
Challenges of Practicing Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) attracted the attention of many associations and educators. The Association for Childhood Education International, The National Association for the Education of Young Children, and Bennett (2004) offered in depth frameworks for ECE. This article examined the challenges that the preschool teachers in Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates face in adhering to ECE frameworks that advocate developmentally appropriate and innovative practices, and recommended to overcome those challenges by meeting the needs in teacher preparation programs at the university level and by providing continuous professional education.

Keywords: Early childhood education, international, curriculum, United Arab Emirates education, Lebanese Pre-Primary Education, Kindergarten system in Emirates, UAEU Teacher Preparation Programs, NAEYC guidelines, UNESCO briefs on ECEC, ACEI guidelines, developmentally appropriate practices, technology, cultural context, professional development, teachers' beliefs, inclusive education.

Introduction

How to provide a successful university program based on sound theory and geared towards a rewarding practice in Early Childhood Education? As I was engaged in restructuring the Early Childhood Education (ECE) program in the College of Education at United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) following the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children standards (NAEYC 2001) standards, I had to go back and forth between the aspired high quality Teacher Preparation Program (TPP) at the university, the practices in the field, and the NAEYC requirements. Consequently, I developed a teaching approach that was oriented towards the diversified needs of teachers, teacher candidates, and children. According to this approach, a preschool teacher needs to portray a creative model for the children, to provide a space for the children to experiment, and to exercise self-accountability. University faculty members could help by regularly evaluating the curriculum offered to teacher candidates, adding performance objectives as needed, and mapping the objectives to course content. An open eye, mind, and heart to the community facilitate the delivery of quality education.

In this paper, I examined challenges awaiting teacher candidates (TCs) as they attempt to implement NAEYC guidelines or other ECE frameworks. Challenges emanate from the transferability of the guidelines to international contexts, the TCs' individual issues, the pre-primary curriculum, and the daily challenges of inservice teachers. Examples were drawn from two countries, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Lebanon, where I had experience training inservice and preservice early childhood teachers.

Transferability of the NAEYC Guidelines

The daily tasks of the early childhood teacher as characterized in NAEYC (2004) are grounded on best practices that are nevertheless hard to transfer to international settings. Specifically, the criteria for health and nutrition, outdoor environmental design, environmental health, management policies and procedures, and access to children regardless of socio-economic status and special needs require support from multiple governmental agencies and availability of qualifications at varied governmental levels. The underlying infrastructure must be established to support the implementation of the criteria; something that is not always available.

ECE associations and educators other than NAEYC (2001, 2004) have addressed expected challenges and offered recommendations that would empower the teacher candidates. Examples were perspectives on early childhood education and care (ECEC) stipulated by the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI, 1998, 2000-2002) and by UNESCO Policy Briefs on Early Childhood, no. 26 (Bennett, 2004).

A comparison among the three frameworks shows that NAEYC, ACEI, and Bennett (2004) stress the well being of all children as a foundation for a nation's future success. For NAEYC (2001) and

ACEI (1998), the early childhood teacher should ideally be licensed or a graduate of a university program within the scope of a teacher preparation program. Curricular areas should immerse the teacher in early childhood education, so that she (a) promotes child development and learning, (b) engages in the teaching and learning process encompassing cognitive, physical, emotional, aesthetic, and moral domains of development, (c) builds family and community relationships, (d) develops techniques for planning and evaluating the teaching environment using observation, documentation, and assessment that supports children and families, and (e) bases her evolving philosophy and continuing professional development on current research and experiences at quality sites.

Bennett (2004) advocated an open approach to curriculum with general value-based framework that accounts for diversity. He argued that too much stress on a cognitive curriculum could limit the benefits of the experience. He also recommended dealing with bilingualism carefully as the language factor could act as a deficit or as an advantage to the child. Moreover, Bennett pointed at contexts in developing countries with inadequate funding, insufficient staff, and low-quality teacher preparation program. He proposed remedial measures that include the use of available community materials, mobilization of mothers, and embedding the cultural heritage in the curriculum. Support for children's health and overall development should be key factors to further curricular improvement and delivery.

Bearing in mind that even within the same country, there is a discrepancy in the practices among the preschools, what conclusions could be drawn regarding needs of novice teachers in the countries, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Lebanon?

A comparison between UAE and Lebanon in terms of environmental and teachers' characteristics is displayed in Table 1.

UAE is classified as a rich country due to oil revenues. The Emirates is a setting where the government is eager to reform the educational system and where UAEU, the largest national university, has been updating its TPPs. Other universities are also adopting quality educational programs.

