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Values in Early Childhood Education (ECE): A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of Values for ECE Expressed in Policy Documents

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Abstract

Purpose: This comparative study identifies core values expressed in Early Childhood Education (ECE) official policy documents from a sample of thirteen countries.

Design/Approach/Methods: This study employs document analysis as well as content and thematic analysis. ECE values identified in the policy documents are categorized into three groups: political and society-related values, educational values, and individual and relational values.

Findings: Document analysis reveals the values that are common across countries and those that are more specific to just one or a few countries at most. This study discusses the characteristics of these values from the perspective of globalization. In doing so, this comparative study illustrates and discusses the tendencies for both convergence and divergence in ECE values in policymaking worldwide.

Originality/Value: The findings of this study expand our understanding of the values in ECE policy documents in the sampled countries, offering insights into ECE objectives and policymaking in various countries.

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Keywords

Comparative education, early childhood education, policy documents, values

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Introduction

Few scholars have explored the values in Early Childhood Education (ECE) policy documents (Einarsdottir et al., 2015, p. 99). Indeed, only a few studies have compared ECE values in the policy documents of two or three countries. For instance, Alvestad and Pramling Samuelsson (1999) compared Norwegian and Swedish ECE curricula, finding many similarities and variations according to the value perspective embedded in the curricula. At the time, the Norwegian plan had a Christian orientation, while the Swedish plan reflected a more democratic perspective (Hovdelien, 2012). In a similar analysis, Soler and Miller (2003) focused on the way in which visions for early childhood were reflected in the curricula implemented in England, New Zealand (i.e., Te Whāriki curriculum), and Italy (i.e., the Reggio Emilia approach). The authors found that the English Foundation Stage Curriculum narrowly focused on children's preparation for school, whereas the values in the New Zealand curriculum were related to cultural diversity and biculturalism. Meanwhile, the Reggio Emilia curriculum emphasized the children as active partners with their own rights.

More recently, Einarsdottir et al. (2015) proposed that ECE values are mentioned in international policy documents, which support several important values. For instance, UNESCO's (2007) *Education for All by 2015: Will We Make It?* highlighted the value of reducing gender disparities. The policy document also underlines the importance and understanding of education as a means of ensuring a safer, healthier, more prosperous, and environmentally sound world, while contributing to social, economic, and cultural progress, tolerance, and international cooperation. Einarsdottir et al. (2015) also argued that *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006) warned educators against a purely market system in education, particularly insofar as this system "moves away from the principle of universality in education, that is, of providing equal opportunity for all children within a universal system in which values of citizenship are uncalculated, and a democratic and multicultural mixing of children is practiced" (p. 118). Indeed, the report mentioned democratic values several times and explicitly framed the Nordic tradition focusing on democracy, in which "Centre goals are to support child development and learning and provide experience of democratic values."

This study compares samples of official documents from 13 countries representing all major continents. It is important to consider the cultural situatedness and influence of globalization. Comparative studies involve comparing and identifying similarities and differences (Buk-Berge, 2005). In this respect, the focus of this study is not on comparing countries or different types of

policy documents, but on contrasting the values for ECE expressed in the selected policy documents.

Research question

This study identifies the core values for ECE in sample policy documents from countries worldwide. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: What are the basic or core values for ECE expressed in the official policy documents of the thirteen countries? In addressing this question, this study identifies which values are common across the selected countries and which are unique to just one or a few countries.

Theoretical framework

What is a value?

The term “value” is broad and multifaceted. Hofstede (2001, p. 5) offers a simplified definition, “a value is a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others.” Expanding on this definition, Kluckhohn (1951) asserted that, “A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of actions” (p. 395). More recently, Halstead and Taylor (2000) defined values as the principles and fundamental convictions that act as general guides to behavior—that is, the standards by which particular actions are judged to be good or desirable. Put simply, values are what people think of as good or bad, or right or wrong. Of course, this makes values extremely difficult to satisfactorily define, as no matter how elaborate they are, they always point back to pre-existing ephemeral assumptions regarding how things “should” be.

