

Intervention practice for preschool children in need of special support: A comparative analysis between South Africa and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article describes and compares intervention for children in need of special support in South Africa and Sweden. This is achieved by developing a theoretical understanding of current intervention approaches and describing the challenges within the South African and Swedish contexts. Ecological development theory, natural environments and activity settings are discussed to justify the conceptualising of intervention practices. Recommendations are made for a more integrated approach that is culturally relevant and meaningful to children and their families.

Key words: activity settings, children, context, preschool, special support

Introduction

The field of early childhood intervention has experienced many changes within the past decade. The most significant being the transition towards intervention practices that are contextualised with improved relevance to children and their families. Intervention has therefore moved from focusing on discrete isolated skills within an artificial setting, towards finding approaches that reflect the child's natural environment^{1,2}. Natural environments have been defined as the day-to-day settings, routines and activities that children engage in on a daily basis³. This differs significantly from simulating clinic-based sessions in the family's home or community setting, using therapist-selected materials⁴.

The aim of this article is to describe intervention practices for children in need of special support in Sweden and South Africa. This will be achieved by developing a theoretical understanding of current intervention approaches and thereafter a description will be provided of the South African and Swedish preschool context and the specific challenges experienced by the two countries. Finally, recommendations will be made on addressing some of the identified challenges.

Theoretical background

The ecological development theory is a tool for deeper understanding of the interaction between children, family and society and also a tool to discover new relationships. This approach to intervention is grounded within the systems approach and ecological development theory⁵. Ecology can be explained as the interaction between the individual and his/her immediate environments. The ecological model views the child within context and acknowledges the multiple systems that influence child development, both in a direct and indirect manner⁶.

In an ecological perspective, the child's context is viewed within a hierarchy of systems, the most proximal to the child being the microsystems: the immediate settings wherein the most reciprocal, regular and sustainable relationships take place which consequently have the largest impact on children's everyday functioning and development⁷. According to Bronfenbrenner the interactive processes that are most likely to influence development are those that have the most meaning to the person⁵. The most common microsystems for young children under the age of six years are the home and preschool settings. These settings are the coherent natural environments that constitute the everyday life of children and families. The interactive processes within these natural environments therefore have to be identified and

understood in order to provide meaningful intervention. The interaction between the child and the environment can be understood by the study of activity settings, which make up everyday experiences and events that involve the child's interactions with various people and the environment⁸.

Knowledge is needed of the range of natural environments that constitute the everyday life of children and families and the relationships between these environments, to be able to provide contextualised intervention. The relationships between different microsystems are represented by the mesosystem^{5,9} eg, the relationship between the family and the preschool setting. The everyday life of children and families is also influenced by more distant relationships. The exosystem is more indirect and the processes within this system not as regular as within the microsystem. Still, the conditions stated within this system influence the everyday life of the child and the family through eg, community decisions about preschool and school activities and regulations, access to rehabilitation, the support by the family's social network, and the security and attitudes of the neighbour environment.

Surrounding these systems is the more abstract macrosystem that serves the conditions for families to act in the society through culture, customs, values, laws and regulations. Activity settings represent an expression of how families and preschools can and do structure their time, based on the conditions and features within these systems¹⁰. These activities are often determined by tradition and culture that include "values and goals, resources needed to make the activity happen, people in relationships, the task the activity is there to accomplish, emotions and motives of those engaged in the activity and a script defining the appropriate normative way to engage in that activity."¹¹ Intervention goals that fit easily into family or preschool structure, activities, routines and traditions are less likely to disrupt the child's everyday functioning and therefore increase sustainability of intervention goals¹².

The context of the preschool child

The context of the South African preschool child is influenced by a multitude of factors. The most significant is that six out of every ten South African children live in poverty, with those living in rural areas being more vulnerable¹³. In addition, it is predicted that by 2010, orphans, as the result of HIV and AIDS and other causes, will comprise 9 - 12% of South African children¹⁴. Child-headed families have already become a painful reality where older siblings are left to care for the young. This has definitely challenged the traditional definition of the family structure



and function to which interventionists are accustomed.

On the opposite side, most Swedish children grow up in a nuclear family environment and about 80% of children start preschool at age 12-18 months as a consequence of parents going back to work after parental leave. Parents are entitled to parental leave for 18 months, receiving 80% of their wages¹⁵.

Early childhood education within the South African and Swedish contexts is structured and formalised very differently. In South Africa educators are faced with a special challenge as they are often solely dependent on school fees for financial support. Due to the varied socio economic structures and high rate of poverty within the country, some sites charge as little as R25 a month and in most sites school fees are not paid regularly¹³. The lack of funding and resources add to the difficulty of child care providers who may also not have access to basic resources like electricity and piped water. Many preschools across the country are attempting to increase the access that young children have to preschool education.

