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Early Childhood Education in Iran: Progress and Emerging Challenges

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Abstract

Frequently, our world seems filled with nations in conflict. The ultimate legacy of nations' inability to cooperate will be inherited by the world's children. Perhaps the most effective solution to creating a more peaceful world in the years to come is to provide high quality education for all children. Such education, however, is more likely to result if teachers of the world become willing to share their success stories and examples of supportive resources. Admittedly, professional collaborations between teachers in the Islamic Republic of Iran and those of the West are rare, at best. Despite political challenges, it is time to find ways to share. A place to begin is to provide teachers with background information regarding the current status of early childhood education (ECE) in Iran. This paper is also a call for a global teacher-response to initiate greater dialogue in support of all of our children.

Keywords: Iran, Education, Early Childhood

Early Childhood Education in Iran

In 1924, Jabbar Baghcheban, "a pioneer of early childhood education in Iran," established the first kindergarten in Tabriz called "Children's Garden." Most children of wealthy families were attending these centers. The first government-supported kindergarten program for children, ages three-to-six years old, was established in 1931 when the Supreme Council for Culture adopted the first law supporting kindergarten. Three decades later, independent kindergarten programs were authorized by the Ministry of Culture (Research and Educational Planning Organization, 2016). Initially, these newer programs were specifically designed to provide early education opportunities for children who spoke languages other than Farsi, the national language of Iran, and as well provide improved support for working mothers (Talebzadeh Nobarian, 2006). These initial programs were later expanded to advance early education for all Iranian children. Today, there are approximately 17,800 kindergartens in Iran (Jahanpanah, 2014).

Current pre-primary school in Bojnord (city in North East of Iran)

Current kindergarten in Tehran (Capital city of Iran)

Supervision of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Programs in Iran

Prior to the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian Women's Organization was charged with the supervision of these centers (UNESCO International Bureau of Education [IBE], 2006). After the 1979 revolution, however, the Iranian Women's Organization was dissolved and kindergartens and the monitoring and licensing of all public and private kindergartens and day care centers became the responsibility of the State Welfare Organization of Iran and the Islamic Council (Research and Educational Planning Organization, 2016). Currently, responsibilities for licensing, evaluating of pre-primary schools, editing book content, and monitoring qualifications of pre-primary schoolteachers reside within the Ministry of Education (Zaare & Ghoshuni, 2008).

In Iran, the terms "*kindergarten*" and "*pre-primary school*" convey different meanings than typically acknowledged by Western countries. Kindergartens in Iran are formal educational programs for children three months to four-years old. Programs for children four-to-six years old are considered pre-primary school education. This means, the kindergartens are under the supervision of the State Welfare Organization; pre-primary school education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

The age of entry to pre-primary school has been the subject of disputes between the Ministry of Education and the State Welfare Organization. While the State Welfare Organization considers four-year-old children of kindergarten age, the Ministry of Education refers to them as pre-primary schoolers. In 2010, two organizations signed an agreement to resolve this agency controversy (Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2014). However, controversy continues because the State Welfare Organization refuses to implement this agreement. Additionally, creation of dual authority for licensing, supervising, and determining of educational content has become quite problematic for programs in the private sector for those attempting to meet licensure requirements. Since pre-primary education is considered "official but not compulsory," it has become exclusively privatized. The primary reason for this privatization is financial. Since the education system is free in Iran, the government refuses to include pre-primary education as part of its compulsory education system. This lack of government support for pre-primary school programs has had an impact on most lower and middle-income families since they are frequently unable to afford private tuition. The magnitude of this lack of government sponsorship of pre-primary school programs is clearly seen in the enrollment in public first grade since a pre-primary school completion certificate is required. Struggles of lower-income parents attempting to enroll their children into first grade are becoming increasingly common in the news media (Iranian Students News Agency, 2015).

Types of ECE Programs in Iran

While government programs do exist for children prior to primary school, the majority of both kindergarten and pre-primary school programs in Iran are private businesses. Common program types are as follow.

Pre-primary school education

The Ministry of Education is the only licensing authority to establish pre-primary school program centers. All pre-primary school centers, including private centers and other governmental and non-governmental organizations, are required to implement their plans in concert with this license. Pre-primary school centers must include a maximum of five days a week with about 3.5 hours of daily activity. The principles and framework of the curriculum and educational activities of pre-primary school programs were approved at the 77th session of the Supreme Council on Education (Sheraki Ardakani, Riahi Nejad, & Razaghi, 2013).

Some pre-primary school programs are located in public elementary schools. Children must be five years of age to be eligible for enrollment. These programs are operated by the Ministry of Education and tuition is generally lower than that of the private sector programs.

