focus on access and participation.

In the context of a global sustainability framework, realizing SDG 4 (education) is an important orientation. It will be crucial, however, to align all areas of education, including ECD/ECEC, with the entire range of 17 SDGs.

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