Developing a Responsive Curriculum in Albanian Daycares

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Abstract

This paper puts emphasis on the importance of creating a responsive curriculum for infants and toddlers in daycares. Responsive curriculum is defined as creating a program which includes an appropriate everyday practice with infants and toddlers by respecting their developmental needs. In this study there have been taken 26 semi-structured interviews with caregivers in five Albanian daycares. The interviews' questions were mostly based on work conditions of caregivers and curricular issues. Some findings revealed that caregivers in Albanian daycares are faced with challenging work conditions such as low salaries and the increasing number of children in daycares. Therefore, caregivers' most difficult challenge is to give the necessary attention to every child's need. On the other hand, the daycares' curriculum is mostly based on play activities. Specifically, children and caregivers carry out some age-appropriate play activities during the day. Even though, the curricular play activities often encourage children's interaction with caregivers and other children, sometimes these play activities are not successful. According to caregivers, some of the reasons that children do not get involved in the play activities are the children's temperament and the large number of children in the groups. In conclusion, there is a need to improve the working conditions of caregivers and to transform the daycares' curriculum so as to be developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers by expanding the concept of curriculum not only as play activities but as a structure which guides educators on how to do the everyday activities with children in a way that promotes emotional, social, cognitive and physical development.

Keywords: Responsive curriculum, Infant/toddler development, Working conditions, Albanian caregiver's status, Early childhood policy

1. Introduction

We now know that from the moment of birth, infants are ready to learn and are able to absorb information rapidly to understand the world around them (California Department of Education/Child Development Division, 2012). Also, during the earliest years of life children grow rapidly in all of the domains of development and adults play a crucial role in providing security, opportunities to explore the environment and appropriate challenges to achieve milestones. Furthermore, infants have no effective skills for coping with discomfort and stress, so they are open to harm (Morrison, 1996). This time is a foundation for later development and learning (Shore, 1997). Thus creating a responsive environment for infants and toddlers not only at home, but even in the daycares is a booster to support early learning and development. The Early Head Start projects reflect the positive results that come from providing high-quality care to low-income families with children under age 3 and by encouraging parenting skills in these families. Children who attended the program were assessed on their developmental skills and performed much better than those who did not participated in the program (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). However creating responsive environment for infants and toddlers in center-based, daycares and family child cares is challenging. It needs to take in consideration several significant variables so as to implement a responsive curriculum. First of all, responsive infant/toddler curriculum is a framework that reflects the typical features of infant and toddler development and the unique characteristics of the child (Swim, 2007). Also infant/toddler caregivers are involved in an ongoing process of observing, documenting, reflecting, planning and
implementing developmentally appropriate activities for the child (California Department of Education/Child Development Division, 2012).

One of the critical variables which can interfere with the implementation of responsive curriculum is the adult-to-child ratio. The majority of the states in America regulate the adult-to-child ratio 4:1 ratio for infants and 10:1 ratio for 4-year-olds (National Child Care Information Center, 2005). Maintaining an adequate adult-to-child ratio allows adults to observe more carefully, to talk, to hold and to comfort babies more often (Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997).

Another important variable is group size which is limited to eight for infants, twelve for 2-year-olds until 3-year-olds and eighteen for 3-year-olds in most of the states in America (NICHD, 1996). Large group can affect the quality of the relationship with the caregivers by responding less to children and by being more restrictive (Vandell, & Wolfe, 2000), but also for caregivers it becomes very hard to observe, document, reflect, assess, plan and implement the curricular activities.

In Albanian daycares there has been some progress in creating responsive environments for infant and toddlers. Psychologists have been training infant and toddler caregivers so as to be more responsive to the children’s developmental needs. As well, in Tirana daycares there has been implemented the infant and toddler curriculum. This curriculum is based on play activities that are held with the children before the lunch hour. However, not all children are interested in these play activities and they are left to do other play activities without observing them, documenting their activities, reflecting on the activities and planning other curricular activities for these children so as to provide age-appropriate experiences that fulfill their developmental needs. In addition, learning occurs at any moment, even during the daily routines and the caregiver’s or the infant/toddler teacher’s responsibility is to observe, document, reflect, plan and implement activities and vice versa. Also the infant/toddler teacher’s responsibility is to be responsive to children’s behaviors, reactions, questions. Creating a responsive curriculum is a necessity for any infant and toddler in daycares. Thus there is an urge to foster early childhood policy systems which develop financial and regulatory structures for responsive curriculum in Albanian daycares.