Different types or categories of values

Values have been categorized in different ways according to the field to which they relate or their function (Kirkhaug, 2018). A pioneer in value research, Rokeach (1973) divided values into two categories: (1) terminal values, which are fundamental values that express long-term goals; and (2) instrumental values, which express preferable modes of behavior or means of achieving the terminal values. Values can be studied at the individual, organizational, and national level (Hofstede, 2003). As this study analyzes national documents and related organizations (i.e., ECE institutions), the values examined herein are located on the national and organizational level. Education is value-laden insofar as it is invariably underpinned by various ideals and notions of desirable attitudes that should be promoted in children. The official policy documents analyzed in this study provide insight into which values are important in particular countries and their societies. Accordingly,

this study examines values on an individual, organizational, and national level, and investigates how these values are intended to influence the development and education of children in ECE centers. As this study deals with values in education, it defines values as attitudes, principles, or ways of thinking that govern the evaluations, choices, and acts of children and staff in ECE centers.

Historical influence on and cultural situatedness of values

Values in education have changed throughout history. Values can change over time and shift with the cultural context. For instance, in Norway, the Kindergarten Act of 1983 asserted that kindergartens should give children “an upbringing according to basic Christian values,” while the most recent edition states that kindergartens should “build on fundamental values in the Christian and humanist traditions ... which are entrenched in human rights law.” As such, the most recent formulation provides a broader basis of values related to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Hagesæther, 2018).

This study compares the ECE values of various countries across the globe. The unspoken cultural underpinnings of these values cannot be ignored. After all, each country has its own history and societal philosophies, which have shaped their views of education and citizenship. Values have a dynamic nature insofar as they can have varying levels of worth at a specific point in an individual’s life—that is, relatively submerged in certain scenarios and overriding in others (Van Niekerk & Botha, 2017). Moreover, broadly speaking, values are regulators that drive society.

Of course, a complete overview of the cultures, histories, and educational systems of the 13 countries examined here is far beyond the scope of this study. Certainly, the relationship between the history and culture of these countries, and how it relates to the values expressed in their policy documents, may prove an interesting follow-up to this study. Furthermore, utilizing the perspective of collectivist versus individualist societies may yield some illustrative examples, which may illuminate the complexity of cross-cultural comparisons. Although this is a gross simplification and both collectivist and individualist sentiments can be found in any society, societal goals may reflect a marked prioritizing of the individual over the collective or vice versa (Triandis, 1988). There are alternative approaches, such as traditional versus progressive or tight versus loose (Pelto, 1968). Nonetheless, as noted, a complete overview is beyond the scope of this study. This issue notwithstanding, when discussing its findings, this study provides examples of how documents from different countries use different terms or connotations for similar values.

Hierarchy of values

Values are often structured in a hierarchy, with those higher in the hierarchy regarded as more important and influential in the evaluations and actions of a person or organization (Tuulik et al., 2016). Of course, such hierarchies vary across cultures. For example, in some societies, “family

honor” is a key value that overshadows values like autonomy or forgiveness. According to van den Heuvel (2001), German youth in the interwar period were taught that the value of racial pride was more important than individual and relational values like mercy and humility. In respect to this study, the core values in policy documents have typically undergone a thorough process of selection, and will be regarded as significant values in the hierarchy of values within that society.

The role of values for ECE in policy documents

This study seeks to answer two related questions. First, what is the importance of the values expressed in policy documents for ECE? Second, what function do these values have in the country and what role do they play for ECE centers, parents, and children? In democratic countries, these values are often produced through intense discussion and debate between various parties interested in ECE, including the government, political parties, education organizations, and religious bodies (Hagesæther, 2018). Throughout such deliberations, numerous values are proposed, discussed, and supported or opposed by different groups, eventually resulting in the acceptance of certain values by the relevant authority, such as parliament or the Ministry of Education. As such, the values expressed in policy documents can be regarded as values with a substantial amount of support in the country.

