

WHEN EARLY EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS ARE THE RESULT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT. THE CASE OF IRISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

In Ireland, early education programs followed a particular path in their development due to a high empowerment of the parents, who, by constitution, were held responsible for their preschool children education. Today, nation wide education policies are highly influenced by nongovernmental organizations at the community level. The aim of the present article is to disentangle the effects of this context over the organization of the preschool programs as well as over the philosophy that lie beneath teachers training programs. We will present the main forms of preschool programs as well as the nongovernmental organizations that offer training, counseling, and support for the institutions that provide early education programs. We will also analyse teachers training programs from the curriculum perspective.

Key words: early childhood education, curriculum development, education policies

Early education system in Ireland followed an atypical development due to cultural trends surrounding children education. In the past, early education was entirely the responsibility of the family. Parents had the right and the duty to offer religious, moral, cognitive, physical and social education to their children. They were empowered by the constitution to get involved in their children education. The state was responsible only for children whose parents could not accomplish this duty due to low income or other difficult social conditions. In this context, preschool education in specialized institutions was not mandatory, parents being those who used to decide the educational path for their children. Once women got more involved in the work market, the enrolment of their preschool children in different institutions became a necessity. Since the state did not offer preschool programs, parents were those who developed nonprofit organizations at the community level (eg. National Children's Nurseries Association, Irish Preschool Play Association, Early Childhood Organization, Montessori Schools) in order to facilitate the development of services for preschool children. For instance, The National

Children's Nurseries Association dates back in 1988 and have the purpose of promoting high standards of quality childcare through information and support for providers of services. Also Irish Preschool Play Association (IPPA) is the largest nongovernmental organization developed to promote and support early childhood services. Founded in 1969, IPPA pioneered the provision of early childhood education, developed policy guidelines, quality standards and provided nationally and internationally accredited training. These organizations advocate today for quality services in early education by offering training, counseling and support for providers of educational programs and by actively getting involved in changing educational policies at the national level. Under their close supervision, early education programs developed first at the practical level as a response to the community needs lacking clear directives from the Ministry of Education (Kelleher, McGough & Ware, 2006). This aspect is reflected in the philosophy that lies beneath the organization of programs for professional development of teachers, practical activities holding a considerable quota in the curriculum. Also, persons with teaching experience are prioritized when enrolling in education programs.

As a direct effect of lacking centralized national education policies, a variety of services offering early education programs, developed at the community level (Eurydice, 2009-2010). The programs are diverse, both by curriculum and layout. Here is a short overview of institutions that offer early education programs:

1. Playgroups are the most spread form of caring and educating preschool children, age between 3 and 6 years old. The Irish Association of Preschool Education through Playgroups offers training to providers of such services. Part of the costs is covered by nonprofit organizations.
2. Naionrai are institutions that provide the same type of care and education as playgroups but they are intended for the exclusive use of Irish language speakers and are totally financed by the state.
3. Montessori schools are widely spread in Ireland. There are approximately 500 such schools that offer services for children between 3 and 6 years old. Most of them are private. The training is offered by Montessori International Organization and by Irish Montessori Society.

4. School after school programs are services addressed to children over 4 years old.

Most of these institutions offer private services and parents are those who must pay. There are possibilities to educate a preschool child without paying. They are offered by primary schools. Most of these schools are property of Catholic Church who, by constitution, has the right to get involved in educational activities within the community. These schools organize two classes where children as young as 4 years old can be enrolled. Called infant classes, they are in most cases the first option for parents because the offered services are free. The classes are frequently crowded with children and the teaching methods are quite similar with those used in primary schools. These are the most invoked critics about infant classes. Despite the fact that the presence is not mandatory, statistics show that at 4 years old, 44% of children are enrolled in infant classes while at 5 years old the percent reaches 100 (Annual Statistical Report 2008/09: Department of Education and Skills). Among the free services for preschool children is the program Early Start. This goes back to '94 and was aimed at children aged 3 to 4 years old, children from families with low socio-economic status. The purpose of the program was to prevent later school dropout. From 2010, this program extended to the entire population of children 3 to 4 years old. All preschool institutions can be providers if they follow the state regulations proposed by National Council for Curriculum and the criteria of quality elaborated by Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. These criteria encompass standards referring to children's rights, school-family partnerships, play as teaching method, curriculum implementation, assessment policies, children health and well-being. Parents involvement proved to be beneficial by having positive effects on the development of quality services for children. The later gained recognition from the ministry of education completed this process of services development that started from community needs.

Teachers training

The diversity of services dedicated to preschool children led to a plethora of teachers training programs, programs that vary as level of qualification. In an attempt to bring to the same level the teachers training programs, since 2000 teachers professional profile for early education

included competences in the following fields: child development, education and play, social environment, health, nutrition, child protection, communication, professional development, management and administration. The bachelor programs design to develop these competencies are strongly focused on practical activities that represent half of the curricula. Also, the importance of parents and community involvement in children education is recognized by having a significant part of the curricula focused on how to develop school – community partnerships.

The concept of early education in Ireland

The debates referring to the concept of early education are centered on the relation between education and care. The law of early education from 1998 (The white paper of childhood education) stipulate that care should be the aim of the programs until three years old, while education should be the main purpose after 3 years old (Corrigan, 2002).

Curriculum for early education

Infant classes follow a standardized curriculum, centered on study subjects, elaborated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. For the other early education services, in more than half of the institutions, the curriculum is developed at the local level. If in infant classes, curriculum is centered on subject areas, the alternative early education programs develop their curriculum following the principles of student centered education and active involvement in learning, Montessori pedagogy or learning through play pedagogy. Trying to incorporate all these practices, in 2009, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment came with the first framework for curriculum development (AISTEAR, 2009). This framework is actually a guide for curriculum development, guide that proposes four interrelated themes considered relevant for children development. They are well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, exploring and thinking. For each theme, aims and learning goals are proposed. The document does not impose a curriculum content. Providers of early education programs are invited to develop their own curriculum according to community needs. The purpose of this framework is to act as a complementary resource in curriculum development in order to bring some coherence to the preschool

educational system, a system that can be characterized by curriculum diversity (Daly & Forster, 2010).

Conclusions

The process of early childhood education system development in Ireland is an illustrative example of how good practices can be successfully developed starting from community needs and following a bottom up track. The empowerment of the parents by constitution proved to be a beneficial context for the development of qualitative services for preschool children. Following the old saying that it takes a village to raise a child, we can conclude that the parents and the community knows best what is good for their children and their voices should be heard when designing education programs and policies.

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