In UAE, teachers accepted in public schools should be graduates of a university program in early childhood education with some exceptions.

Table 1: Environmental and Teachers' Characteristics Surrounding Preprimary Education in UAE and Lebanon up to 2005.

Indicator	UAE	Lebanon
I- General characteristics		
Urban Population	Greater than 85 %	Greater than 85 %
Primary education	Free and compulsory	Free and Compulsory
Pre-primary education	Non-mandatory	Non-mandatory
Number of pre-primary education years	2 (4 to 5 years old)	3 (3 to 5 years old)
Pupil Teacher Ratio	18:1	16:1
Hours in preschool	Around 5 hours per day, 5 hours per week*	At least 4 hours per day, 5 days per week.
Percent of children with ECCE experience	79 %	Greater than 90 %
Percent in pre-primary schools	74 %	64 %
Percent in private preschools	Greater than 70 %	Greater than 70 %
Gender Parity in pre-primary education	100 %	100 %
II- Teachers' Characteristics		
Percent trained	70 % (1999) 50 % (2005)	10 %
Formal education	Public KGs: Most are holders of a university degree*	53 % holders of post secondary non tertiary education
Percent of female teachers	100 %	100 %

Note: The given information was extracted from UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2006, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, 2008a and 2008b, and J. Van Ravens and C. Aggio, 2008.

* The information is based on personal experience.

The Emirates Public School System offers two elective years labeled Kindergarten (KG) I and II prior to first grade to 4 and 5 years old children (Van Ravens, J, & Aggio, C., 2008). The KG curriculum has been redesigned to reflect a developmentally-oriented instead of an academically-oriented model. Children's gross enrolment ratio in the KGs was around 74% in 2005 (UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, 2008a). Among those, more than 75% were in private schools (Van Ravens, J, & Aggio, C., 2008).

As for Lebanon, the requirements for teachers vary widely both in public and in private schools. Teachers' degrees could be less of a high school and all the way up to a university degree. A Three year technical degree termed (Baccalaureate Technique) in kindergarten education is one of the degrees offered. It is equivalent to a high school degree but is focused on early childhood education. In private schools, the main criterion to accept a preschool teacher is knowledge of a foreign language in addition to whatever degree available.

Education in Lebanon is compulsory and free from 6 to 14 years old (as cited in UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2006). Pre-primary education is non-mandatory and is offered over three years starting 3 years old. In Lebanon, gross enrolment ratio up to 2005 was 64% (UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, 2008a). More than 70% were in private schools (Van Ravens, J, & Aggio, C., 2008).

While at least 90% of all teachers were qualified in the subject matter in UAE, only 13% of Lebanese teachers were (UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, 2008a). For pre-primary education, the percentages were around 50 % for UAE and 10 % for Lebanon (UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, 2008b).

Given the background information and the role that the preschool teacher plays in introducing children to the educational system, what adjustments do new graduates have to make to implement ECE guidelines?

Individual and Context-Specific Issues

Teacher Candidates should examine their needs to meet the guidelines stipulated by the three ECE frameworks discussed earlier. In addition, they should address individual- and context-specific issues as follows.

Individual-Specific Issues

Three individual-specific issues ought to be taken into consideration: voicing opinions, integrating former knowledge with developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), and evaluating internet resources. Addressing those issues objectively and systematically would enhance TCs skills to implement DAP. Each issue is addressed as follows:

Voicing opinions. Throughout schooling, the teacher candidates in UAE were not trained to voice their opinions; they needed coaching to do so once they had reached university education. Faculty members expected practices and activities that attended to the whole child. Sometimes, those practices were different from what was best practice in the teacher candidate's culture. Innovative ideas should be viewed in context. Encouraging the teacher candidates to discuss the child's environment in the light of new cultural and technological developments, to suggest possibilities for better practices, and to try out those alternatives was very time consuming but worth the effort and should be embedded in the performance objectives in the university curriculum; otherwise, the teacher candidates would not be able to become agents of change.

This issue is less of a concern for the Lebanese TCs since they are used to voice their opinions from the early years of schooling.

Integrating former knowledge with DAP. It would be very simplistic to take a book and deliver it as is or to apply an educational activity without accommodation in global contexts. I once asked teacher candidates in UAE to come up with five action songs or activities on one theme to use on the playground. Without directions, most students would either use songs from the Internet that were not culturally relevant or use national folk songs that were not necessarily related to the theme. To

integrate the cultural heritage in a developmentally appropriate manner, they used national folk songs and changed the words to fit the theme. They did a good job. Some of the action songs were similar to English songs, such as, *A tisket, a tasket* or *Here we go looby loo, here we go looby light*. TCs captured the joy and the importance of activities and looked for additional resources without fear.

