Exploring Social Constructions about Early Childhood Education: Implications for Policy and Practice

Muhammad Athar Husain, Amir Zaman and Abdul Ghafar

Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan

Abstract: Social constructions keep on bringing change and maintain continuity about early childhood education in fast changing global world. Dominant notions of childhood education shape social understandings and determine direction for policy and practice. This study explores how preschoolers are viewed by the society. A sample of 25 parents, 50 preschool teachers and 25 early childhood teacher educators were interviewed on a semi-structured interview protocol. The participants' views were obtained on young children's social and moral development in perspective of Pakistani society. Results indicated that there have been changes in social constructions regarding social and moral development of preschoolers. Data showed that emphasis has been on language learning, literacy skills and value embedded education for preschoolers. There are possibilities to incorporate such emerging social constructions and their implications for future policy and practice in early childhood curriculum and teacher education curriculum.

Key words: Early childhood · Teacher educator · Social construction · Childhood curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists, anthropologists and theorists have finally dispelled the notion of fixing early childhood education to some static state [1]. Several studies reported that meaning of childhood was placed within specific social, cultural and economic contexts. Normative assumptions about children perceived them as dependent or vulnerable or independent and competent [2]. These normative assumptions went on changing and focus of interest now shifted to social construction about early childhood education in a particular context.

Recent trends in early childhood studies focus on looking at early childhood education as a social construction [3-4]. Socio-political, economic and cultural contexts influence to change vision about early childhood education as such visions are considered to be embedded in those particular situations [5]. Various theories of childhood studies paved the way for viewing children from different angles in different social milieu. There also emerged conflicting social constructions during different historical periods. Childhood as a subject of social analysis cannot be separated from gender, class or ethnicity [4]. There is an abundance of research at present examining the notion of childhood as a social construction [6]. Attachment is central to children's learning and development and to family relationships. Close and reciprocal relationships between caregivers and children in the first years of life are of central importance to all early learning and development. Attachment provides a secure base of trust from which children explore their world and helps them relate to other people. Attachment security is vital for children's sense of wellbeing and their feeling of safety within and outside the boundaries of their family [7].

In the past few centuries, perceptions and experiences about childhood went through many social, political and economic changes. Earlier five year old child just belonged to work, leisure and pleasure. Then children were important to the family as being financial asset to them. Later on from 1800 onward, children became more independent with increasing awareness of their rights. Recently, children have become dynamic members of the society and vibrantly contributing to the family. Studies indicated that there is remarkable difference in a student's social skills before preschool education and within the process of preschools education [8]. Both family and the society now have different world view about social,

Corrseponding Author: Muhammad Athar Husain, Department of Education, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan-Pakistan.

political, cultural and economic role of children in the modern times. Three dominant constructions about childhood, that is, child as dependent with the family; the child as learner within a community of learners and the child as citizen within a social community [9]

Social construction puts forward that how people construct meanings of social experiences and develop their world view of surrounding realities [10]. Social and cultural contexts provide place in which individuals' perceptions grow and affected by their experiences and their interaction with others [11-12].

Social constructions of early childhood education encompass physical, social, emotional, psychomotor and cognitive areas of children development. Social constructions also hold significant importance from social, economic, cultural and biological standpoint.

Early childhood scenario in Pakistan has been confronted with multifaceted problems and issues. Various efforts were made on the part of the government which could not nourish and promote early childhood education as the most significant human capital.

Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2011 under the umbrella of South Asian Forum for Education Development presented the following picture of early childhood education in Pakistani society:

There has been litter progress to ensue the rights of children as data showed that 32.3% of children at age 05 were not enrolled in any school whereas of 32,323 children age group 3-5, 57.3% were not enrolled. ASER 2011 also negated the notion of early childhood education as an urban phenomenon being created through private education sector. Data showed that 67.6% children of ECE level were enrolled in government schools and 29.3% were enrolled in private schools.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study was to explore emerging perceptions regarding social constructions about early childhood education in Pakistan. How do parents, preschool teachers and early childhood teacher educators perceive social constructions about early childhood education in Pakistani society?

