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ECCE services in Mexico: Reducing social inequalities

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Abstract

In Mexico, the socioeconomic and cultural situation creates educational inequalities, and its impact is greater on young children. Since the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services have become a major pathway to compensate for social inequalities, in 2008 they have begun to be implemented through the “Programme for Strengthening Early Education and Child Development.” In this article, it is presented a brief review of the main theoretical approaches on social inequalities in early childhood, the main benefits of ECCE to counter inequality, and the status of ECCE services in Mexico to create a model of indicators of good practice.

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1. Introduction

In Mexico, as in other countries, the socioeconomic and cultural situation of population creates educational inequalities whose impact is greater in the early years of life of its inhabitants. For this reason, in recent decades Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services have become a major pathway used by developing countries to compensate for social inequalities (Blanco & OREALC/UNESCO, 2010; Doyle, Harmon, Heckman, & Tremblay, 2009; Woodhead, 2006). Social inequality is one of the major problems affecting Mexico. Thus, in 2008 the “Programme for Strengthening Early Education and Child Development” began to be implemented. Its aim is to integrate, improve, and increase the supply of services for children from 0 to 3 years old. To achieve this aim, we consider necessary to recover and systematize the experiences of good practices in order to construct indicators that facilitate and enrich this process. In this article, we will do a brief review of the main theoretical approaches on social inequalities in early childhood, the main benefits of ECCE to counter inequality, and the status of ECCE services in Mexico in order to create a model of indicators of good practice.

2. Social inequalities in early childhood

The life of children in poverty, especially in extreme poverty, is hazardous from birth. Child trafficking and child abuse are some examples of conditions facing millions of young children around the world. It is estimated that in 2005 10.5 million children died before reaching five years of age. Of these deaths, almost 40% occurred during the

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first twenty-eight days of life, and the main causes of death were armed conflicts and preventable diseases (UNICEF, 2009).

Nearly 30% of the population in impoverished countries lives on less than a dollar a day, mostly women and children (Davila & Naya, 2010). One out of four children born in developing countries is condemned to live in extreme poverty (UNICEF, 2005). Being born poor in a poor country may be the cause of about 50 million children are not registered at birth, thus they cannot access to basic health and educational services. It is also highly likely that these children belong to ethnic minorities that do not speak the official language of their country and their customs are not part of mainstream culture, which makes them victims of a double exclusion (UNESCO, 2011a).

Being born a woman is another difficulty usually added to the obstacles caused by poverty and ethnicity. In the long run, inequality between men and women in the access to education causes difficulties in the physical, social, cultural, and economic development of girls. This cultural exclusion may cause conditions that deny women's rights to citizenship and education, and therefore, they are more vulnerable to exploitation in all its manifestations (Dávila and Naya, 2010). Poor adolescent girls in rural areas are less likely to acquire knowledge on sexually transmitted diseases and on the use of contraceptives. In case of pregnancy, they have higher risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and their children are more likely to die or suffer from malnutrition. Teenage mothers and their children are less likely to benefit from health services and to attend school, thus perpetuating the negative cycle of inequality (UNICEF, 2005).

Children and women are the main victims of poor hygiene and poor health conditions. According to data from the 'State of the World's Mothers' (Save the Children, 2010), every year about 350,000 women die during pregnancy or childbirth, and nearly 9 million children die before reaching 5 years of age. These numbers are 50 times higher in developing countries than in industrialized countries.

Malnutrition is one of the main causes of social and educational disadvantages. It usually begins during pregnancy, affects the health of newborns, and endangers both the life of the mother and of the child. Maternal under nutrition and the inability of health systems to ensure effective prenatal and postnatal care are contributing factors to infant mortality. In addition, disadvantages in the field of education are passed from one generation to another. A child with malnutrition suffers serious consequences in his/her development even before entering school, which is an arduous obstacle for his/her formation (CEPAL, 2010; Mehendale, 2010, UNICEF, 2005).