The Lebanese teacher candidates were familiar with at least a second language and already knew children's songs from other countries. Integrating songs or activities was less of an issue.

Evaluating internet resources. The use of the Internet as a resource was common among the teacher candidates. In fact, using the internet was not an issue but assessing the relevance of the findings was. In one project, I wanted the teacher candidates to look for activities related to one theme of their choice using the Internet and to assess the relevance of the activities in context. So, I asked them to translate one activity from English to Arabic, and adjust it to the context providing a justification. The justification for when and how to use the Internet should be continuously discussed with the teacher candidates in UAE and Lebanon, both for their own use and for the children's use in the classroom later on.

Context-Specific Issues

Teacher candidates need to be aware of issues in the early childhood settings that would hinder full implementation of ECE guidelines. Specifically, they need to be aware of the curriculum content and the everyday challenges of pre-primary teachers.

Nature of the KG Curriculum. In UAE, transitioning between behaviorist and cognitive methods of instruction was the main challenge; in Lebanon, achieving the balance among emotional, social, cognitive, and physical areas of development was more pressing.

KG teachers in UAE have used an academically-oriented model for years with emphasis on behaviorist methods. In the behaviorist model, teachers immediately see the benefits; they can write an objective and actually see it happen at the end of the session. For example, the child identifies numbers or names pictures, as requested. The teachers were hesitant to apply a play-based model based on cognitive theories. They were not comfortable experimenting with the child and waiting for long-term results.

How to break the cycle? One solution was to brainstorm with the KG teachers on the importance for the child to know the required piece of information. Reflective teaching would encourage teachers to try something less predictable but more joyful.

In Lebanon, the public schools have adopted a preschool program based on themes and activities for the three years of pre-primary education. The program proposed by the Center of Educational Research and Development in the mid 1990 was composed of 12 topics each year falling under two major clusters: People and communities, and natural environment. Children learn songs in the Arabic language and one foreign language, English or French. They also learn key words of the different topics in two languages. The program is currently under review. Objectives of the review are to expand the content to allow for more literacy activities and to embed an evaluation system in the curriculum (Center for Educational Research and Development, n.d.).

Private schools do not have to abide by the governments' curriculum. They teach the proposed topics and have ample time for additions.

Given the emphasis on academics and learning foreign languages in private schools, financially able parents enroll their children in private schools because learning a foreign language, French, English, or both, is considered an asset. Teachers distribute the time so that learning words and writing letters take a portion of the daily activities. That portion increases or diminishes depending on the school's program, teachers' knowledge of the foreign language, and children's achievement. In many private schools, children reach first grade fluent in the foreign language. Their counterparts in the public schools can identify key words and main sentences only. This difference leaves public school

children with a disadvantage in the acquisition of the foreign language right from the start of their academic lives.

It is important to discuss the difficulties in the implementation of the KG curriculum with the teachers and the TCs in a direct and planned manner. Teacher effectiveness needs to be evaluated based on the child's performance on the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains rather than on the child's memorization of numbers, words, or concepts.

Challenges of inservice KG teachers in UAE and Lebanon. Inservice teachers need to rectify the societal expectations of them, strengthen their assessment of children's behavior and special education needs, and engage in effective professional development. Each of the three challenges is addressed below:

1- Community and family expectations: In UAE, teachers pointed out to inconsistencies regarding their status in the community and expected roles. With respect to their status, the teachers felt that most members of the community viewed the KG school as a place where children were kept for few hours. The communication was not effective between the school and the parents. Most parents were not interested in discussing the child's performance with the teacher. Unless there was a major problem at the KG school, the mother, being the primary caregiver, rarely visited the school. As for their roles, the teachers reported being uncertain how they complemented the parents' roles at home.

Teachers were willing to work with the ambiguities regarding their status and roles because they loved children. Love for children was a reason mentioned by many teachers for choosing the profession. TCs need to be aware of those ambiguities and try to work out plans to highlight the role of ECE to parents.

In Lebanon, parents' involvement in their children's lives throughout preprimary education varies widely. However, they are keen on following up their child's progress in the second language.