Research Questions:

- What are emerging social constructions about early childhood education?
- How do parents, preschool teachers and early childhood educators perceive early childhood education in specific social context?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: Parents, preschool teachers and early childhood teacher educator were participants of this study. Participants included 25parents who had at least two preschool going children; 50 preschool teachers who were teaching preschoolers with at least 10 year teaching experience and 25 early childhood teacher educators with at least 05 year teaching experience. All the participants were selected through purposeful sampling and they were from Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab Province, Pakistan. It is described that purposeful sampling as the selection of "information-rich cases," even single cases, for in-depth study [13].

Procedure: Consent of all the participants was obtained and they were informed that their participation is voluntary. A time schedule was predetermined as per convenience of the participants. They were interviewed on a semi-structured interview protocol. Interview for one interviewee lasted 30 to 45 minutes.

Data Collection: Participants described their experiences which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were asked to narrate their perceptions on social constructions about early childhood education. Content analysis was conducted to identify categories from their responses on interview protocol. To identify patterns and categories, interview responses were read several times. Ten categories were identified and reviewed by the researcher. Categories then were shifted to five themes if one category was recognized in 70% of the responses of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content analysis of the data revealed five major themes: All of the names presented in this section were Pseudonyms.

Support and Attachment: More support and attachment to early childhood education are acknowledged and emphasized in the society. Material and moral support is improving and concerned social stakeholders are getting more attached to early childhood children. Roheen (mother) said:

I give more time to my children. I support them in their daily routine activities and sometime I have to play with them. They want to spend more time with me and feel like getting support every time from my side.

Shahzain (A preschool teacher) said:

Society is changing and people are going to be more attached to early childhood education of their children. The parents extend and expand support in providing equipment and materials for conducting activities of reading, writing, listening and speaking. The children are getting more attached to the school staff and the school environment. Although various research studies have supported the role of child and maternal characteristics in determining attachment security within family [14].

Attachment in early year provides trust from which children explore their world and helps them relate to other people. Garbarino discussed that attachment gave sense of safety and well being within the family [15].

Care and Control: Another theme that emerged from data analysis was about care and control for early childhood education. Practice of caring and controlling the diverse aspects early childhood education is growing. Content on care and control is not sufficient in early childhood curriculum and teacher education curriculum.

Abdullah (Early childhood teacher educator) said:

Although care and control is not a new trend, Pakistani schools providing early childhood education do not have enough material on care and control in curriculum. Emphasis is not given on provision of care and control. Goals of care at early childhood education perhaps are not clearly defined.

Shiza (mother) replied:

I feel that preschool is lacking care of the preschoolers. Teachers are not fully aware of caring attitude and strategies. There is not content for mothers and even sometime preschool teachers do not know how to handle some critical situations like injury, burning, child left all alone, biting etc.

Maria Imran mother) said:

I do not think preschool teachers are trained for care and control. Many things need to be controlled regarding computer technology and information technology. I suggest that early childhood teachers and early childhood teacher educators need training on care and control of preschool children.

Social Attitude and Culture: Social attitude and society's culture towards early childhood education is changing. Education with care is not common in public preschools of Pakistan; however, parents and teachers are now demanding such preschool programs that offer education with care. Data revealed that early childhood education was closely linked with culture of the society. During early years, children grow very fast, their understanding of culture and social attitude also develops rapidly.

Burhan (Pre-school teacher) said:

Families are focusing more on care and culture now. Children are being encouraged to take part in social engagements that connect them to the cultural needs. Social environments are shaping the attitude of the people towards early childhood education.

Parents experienced that there is a shift in social attitude of the parents and they think culture to be linked with early childhood curriculum.

