

A Kindergarten Paradox?
Can Preschools Serve As Resource And Outreach Centers?

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the role kindergartens in a number of countries, including Turkey, play and might play when it comes to social cohesion and safeguarding children's rights. It is based on observations and experiences from numerous projects in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Turkey and Central- and East-European transitional countries. The paper describes a so called 'kindergarten paradox'. Kindergartens and other ECEC services are often seen as the social institutions with the greatest potential to stimulate social inclusion of children from poorer families as early as possible. At the same time the formal ECEC services are usually attended by children from better-off families; further, kindergartens, by delivering supposedly quality service, logically stimulate the psychosocial, cognitive and emotional development of these better-off children further and thus make the gap between them and children of poorer backgrounds even greater and more difficult to overcome at later age.

Then the paper argues that minimal improvements to the existing ECEC infrastructure are needed to address the kindergarten paradox. Possible interventions, some of them already piloted, are discussed. These initiatives extend the access of quality ECEC services to children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. This, in turn, reinforces the positive role the kindergartens and other formal day-care services for preschool-aged children might play in increasing social inclusion and promoting the rights of young children.

Introduction

This text puts forward some slightly provocative ideas on providing access to quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services to as many children as possible, as quickly as possible. The matter is addressed in the context of the role of kindergartens, preschools and other formal ECEC facilities in transitional countries play vis-à-vis social cohesion.

Firstly, this text casts light on what one can name a *kindergarten paradox*: is it possible that preschools do more damage than good when it comes to social inclusion of disadvantaged children? Recognizing that in some countries the policy-makers address the issue on a large scale, the text then focuses on what happens and what can -and maybe should- happen between now and the time when the formal preschools services for all children put in place.

Several unorthodox approaches to using existing formal ECEC infrastructure are suggested, making a case for *turning the existing formal ECEC facilities into resource and outreach centers*. This text does not have the ambition to exhaust all possible dimensions of the preschool-as-a-resource-center concept. The sketched ideas are only illustrations of how the notion can be realized in practice in a short time and with relatively low investments. Last but not least, some potential resistance is foreseen and proposals are made on how to overcome it.

A kindergarten paradox?

There is consistent data demonstrating that attending quality ECEC services has a positive effect on the healthy development of the young child and her school readiness (UNICEF, 2008; Bennett, 2008)¹ and well-being later in life, including her economic success (ibid; Friedman, 2010). It is also well established that the benefits ‘are strongest for the poor children and for children whose parents have little education’ (UNICEF, 2008).² It is logical then to expect that stimulating children from disadvantaged families to participate into mainstream ECEC should be a focal point of ECEC policies. The reality, in most transitional countries, is different. It is not a secret that the children attending kindergartens, also in Turkey and across Central and Eastern Europe, are mainly those with better-off parents. Typical example is Serbia: according to a report on the state of children in Serbia twelve percent of all families pointed that ‘the service was too expensive’ as a reason for their child not attending a kindergarten, while the respective percent among the Roma families was 38. No wonder then that only four percent of Roma children in the country were covered by preschool institutions (Milanovic, 2007).

One reading of this tendency is that the gap between the worse-off families and the rest of the society manifest itself at very early (st)age. Another, more unpleasant interpretation, is that the preschools (which are probably the social institution with the greatest potential to stimulate the social inclusion of children from poorer families as early as possible) in fact decelerate social cohesion. Attended predominantly by children who are anyway better-off and delivering supposedly quality service, the formal ECEC facilities logically stimulate the psychosocial, cognitive and emotional development of these better-off children even further and thus make the gap between them and children of poorer background even greater and more difficult to overcome at later age. This is what this text defines as the *kindergarten paradox*.

¹ Bennett, 2008 provides an extensive review of the literature on the benefits of quality ECEC services.

² See also Bennett, 2008 on the benefits of formal ECEC provisions for children from disadvantaged background.

