Culture and Early Childhood Learning

The Politics of Comparison and the Proliferation of 'Best-Practices' in Early Childhood Education[*]

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Introduction

'Cultural sensitivity' is common advice in the field of early childhood learning and development, and few would argue with it (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2004). But are we willing to take this advice to the point of yielding to culturally-based understandings of how children learn and how to promote optimal developmental outcomes? On the contrary, there is a great deal more rhetoric about responding to cultural diversity than evidence that we really mean it when we say, as most developmental psychologists and many educators do, that culture is embodied in the ways children are raised and the proximal ecological system in which they grow and develop (Cole, 1998; Goncu, 1999; Greenfield & Suzuki, 1998; Levine & New, 2008; Rogoff, 2003; Super & Harkness, 1997).

Although many investigators, educators, and international development professionals acknowledge the geo-cultural limitations of the research base that informs current child development theory, learning assessment tools, and program interventions, this has not prevented a proliferation of branded programs touted as 'best practices' based on the authority of Euro-western science or, simply, persuasive marketing of training, toys, tools and teaching techniques (Fleer, 2003; Kincheloe, 2000). Expediency, along with assumptions that Euro-western theory and research on child development are universally valid, tends to be used to justify the transport of 'best practices.' It is common to hear that where there are no readily available, locally developed tools or programs, there is no need to 're-invent the wheel' when an existing tool or program can be imported.

Research Context

The concept of 'best practices' may once have been meaningful, designating early learning measurement approaches or program models identified through experimental and quasi-experimental research as capable of delivering, comparatively, the best outcomes with respect to a particular aspect of development within a particular population of children. Today, however, declaring an approach a 'best practice' often signifies little more than a tool or approach that is

well-liked by a particular constituency, such as the originators of the tool or program model, and that a government agency, program board, or funding/donor agency would like to promote the practice based on its intuitive, theoretical, or financial appeal, or the fact that the practice worked well in one particular setting. Few peer-reviewed research reports substantiate the claim of 'best' through studies establishing the construct or predictive validity of standardized early learning measurement tools for culturally diverse populations. International comparisons of early learning outcomes using standardized measurement tools are increasingly being used to set agendas, plan policy, and transfer 'best practices' from one country to another.

Key Questions

What developmental norms and goals for children's learning and development and whose cultural values and methods for socializing children and transmitting knowledge drive the creation and choice of curricula for early learning programs exported from a (usually western) source country to a foreign country or cultural setting? And what is at stake?

Exporting early learning measurement tools and programs created in Euro-western countries where European-heritage norms and approaches to development predominate can interrupt the transmission of locally valued cultural knowledge and practices and undermine the diversity of voices, knowledge sources, ways of life and supports for raising children in local conditions in receiver countries and communities (Stairs, Bernhard, et al., 2002). Cultural knowledge and positive parenting practices constitute the very resources that community development programs such as those operated by many non-governmental organizations aim to preserve and capitalize in order to promote community-based, culturally resonant supports for children's learning and development (Nsamenang, 2008). Programs built on these local assets are likely to garner high demand and participation from parents, grandparents, and local leaders and are most likely to be adapted to local conditions and sustainable (Fleer, 2003).

Recent Research Results

Four examples from the author's program of research, Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships, illustrate the usefulness of 're-inventing the wheel' to ensure an approach tailored to local conditions and destinations for children's early learning. In a study of the views of Indigenous parents, Elders and early childhood practitioners about assessing young children's cognitive development and readiness for school, participants emphasized the importance of building self-esteem as a foundation for learning (Ball & Janyst, 2008). They described key curriculum content focusing on community history (how children are related to the land), genealogy (who children are related to), and cultural participation (preparing for roles in ceremonies and sustenance using natural resources). They disagreed with mainstream definitions and standardized measures of school readiness promoted by public schools, arguing that schools need to be ready to receive children who have a rich understanding of who they are and their cultural identity, even if they are not acculturated to classroom based teaching and learning and may have few numeracy or text based literacy skills at school entry.

