

STARTING STRONG:
CONUNDRUMS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE OECD REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Some judge the quality of major reports by the number of pages; others by the artistry of the graphics; and still others by the scope and currency of citations. This morning I would like to suggest yet another alternative: that the measure of a really great report is the degree to which it makes us think and reflect . . . the number and the nature of the conundrums it unveils. On all these counts, it is clear that we have an outstanding report in *Starting Strong*. Not being an artist, or a citation or page counter, I would like to focus my comments on the latter criteria . . . the nature of the conundrums the report evokes and what it emplores us to consider as we craft even better systems of early childhood education and care. Before turning to recommendations to OECD, I will address three different kinds of conundrums: pedagogical, policy, and contextual conundrums.

**THREE CONUNDRUMS: PEDAGOGICAL, POLICY, AND
CONTEXTUAL**

PEDAGOGICAL CONUNDRUMS

For the purposes of this discussion, conundrum is defined as a puzzling question or problem. For some conundrums, there may not be satisfactory answers while for others, the conundrum presents an unanticipated challenge that demands attention. Not all conundrums discussed apply to all nations in the report, yet they present sufficiently complex or tenacious challenges so as to warrant examination.

Consider for example, that at the very same time that there is a press for standardization of early childhood outcomes or frameworks in many countries, the populations of those nations are becoming increasingly diverse. This presents us with the conundrum of reconciling calls for standardization of learning outcomes, and in some cases approaches, with increasing diversity of cultural contexts from which children come, increasing differences in parental values and needs, and increasingly diverse children. This issue also must consider how we train for this diversity in light of increasing calls for standardization in teacher preparation settings.

Another conundrum relates to the calls for partnership in payment schemes among parents, government, and business. Such calls, as idyllic as they are, often fall on economies that are suffering and are constrained, on businesses that are doing all they can to keep afloat, and on young parents who may be at the lowest point in their

earning curve. Indeed, many young parents are already pressed by the costs of child care and early education. So, how do we reconcile the tendency in some nations to increase parental fees and our desire for universal access that is dependent on parental fees with the reality of potentially decreased utilization by parents who cannot afford the service?

We are aware that in order to improve quality, there is need for increased professionalization and genderization of the field. At the same time, in many nations, the salaries and benefit packages offered those working in early childhood care and education are not adequate even at current levels of training. A huge conundrum is reconciling the urgent need for a more professionalized workforce with many nations' ability and willingness to pay for it. The conundrum is further complicated in some countries where staff turnover rates make it difficult to maintain even the current workforce, with the result that vacancies and discontinuities characterize the current employment landscape.

Finally, with regard to pedagogical conundrums, the report and many professionals call for the creation of a united, integrated vision of early childhood education and care. Yet, in nation after nation, there is growing recognition of the need for decentralizing services and governance, keeping both close to home. Is it really possible to develop a unified system of early childhood care and education when there is such a strong propensity for local control and diversity? Moreover, when we consider early childhood education and care as including children birth to age eight, there already is a compulsory education system in existence for the upper part of that age bracket and a rich social services system for many, if not all, needy children: the question then becomes how do we reconcile the need to *create* a system with the system/s that already exist?

POLICY CONUNDRUMS

Conundrums are not restricted to pedagogy alone. Indeed, many of the most complex conundrums are those related to policy. Consider, for example, that the report, and we, call for increased investments by governments, at precisely the time when many governments are increasingly mistrusted by citizenry. How do we expect that social democracies that are truly responsive to the populace will elect to invest more resources in early childhood education and care? Moreover, how do we reconcile increased calls for government involvement in an era where many nations are moving toward wide-scale privatization of services? These issues are not new, but they clearly constitute the serious conundrum of discerning government's role amidst changing and sometimes controversial social conditions and needs.

In the fiscal domain, we hear that demand strategies seem to be more responsive to parental choices, but often when parents choose, they make choices that segregate or re-segregate children by ethnicity and income, and/or functionality. How do we reconcile the rights of the individual family with needs for justice and for social equity for society? What happens when individual freedom may come head to head with other critical social values, as is happening in some of the nations studied?

Finally, of critical policy importance, we must come to grips with the ever-present tensions between increasing support to enhance the availability of services

and hence improving access versus the need to focus on quality and make all services offered of the highest quality. This conundrum is the core policy question because it determines the nature of the services and opportunities a nation wishes to provide. Moreover, with limited resources, how do we reconcile the need for consistency and quality with governmental hesitancy to regulate?

CONTEXTUAL CONUNDRUMS

The above conundrums have been very closely related to early childhood education and care pedagogy and policy. But early childhood does not sit alone on a desert island, remote from socio-economic forces, and certainly contemporary children and families do not. We, therefore, need to cast our discussion more broadly.

