

How do we acknowledge and promote the lived realities in varied contexts across the Asia Pacific Region?

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Summary

Early Childhood Development (ECD) encompasses physical, socio emotional, cognitive and motor development between 0-8 years of age (World Health Organization, 2020). It also describes the sector which relates to Early Childhood Care and Education. In recent years it has seen an increase in the priority, with many governments in the Asia Pacific region making a commitment to investing in and improving the provision for their young children. With the continuation of globalisation, new marginalised groups are coming to the fore in the discussion on ECD and initiatives are starting to be produced in order to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable groups in the region. With the commitment to international goals such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), comes standardised measures and expectations which can be problematic for these contexts. This brief will explore why this is so and make some recommendations for how to navigate the development in this sector. This brief will draw on information shared at the 9th Asia-Pacific Regional Network Conference on Early Childhood Development held in Ha Noi, Viet Nam in December 2019 as well as drawing on existing literature exploring the issue of a need for research which is conducted in the countries and communities to which the policies will be applied.

Background context

Early Childhood has been defined as being from birth to 8 years (World Health Organization, 2020). Early Childhood Development (ECD) has been an increasing area of debate and consideration in recent decades with the importance of the period being recognised. The influence of experience in the early years on development, both in childhood and later in life, is significant and has therefore prompted much support for the increased investment in ECD (Nilsen, 2017). The arguments for this include, the economic benefits of investing in young children

for the economic competitiveness of the country in the future, the criticality of the period for children fulfilling their potential and the fact that early childhood is an important element of the human rights of all (Nilsen, 2017). There has been an acknowledgement of the need to promote early development in the Asia Pacific region, with countries having ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and introducing policies for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), both of which include commitment made to ensuring the rights and wellbeing of all children. However, there are still issues around implementation of the policies and the applicability of associated standards to different contexts. Although some articles from these documents are statutory, international policies have also played a part in informing other non-statutory national policy in each country. The principles of these policies aim to support all children to reach their developmental potential. There is an increasing body of literature highlighting the potential problems with implementing these policies in the region and calling for action, as will be covered in this brief.

Why is this important? And why now?

It is important to explore the enactment of policy developed from the international documents as there is an increasing awareness that not all childhoods, and not all conceptions of what constitutes healthy childhood and development are the same (Burman, 2017). In fact, in each country, region and community there will be a different idea about what children ought to be provided with in order to achieve their potential. These varied values and the accompanying lived experiences and expertise are a source of knowledge that can potentially be left unused, or even overtaken by the principles promoted within the international policy. This can relate to measurement of the effectiveness of programmes or provision in which standards are decided remotely, usually based on research conducted in European-American contexts which are inherently informed by European-American values (Pearson, 2011). Along with this, can come an assumed universality of the values and standards which are promoted within the policy (Nilsen, 2017). In practice, this is not the case and each context has different values and different ways of implementing global development initiatives or goals,

which are not always recognised. However, academics and practitioners within the sector are now saying that “such variations should be construed as enhancing, not compromising, delivery of quality programmes across diverse contexts” (Pearson, 2011, p. 219). The rising awareness of these issues and the fact that many governments across the region are making ECD a priority makes this an ideal time to address the issues and improve provision to support all children, from all groups to achieve their developmental potential. There are some examples of this being enacted which will now be discussed.

Examples

OneSky for All Children is a charity which provides training for care providers working in home-based care centres, which are informal nurseries, often providing care for the children of migrant workers, an emerging marginalised group who are considered at risk of poor outcomes. Rao, et al. (2012) identify that some settings within the region are “resource-constrained” (p. 865) by Western standards. OneSky offers an example of adaptation to the environment by using low or no-cost materials in order to make toys, learning materials and displays. They also take a strengths-based approach which focuses on the capabilities of their trainees and coaches them to improve their provision to the children of a marginalised group in Vietnam. Although the charity OneSky has historically worked in China, and their expertise were therefore based within that context, when they began projects in Vietnam, they embedded local values and knowledge into the training programme by employing local professionals to design the content as they knew the needs, strengths and life experiences of their target group. In this way, they provided efficient and relevant training and also continue to show an understanding of the reality of their trainees and the children they care for.

The Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) held a conference where 600 participants from countries within the region took part in three days of presentations, collaboration and debate on issues in their contexts. Sharing knowledge and experiences with each other was valuable in understanding their own unique contexts and also enabled problem-solving through group work. Research conducted in the countries, by representatives from those countries was presented, and highlighted the importance of this work to explore the situation in

the region. Emerging themes from this research included the impact Global Warming is having on the region and marginalised groups in some countries, including migrant workers as mentioned above and those living in rural communities, where access to quality early childhood care and education is often limited. The conference is an example of the value in practitioners actively addressing the issues they face and adapting the principles of the international policy to allow for the cultural, social and individual needs of the children, families and communities whom they serve.

Policy recommendations

- Research should be funded to explore the specific contexts within each country, with a focus on learning about the lived reality of those within that community and identifying settings which are examples of practitioners adapting international policy and guidelines to best meet the needs of their children.
- International and National policy should have an element of flexibility embedded within the guidelines to allow practitioners agency. Associated standards should be sensitive to the context.
- The variance of experiences, needs and strengths of each community should be promoted as a positive.

Conclusion

Commitment made to international policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) are considered a positive move within the Asia-Pacific region. With the continuation of globalisation and standardisation within the sector of Early Childhood Development, the issue of applicability of the principles of such documents and sensitivity to the lived experiences of each community is an issue which is gaining recognition with the field of research, however more research is needed to explore the individual contexts. Contextual research would provide a rich source of knowledge on this issue and could inform policy in order to allow for specifics of

each community and context. There is also the recommendation that international policy should allow a level of flexibility to allow practitioners to be informed by the contextual research and their own expertise in order to develop their best practice, based on the strengths of their community. In this way, professionals will be able to best support all children to achieve their developmental potential.

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