Hania (Mother) replied:

I take my kids to cultural activities and ask them to find its relevance to their curriculum. I have attitude that community and culture are components of early childhood curriculum.

Community Member: Some of the benefits attached to early childhood education demand that preschool children are considered to be a crucial member of the community. Data indicate that now social thinking is changing.

Nayyab Siddique (preschool teacher) said:

Parental involvement is increasing. Parents provide opportunities to their children to play their role in community activities. Now they talk to them, share with them and consult them which give children a sense of self-esteem, confidence and courage to consider them as important community member.

Children of early childhood education are facilitated to interact with children of diverse backgrounds which exist in the community. Community participation also helps them to increase their vocabulary and develop social, cognitive and physical skills.

Javaria (mother) was of the opinion:

I want my kids involve family and community activities and decisions. I consider them members of the community who can get involved in decision making. I also extend support to them and talk to their teachers for getting them involved in community functions.

Early childhood programs have family and community component. Stevens has suggested that social support for parents has curriculum ramifications [16]. He believes that family support programs must apply fundamental parent education strategies to broaden the families' informal social networks and to enhance their social support networks. He also believes that family support programs must utilize many transmission mechanisms (*e.g.*, modeling, coaching, interpreting, evaluating). In creating a program for families and children, teachers broaden the range of their clientele. Services are provided for both children and their families. Activities are planned to go beyond the classroom. The relationship between parents and teachers is modified so that parents change to both partners and clients [17].

Language and Literacy: An important theme emerged from the data was related to language and literacy during early childhood education. Parents, preschool teachers and early childhood teacher educators believe in language skills and are creating environments to provide opportunities for the development of language and literacy.

Khurram Shabbir (Early childhood teacher educator) replied:

I prepare student teachers for early childhood classes with focus on reading and writing. As our preschool children have been lacking opportunities and favorable environments for reading and writing, now teacher training institutions impart pedagogical knowledge and skills suitable for language and literacy skills.

Effective early childhood programs aim at providing instructional techniques to parents and educators which enhance children's language and literacy skills and experiences.

Fatima Noor (mother) said:

I am concerned with reading, writing and speaking of my child. I discuss some related problems with her teacher during my pick and drop. I consider language and literacy very vital during early years.

Arifa (mother) replied:

I give more time to reading and writing. For speaking I want them use computer and they listen nursery rhymes, kids' stories and songs; and watch videos of various programs/software designed for young children. Early childhood education schools should include effective strategies for language and literacy of preschoolers.

Researches show that when adults create rich language and literacy environments and respond to a preschool child's communication in specific ways, they can boost that child's emergent language and literacy development and increase the likelihood of future academic success. Parents and caregivers, including child care providers, preschool teachers and early childhood educators (ECEs) can extend potential help for language and literacy development. Effects of emerging social constructions about early childhood education are far reaching brining about a paradigm shift.

CONCLUSION

Social constructions of childhood are important for teacher educators, preschools teachers, parents, child advocates and policy makers to understand, as these images shape early childhood policy and practice. What is remarkable about the visions of social construction of childhood over the years is that there has been much more attention to children's needs than to their strengths.

Social constructions about early childhood education have impact to change social mind set regarding investment in early childhood education. Pakistani society is transforming limited vision of early childhood education towards multiple understandings which are embedded in social settings. Now the people are getting awareness of contemporary practices of early childhood education and their vision is getting out of the box. There is fast increasing development in early childhood education but still more awareness about preschool education in needed and to make it attractive [18]. Such paradigm shift is seen as change agent for advocating and supporting social constructions about early childhood education.

The prevalent social constructions imply connections with purposes and outcomes of early childhood education. The parents, teachers and early childhood teacher educators view children more dynamic and vibrant social asset. A new paradigm about social constructions of early childhood education is growing which is focusing on care, control and quality in early childhood education. This social change may ultimately bring about support for ECE and a change in teacher education curriculum.

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