These values also provide a relevant point of reference for parents, local representatives, and teachers, among others, regarding what is happening in ECE. The value of gender equality is an explicit example of this. As points of reference, such values often provoke discussion among the teachers or between teachers and parents on whether or how to realize such a value in their ECE center. The values stated in policy documents can also influence the training institutions for ECE teachers. They can influence the curriculum, what is taught, and what research projects professionals decide to initiate. These values similarly influence education publishing companies, including which books they choose to print. For example, the prioritization of environmental preservation can influence the themes included in science, the undertaking of projects on nature conservation, and the publishing of relevant didactical books on this theme.

Although the values expressed in policy documents can also be reflective of actual practice, this is not always the case. On the one hand, policy values may reflect the work done in educational institutions, especially if the policies are known to the relevant actors and discussed, adapted, and implemented accordingly. If this is not the case, the values identified in policy documents are evocative but ultimately worthless.

Globalization of values

Globalization has been described as a dual process in which increased flows of ideas, images, goods, and people make each locale more alike, yet simultaneously more internally diverse

(Appadurai, 1996). Globalization leads to the faster spread of technology, ideas, knowledge, and culture. The world has become more open and connected, with greater contact between people and cultures resulting in our gaining more knowledge about one another and about different cultures and societies. Young people worldwide are listening to the same music, looking up to the same heroes, and desiring the same symbols of status. However, whether a complete cultural conversion is happening remains a matter of contention (Ritzer, 2011). According to Wiborg (2007), globalization intervenes in all phases of our lives and shapes both our socioeconomic circumstances and our values. Discussing global education policy and national school systems, Wiborg (2016) asks whether globalization leads to divergence or convergence in education policy. The current study provides evidence that while globalization may lead to some convergence in early childhood policies, divergence is also evident.

Methodology

This comparative study analyzes the values for ECE as expressed in the policy documents of 13 countries. With respect to selecting countries, this study actively sought to ensure that all continents of the world were represented, with the exception of Antarctica. The selection of countries and professionals from each country was based on the accessibility. In this respect, we recruited partners from various countries through our international networks at Queen Maud University College (QMUC) as well as colleagues and friends.

Positive responses were received from ECE professionals located in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco, Israel, Norway, Spain, the United States (US), Puerto Rico, and Brazil. Accordingly, participants were drawn from all continents except Antarctica, namely, Africa (Eswatini in the south, Kenya and Ethiopia in the east, and the Arabic country of Morocco in the north), Asia (Japan in the east and Israel in the west), Europe (Norway in the north and Spain in the south), North America (the US and the US territory of Puerto Rico), South America (Brazil), and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand). However, using these countries as samples does not guarantee global representativeness, which may pose a significant limitation.

This study identifies and compares the values expressed in official policy documents concerning ECE in different countries. Policy documents are defined as official and binding documents in the respective countries. Such documents are typically regarded as the foundation upon which teachers base their practices and are used to guide daily work in ECE centers and schools (Codd, 1988; see Appendix A).

As this is a comparative study, it focuses on discerning and discussing similarities and differences between the selected countries in terms of the values they have chosen to prioritize in

ECE as reflected in their policy documents. In doing so, this study seeks to clarify whether it is possible to identify certain trends in ECE values, the characteristics of common values, as well as which values, appear to be more idiosyncratic to particular country contexts. This study also examines whether there is a tendency to emphasize political, educational, or individual values; what roles these values play in ECE; and the background of these values and their presence in ECE policy documents.

This study identifies and compares the core values expressed in policy documents concerning ECE in thirteen countries. Naturally, document analysis is the primary approach. Document analysis is an efficient and cost-effective approach in cross-cultural studies as the data are available without applying for permission and there is no problem of obtrusiveness. The analytic procedure entails finding, selecting, appraising (i.e., making sense of), and synthesizing the data contained in the documents (Bowen, 2009, pp. 27–28). Data selection is an important step. In this respect, this study first decided to select official binding documents from each country, including laws, curricula, and curricula guidelines. With respect to curricula, we included the content articulating core values or guidelines. For this study, the thirteen research partners identified the relevant policy documents for their countries. They also completed the first level of analysis by selecting and appraising the values from their national documents in cooperation with the researchers.