The usual policy-makers large scale solution

The kindergarten paradox has not gone completely unnoticed by a number of policy makers. Some countries responded with extensive programs to build infrastructure and capacity to cover all pre-school-aged children into the formal ECEC system. For example, Turkey runs an ambitious multimillion program in the field of formal ECEC to include half of its three to five year old children and all five-year old children (60-to-72-month) into formal ECEC facilities by 2013, as prescribed by the Governmental *Ninth Five Year National Development Plan* (İnanlı, 2009).

Another recent example is Bulgaria. In the summer of 2010 the government took a € 20-million loan from the World Bank to build new preschool facilities, to fund social service providers and to train professionals to work in the kindergartens and other formal preschool facilities. According to Mrs. Simeonova, Deputy-Minister of Labor and Social Policy the main objective *'is to improve and extend the services for children from families with low income and children with disabilities up to 7 years of age'* (News.bg, 2010). The effort will be to *'include [all] children aged three to seven into the kindergartens and to improve their school readiness'* (ibid).

Alternatives

These two initiatives as many other policy responses illustrate a wide-spread believe that there is no better alternative to high-quality ECEC services backed by the state. The governments' efforts to provide such services are maybe the best the children from poorer families can hope for in a long run. But this approach is expensive and time-consuming. And in a short- and medium- term there is a problem: while the governments make sure that every child is provided with an affordable place in a quality ECEC facility, cohort after cohort of disadvantaged children will keep on lagging (even further) behind and the vicious circle of social exclusion will be prolonged for yet another generation.

Are there alternatives? There are numerous 'alternative services' run by NGOs, religious or secular charitable organizations, sometimes by businesses. Most of them do wonderful job and deserve admiration. Still, there is no single example of a country where these services might be considered a viable response to the *kindergarten paradox*.

Yet, a possible answer to the question *how to help children left behind by the existing (formal) ECEC provisions* might be closer to home than it seems. There is a relatively simple answer: by opening the existing kindergartens to children and families who do not have access to them now and by introducing formal-ECEC-provisions-outreach services. In other words: ***by transforming the formal ECEC services from 'closed' institutions serving a limited number of subscribed children into a something that might be named 'ECEC resource centers'***. What does it mean in practice?

Probably the easiest first step is to look at the subscription practices: In many countries where the most disadvantaged children do not attend kindergartens the existing (formal) provisions are often too rigid. For example, children may only be subscribed on a full-time basis. Introducing a possibility for a child to attend a kindergarten for only half a day (e.g. only the mornings or the afternoons) or for –say- three days a week might mean that a kindergarten's capacity³ might increase by at least a third of what is now considered its maximum. Part-time attendance would also mean lower subscription fees and therefore more chances for children whose parents cannot afford to pay the inevitable full fee. This way only a simple change in the attendance policies might provide access to quality ECEC services to a significant number of children from poorer families. The quoted earlier literature (e.g. UNICEF, 2008) clearly states what access to quality ECEC provisions

³ In sense of: the number of served children.

might mean for the psycho-social development of underprivileged children; additional benefits of flexible subscription include increased access to the labor market for 'low-income' mothers/parents as well as more chances for the 'better-off' children to enjoy some time with their families instead of spending a full-time working week in a kindergarten.

Another, a little bit more radical, idea is to engage the kindergarten educators and other professionals in out-reach activities with 'out-of-preschool' children and their families. We can already point out to some promising examples.

Such a case was created by preschool educators from Ada.⁴ They, in collaboration with NGO colleagues, used the means of perfuming arts to engage children from a socially isolated minority community. This is how the participants themselves described their project *Be part of the Story*⁵: 'the project was implemented by a team of preschool teachers, who together with children and parents from a Roma settlement prepared and realized the puppet performances in the settlement. The main idea was to create outreach activity, *to open up to the idea of kindergarten teachers going where the children are*'. Also as part of the project workshops [for Roma children and their parents] took place in the kindergarten. A very specific, measurable outcome was that the number of Roma children in the kindergarten increased; equally, if not more important was that an 'alternative model' of working with marginalized children was established; Roma parents and community members have [now] better understanding of the importance of early childhood education; prejudices between Roma community and preschool institution [were] overcome' (Trikić, 2009).