2- Children's behavior and special education needs: A teacher who does not recognize or address a child's non-normative behavior might engage in developmentally inappropriate practices. However, the interviewed teachers in UAE did not view attending to children with special needs as part of their roles. They wanted help with diagnosis and they feared not doing a good job. The majority of the interviewees developed a preference for a class without children with special needs. The teachers' attitudes could negatively affect the child with special needs especially that the delay in setting special programs to the child would jeopardize her chances of successful inclusion.

In Lebanon, teachers were willing to attend to a child with special needs in their classes when coached to do so by a coordinator.

3- Status quo of professional development: Some teachers in UAE have difficulties keeping up with latest developments in the specialty and using technology. In general, teachers look for resources on their own or receive information from coordinators. However, there is a shortage of qualified coordinators trained to provide the needed resources but it is predictable that more qualified people would join the system in the future. A more global perspective is more aligned with Bennett's recommendation (2004) to start professional development step by step.

As for Lebanon, one main issue for Lebanon would remain the low number of trained teachers in the field, estimated to be around 10%.

The government given the unstable political situation in Lebanon is not able to adequately follow up on teachers both in public and private schools or to provide timely and adequate training.

Teachers in private schools are mainly recruited because they speak well a second language. Children receive a second language instruction but they do so sometimes at the expense of the social, emotional, and physical areas of development.

A review of the issues is available in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Individual and Context Specific Issues affecting UAE and Lebanese Teacher Candidates (TCs).

Issue	UAE TCs	Lebanese TCs
I- Individual-specific issues		
Voicing opinions	Need coaching to do so	Less of a concern
Integrating former knowledge with DAP	Need support	Need less support
Evaluating internet resources	Activities need to be assessed for their relevance. TCs should be trained to do so.	
II- Context-specific issues of inservice KG teachers		
Nature of the curriculum	New curricula are being developed. Transition from behaviorist to play-based methods.	New Curricula are being developed. 3Rs at the expense of other areas of development.
Community and family expectations	Inconsistencies regarding status and roles	Emphasis on child's academic achievement
Children's behavior and special education needs	Attendance to children with special needs should not be part of the role.	Attendance to children with special needs could be part of the role with help.
Professional development	Coordinators expected to deliver necessary material	Varies widely between none available to well- provided.

Recommendations

What challenges would new Emirati and Lebanese graduates in ECE face in meeting the ACEI and NAEYC guidelines? At the university level, the requirements for an accredited program are being implemented. TCs are aware of the ECE standards stipulated by specialized organizations and are prepared to implement them and to be resourceful.

However, at the applied level, a lot needs to be done. The management component, health and nutrition requirements, policies regarding inclusion, and community outreach, as specified by NAEYC, are not adequately developed. In addition, the management component should encompass public and private sectors.

TCs need to address the context-specific issues described above. They are not expected to do so alone. To succeed, they should be supported by policies that provide for children's needs.

Bilingualism is yet a debatable issue. In the emirates, policy makers at the public schools prefer the child to be competent in his/her native language (Arabic) before learning a second language (English). In Lebanon, immersing a child in a second language is part of the culture. Literacy needs should be embedded in harmony with other areas of development.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of conducting research into the lives of preschool teachers, coordinators, and administrators in order to plan for continuous professional education and to feed that information into the curriculum offered at the university level so future graduates would not have to face the same issues. This is increasingly important with the rapid changes taking place in the society. If conditions for structured research are not available, then informal inquiry should be initiated.

Implications for International Contexts

How to provide a successful university program based on a sound theory and geared towards a rewarding practice in Early Childhood Education? Throughout this paper, I examined two cases but the steps could be applied to other countries as well. Educators could provide for a successful ECE by, firstly, assessing the gap between theory and current practices on the ground; secondly, empowering inservice and preservice teachers with reflective skills so they are able to assess situations themselves; thirdly, planning with teacher candidates to address challenges on the ground by starting step by step; fourthly, getting involved in inservice training to narrow the knowledge gap between novice and existing teachers, and finally, conducting research and feeding results into workshops in the preschools and in the university curriculum for new graduates.

In conclusion, university preparation imparts the process of quality education. Better yet, the teacher who has memories of creative activities in her childhood would want other children to have a similar experience. So, the earlier quality education is started, the better.

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About the Author

Majida Mehana received her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from The Pennsylvania State University with a major in Early Childhood Education and minors in Statistics and in Human Development and Family Studies. She was engaged in teaching assignments at the Lebanese University, United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), and Arab Open University-Lebanon where she taught early childhood education, curriculum and instruction, children's literature, and statistics courses to students of diverse backgrounds. She developed the Early Childhood Education program at UAEU according to NCATE standards. She is currently an educational consultant providing training on teacher education and development.