The type of document used varied from one country to another. In 2018, the Kingdom of Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) introduced a new National Education and Training Sector Policy, which specifies educational values for all types of schools from preschool to secondary schools, but is relatively general with respect to ECE. Nine of the selected countries—Australia, Brazil, Ethiopia, Israel, Japan, Kenya, New Zealand, Norway, and the US—have an educational plan, curriculum guideline, or framework plan presenting the national ECE education policy. For three countries, namely, Spain, Morocco, and Puerto Rico, values in ECE or in all types of education are expressed in legal texts. Here, values are expressed as a short list with little explanation. While Norway also lists basic values in a legal text, there is some elaboration via a framework plan for preschool teachers. Meanwhile, the US presents a unique challenge: rather than imposing a national plan or framework, each state is responsible for developing its own Early Learning Framework. Nonetheless, all of the states and territories took a similar approach in addressing all domains of development and focusing on accountability for child outcomes. Therefore, the learning guidelines of various states are markedly similar. Accordingly, this study's USA partner selected one state, Minnesota, for analysis. Values representing the US are extracted from the *Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* (ECIPS, 2017).

Another concern is the language in the various documents. Five of the selected countries—Australia, Eswatini, Kenya, New Zealand, and the US—use English as an official language, while Ethiopia, Israel, Japan, and Norway provided official English translations of the frameworks.

However, for data from Brazil, Morocco, Puerto Rico, and Spain, this study depended on participating ECE professionals to translate the value terms into English and ensure that the relevant terms and values were correctly understood contextually.

After receiving the documents and identified values from all partners, content analysis of the documents was conducted to identify the core values expressed therein. The identification and classification of values was a two-way process. In many cases, the local partners performed the first identification of values and sent their findings to the researchers together with the relevant documents. When policy documents were originally in or officially translated into English, we were able to participate in document analysis. Our results were returned to our local partners, who provided further input. A list of different values identified from all collected policy documents was then distributed to all participants such that they could alert us to any oversights. This process produced a list of values for each country.

This process was followed by a thematic analysis of all identified values (Bowen, 2009). Through close examination of the documents and based on the fact that values in the ECE policy documents express values at the national, institutional, and individual level (Hofstede, 2003), the following three categories of values were identified in relation to ECE: (1) political and society-related values, (2) educational values, and (3) individual and relational values. The values could have been categorized in a variety of ways; for instance, groupings could be viewed from political or sociological perspectives. Nonetheless, this study employed an educational/didactical perspective, with teachers constituting one of the main target groups of such documents. This approach aligns with the previously mentioned categorization of values according to the national, institutional, and individual level. Accordingly, *political and society-related values* are principal statements that express how the society should function and reflect attitudes toward children and society. *Educational values* emphasize what the ECE centers should strive toward, how the ECE centers should be organized, and how they should work to reach these goals. Meanwhile, *individual or relational values* express the values one wishes to promote in children. Individual values are often expressed in relation to other people.

Some of the identified values could fit in two or all three of the aforementioned categories. For example, honesty is an individual or relational value insofar as it is an important quality of an individual, but can also be regarded as a political or society-related value as it is an important value in society. However, when used in relation to society, honesty forms part of another concept: anti-corruption. As such, the grouping of the values in this study is not intended to be exclusive; rather, it is intended to provide an overview of the values articulated in the ECE policy documents of various countries.