Many pre-primary school programs are also located in private ECE centers. Directors in these centers must apply for licensure through the Ministry of Education and allocate some of their classrooms to pre-primary school programs. However, these centers are faced with many additional challenges to meet the requirements of licensure for kindergarten and pre-primary school programs. Such confusion is primarily explained by the dual governmental oversight framework. Private programs must follow standards of the State Welfare Organization for kindergarten level while at the pre-primary school level they must meet the Ministry of Education standards.

Private sector kindergartens

Goals for private sector programs include developing cognitive, social, religious, spiritual, physical and mental health of children from birth through pre-primary school. While government kindergarten programs do exist, the majority of kindergarten programs are private. These programs are funded solely by tuition paid by parents. These programs are strongly influenced by location. Facilities located in affluent areas typically contain better educated teachers and greater access to advanced techniques and technologies.

Rural kindergartens

Kindergartens in rural areas, which comprise about half of all centers, are generally established by the semi-private sector and are responsible for the development and education of rural children. While not as costly as private kindergartens, a vexing challenge of these programs is finding teachers with adequate academic credentials. As in many developing nations, this problem is affected by younger teachers who tend to prefer employment in larger cities.

Workplace kindergartens

Child care for children of employees of companies and factories is provided under Article 78 of the National Labour Law. Developed with the collaboration of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, these programs allow parents to have their children cared for near their worksite. This allows parents to visit and breastfeed their children during break times as well as be able to see that their children are in good care. The cost for these programs is subsidized by industry so tuition is generally less than private kindergartens. Admittedly, there are few of these kindergartens in the country.

Public sector kindergartens

These programs are established by ministries, organizations, institutions, and other governmental agencies. Where they do exist, they are free for female employees and offered at cost to the general public. However, as with Workplace Kindergartens, such programs are rare.

Kindergarten for the indigent

Public childcare is established by the State Welfare Organization to provide services to children of poor and vulnerable parents. These programs are sparse in number and generally located in high poverty areas. Indigent programs receive little funding and very few resources. The quality of instruction and services of these programs are not comparable with kindergartens found in the private sector (Zaare & Ghoshuni, 2008).

Quran kindergartens

In addition to providing an educational program similar to those in the above programs, Quran kindergartens are established for teaching of the Quran and Islamic religious concepts. In these programs, children sing both religious and secular songs and use play to learn social and religious skills. Teachers are trained in both spiritual doctrine and basic pre-primary school education (Research and Educational Planning Organization, 2016).

Friday prayer day care

These facilities provide childcare on Fridays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. to enable parents to participate in Friday prayers. This is a free program funded by the government (The State Welfare Organization, 2009).

ECE Staffing in Iran

The quality of staff of any organization is critical to the success of that venture. ECE staff in Iran generally include directors, teachers, and assistants.

Pre-primary school staff in ECE Center in Tehran

Directors of ECE centers

In general, directors of ECE centers are female, Muslim, and at least 25 years of age with a bachelor or higher degree in early childhood education or related fields. If the director is not Muslim, she must be of one of the official religions sanctioned by the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (i.e., Zoroaster, Jewish, or Christian) and meet the same academic requirements (The State Welfare Organization, 2009).

Kindergarten and pre-primary school center director

Teachers of ECE centers

ECE teachers must have a minimum of a high school diploma. In addition, these teachers must complete training prior to starting the job and receive a certification from either Jahad Daneshgahi Organization (Iran's official training organization) or the State Welfare Organization. Teachers must pass the courses such as first aid skills, play and movement, psychology and child development, education of religious and social concepts, common diseases in children, storytelling techniques for children, and children's emotional and behavioral disorders. The length of the training periods for those with only high school diplomas is six months to a year (Hoot et al, 2015).

Pre-primary school teachers receive the lowest salary in the educational system of this country. Since they work minimum weekly hours, their employers are not required to follow Department of Labor regulations such as provision of insurance or minimum wage. Qualifications for teachers in these programs include the ability to communicate with children under age six years, the capacity to provide appropriate Quranic instruction, the interest in teaching Quran to pre-primary school ages (teachers of religious minorities pre-primary school are exempt from this requirement). Additionally, teachers must achieve an associate degree in a related field and evidence clearance from the Department of Labor (Talebzadeh Nobarian, 2006; Sheraki Ardakani, Riahi Nejad, & Razaghi, 2013).

Teaching assistants

Assistants generally have minimal formal education and seldom have professional ECE backgrounds. In addition to supporting the teacher, assistants participate in janitorial tasks such as washing and cleaning the classroom. Toileting and bathing young children is exclusively reserved for teaching assistants. It is rare, in Iran, a teacher would assist with this task (The State Welfare Organization, 2009).