Generally all children in Sweden attend preschool from one to five years and they are a part of the support system for all children¹⁶. Since 1998 there have been overall national goals for preschools which are set out by the Swedish Parliament and Government in The Education Act¹⁷ (Parliament) and curricula (Government). The school system in Sweden is a goal-based system with a high degree of local responsibility and teacher autonomy. Most children are educated by preschool teachers and usually there is an assistant working in the group as a resource person if the group contains a child with disability or in need of special support.

Intervention

In Sweden one way of receiving early intervention for children in need of special support from birth to the start of school at age six¹⁶ is through attendance at preschool. Policies and school documents request that all children should be included in regular preschool settings. The curricula for preschools states that children "who occasionally or on a more permanent basis need more support than others should receive this in relation to their needs and circumstances". The Swedish Educational Act¹⁷ states that children who for physical, mental or other reasons need special support in their development should be given the care their special needs demand. That means that policy documents state that children in need of special support have special rights, eg, Individual Development Plans, support from an assistant and/or special teacher, as well as support by the habilitation centre and the Swedish Institute for Special Needs Education, depending on their needs.

The intervention practices given to children in Swedish preschools are largely contextualised in that they tend to be organized around the everyday routines and activities of the specific setting. In some cases, the preschool might organise different activities for children in need of special support, but most of the intervention is given within the natural environment of the child and the preschool. Some children with diagnosed disabilities have a personal assistant specifically to assist them, but sometimes these assistants lack any education. Two studies by Norling and Luttrupp (in progress) both show that an assistant can facilitate as well as hinder participation and inclusion. The National Board of Health and Welfare together with the Institute for Special Needs Education published a report about collaboration¹⁸. They reported that one of the most problematic areas for children and their families is the role and working tasks of the assistants. Thus, some preschools prefer to include fewer children in the group and let one of the preschool teachers take responsibility for the child with disability.

In Sweden, children with diagnosed disabilities and their families have access to several different support systems. This includes support by the habilitation centre with a mixture of different professionals working in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary teams; special teachers, speech therapists, psychologists, social workers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and paediatricians. The National Institute for Special Needs Education is a state funded organisation with about 600 special teachers working as advisers to support municipalities, preschools and schools in their work with children in need of special support. The advisors mostly support teachers and administrators with supervision and further education and seldom work directly with children.

Early intervention in South Africa is politically organised in a quite similar way to that in Sweden, but there are obvious differences as to how early intervention practices are carried out in the two countries as well as in the conditions for these practices to be realised. According to

the Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁹ "early childhood development should be multi-sectoral, community-based, and integrated to enable young children with disabilities to benefit from a learning environment" (p.98). This calls for a responsive, integrated approach for the child in need of special support into both the formal and informal Early Childhood Education Sector which is supported by The Education White Paper²⁰, the Integrated National Disability Strategy²¹ and the White Paper on Inclusion²².

A report on the state of the nation's children in the South African Education White Paper²⁰ identified the following as the main focus areas of early childhood development in South Africa:

- ❑ inculcating values such as anti-racism, anti-sexism, and human rights
- ❑ identification and prevention of children who are at risk for learning difficulties and social, behavioural problems
- ❑ development of literacy
- ❑ a strategy for reducing poverty and inequality

While policy is supportive of an integrated holistic, community-based approach to early childhood education and intervention for the child in need of special support, provisioning has remained under-funded and splintered. Due to the overlapping responsibility of the Departments of Health, Education and Social Development there is limited clarity as to which government sector should fund early childhood education. While some provincial governments provide subsidies to registered preschools, a large percentage of community-based schools are funded by school fees or non governmental organisations¹³.

Some preschool sites have integrated children in need of special support into their schools, however intervention for these children is primarily provided at local community clinics or at hospitals where health care is free to children under six years. The introduction of a community service year for speech, occupational and physiotherapists assisted in bringing services geographically closer to the families. This, however, does not imply that the services being offered have been transformed. While location has changed in bringing services closer to communities, the methodology of using natural environments still has to be operationalised. Community service has improved the accessibility of services to children and their families, but further collaboration between this service and preschools is required.

The challenge to early interventionists

The challenge to early interventionists who aim to address the needs of preschool children and their families is one that extends the bounds of traditional views of intervention. A call is made to develop a contextualised approach that views children within their multi-faceted context.