With respect to ethical considerations, as this study examines public policy documents, there are no concerns regarding confidentiality or the harm to individuals. All documents analyzed in this

study are official and open to the public. We are aware that in such public documents, not all demographic groups may be represented to the same degree. We are also aware that various political ideologies may influence the meaning of the concepts and how they are used. Of the four researchers of the current study, two are Norwegians, one is Norwegian/Moroccan, and one is an American, each possessing individual cultural backgrounds and values. This study does not disclose the political, ideological, or cultural context of each country; rather, the focus is placed on the values that the countries themselves have expressed in their policy documents.

Findings and discussion

Latest policy documents in ECE

Globally, ECE development has grown significantly over the last thirty years. ECE development has also been prioritized as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN). Consequently, the development of ECE programs is widely understood as an investment in the future of the country. The collected ECE policy documents and revisions were issued from 2009 onward. Additionally, all countries had some kind of value statement in their policy documents. Framework plans or curriculum guidelines often began with a few pages or a section expressing, explaining, or defining basic or important values for ECE. Legal texts tended to provide shorter lists of ECE values. Nonetheless, the values articulated in policy documents suggest how a country intends to secure the future of society. In the following discussion of the identified values, this study also traces tendencies toward globalization in this sector.

The presentation of values. Policy document analysis revealed numerous values. The scope of this comparative study does not allow for discussion of all of the values in each country. Accordingly, this study focused on two aspects. First, this study identified values that seem to be common across many countries, thus suggesting international trends. Second, this study discerned values expressed in just one or only a few countries, illustrating the diversity in the setting and expression of values in ECE. Those interested in a more detailed account of values in one or more countries can consult the policy documents provided in the Appendix. The following sections present and discuss the three categories of values identified in the collected policy documents: namely, political and society-related values, educational values, and individual and relational values.

Political and society-related values

Political and society-related values are principles concerning attitudes toward greater society, how it should function and be organized, and what should be emphasized in children's attitudes toward society.

One aspect of identified political or societal values focused on “national heritage and culture” or “national pride” (i.e., “love of one’s nation”). This value was articulated in some form in the policy documents of eight of the studied countries, namely, Ethiopia, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Morocco, New Zealand, Norway, and Puerto Rico. Most countries emphasized that children should learn to know, be proud of, and love their own country and cultural heritage. Rather than defining the concepts of heritage and culture, policy documents tended to highlight certain aspects of heritage and culture, including history, festivals, songs, stories, and ways of living (Kjølvik, 2017).

Different countries used different concepts or terms to express this value. For instance, Kenyan documents expressed this value as patriotism and as related to the unity of the country. This may be due to the fact that Kenya comprises numerous tribes and has experienced intertribal tensions in the past. Similarly, policy documents from Ethiopia—a country of about 110 million people from various ethnic backgrounds and a history of ethnic power struggles—emphasize the value of national heritage and equality across all sections of society. Such a value can be crucial for a nation to continue as one country. Puerto Rican documents also articulate the value of loyalty and devotion to the country, while Israeli documents underscore the value of love for one’s nation and heritage. In the case of Israel, the nation was founded in 1948, after some 2000 years of the Jewish diaspora. While some Israelis were born in Israel, many came from other countries and possessed their own traditions and languages. Accordingly, establishing a national Israeli identity with its own language has been a major goal of the country (Brody, 2018). Significantly, this goal is balanced with an emphasis on the value of tolerance toward other cultures. It is hardly surprising that recognizing, appreciating, and loving one’s country is a value emphasized by the majority of the countries examined in this study. Indeed, this value is central to the identity development of children. For instance, children will identify themselves in relation to their country by expressing their nationality, such as “I am Japanese” or “I am Kenyan.” This value is usually balanced through the emphasis on respect for other nationalities or minorities.

The latter underscores a particular issue here, namely, values in relation to *minorities and minority culture*. Values in relation to minorities and minority cultures concern the rights and values of indigenous people. Indigenous peoples are culturally distinct ethnic groups who are native to a place that has been colonized or settled by another ethnic group. Indigenous minorities comprise an estimated 370 million people across 90 nations (Amnesty International). In many cases, these groups have been discriminated against and marginalized for generations. Against this historical backdrop, many countries now emphasize the value of respect for indigenous and minority groups in their policy documents. Although we have not explored the process of how these values came into use in ECE policy documents, the *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention* may have been influential in this regard (1989, ILO 169).