One of the most difficult conditions to overcome is the one that children experience in areas of armed conflict. Since 1990, 90% of deaths caused by armed conflicts around the world have been civilians, of whom approximately 80% were women and children (Davila & Naya, 2010) and the probability of dying before five years is two times higher for children born in these countries (UNESCO, 2011b).

The conditions of inequality that threaten the child population and that, generally, are transmitted from generation to generation are too many. These conditions affect children as well as the rest of their families. Many of these families for generations have been denied the opportunity to escape these situations (CEPAL, 2010; Vegas, Santibáñez, & World Bank, 2010). The intergenerational transmission of poverty occurs not only in the economic and social levels but also occurs in the educational one. ECLAC (2008, in OEI, CEPAL, and Secretaría General Iberoamericana, 2010) refers to this phenomenon as the 'degree of heritability of educational capital'. According to it, young people whose parents did not complete formal education are less likely to complete secondary education. In the next section, we will review some of the main factors of social inequality that generate educational inequality.

2.1. Social inequality as a generator of educational inequality

The early years are a critical period for human learning and human development. However, it is estimated that over 200 million children do not fully exploit their potential due to poverty, poor nutrition, and inadequate health care (Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead, 2009). Leseman (in EACEA & Eurydice, 2009) identifies four factors that cause inequalities in education: 1) the accumulation of socioeconomic and psychological risk, 2) the lack of stimulation of cognitive and language development in family interactions, 3) the different cultural beliefs that determine parental educational styles and socialization practices, and 4) the linguistic and

educational consequences of bilingualism. We define these factors as ‘internal factors’ because they depend on the personal conditions and the family background.

To the ‘internal factors’ are added ‘external factors’. The latter are related to educational opportunities and the quality of education. External factors are the cause of educational inequality, since the socio-economic and spatial segmentation of educational services keeps the condition under which “schools for poor people and schools for rich people coexist” (OEI et al., 2010, p. 54). This condition also generates a segmentation of the quality of educational opportunities because, in general, schools that attend low-income students often have deficiencies in infrastructure and educational resources, as well as in the quantity and quality of training of their teachers. Insofar as internal and external factors are combined, the effects on child development can be more severe. In these cases, ECCE services may contribute significantly to fight educational disadvantage if certain conditions are met, including quality.

Regardless of personal resources with which a child is born, his/her family status and social resources will play a highly decisive role in his/her formation and in his/her quality of life. Lopez and Tedesco (2002, p. 9) recognize that “every child is born potentially educable, but in many cases, the social context works as a barrier that prevents the development of that potential.” This potential has been defined as ‘educability’ and refers to:

“...a social construction that transcends the subject and his/her family, and accounts for the basic cognitive development that occurs in the early years (linked to adequate emotional stimulation, good nutrition, and health) and the primary socialization through which children acquire the rudiments of a basic framework that allows them to join a specialized situation other than the family, such as the school” (Lopez & Tedesco, p.9).

Educability implies considering that poverty is not only material. Also other factors such as social ones determine school success. Since the degree of educability is conditional, especially during the first years of life, it is necessary to address the social inequalities experienced by millions of children to ensure better academic results, and thus to provide a better quality of life. Currently, it is obvious and almost unarguable the potential of education as a tool to fight poverty. This idea is part of the official discourses relating to education, especially those referring to the fight against social inequality. The relationship ‘education vs. poverty’ is so universal that, currently, no one disputes it. Instead, it is often claimed as a political priority for development (Tarabini & Bonal, 2007). Therefore, today, more than ever, international agencies and governments around the world see ECEC services as a fundamental way to compensate for educational and social deficits. Let us see the main arguments that support this position.