In a second study exploring early identification of learning difficulties, Indigenous parents and Elders asked why standardized and globally disseminated early learning tools such as the Early

Development Inventory (Janus & Offord, 2007) and screening tools such as the Nipissing District Developmental Screen (NDDS, 1993) do not assess young children's strengths, but seem more focused on identifying deficits (Ball, 2006). One Elder commented: "They don't ask whether children know their Indigenous language or what children know about how to behave in different social settings or in ceremony. Schools aren't interested in children learning their culture so they don't ask about it," A First Nations community leader asked: "Has anything changed since the government first designed their education systems to take the Indian out of the child?"

In a third study focused on roles for speech language pathologists, 49 out of 70 speech language pathologists who had worked with First Nations children for two or more years reported that their standardized measurement tools did not yield valid or useful information and their best practices for early intervention were not helpful in their practice. They overwhelmingly called for 'an altogether different approach' – one that is responsive to local goals and conditions for young children speech-language development and that actively involves parents and other caregivers as primary supports for children's early learning (Ball & Lewis, 2006).

A fourth study found that many Indigenous parents and some non-Indigenous teachers were concerned that standardized tools for measuring speech and language development and school readiness may lead to misinterpretations of speech and language differences such as First Nations English dialects or vernaculars as evidence of deficits. Low scores on tools assumed to be universally valid likely contribute to the alarmingly high rates of diagnosis of First Nations children as cognitively and linguistically delayed or impaired (Ball & Bernardt. 2008).

Research Gaps

Research is needed to develop and test measures of early learning and program effectiveness that are culturally relevant but that also are not entirely idiosyncratic and reliant upon unwieldy phenomenological or public opinion research. While there are many commonalties across cultures in goals for children's early learning, methodologies must work to identify cultural distinctiveness in developmental expectations and trajectories. The past decade has seen an explosion of appreciation for collaborative approaches to research whereby investigators, policy makers, and program designers can compensate for their cultural blinders by collaborating at every step with skilled members of cultural communities to develop the research base for culturally appropriate policies, tools, and interventions (e.g., Community Based Research Canada; Community Campus Partnerships for Health; Living Knowledge Network; Society for Participatory Research in Asia).

Conclusion

This article calls for us to curb our enthusiasm about promoting uniform methodologies for international comparisons and exporting so-called 'best practices' to cultural and national contexts that are fundamentally different from their source. We risk inadvertent complicity in a neoliberal imperialist agenda to secure and expand the hegemony of individualist, often European-heritage, positivist values, goals and pedagogies of early learning and development (Burman, 2001; Kincheloe, 2000; McNaughton, 2005).

Implications

What roles can we play in supporting children's development in ways that protect and build upon culturally based assets and goals?

Governments should ensure quality early learning opportunities for all children whose caregivers seek support, but funding need not be tied to one-size-fits-all curricula or learning goals (Fuller, 2007). In Canada, the federal government's investment in Aboriginal Head Start is a powerful example of a program mandated to stimulate children's development across six domains, including culture and home language, using methods and curriculum content that are chosen, elaborated, and delivered by each host community (Ball, 2008).

Open-ended, dialogical engagement with communities can illuminate how to bring knowledge and tools from research together with local knowledge and approaches to address culturally defined goals for children's early learning and development. There are many examples of participatory, co-scripted approaches to early learning program development (May & Carr, 2000; Reeders, 2008; Rinaldi, 2001; Tagataga Inc., 2007; Wilson & Kamana, 2001). In addition to supporting individual children and families, these programs are working to protect cultural heterogeneity in the face of the overwhelmingly homogenizing forces of globalization.

Cultures are always changing: goals and approaches to children's early learning embody these changes over time. As investigators, policy makers and practitioners, we need to leave room for culturally diverse families to re-invent themselves in their own image and not, through the absence of choice, in the image of English-speaking North American middle class cultural constructions of the child.

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