Universalizing Early Childhood: History, Forms and Logics

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Introduction

Early childhood has become a global issue – for communication and observation, for comparison, monitoring, and the measurement of gaps and successes with regard to international goals and indicators. Not only have countries around the world developed and expanded early childhood programmes and services for the education, welfare and health of young children, they have also assigned ministerial responsibilities, developed curricula, formulated national plans of action, raised the levels of qualification for early childhood educators and trained parents in parenting skills (UNESCO, 2007; see also Monaghan, this volume). Moreover, the issue of early childhood has entered the world political agenda. The year 2010 was remarkable in this regard: in September of that year, the first UN World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education took place in Moscow (UNESCO, 2011); and in November, the UN General Assembly adopted the first resolution in its history that was specifically dedicated to early childhood (UN GA, 2010). The public interest in the issue of early childhood has increased cross-nationally as well as on a global level especially since the 1990s and has accelerated further since the turn of the twenty-first century (see Sugawara, 2008).

The institutionalization of early childhood as a global issue today is astonishing as the ‘discovery of early childhood’ (May, 1997) is a historically recent phenomenon. Although references to the early years can be found across cultures (see Olmstedt and Weikart, 1989), the modern understanding of the early years as the foundation for subsequent individual and social development dates back to the eighteenth century Enlightenment discourse on individuality and social progress (Cunningham, 1995; May, 1997). In addition, the institutionalization of early childhood as a global
issue seemed quite improbable because early childhood has been, and continues to be, a quintessentially local form, deeply embedded in specific familial and communal settings and linked to distinct cultural practices of childrearing, child feeding and socialization patterns (see LeVine and New, 2008). Whereas later childhood has gained global attention in relation to the worldwide institutionalization of national education systems, the early years have, hitherto, been constituted primarily as a familial or community concern, with little relevance for state action or international cooperation (see also Monaghan, this volume).

As early childhood is a historically recent and locally embedded category, it is necessary to explain how it became institutionalized as a global social concern. How are the early years constituted and constructed in a way that makes the globalization of this issue likely? How has our understanding of the early years changed, and how have the conditions for communicating about early childhood changed? Which logics are involved in globalizing such a ‘local’ issue as childhood? Hence, the aim of this chapter is to present one strand of the globalizing (hi)story of early childhood. It uses the perspective of neo-institutionalist world society research to argue that the global meaning and relevance of early childhood – and of political action for young children – is constituted through the logic of universalization, and that this logic is one condition for the institutionalization of early childhood as a global social concern. The arguments and analyses presented in this chapter are part of a research project on the constitutive conditions for the globalization of early childhood, which draws on analyses of publications of international organizations and documents from the League of Nations and the UN archive in Geneva, data from the Yearbook of International Organizations, ethnographies of international conferences and expert interviews with staff from different international organizations (UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, Save the Children US and Sweden, and the Consultative Group for Early Childhood Care and Development, among others).

The first part of this chapter situates the current societal interest in early childhood within a broader historical process. It provides a condensed overview of how the individual and societal importance of the early years emerged as an issue for global social concern. The second part of this chapter analyses how the importance of early childhood has been universalized within a major international policy framework, notably, the Education for All (EFA) initiative. I will distinguish three forms of the universalization of early childhood within the EFA framework: semantic universalization with regard to the repetition of