3. ECCE: An investment for development with equity for children.

The Care and Early Childhood Education (ECCE) is defined as those services to support the survival, growth, development, and learning of children from birth to entry into primary school. Its purpose is to improve health, nutrition, hygiene and the cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development of children to ensure better conditions of life and better school performance (UNESCO, 2007). Among the main benefits of ECCE we can find the following: a) improvement of the health and nutrition of the mother and of the child by improving educational opportunities, b) improvement of attendance and outcomes in primary education and the next educational levels, and c) reduction of social inequalities (UNESCO & WCECCE, 2010). For children living in poverty and/or exclusion, access to ECCE services means the possibility of increasing their chances of survival, benefiting their health and, consequently, improving their development.

Heckman (2006) argues that many of the major economic and social problems are rooted in the population’s low levels of education, referred not only to cognitive skills but also to other non-cognitive skills such as motivation, perseverance, and tenacity, which are also important for success in life and to live in society. These skills are easier to teach during the first years of life. For this reason, some authors, such as Egido (2000), highlight the socio-economic value of early childhood services, since “programmes aimed at younger children do not have only beneficial effects in individual terms and in the short run, but also in social and economic terms throughout the life” (pp. 123-124). Research in the United States of America from programmes

like “Carolina Abecedarian Programme” and the “High/ Scope Perry Preschool Programme”, among others, have shown that interventions that begin to be applied at an early age are better when they are directed to most disadvantaged children. In this sense, investing in disadvantaged children is a public policy initiative that promotes equity and social justice and, at the same time, promotes productivity in the economy, and society in general. The mothers’ education and the creation of awareness policies impact on the benefits of the newborn care. Also, this is a way to improve the prospects for economic growth and social development (Save the Children, 2010). However, it is necessary to ensure the quality, so that these benefits are truly visible and profitable. Unfortunately, many of the existing ECCE programs do not meet this requirement, and they become a lost investment. We share the idea of Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead (2009) according to which the fundamental thesis on which policies and early childhood services should be constructed is: ‘respect for the rights of every child to care, development, and education.’ The guarantee of equal opportunities for all is a prerequisite for social justice, and it requires that measures taken on behalf of early childhood compensate for the disadvantages.

4. ECCE services in Mexico

Currently, according to World Bank classifications, Mexico is considered an upper middle-income country. However, the distribution of that wealth has serious disparities: 10% of people with lower incomes receive only 2% of GDP, while 10% of people with higher incomes receive 40% of GDP (UNICEF Mexico, 2010). The situation of early childhood in Mexico has improved considerably in recent decades. However, in 2008, 11.6 million children between 0 and 5 years of age lived in the country. Of these children, 56.4% lived in situation of multidimensional poverty. While few Mexicans live with indices of quality of life higher than the average for developed countries, a large majority does not reach even the minimum rates for decent living. These differences are reflected in academic results from national and international assessments.

In line with international trends and in response to the recommendations made by various international agencies, ECCE services have become one of the main measures adopted by governments to bridge social gaps. In Mexico, ECCE services have taken the form of ‘early education’, and there are a variety of models and programs. This situation has generated effects such as an ineffective supervision of services, a lack of reliable data on the child population and programs for it, a lack of updating, training, and professionalization options for the early education’s personnel, among others (SEP-SEB, 2008). Therefore, in 2008, the Secretariat of Public Education launched the “Programme for Strengthening Early Education and Child Development.” Its main objective is to improve the quality of early education services by implementing a care model based on a comprehensive approach that promotes the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development of the population from 0 to 3 years of age. This programme is intended to establish a compulsory basic curriculum for all agencies that provide care and educational services to children between 0 and 3 years of age. It also establishes general guidelines for the organization and operation of early education services, and expands the coverage of the various programmes and services for this population.

5. Conclusion

In Mexico, as in other countries, ECCE is an ideal way to reduce social and educational inequalities. Despite this importance, nowadays there is no census-type information on all ECCE services in the country. It is unknown what impact these services generate or have generated on the issue of social and educational inequalities. We believe that the current shortcomings of services and the intention to improve social and educational conditions of Mexican children make it necessary to create a model of indicators to diagnose the current status of ECCE services in Mexico, and on the other hand, to identify good practice experiences which may be replicated.

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