

SOCIO-CULTURAL VARIATION IN THE MAGHREB PRESCHOOL AGENDAS

by

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of the socio-cultural environment on the preschool system in the Maghreb region. Inspired in part by comparative studies, such that of Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989) in which they investigate differentials in the dynamics of functioning of preschools across different and discrete cultural contexts, the paper precisely sheds light on the influence of the socio-cultural context on the structural organization of preschool. However, such impact does not only figure across countries with palpable demarcation lines but rather among counties sharing almost the same cultural heritage. In this respect, it is thought here that a homogeneous cultural environment such that of the Maghreb countries (i.e., Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco) does not necessarily occasion the same type of impact knowing that considerable variation appears in regards to the morphologies and pedagogical agendas of preschools within each of the aforementioned countries.

Key words: Preschool; Maghreb countries; cultural environment; child education.

Introduction

Preschool is a institution that is universally premised on the necessity to satisfy the pedagogical needs in early childhood education at the psychological, social and cognitive levels. It acts as an intermediary between the educational space of the family and the community life (Terrisse, 1988). It seeks to enhance the intellectual faculty of children from the earliest stages of communication. As a matter of fact, there is substantial evidence in child research literature postulating that children are disposed of multiple competences which are deeply rooted in the fetal characteristics of children (de Boysson-Bardies, 1996; Lécuyer, Pêcheux, Streri, 1994). The preschool environment crucially consists in its being a tool which contains the synergy between the natural route of development of children (i.e., novice learners) and the educational program devised by the educator (i.e., the expert) (Vygotsky, 1978).

Nonetheless, preschool systems demonstrate huge diversity in as far as the pedagogical choices are concerned. Such preferences are systematically moderated by the cultural specifics of each country, which makes a given preschool system far from being nicely immersed in a cross-cultural pedagogical paradigm (Montessori, 1987). Each country establishes its own system in accordance with (i) the social status assigned to children, (ii) its definition of education, and (iii) the role of parents in the educational experience (Brougère, 2000). In this respect, Tobin et al.'s (1989) study is designed to compare the preschool systems in Japan, the United States, and China at the level of their pedagogical preferences, objectives, and cultural values. This comparative study reveals significant evidence of the differences at the three levels. In fact, the inherent cultural features of a given country can be typically distinguished in the profile of a preschool system in view of the demographic characteristics, conflict management, and the place of the individual in his/her community.

In the same vein, Bédard (2002) refers to a considerable commonality between Canada and Switzerland, two countries with an important number of ethnic communities. This cultural setup in both countries reverberates in their preschool systems through the introduction of an inter-cultural dimension that aims to consolidate the social integration of these ethnic communities and to broaden the interface of interchange between them, most notably in the Switzerland of late 1980s. This pedagogical agenda is best illustrated by (i) the implementation of foreign language learning programs as a complement to learning the official languages as well as (ii) other programs designed to observe social behavior on the basis of tolerance and diversity (Postlethwaite, 1995).

Japan and the United States: the place of the individual in the group

Tobin et al. (1989) notice that there is one child educator per thirty preschoolers. She does not often help them during their engagement in a task or activity, nor does she intervene when occasional conflicts take place. There is indeed a substantial amount of freedom given to children in choosing and conducting their activities added to the importance given to learning socialization skills within the group (Kato-Otani, 2004). Importantly enough, it is in general mothers with credentials who oftentimes abandon their career jobs to be in charge of education of their children throughout the preschool years. In light of the typical one-child composition of Japanese families and the lack of socialization for the lonely mothers, the educational preschool system seeks to grapple with the absence of child-to-child contact. This is why childhood educators tend to minimize their intervention in conflict situations and focus on the relational behavior of children.

By way of comparison, in the United States there is one child educator per twenty preschoolers where the child-educator relationship is highly individualized. The educator usually intervenes when it comes to limiting or avoiding conflicts. Here, the main purpose of education consists in the psycho-motor development of children in addition to their self-worth and their emotional. The preschool experience should be therefore likened to an enjoyable enterprise (Tobin et al., 1989). This explains in part how the American culture is based on one's awareness and valuing of individualism, and so the pedagogical decisions at the preschool educational system cannot deviate from this cultural frame of mind.