This issue is specifically mentioned in the policy documents of six countries: Australia, Brazil, Israel, New Zealand, Norway, and the US. It is unclear why seven of the examined countries make no reference to this value. It is possible that this value is addressed in other documents. Significantly, failure to recognize indigenous groups can lead to serious issues of discrimination and marginalization. Certainly, Brazil has a clear statement regarding this value, noting that ECE centers should “respect and value children with indigenous, African, or African-Brazilian culture, reaffirm ethnic identity and mother tongue.” Israel emphasizes “tolerance for other cultures” and provides for a special Arab stream in ECE that is taught in Arabic. Australian documents similarly underscore that kindergartens should promote respect for and understanding of the indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Australian policy further notes the need for education to be provided by culturally competent teachers and the broader aim of closing the education gap between indigenous and non-indigenous children. Both Australia and New Zealand emphasize the recognition of the culture, language, and identity of both the majority and minorities. New Zealand explicitly notes the importance of learning in more than one language (i.e., English and Māori), and reference to both cultures is made throughout the curriculum plan. Likewise, the *Norwegian Framework Plan* (2017) emphasizes the value of “respect for Sami culture.” This reflects Norway’s history, with Sami children subject to strong assimilation policies until approximately 1980 (Vik & Semb, 2013). Now, Sami children have the right to be taught in their own language and about their own culture (Hellesvik, 2017). Meanwhile, in the US sample from the state of Minnesota, equity is an overarching value intended to address the historical conditions and barriers that have limited the opportunities of marginalized people in the past.

The policy documents of nine countries articulated values related to *democracy, personal freedom, and equality*: namely, Australia, Brazil, Eswatini, Norway, Japan, Puerto Rico, Morocco, Spain, and the US. Here, basic rights—including freedom of thought, speech, and participation—are mentioned, as are equal rights and equality between men and women. Values like freedom of thought, speech, religion, participation, and equality can be traced back to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). These values are a prerequisite for democracy. In the *Norwegian Kindergarten Act*, all such values are seen in relation to human rights law, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and the *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention* (ILO Convention 169). However, despite being fundamental in human rights law, these values are under pressure in many countries. Indeed, gender equality, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion are not explicitly mentioned in the ECE policy documents of many countries.

The value of democracy is an obvious example of how the same concept can be used differently across various countries and cultures. For example, both Eswatini and Norway are kingdoms that hold democracy as a core value. However, Eswatini is an absolute kingdom where the King

appoints the prime minister and a number of members of the parliament, while Norway is a constitutional democracy where the king does not possess political power. Instead, the Norwegian people elect the Prime Minister and all members of the Parliament.

The policy documents of seven countries—Australia, Brazil, Israel, Japan, Eswatini, Norway, and the US—mention *care for the environment, respect for nature, and conservation or sustainable development*. While Eswatini simply mentions “sustainable development,” Japan and Norway both emphasize caring for nature and the preservation of the environment. Brazil is more specific and notes, “preservation of environment, of biodiversity, and sustainability of life on earth.” Australia underscores respect for the interdependence of people, plants, animals, and the land. Interestingly, the US is the only country that explicitly uses the term “conservation,” which refers to an awareness that resources are limited and the value of reusing and recycling resources. This value is related to care for nature and sustainability and clearly encompasses similar values to those listed by the six other countries mentioned here.

There is a strong international emphasis on care for nature and environment as a result of various UN initiatives. Indeed, one of the eight Millennium Development Goals included the need “to ensure environmental sustainability” (MDG, 2000). In the follow-up to these goals, the SDGs were developed in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, and agreed upon in New York in 2015 (SDGs, 2015). The SDGs have an even broader emphasis on climate change and nature conservation. The ratification of the SDGs has been followed by a growing number of international conferences and agreements, including the Paris Climate Conference (2015) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction in Japan (2015). It is interesting to note that such concerns for nature and environment have rapidly gained a foothold in ECE policy documents.

