Socio-cultural Perspectives on Policy Making in Early Childhood Education: Policy Lessons and Implications from the Preschool in Three Cultures Studies

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Abstract

The argument in this paper is two-fold: (1) Policy making should reflect a consideration for sociocultural factors; and 2) Policy making, whether or not policy makers realize it or desire it or not, inevitably reflects the influence of sociocultural factors. Cultural forms of ECEC are valuable, under-appreciated, and endangered by globalization and pressures to modernize, rationalize, and compete with those of other countries. These beliefs and practices should be preserved and treasured. But they should not be viewed as fixed. Early childhood education practitioners, policy makers, and scholars should value the early childhood educational beliefs and practices of their culture and should think of them as national treasures, as patrimony, as endangered educational ecology, which it is their responsibility to protect and pass on to the next generation.

[Key Words] Preschool, Anthropology, China, Japan

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INTRODUCTION

I am mostly an anthropologist, by training as well as disposition. Although I have worked for many years as a professor of early childhood education, my research on preschools is always anthropological, in using ethnographic methods and focusing on cultural issues. Anthropologists are rarely involved in making educational policies. And more generally, policy making in early childhood education and other domains of education is rarely informed by socio-cultural perspectives. But it should be!

My argument in this paper is two-fold: 1) Policy making should reflect a consideration for socio-cultural factors; and 2) Policy making, whether or not policy makers realize it or desire it or not, inevitably reflects the influence of socio-cultural factors. In other words, even when they think that their educational policy decisions are not based on socio-cultural factors, a post-hoc analysis can show the pervasive influence of socio-cultural factors in their thinking.

In this talk I will develop these points using examples from Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited, the book and video my colleagues Yeh Hsueh, Mayumi Karasawa, and I published in 2009. This book is a study of approaches to early childhood education in China, Japan, and the US over a twenty period, as it compares ECE in these countries in the mid-1980s and twenty years later.

A central contribution of both the original and the new Preschool in Three Cultures studies is that culture matters, and that preschools are sites that both reflect and reproduce the larger cultures of which they are a part. In the conclusion chapter of the new book we reflect on processes of educational continuity and change, and suggest some new ways of thinking about how systems of early childhood education and care stay the same and change over time, as they are impacted by a variety of pressures, including domestic and international politics, the emergence of new paradigms, economics, demographic shifts, and globalization. These are the socio-cultural factors I mean to refer to in this paper.

I should make clear at the outset that my discussion of policy will focus primarily not on the politics of policy making conducted in ministries of education (although I will mention a few of these official policies) but instead on policy as enacted at the level of the beliefs and practices of early childhood education practitioners. I read behind and beneath these beliefs and practices broad areas of continuity and change in educational policies in early childhood education.

This paper is organized in four sections. Following this introduction there is a section in which I introduce (briefly) some anthropological notions of policy making. Then comes