According to Tobin et al. (1989), the relationship between parents and the preschool structure is deeply anchored in the socio-economic and political context in a given country. In fact, preschool tends to meet the expectations of parents in accordance with a nation-wide format that provides a set of standards for an educator to follow, which may insinuate a way of thinking in tandem with the free-market spirit of the country. Contrariwise, the expectations of Japanese lonely mothers are centered around the value of socialization and interaction which may avail both their children and them. To a certain extent, these expectations decidedly account for the tendency in Japanese preschools to organize social encounters and opportunities of exchange, not only between children but also between their families.

Canada: a dual culture

The Canadian preschool system highly accentuates the importance of play in the learning course of children. In this vein, Bédard (2002: 11) notices "Quebec has recently witnessed a breakthrough in the conceptualization and implementation of new tools and services designed for early childhood [and that] the socio-economic and demographic

evolution of the Quebec society has among other things called for huge demands insofar as preschool education services are concerned.” To such demand, the Quebec government intervened to set the guidelines to standardize in a sense this booming sector of education. Through a 1997 reform, they intended to redefine the concept of play and its utility so as to optimize the learning techniques and homogenize the learning rate of children. This policy, Bédard (2002) comments, is an attempt to “abandon the spontaneous” spirit that characterizes the evolution of the preschool system in Canada. In fact, this change of heart is, according to Bédard (2002: 18), ascribed to a confusion in the interpretation of the concept of play as to whether one should focus on the pleasurable side of play or its empirical dimensions to optimize learning.

Bédard (2002) maintains that role play is no more than a means used to strengthen the child’s ability to internalize knowledge and consolidate his/her fledgling skills. Play is hence a pedagogical method that systematically provides adequate motivation for children to meet the challenges of acquiring new knowledge and developing their competences. At this juncture, with reference to the above reform, Bédard (2002: 65) distinguishes between “spontaneous free play” and “learning process.” Accordingly, the virtue of play lies in the comprehensive development of children, including his/her psycho-motor, affective, social, and linguistic and cognitive competences. The play concept is not merely an activity without a rationale nor simply an act of participation of the child in his/her environment. It is rather a constructive learning instrument which seeks to enhance the qualitative aspect of preschool education through developing cross-sectional competences (i.e., intellectual, methodological, communicative, etc.) (Bédard, 2002). As to children of an advanced age, there are childcare centers which foster their curiosity as they allow them to explore the following domains: languages, mathematics, social environment, technology, etc.

Through an in-depth look into the influence of bilingualism on the Canadian preschool system, one may notice that there has been a successful integration of the francophone and anglophone cultures. In fact, this merger spirit was partly inspired by the old French preschool system where in 1777 some childcare centers in France used to focus on play activities and verbosity skills (Pougatch-Zalcman, 1980). The play concept was further reinforced in the curricular decisions in relation to the Canadian preschool system in light of the then emerging ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky. In this vein, several recent assessment projects specialized in early childhood education, such as Bara and Gentaz (2004), pinpoint to the variety in the policy of the preschool system. It includes, among other things, focus on the psychological and social development with respect to play activities and tasks that encourage the values of solidarity and competition beyond the family confines.

As regards the influence of the anglophone culture, its characteristics reside in the qualitative aspect of functioning in the preschool system and it is manifest in the child’s involvement in the choice and engagement of the pedagogical activities. The anglophone preschool system focuses on the quality of the services offered to preschoolers. In other words, the pedagogical objectives are related to integral areas of child educations such as self-esteem, motivation, ability to take decisions, independence, etc. Among these typical activities to observe these areas of development, preschools:

- Integrate elements of pleasure in all the activities (e.g., confidence-building tasks) assigned to children.
- Make assessment follow-ups and communicate estimates to parents.

- Discuss with children their works in order to boost their intellectual and motor abilities and eventually their autonomy.

The Maghreb region

Although the modern preschool system has recently garnered increasing attention in the Maghreb countries, the number of preschoolers still remains insignificant in proportion to the child population therein¹. Preschool is still elective and in most of the cases is not programmed in the general curricular agendas of these countries. Hence, it does not qualify as necessary step for young children to subsequently join the primary school. In fact, it is only middle-class children who represent the majority of preschool attendants (Tlili, 2004). The three Maghreb countries of Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria share a huge interface and a cultural heritage which includes a common language (i.e., Modern Standard Arabic), geographical contiguity, similar history (e.g., French colonization), and solid ethnic kinship. In light of such similarities, the question which worth-addressing here is whether this reasonably homogeneous background may intimate a uniform preschool organization across these countries or perhaps a great deal of structural and conceptual variation.