One of the trends currently in vogue is that of globalization, meaning the processes by which the world, once richly diverse, is becoming more alike and more connected. Often, however, when we talk about globalization, we never fully dissect the conundrums it induces. One consequence, particularly germane to early childhood education and care, is the cultural homogenization that globalization breeds. By this, I suggest that world-wide, we are becoming more unicultural. Walk anywhere and there is a MacDonaldis, be it European capitals or remote parts of Africa. Globalization not only breeds common markets and common goods, but potentially it leads to reductionist and less textured world views and values. Indeed the preservation of the unique heritages we want to pass on to our young children will need increasing attention as we globalize. If we accept the premise so beautifully stated in the report, that policy follows a nation's social construction of childhood, we will need to reconcile how we preserve that social construction that is so unique to nation-states with the contemporary press for globalization and the cultural assimilation it renders.

A second characteristic of our contemporary context is the use of technology and the internet to bring us closer together. Many scholars and social advocates have been concerned that uneven access to technology, and the internet in particular, will serve to further divide both nations and peoples into the "haves" and "have nots." While this may come to fruition, the pace of technological development suggests that internet access will become increasingly inexpensive and accessible to all. Whichever stance one takes, full access thereby reducing economic divides, or partial access thereby increasing them, the impact of technology means that we must think ahead to a new kind of culture, the internet culture, and how it will reform values, influence what and how children learn, and alter the processes by which they will learn. Indeed, as noted by Thomas Friedman in his best selling book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, one of the greatest challenges of the next twenty years will be to reconcile mechanization and modernity. How do we prepare children for life in a technological world that we can't fully anticipate or know? And how do we accommodate the changing conceptions of childhood that such access will inevitably render?

A third, less well-studied characteristic of our contemporary landscape is what Stan Davis and Christopher Meyer write about in *The Blur*. Today, more than at any other time in our social history, our lives and ways of being are being blurred. We blur time, place, and increasingly, function. Five years ago, the terms "24-7" and

”tele-commuting” were unknown. Today, we work from our homes; our offices become havens for social support once rendered by caring friends and families. Places that were set up for one purpose seem to be meeting many; for example, in some countries, people have their eyes examined at shopping malls, drop off their dry cleaning at train stations, and go to hardware stores for week long lessons on plumbing and electrical work. Child care centers are now selling life insurance to make ends meet. Life is blurred—things that were once discreet are coming together. In early childhood education and care, we hear loud calls for integrating services (family support, health, mental health, with ECEC) and ministries.

As society and our lives become more blurred, we need to acknowledge the new skill sets, the new values accorded change, and discern how these changes impact the fibre of early childhood and childhood itself. Blurred families, blurred days where children are shifted among people and settings, mean that we need to consider that which must be retained about ECEC . . . that which makes us unique and that which must be altered to make room for new social constructions. Welcoming the new as it reshapes parts of the old is our challenge.

OECD and ITS ROLE

That the OECD has developed this study and excellent report is a stellar contribution. If OECD were to consider sustaining a commitment to early childhood education and care, how might such a commitment be manifest?

First, this excellent report should be made widely accessible to different audiences. This might entail repackaging some of the information in the report into briefer, more streamlined documents that would be more suitable for policymakers. Such documents could take several forms, including focusing on transcendent policy issues, such as professional development or compensation, and discuss how these issues are addressed in different countries. These policy briefs could explicate the issues and provide workable examples. With each topical policy brief no more than 20-25 pages, they could also be published in a series and widely distributed to policymakers, students, and the profession. In addition to these efforts, the report itself should also be produced, and disseminated according to a well-conceived plan that will garner as much attention as possible.

Second, the thematic review that undergirds the report could be extended to several countries that were not included. Such a strategy would have the advantage of expanding the knowledge base, thereby providing additional useful comparisons. It would be helpful to select countries strategically so that they would yield new issues and provoke further thinking.

Third, OECD could take leadership in collecting comparable data from participating nations. Such data should be based on a parsimonious set of ECEC policy indicators that could be collected across nations bi-annually to monitor national progress. Such comparative reports are extremely useful in informing research and in generating new research. The data could also provide one base for new networking opportunities. An example of this strategy can be observed in the KIDSCOUNT work in the United States sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Fourth, OECD could reach out to non-OECD nations, perhaps via collaborations with UNESCO, to create an on-going appetite for such work across diverse nations and cultures.

Finally, OECD, like all major world organizations, needs to install in your halls and enshrine in your documents the words declared by Mary Heath Vorse that, in the final analysis, all civilizations will be measured by what choices its young children have in the world.

Clearly, the tasks ahead for us are no less daunting. We, too, must consider using this majestic report in service to that obligation. In helping each of us choose wisely as we deal with the inevitable conundrums our history, our cultures, and our values render as durable legacies. Only then, will we live up to the challenges this work has unleashed.