Recent Progress and Challenges in ECE in Iran

Research is clear that quality early childhood education is the key to optimal development of future citizens as well as our best hope for future economic progress of nations (Blakemore & Frith, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sylva & Pugh, 2005). For example, studies suggest that children who have experienced high quality early education are more successful in terms of both social and educational development during their higher education (Barnet, 2008). Research studies further indicate that early education has a more powerful effect on pre-primary school children from lower income environments than on their wealthier counterparts (Lamb 1998; Myers 1995, 2004).

In addition to rapidly emerging research, a number of recent societal aspects also contributed to Iran's rapid development of early childhood education programs including the increased numbers of working parents, the more educated parent population who understands the importance of high quality early education as well as the increased awareness of addressing issues relating to second language and special needs learners. While progress has certainly been made in recent years, access to pre-primary school programs is still not universal. In Iran, of the 7 million pre-primary school children, four-to-seven years old, 5 million children from primarily poor and rural households still do not have access to pre-primary school education (UNICEF, 2012-2016). Additional challenges include rules and regulations for child care centers, ECE teacher preparation programs, lack of incentives to become a pre-primary school teacher, and issues related to language.

Rules and regulations for child care centers

According to the law, each day care cannot accept more than 100 children and only women are granted permission to open centers. Further, both the proprietor and director of a day care center must generally be both Muslim and of Iranian descent. Non-Muslims whose religions are accepted by the Iranian Constitution (i.e., Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians) can request permission to open day care centers if those centers are designed to serve only the children of the same religious community and the centers are located near those children's homes. In addition, prospective day care operators must swear allegiance to the Islamic Republic and its principles and may not belong to illegal parties or groups. They must also be at least 25 years of age and in stable mental and physical health condition as determined by The State Welfare Organization. Physically handicapped women, whose condition would not interfere with the administration of the centers, are allowed to apply to operate a day care center. Applicants must possess a bachelor or higher education degree in ECE, educational science, psychology, or sociology, and have, at least, one year of practical experience in working with young children (Talebzadeh Nobarian, 2006).

ECE teacher preparation

The professional preparation of ECE teachers in Iran comes in two forms—preservice and in-service education **(**Hoot et al., 2015). At the preservice level, degree programs at the associate through master's level are provided by universities. At the in-service level, short-term courses are provided for those currently teaching who have only high school diplomas in order to update these teachers with emerging knowledge in the field. In this dual system, only those with formal preservice education/degrees may become directors and, thereby, receive much higher salaries.

Preparing pre-primary school teachers in Bojnord (city in North East of Iran)

Lack of incentives to become a pre-primary school teacher

ECE teachers rarely hold graduate degrees in pre-primary school education from teacher education institutes or universities. Since pre-primary school is not part of Iran's compulsory education system, those who hold graduate degrees in ECE generally work as managers or directors of centers. Further, pre-primary school teachers have little incentive to continue formal education since pre-primary school centers are generally non-profit schools. As such, the Ministry of Education is not responsible for benefits such as job security or insurance. In addition, the potential for obtaining a salary commensurate with teachers in the public education sector is low. Teachers usually are not able to independently live on a single teaching job salary and have second or even third jobs to satisfy their living expenses **(**Hoot et al., 2015).

Language issues

While Farsi (Persian) is the national language of Iran, many languages are spoken (e.g. Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish, and Lori). Children from different geographic regions of Iran, such as west and south, may not speak Farsi. The language barrier is a major challenge for these children. In response to this challenge, in 1989 the Ministry of Education proposed to start a formal first day of school and pre-primary bilingual school classes one year earlier. While many question the impact of such a short time for learning a second language, it is reasoned that this opportunity would provide a bit more time for children to learn Farsi and adjust to a new environment (Mofidi, 2008). Moreover, some native Farsi speaker teachers suffer from similar language challenges in their teaching as well as in communicating with parents. The lack of language skills and cultural background clearly causes a lack of trained teachers in these areas. In order to attract more teachers to these areas, the government has recently increased stipends for rural teachers. However, even this increased benefit does not appear to be changing this trend.

Conclusion

Children deserve the best that the world has to offer. However, political systems and responses to these systems often keep nations from sharing their successes and challenges with others who might support them. The current article details Iranian progress from opening the first public supported kindergarten in 1924 to today. Accompanying growth is a challenge in the area of preparing teachers for diversity, working with second language children and parents, and providing financial benefits that will attract and retain the brightest and best professionals. Such challenges are not dissimilar to ECE teachers throughout the world. Perhaps if specific strategies were developed for sharing ECE progress and failures internationally, teachers of the world could begin to better prepare children, resulting in a better future for all. It is our hope that professional ECE organizations such as Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP), and Comparative International Education Society (CIES) might begin to address this challenge in the near future.

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