Finally, five countries refer to the value of *peace*, namely, Kenya, Spain, Japan, Morocco, and New Zealand. Kenya mentions peace and social justice, while New Zealand and Spain discuss the peaceful resolution of conflict. For most countries, the value of peace seems to relate to peace within that country. Japan expands this conceptualization of peace by noting the desire to “contribute to world peace and development of international society.” Japan is the only country examined in this study that addressed world peace. It is not clear why world peace features in Japanese ECE documents, although it may be related to the traumatic experiences of the country at the end of the Second World War (1939–1945).

Educational values

Educational values refer to the preferred way in which the sociopolitical order is instilled in each new cohort of citizens. Education is the means by which a society reproduces itself. Through education, the young are socialized and learn the skills, mindsets, civic awareness, and moral tenets prized by a society. This study observed greater differences between the countries in terms of

educational values than in individual or relational values. In other words, educational values were more idiosyncratic than those in the individual or relational category, where most countries espouse variations of kindness, empathy, and respect. Although educational values are more specific to each country, there are some exceptions, with Australia, Eswatini, New Zealand, Spain, and the USA presenting values concerning *inclusion* and the repudiation of discrimination. Similarly, seven countries—Australia, Brazil, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Puerto Rico, and Spain—emphasize critical thinking as a value. Critical thinking can be seen as related to the value of democracy insofar as the ability of people to think for themselves is necessary for a democracy to function.

It is important to recognize that the values expressed in such public documents are normative and not indicative of how they are put into practice or what degree of internal variety exists in the society in question. Nevertheless, it is likely that such values reflect cultural priorities to some extent. Arguably, such cultural considerations are better expressed in such normative sources, where they are unimpeded by the necessities of practical reality.

At the most basic level, we can discern differences between what are often thought of as individualist and collectivist societies. For instance, the first values mentioned in the Japanese general kindergarten provisions are lifelong character building and abiding by the rules. The same is true of Puerto Rico, whose educational values primarily focus on values promoting functioning society and fulfilled individuals, including responsibility, objectivity, punctuality, impulse control, and problem solving. Adherence to the rules is best understood as a collectivistic ideal, particularly insofar as it entails the individual conforming to external prescriptions, where the primary beneficiary is the social order itself. The value of lifelong character building should also be understood as collectivist in nature. Indeed, character building is a central tenet of Confucianism, a social and moral philosophy that has played a significant role in Japanese political history, which emphasizes the duty of each member of society toward one another (Paramore, 2016). Although to a lesser extent, Spanish values also appear to promote primarily collective ideals. Most of these values, such as collaboration and the rules of coexistence, are virtues residing in the relations between people and not within individuals themselves. Conversely, nearly all of the stated educational values in US policy documents emphasize individual attainment. The only possible exception is inclusion. However, although inclusion may appear to be a collective ideal, it is worth noting that American public discourse primarily presents the need for inclusion as a fulfillment of individual rights against discrimination.

Another division is between values prioritizing the preservation of tradition and those encouraging societal advancements. The most prominent example of the former is Israel, which prizes the respect of tradition, adherence to the scriptures, and the observation of religious tenets and holidays. In contrast, Ethiopian policy documents emphasize the use of education as a tool for individual and national progress. Both Ethiopian and Kenyan policy documents highlight the pursuit of excellence, suggesting that such excellence is a driver of social advancement.

Some of the countries expressed their educational values *through the lens of religion*. For example, Israel calls for the importance of respecting tradition, the scriptures, and observing religious tenets and holidays. Similarly, Morocco makes reference to moderate Islam and “religious and societal values.” Meanwhile, Norway evokes Christian and humanistic values, which it interprets in relation to human rights law.