2. Aim

The aim of this empirical research paper has been to take qualitative data from semi structured interviews with infant/toddler caregivers related to the working conditions, the structure and implementation of curriculum in the daycares. This qualitative data will be used to make a comparison between the actual Albanian daycares contexts and the standards of high-quality daycares so as to progress in the direction of these standards.

3. Method

3.1 Study Design and Participants

A total of 26 infant/toddler female caregivers participated in the study from five daycares situated in Tirana. There have been used semi structured interviews to collect data. The youngest of the caregivers was 26-years-old and the oldest 58-years-old. The mean age of the sample was 42.6 years. From 26 caregivers, 11% had a higher degree in teaching, 11% were continuing their studies in teaching, 30% had a nursing degree, 7% had a professional high school diploma (as a doctor assistance), 11% had a specialization in social animation and 30% had a high-school education level.

3.2 Procedure

Consent form was taken from the main directory of Tirana daycares. From 29 daycares, 5 daycares were selected to take the semi structured interviews with caregivers. The selected daycares were diverse and represented in general the Tirana daycares. One of the daycares was not reconstructed and did not have outside environments for infants and toddlers, two others were partially reconstructed.
and did have outdoor environments while the last two daycares were fully reconstructed and had large outdoor and indoor environments for children. The caregivers were asked for permission to take the semi-structured interviews and almost all of them accepted. The interviews were held in the psychologist’s room and were registered. The interviews lasted from 15 minutes to 30 minutes. The scope of caregivers’ interviews was to get information about their working conditions. Also the scope of the interviews was to get information about the curriculum implementation in daycares and their attitudes toward the infant/toddler curriculum. The interviews were transcribed.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on content analysis of the recorded semi-structured interviews the results have been organized in two groups: a) working conditions of caregivers; b) infant/toddler curriculum structure and implementation.

4.1 Working conditions of caregivers

The results taken from the semi-structured interviews regarding the working conditions of caregivers give insight on the adult-to-child ratio, group sizes, working hours, education level, salary and the caregiver status.

In daycares, groups of infants and toddlers were divided in three or four depending on the number of children and the building indoor space. The youngest groups included infants from 6-month-olds to 12-month-olds. In Albanian daycares it is not allowed to register infants younger than 6-month-olds. Other groups were called the mix group because there were included children from 12-month-old to 36-month-old. The oldest groups were made of children from 24 month-olds to 36 month-olds. The adult-to-child ratio in the youngest groups usually was 1:6, 1:7, but there were even rare cases of the adult-to-child ratio 1:8. The adult-to-child ratio of the mix groups usually was 1:10 when there were two caregivers working together. There were even cases that three to four caregivers worked in the same group and the group size reached 20 infants in the youngest groups and 25-30 in the mix group. The adult-to-child ratio of the oldest group usually was 1:10, however when more than two caregivers were in the same group the group size reached nearly 27-30 children. There was even a group of children 12-month-old to 24-month-old that had an adult-to-child ratio 1:8. The working days were 5 and the working hours of the staff were 8.

Nearly 30% of caregivers’ interviewed had only high school education level. The rest of caregivers had a more professional level of education (see participant section). However the salary is in its minimum level. During the interviews, caregivers many times pronounced that their status was different from kindergarten educators or teachers and this is reflected even in the salary level. One caregiver explains “In fact, my job is to take care of children not to teach children as kindergarten’s educators do. That is the reason I am called a caregiver. I am paid to care for children...”

Despite these working conditions, there is no evidence of staff turnover like in other countries where staff turnover creates problems with the quality of care (Whitebook & Sakai, 2000). Still, the difficult working conditions slow down the development of responsive curriculum. From the results it is clear that working conditions and the lower status of the caregiver create a barrier for professional development. Actually, the responsibilities of infant/toddler caregivers are not only to care for children but even to respect their desire to explore and learn in the daycares’ environments by being supported in any developmental domain. The word teacher is always intended to refer to any adult responsible for the direct care and education of a group of children in any early childhood setting. Included are not only classroom teachers but also infant/toddler caregivers, family child care providers, and specialists in other disciplines who fulfill the role of teacher (Copple, C & Bredekamp, S, 2009).

4.2 Infant/toddler curriculum structure and implementation

The results taken from the semi-structured interviews regarding the infant/toddler curriculum
structure and implementation give insight on the program model and how it is implemented in the Albanian daycares’ context.