The heterogeneity and diversity of the South African context calls for an approach that accounts for the various stressors to which families are exposed. The government needs to define its role in relation to early childhood development and increase the accessibility for the most vulnerable children in the country. Early childhood intervention should be multi-sectoral, community-based and integrated to afford young children with the necessary opportunities for learning.

The majority of preschool educators in South Africa received their training from non-governmental organisations and are therefore viewed as "unqualified" according to regulations. Furthermore, 20% have received no training and only 10% are seen as adequately qualified¹³. An additional concern is that the audit found that English was the dominant language of instruction across the country, irrespective of the child's home language. Most South African universities are at present redefining and developing their curricula towards a more locally responsive model. Therapists should be introduced to community-based work as part of their undergraduate training with exposure to the stark realities of poverty, the impact of HIV/AIDS and many other factors within the microsystems of the children and families with whom they have to work.

Although the majority of Swedish children in need of special support are included in mainstream preschools, the challenge for teachers is actually to integrate these children into the everyday activities, relationships, and routines of the preschool. Another challenge for preschools is to realise that they have to consider the needs of individual children by creating activity settings in which children can use their abilities, interests, and experiences to increase the level of sustainability of intervention.

Some challenges in the field of early intervention are common to both South Africa and Sweden. These are mainly related to the need for coordination and collaboration between support organisations and



the professionals working at a local or national level, as well as to basic education about children's general development and disabilities.

An urgent challenge for both countries is the issue of social changes. In Sweden, increased immigration demands that preschool teachers and other professionals working with children in need of special support, and their families, are aware of contextual prerequisites such as family structure, activities, routines and traditions that could differ from the ones inherent in their own cultural understanding. In South Africa professionals working with children and families need to acknowledge the implications of the challenges that families face on a daily level and also develop an understanding of how family and traditions impact on children in need of special support.

Discussion

Everyday family and community life provides young children with many different kinds of learning opportunities and experiences^{27,28}. The cultural context is transmitted to children through activity settings, which make up everyday experiences and events that involve the child's interactions with various people and the environment. Engagement in everyday routines and activities that are deemed desirable by parents and the community will produce positive psychological experiences that go along with socio-cultural wellbeing²¹. Preschool teachers and early interventionists therefore need to increase their understanding of children's contexts in order to facilitate learning. This knowledge will improve their ability to afford relevant, meaningful experiences to children. Research has demonstrated that children's learning would be enhanced if they were provided with opportunities to practise existing skills, explore their environments, and learn and master new abilities²⁷.

The lack of coordination and collaboration between different organisations providing assistance to children in need of special support in both South Africa and Sweden, delay the possibilities for inclusion. The Swedish preschool curricula state that the preschool must take "advantage of children's abilities and desire to take greater responsibility for themselves and their participation in the group of children" and allow the children "to influence the contents of activities"²³. Individual children should be given opportunities to make decisions according to their own abilities, interests, and experiences. This poses new demands, expectations and challenges for the preschool teachers as to how they relate, communicate and work with the children as well as their families. More knowledge is needed about pedagogical methods and practices based on children's individual needs. It is also essential for teachers to have knowledge about barriers and facilitators in the total support system of the children. It is necessary for the teachers to think divergently and to work across disciplinary lines²⁴, which means that preschool teachers need to cooperate with other disciplines like speech therapists, psychologists and occupational therapists as well as with the family to ensure continuity and contextualisation of early childhood intervention.

Conclusion

While supportive policies and guidelines exist in both South Africa and Sweden, the challenge of implementation remains unique to each country. South Africa, which is a young democracy, faces the challenges of poverty, HIV/AIDS and an inherited inequality of resource distribution. While these macro level issues appear insurmountable there are many attempts within the field of early childhood intervention to advocate for the rights of children, especially children in need of special support. The road ahead is still a long arduous journey. Various role players have identified the need for change and have started developing approaches that attempt to make an impact at a micro level. One such example is the parent-child programme developed at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, which attempts to move away from the traditional approach to intervention towards a more empowering model of service delivery.

In Sweden, the challenges are largely present at a micro level in implementing real inclusion by providing activity settings based on individual needs of children and families. This requires, among other things, increased cooperation and collaboration around the child in need of special support. A suggestion is to implement evidence-based practice in Swedish preschools. If practitioners receive more knowledge and tools to identify evidence-based intervention they may be able to highlight their decisions about which interventions they should implement in preschools. Another important issue is that the intervention will be supported by theoretical and empirical evidence³⁰.

The current phase of transition in both countries calls for active participation by early interventionists in creating natural learning opportunities that are culturally relevant and accessible to families of young children in need of special support.

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