Some examples from Turkey; a book-and-toy library opened in the premises of a preschool serving almost exclusively upper-middle-class children in the Mediterranean city of Mersin. Children and parents from the neighborhood together with children and families-clients of the kindergarten have been welcomed to use the library. The reasoning behind the initiative was to encourage parents to read to their children and stimulate their interest in (picture) books as well as to persuade parents to play with their children and spend more 'quality time' together, at home. A special toy-workshop space was created, a place where children and parents can repair or make toys together and where children's creativity and senses of ownership and responsibility are to be fostered. A lesson learned here is that both parents and children responded positively and children demonstrated better linguistic skills⁶ (Aarssen, 2010).

Another Turkish example, also from Mersin, is of a summer preschool for children - and their parents (in this case - mothers) - who had never before been served by formal ECEC provisions. The initiative took place in premises of primary schools in poorer areas of Mersin and was run by preschool staff. The reasoning behind the initiative was that 'children from low income families have a more difficult time adjusting to primary school and do less well academically', therefore such a summer preschool would 'better prepare them for primary school' (Aarssen, 2010). In addition the school was targeting the parents and siblings: 'One of the reasons that these children do not attend preschool is because their parents are not aware of its importance and benefits. The summer school thus also tries to raise awareness amongst parents, so they hopefully will send their other children to preschool' (Aarssen, 2010). Among the important lessons learnt from this pilot was that 'improved

⁴ Ada is a relatively small town in Vojvodina, Serbia.

⁵ Special appreciation for the staff of the kindergarten 'Čika Jova Zmaj' Ada, NGO 'Duga' Ada, Red Cross, Ada and the parents who took part in the project and to Viktorija Ferenci, and Svetlana Milošević for their leadership.

⁶ Another very important lesson from this initiative is that the parents of disadvantaged families 'after a while stopped coming. A possible reason might be that the [...] preschool is located in a middle class area and it is often considered as a "rich school". Parents from low income families might have felt uneasy or a bit out of place in this rich school. To address the problem [the preschool management] is aiming to set up two more toy libraries but this time in low income neighborhoods of Mersin. The expectation is that parents feel more at ease when amongst others who are in the same socio-economic position.' (Aarssen, 2010)

social-emotional skills (e.g. children started acting as role models for other children, they showed better personal hygiene skills, etc.) play abilities, language skills [were observed]' (ibid). Equally important, it was reported that the children from the summer preschool performed better at their first year in the primary school than their peers who did not attend the summer preschool (ibid).

Certainly, there are many more examples like these, from other countries. Yet, these happen incidentally; *they are not part of a policy or well-planned effort of opening up the kindergartens for children who need them most.*

Opening up the kindergartens for children who need them most is a possible approach in itself. As a rule the preschools in most transitional countries are well equipped with toys, picture books, media and other facilities such as playgrounds, and sometimes even swimming pools, that stimulate the motor, psycho-social and cognitive development of young children. This again reminds that those who have (children of better-off families) are given even more chances to develop and those who do not have (e.g. children who do not have for example picture books at home) are not able to benefit from the preschools' equipment; it seems like a very apparent manifestation of the kindergarten paradox. But this situation also provokes a question: is it really that difficult to open the kindergartens to underprivileged children -let's say- in the weekends? Or to allow economically weaker parents to spend 'quality time' in the evenings together with their children in premises which by default are meant to stimulate early childhood development? No doubt, there will be some costs to organize the access in safe and secure way but the existing research on the benefits of ECEC (UNICEF, 2008; Bennett, 2008; Friedman, 2010; see also above, p. 3;) makes us believe that the cost-benefit ratio will be positive.

Each of the suggested options to optimize the usage of the existing ECEC infrastructure in order to reach out to children who need it most should be good enough by itself to make a difference. Combining them might lead to greater synergies, speeding up and spreading out benefits fostering social inclusion as early in life as preschool age. Combined or not each of the mentioned initiatives can be introduced relatively quickly: probably most transitional countries will be able open up their formal ECEC facilities within a year after a political decision is taken. Another important point is the relatively low cost of such approach: most of the material infrastructure and manpower is in place; what is needed is mostly good organization, attitude change and some measures guaranteeing the safety and security of the children.