Morocco and the apogee of *Kuttab*¹

According to Bengharbit-Remaoun (1993), the sector of preschool education has evolved tremendously in the early 1990s thanks to the governmental efforts and consciousness raining within the community. In consequence, less than one-third of the three million population of Moroccan children aged between 3 and 7 attended preschool in 2003 and based on the governmental statistics, preschool attendance would peak by the end of the decade. However, the *kuttab* still receives 77.34% of children of preschool age) despite the variety of parallel educational institutions (e.g., private and public childcare centers, schools for foreign citizens' children, etc.).

The peculiarity of the Moroccan preschool system consists in the consideration of the *kuttab* at the heart of this educational institution. Bouzoubaa and Bengharbit-Remaoun (2004), in this respect, explain that contrary to the majority of the Arab countries where the *Kuttab* is of a peripheral importance, not only has the Moroccan government reinvigorated this institution it has also provided it with financial support. Concurrently, the pedagogical policy has been made clear after passing a law that specifies the major guidelines to endorse in preschool education.² Among the objectives set by the government are learning of a considerable number of verses from the Koran, fundamentals of the Islamic faith, patriotic and humanistic values, development of sensorial competences and creativity, and development of reading skills and writing skills in Arabic, and familiarization with the Amazigh language³.

¹ The *Kuttab* is an elementary school generally situated in Mosque buildings and it dates back to the early days of Islam. The main subject of instruction in this educational institution is the rote-based learning of the Koran under the supervision of the *Meddeb*. Other skills are equally involved such that of reading and writing Classic Arabic.

² One characteristic of the 2000 law, entitled "The Basic Status of Preschool Education," is that the government delegates the management of preschool education to the private sector and only concentrates on the areas of regulations and pedagogical training.

³ The Amazigh language is spoken by people of North Africa (the Maghreb). It used to be the main language before the spread of Islam in this region. Despite the domination of Arabic and French, being the official languages, the use of Amazigh language remains important among the Berber communities especially in Morocco and Algeria.

The weight of the religious aspect in the Moroccan preschool system, being manifest in the prevalence of the kuttab institution, accounts for the socio-cultural setup of this country which is basically ruled by an Islamic monarchy. This peculiarity enables children, irrespective of their socio-economic background and region of residence, to receive the basic level of education. The easy access to the kuttab represents in some way a solution to the economic hindrances that prevent the mainstream of child population from joining private preschool institutions especially in the rural areas.

Algeria: absence of the play aspect

Although early childhood education is to a large extent shaped by the family, by the street, being considered as the playground, and by the Mosque, the preschool system became popular starting from the 1990s (Mékidèche, 1996; Senouci, 1992). In fact between 1998 and 1999, preschool education reached 3.8 % of institutions under the management of the Ministry of National Education. In 2003, a research study, financed by UNICEF, reported 11 % of Algerian children attended preschool with 24 % of this population were under the legal age. Also reported was that in 2004 the number of preschoolers projected to reach record attendance. In this vein, a national committee in Algeria assigned a team of education experts to elaborate a reference plan involve the age range of 5-to-6 years.

Regardless of the structural diversity in the Algerian preschool system (e.g., childcare centers, specialized clubs, etc.), all these educational institutions seem to follow the same pedagogical line. Aside from preparing children for the basic school level, the main objective revolves around the following: teaching should be exclusively in Arabic, teaching social rules of etiquette, physical education, patriotic awareness raising, learning in team work, focus on artistic activities and creativity, and introduction to reading skills and mathematical logic (Senouci, 1992). It should be noted here that the pedagogical conception is academically-oriented due to social pressure to prepare children for 'better' future education. Such effort may greatly appropriate the preschool education system in order to resemble the basic school format at the expense of the play and socialization characteristics. Importantly enough, some interviewed 1669 educators admitted that the ultimate objective was to ensure a profound schooling career for children (Bouzoubaa & Bengharbit-Remaoun, 2004).

This attitude reveals the problem of training shortage which largely explains why the majority of childhood educators resort to switching to old reflexes and traditional and socially-biased definition of childhood and education. In fact, all the interviewed 1087 educators showed preference for reading and writing activities (90.24 %). Similarly, the interviewed 5547 parents voiced consistent expectations concerning preschool which highly accord with those of the educators. To such complementarities between social pressure and lack of educator training, the report suggested that the blueprint of objectives and their implementations be revisited with a view to encouraging the element of pleasure, developing children's emotional intelligence, and stimulating their intrinsic motivation.