The infant/toddler curriculum in Albania daycares is based most on play activities that caregivers organize with children. One caregiver stated: "We play to learn and we learn to play..." There are different kinds of play and topics which are carried out by caregivers during each day. However, caregivers have a specific time during the day in which they spend 15 to 20 minutes with children doing these play activities. Another caregiver stated: “During the morning hours we find the time to follow the objectives of the program, usually after the diapering of children...” Most of the caregivers declared that there are even children in the group who did not show interest in the curricular play activities. One of the caregivers confirmed: “Not all children have their attention during the activities of the program; it depends on the temperament of the children. Some of them are very careful listening to you; they look in your eyes when you sing while others want to play with their toys. Usually the youngest children are not careful and you don’t expect them to listen or carry out the play activities.” Another caregiver acknowledged that there is a big challenge with children that are distracted because they need to work harder in order to achieve the objectives of the curriculum. So during the curriculum implementation, there are children which are not involved but are engaged in their own play activities.

While another caregiver declared: "We teach children the way they should play the game or in other cases we teach them the colors, the seasons of the year by demonstrating pictures to them.” The way caregivers achieve the objectives of the infant/toddler curriculum is by having structure interaction during the play activities with children.

However, infants and toddlers have holistic learning experiences, which means that even if they focus on one thing at a time, they focus can change quickly. From the perspective of the infants or toddlers, the lesson learned may end up having nothing to do with colors (California Department of Education/Child Development Division, 2012).

Even though there is a structure interaction during the play activities, caregivers have had opportunities and have taken the initiative to follow the children's lead and they even could write their comments on these activities in a booklet. Here is a caregiver comment: "However I am not forced to follow all of the daily themes and play activities. If most of the children are not interested than I go on with another activity which might be funnier for them like singing, drawing, playing with the blocks. Then, I write down what activities children were more interested in playing.”

Another data taken from the caregivers is related with the impact large groups of children have on planning the play activities of the curriculum. A caregiver who is in charge of 2-year-olds and 3-year-olds said: "I work with two other colleagues and we have in charge nearly 27 children. Of course there are difficulties when organizing the play activities. Children are very young and we have a very large group.” It is clear that large group sizes can affect negatively the play activities with children and even other activities like diapering or feeding. Another caregiver confirmed: “We have a very high number of children in our group and sometimes even feeding the children can become very challenging.”

Creating a play environment is another key aspect of planning an infant/toddler responsive curriculum. In a play environment children's initiative is triggered and learning occurs during the exploration and experimentation of the environment. Most of the caregivers had concerns related to the play materials. Usually these play materials were brought by parents. One caregiver commented: “We have insufficient play materials to implement the curriculum. Children would be more interested in storytelling if we illustrated the stories with pictures, dolls or the accurate materials.” Another caregiver states: “...But I have to say the play materials are limited. Parents provide the toys.” Thus it is hard for caregivers to plan the indoor and outdoor physical environment in a way that promotes learning through self-initiated play.

An important partner in infant/toddler responsive curriculum planning is the family. Caregivers’ observations of the children’s behaviors in daycares need to be shared with family members. Family members offer information about the child’s behaviors at home and the individual characteristics of the child as well. This sharing of experiences gives the child comfort and security to explore the daycare environment and also help the child to connect learning at home with that in daycare. However, the
infant/toddler curriculum did not put emphasis on how to build the partnership with the family members of the children. A caregiver working in the youngest group made this comment: “We try to make children active and involve them in different plays. We talk and sing a lot to them. However, we can see that parents do not give this kind of attention to their children at home. Mostly parents are interested in feeding the baby than getting involved the baby in play activities or other learning activities.”

On the whole, the qualitative data gives insight on the key elements of responsive infant/toddler curriculum that need to be enhanced in Albanian daycares. Key elements such as non structured interaction, non directive learning experiences, the involvement of all children, the partnership with the family and the play environment need to be promoted. The main aim of the responsive curriculum is to plan activities based on the developmental and learning principles of infants and toddlers by observing, documenting, reflecting in an ongoing way so as to promote children's potentials.

5. Conclusion

Developing a responsive curriculum first of all needs developing early childhood policy and a supportive funding system that can provide high-quality developmentally appropriate experiences for all children (Copple, C & Bredekamp, S, 2009).

Policy makers need to support such very early experiences and practices by establishing policies and finding public funds. To implement responsive infant/toddler curriculum, policy makers in infant/toddler development should take in consideration the working conditions of caregivers, also the status of caregivers and caregivers’ professional development. As well, policy makers in infant and toddler development should take into consideration a program quality rating system in daycares and evaluation programs, too.

Caregivers' role is very important in children's experiences in daycares. Children spend 8 hours in the daycare environments by interacting with caregivers and their peers. By being responsive to the children’s developmental needs and as well children’s individuality, caregivers engage children in rich experiences that prepare them for future learning and give children a positive attitude toward learning.

References