The possible quick pace of introduction and the low costs are two factors that might make the kindergarten-as-a-resource-center concept an attractive one for policy makers. An accelerated, although partial, access of vulnerable children to formal ECEC provisions becomes a possibility already in the period of 'waiting' for the new infrastructure to be built and the new educators to be trained.

Possible resistance against this approach

The sketched ideas might not be welcomed immediately by all stakeholders.

The parents

Probably the greatest resistance will come from parents whose children attend the kindergartens now. It is only natural that they question whether 'opening up' of the kindergartens might lead to worsening the quality of the services for their own children. Similar resistance was recorded a few years ago during a study on social attitudes towards child protection reforms in Bulgaria. Then a director of an institution for children growing up without parental care explained that it was mainly

the parents of the ‘regular children’ (as well as the teachers) in the ‘regular schools’ who were mostly unhappy with the fact that the ‘children from the institutions’ were being integrated in the mainstream education (Симеонова & Сименов, 2007).

There is no reason to expect that the reaction of the preschool aged children will be different. Such possible response has to be well understood. By no means should the parents’ concerns be neglected or the parents themselves demonized. There are at least two arguments that might be offered to these parents.

The first one is *the mutual benefit argument*: the children of the better-off parents sooner or later will encounter their socially or economically weaker peers, most probably already at the elementary school: the more advanced the ‘weaker’ group of children is and the less the difference in the developmental level of both groups, the less the chance that the ‘better-off-background’ children will be held back by ‘weaker’ group.

And then, there is *the social justice argument*: kindergartens are –usually- heavily subsidized which means that the ‘richer’ children get a service paid largely by taxpayers’ money; at the same, the same service remains beyond the reach of their poorer peers.

The kindergartens’ staff

The kindergartens’ staff might not warm to *the idea of opening up* right away either. They understand too well that working with socially disadvantaged children is completely different ballgame and, honestly, who is looking for extra working hours and reaching out to muddy neighborhoods? But even the limited experience with the cited above pioneering projects (in Serbia and Turkey) clearly demonstrates that once the professionals discover the challenge of reaching out to the most needed, they ‘can’t get enough’ of it. And those of them who are educators not only by profession but also by vocation are quick to grasp the importance of early stimulation of young children.

The policy makers

The policy makers too might not become immediate supporters of such initiatives. Many of them might ask themselves why experiment with a system (of the preschools) which in many places functions reasonably well and risk angering the (upper-) middle-class whose children are overrepresented in the kindergarten population and who tend to be the most active voters. Yet, the policymakers, at least the most visionary ones, stand to benefit enormously. They are the ones to take the credit for introducing an initiative that in middle-to-long term might have a preventive effect on a large range of social ailments– from school drop-out, to youth criminality, to social segregation.

The best possible allies?

The children apparently are most open to share the benefits of ECEC with all their peers regardless of the differences in socio-economic or ethnic background as the following beautiful, but also a little bit sad example demonstrates. A mini-projects named *I ja znam da crtam*, (I, too, know to draw) provided an opportunity for children and their parents from ethnic-minority and ethnic-majority groups to take part together in an art workshop.⁷ Rather than to train future artists, the objective was

⁷ *I ja znam da crtam* was implemented thanks to Zvezdan Ramic and his colleagues from Romski Kulturni Centar (RKC)– Vranjska Banja, Serbia.

to stimulate the inter-ethnic and intercultural exchange in a place where the different communities were drifting apart. Several months after the workshop the children from different ethnic background still sustained their new contacts and friendships, whereas their parents barely managed to do so. Parallel, similar workshops involving children and parents from the same ethnic group but with different socio-economic position led to... exactly the same outcomes. It comes as no surprise: young children obviously fail to discriminate on the basis of ethnic or economic background. Is this a skill acquired later in life?

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