The absence of the element of pleasure in the Algerian preschool system and the focus on teaching values of patriotism deeply reflect a socio-cultural reality which emanate from a tragic historical and social background. Indeed, the French colonization, which lasted for more than 150 years and left 1 million Algerians dead, was followed by a bleak wave of terrorism during the 1990s. These historical events have occasioned continual traumas in the

social character of the Algerian society where little room is left for the aspect of pleasure and entertainment.

Tunisia: edging between modernity and tradition

Tunisia has an advanced record in its effort to promote the preschool system, notably with regard to infrastructure and childhood educator training (Djaziri, 2006; Rejeb, 1985). The kuttab is generally viewed by parents as an antiquated institution which can hardly meet the expectations of modern life. Accordingly, the meddeb (i.e., the person in charge of teaching children in the Kuttab), for instance, does not receive any form of training and his role is only to use drilling tasks for children to repeat and learn by heart verses from the Koran. Consequently, he does not acquire the basics of professional supervision, which makes him resort to aggressive punitive measures such as beating and insulting children who commit mistakes (Rejeb, 1985). The legislature seems to accommodate to the mainstream expectations of early childhood education. In this vein, the Act No. 65, implemented on July 29, 1991, set the major objectives which define the preschool system in Tunisia:

- Strengthen children's sense of patriotism and civil society and promote their openness to other civilizations.
- Help children build their personality and maintain the values of tolerance and solidarity.
- Develop children's emotional intelligence, various competences, and critical spirit, intellectual capacities and prompt them to take the initiative and foster their creativity.
- Ensure a balanced distribution of the different areas of learning.

In sum, the pedagogical framework adopted in the Tunisian mainstream preschool system is diverse enough to include, in addition to the element of pleasure, objectives attendant to the psycho-motor, cognitive, social, affective, communicative, and creative development of children's personality. The Tunisian experience has certainly evidenced some progress due to the government's effort to generalize this educational model across all the regions of the country. However, the problem which emerges out of this undertaking lies in the mismatch between the political text and its practicality in everyday life. As to the act of parliament mentioned above, it insists on the necessity to orient early childhood education not only to the acquisition of values of patriotism and Arab-Muslim belonging but also to learning values originating from other civilizations. As a matter of fact, while leaving behind the traditional option of the kuttab and the teachings of religious values due to the unpopularity of this institution, there is no real acculturation effort to fully immerse into other cultures especially the European ones (Djaziri, 2006). The case of French in this country may illustrate this mismatch. Although French is taught as a second language, its approachability among Tunisians is limited mainly due to being taught at a relatively advanced age of children (i.e., 10 year-olds). Perhaps one of the qualities of modern time Tunisia is the linguistic mix between French and Arabic (i.e., code switching). However, such blend does not qualify as a mark of acculturation, that is, the proportionate coexistence of both Arab and French cultures in one's frame of mind. Despite the social and political effort to promote French, the limitations of such endeavor may be explained by the absence of clear methodology and implementation tools of teaching French in the preschool system.

In retrospect, one may discern that there is a cultural disarray underlying the preschool system in Tunisia. Such disorder reverberates in the socio-cultural context this country at this point of time through the emergence of many discrepancies in social life such as psychotherapy being paralleled by the existence of psychic business, alcoholism and

religious devotion, the large inventory of French lexicon in common people's native Tunisian Arabic dialect, and the intermittent effort to promulgate Arabism in the public sector (i.e., at the level of ministries and governmental agencies) and bias to the French language in the private sector.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how preschool is differentially conceived by countries that are culturally distinct (e.g., Japan, France, The United States, etc.). Aspects of variation related to the definition of the preschool system is largely ascribable to the historical, social, and material determinants specific to each of these countries such as the place of the individual in the United States and the impact of bilingualism in Canada. However, such variation does also occur in countries which are believed to be culturally homogeneous. As a case in point, the Maghreb countries illustrate considerable diversity in as far as their preschool systems are concerned. This diversity is manifest in Tunisia's policy of openness which masks a cultural disarray that is reflected on the unclear pedagogical choices. The case of Morocco, poverty and cultural heritage largely explain the governmental preferences for and support of the old preschool system of the kuttab. Algeria's historical background together with social pressure for academic success may account for the absence of the element of pleasure and entertainment in the preschool agenda.

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End Notes

¹ Organisation arabe de l'éducation, de la culture et des sciences. (2000). *La stratégie arabe pour l'éducation préscolaire, période de l'école maternelle*. Tunis.