

PUBLISHING

CONFLUENT SPHERES: REFLECTIVE CONSIDERATIONS ON SOCIAL PEDAGOGY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Social Pedagogy and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) are fields that, even when they are not totally independent, display a significant distance between them. However, the gap is apparent: they both have much in common, and the latter cannot be entirely performed if the defining principles of the former are not fulfilled. According to Úcar and Bertran (2007) Social Pedagogy and ECCE converge in the interest in vulnerable populations. In this sense, they assume participatory democracy and social justice as preeminent values. Moreover, both are willing to manage concrete actions in the pursuit of the comprehensive resolution of the problems affecting daily life of communities. Therefore, Social Pedagogy and ECCE coincide in that, in order to build a fair, democratic and participative society, everyone should be considered, and not when the law officially allows it, but since the moment we are born. As a matter of fact, learning gets outstandingly active when we are born. And I say outstandingly because many studies suggest that learning begins before we are born, as Murphy Paul (2011) fully documented. Therefore, we require care and education since birth. To that end, it is essential for families, communities and institutions to jointly promote and implement both processes, as social equity might require.

Global organizations of worldwide renown such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UN, OEI, OECD and WB, have been key to disseminate and promote ECCE, by means of summits and international arrangements regarding the decision making

process. This can be quickly said, but required efforts made over the years and the overcoming of socio-historical constructions produced by different societies. In fact, childhood has not always been considered as today. Adults and their institutions have established and normalized the types of relations with kids, and these relational types have likewise been leading the definition of public policies and the design and implementation of programs targeting early childhood. There was a time when kids and the way that they were treated, belonged to the private sphere, managed by every family, if any. We could even say that parents treated children as properties, as defenseless and dependent beings. This conception has substantially changed. Family is nowadays a social institution of public interest, and it is not considered as a mere subsidiary factor, but as a complex, diverse and changeable entity that must strengthen the full development of kids, creating the ideal conditions for this to happen. According to Losada, De Angulo and Palmer (2013), the brain growth of children is favorably adjusted when it is developed in a context of sensitive company, where close adults care for them and do their best to teach them that respecting human rights is not a distant, odd and agonizing matter, but a concrete, daily and familiar reality involving everyone. Children nurtured in an environment of respect, mutual support, dialogic negotiation and unconditional love will have a strengthened central nervous system and will always prefer equally respectful and empathic areas of coexistence; if

they cannot find them, they will do their utmost to build them.

It is not possible to build a proper environment for the full development of children if we do not assume the role that parents and caregivers must perform. According to Orte Socias, Ballester Brage and March Cerdà (2013), it is essential that these agents develop and consolidate caring parenting practices that can deal with the needs of their kids. Parents and caregivers should facilitate and promote the participation of children in the definition of family rules. Besides, when setting regulatory limits, they must do it in positive terms. The children that grow up interacting with parents and caregivers with this profile will get significant peak levels of autonomy, sociability, sense of collaboration and self-reliance. In this sense, the work of social educators with families is a plausible and advisable alternative. From the perspective of Kumpfer and Alvarado (2003), socioeducational work supports the update of the importance of family roles in the full development of children that, as a consequence, achieve the identification of their strengths and opportunity areas regarding childcare, even in adversity.

It is thus a question of complex requirements that encourage and guide sociopedagogical work of ECCE, which consists in short in:

- 1) Promoting health enhancing physical and psychological conditions were children develop.
- 2) Stimulating cognitive and linguistic development bettering intellectual conditions of children, family and community.
- 3) Fostering integration between family and community improving the educational styles of parents and caregivers, as well as their socialization practices.
- 4) Where possible, favoring bilingualism as an inclusive tool of minorities and language proficiency with a view to schooling.
- 5) Courageously collaborating in the pursuit of equity in the access to education.
- 6) Boosting and ensuring gender equity.
- 7) Promoting human development.
- 8) Contributing to the achievement of the objectives of development programs as 2030 Agenda.

All of this can be performed through parenting practices. As I mentioned in other article (Villaseñor, 2012), “socioeducational programs promoting the enhancement of parenting practices targeting the early childhood can compensate for the effects produced in contexts presenting inequalities in demographic, economic and socio-cultural fields”. In fact, according to UNDP (2010),

poverty is characterized by an intergenerational transfer. To overcome it, we must confront, from these practices and from the community, ultimate problems such as inequalities in the income distribution, as well as achieve objectives like the sustained increase of the levels of social inclusion. In this case, Social Pedagogy and ECCE are essential, because it is unquestionable that education is the most powerful tool to fight against poverty and promote equitable development. This is neither a desideratum nor a utopian declaration. The viability of the antithetical relation of education vs. poverty is universal, and this could hardly be denied. On the contrary, considering education as the perfect antidote against the poison of poverty is a prime political objective in order to achieve development and a sustainable future. In fact, more than five decades ago the project entitled *Head Start*, which participated in the so-called “War against poverty” in USA, asserted something that nowadays might seem obvious: social class and race are not inherited conditions. Instead, they are based on a constellation of individual and social prejudices. In this sense, the project considered that the intervention strategies should focus on specific beneficiaries, which could “compensate for the belonging to an unfavorable family or community” (UNESCO, 2007, p.124). Over time, this assumption was verified and imposed as an unavoidable principle. Today, the outcomes of that project serve as a base to the studies and programs prompting investment in the early childhood as a strategy to combat social exclusion. In the case of ECCE, its impact on children and children living in unfavorable contexts is evident. Hence, some countries with limited resources decide to design public policies and social programs to assist early childhood. A concrete example of this trend is the compensatory programs that, even when they have powerful detractors, are a legitimate resource in societies where social disparities are at the very heart of the system.

More specifically, I can cite some examples of good practices that proved the efficiency and impact of ECCE in context of social inequality. Among these programs we can find: strategies to strengthen the capacity of families (Brazil); community-based test centers of full development of early childhood (Burkina Faso); the pilot project Care and Full Development for Tanjungsari Women and Children (Indonesia); day nurseries Makhalla (Uzbekistan); the program “Initial education” by the Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo (Mexico), etc. Promoting a full development for early childhood is the main duty that we should address to ensure that human rights are respected and, first and foremost, implemented.

In countries where extreme poverty is a structural problem, ECCE programs, especially the non-formal education modality, have become an optimum strategy to reach children that live in those contexts. In some cases, this modality has gone from being a pedagogical work to become a strategy for social development. In this regard, Fujimoto (2009) identified some indicators of quality of education for the out-of-school early childhood, to name but a few: 1) parents and community participate in the decision making regarding pedagogical, organizational, management, operation and coordination aspects with other community and sector programs and 2) educational agents assume a clear prominence as social agents, respecting cultural values of communities. In other words, these are contextualized and participative socioeducational interventions.

In any case, and in conclusion, Social Pedagogy and ECCE are confluent spheres which recognize the rights, needs and potential of children, have a firm political will, jointly make responsible decisions and assume as inalienable principle the participation of civil society and the engagement of families and communities.

The characteristics I have presented summarize some of the qualities and actions of the programs of ECCE; some present a theoretical nature and others a methodological nature, but both concern to contextual aspects (e.g., policies) helping to ensure the efficiency of the programs. Beyond that, ECCE and its referential framework, in other words, Social Pedagogy, enable the definition of some concrete actions considered as good practices in those contexts that somehow put full development of people at risk.

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Karla Monserrat Villaseñor Palma

Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla
karla.villasenor@correo.buap.mx
Editora Asociada de PSRI