Several countries highlight social values. For instance, Brazil underscores “respect for the common good,” Israel points to “respect for social conventions,” and Japan prioritizes “respect for the rules.” Conversely, other countries articulate values aimed at the individual level. For example, nearly all of the stated educational values in US policy documents emphasized individual attainment. Values such as creativity, curiosity, and self-management are all primarily virtues that an individual possesses and which benefit the individual rather than the group. This reflects the intent of US early learning guidelines to ensure agreed upon outcomes for each child. That said, the Minnesota ECIPS also focused on inclusion, which might be interpreted as a collective ideal. The value of independence is most explicit in the policy documents of Puerto Rico.

The Kingdom of Eswatini promotes the relatively unique value of *holistic child development*, a value reflective of the ethos underpinning the country’s recent educational reform. Holistic child development is intended to be part of a society-wide effort to lift the country out of poverty by focusing on the development of human resources, including adequate nutrition, health care, and parental support (UNESCO, 2014).

Analysis revealed a host of values, some of which appear to be rooted in day-to-day practicalities, while others seem more abstract and aspirational. This observation is indicative of another difference: namely, the degree to which values are grounded in the social fabric of the respective country. For instance, the Moroccan call for respecting other children’s belongings is clearly a very concrete and practical expectation, as is the Japanese value of following the rules. Meanwhile, the Norwegian values of creativity and a sense of wonder are more intangible and evocative. Indeed, such values are wholly abstract, with their definition and attainment implicitly reliant on substantial personal development. In contrast with the Japanese value of uncritical obedience to the rules, the Norwegian value of acting ethically relies on personal reflection and development.

Play is an example of a practical value. Seven countries—Australia, Brazil, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, and the US—mention the value of *play*. In many countries, there is an ongoing discussion on the importance of play and academic learning in ECE centers. Indeed, some consider play to be the primary activity in ECE. In this sense, play refers to the way in which children explore the environment and social relations, engage in social and emotional learning, cultivate understanding, and obtain knowledge. Play is a natural activity of children and has its own value (Lillemyr, 2020). In this regard, others consider play as a break between learning sessions and means of

refreshing children to make them more receptive to learning. Certainly, preschool children have a large capacity for learning. It is important that time is utilized effectively in preparing them for the future.

As noted, this discussion is still ongoing, with each country choosing different approaches in an attempt to balance play and learning in ECE (Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Sundsdal & Øksnes, 2015). Interestingly, only five of the selected countries mentioned play as a core value in ECE. Although we cannot comment on the situation in the other seven countries, this discrepancy may provoke reflection on the place of play as a core value in ECE. In some countries, where ECE is new and there are relatively few primary schools, the role of ECE centers is typically regarded as preparation for primary school. In this regard, it is worth noting that the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* emphasizes children's right to play (Article 31). The UN has noted that Article 31 has not attracted enough attention from politicians and the public. Indeed, the UN has further warned that children's right to play is threatened in many countries (UN General Comment No. 17 [2013], Sundsdal & Øksnes, 2015, pp. 3–4).

Individual and relational values. In terms of individual and relational values, all of the selected countries mention numerous moral values related to living together, self-care, and care for others. According to Hofstede (2003), values are “a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others” (p. 5). Whether conscious or unconscious, explicit or implicit, *individual and relational values* serve as guiding principles—serving as a guideline or moral map for individuals and their interactions with others. Individual values have a significant impact on children's formation process. Begley (2010) has emphasized that values are motivationally grounded and have a conscious and unconscious effect on people's actions, attitudes, speech, and behavior. Values have a dynamic nature in the sense that they can have various levels of worth at a specific point in a person's life. They can be submerged in certain scenarios and overriding in others (Begley, 2010).

Individual and relational values serve to guide the actions we perform, the judgments we make, and the attitudes we take in relation to one another (Askeland & Aadland, 2017; Halstead & Tylor, 2000). These values represent standards (e.g., security, equality, and freedom), virtues (e.g., honesty and justice), and relationships (e.g., care, trust, responsibility, politeness, and respect). According to Buchko (2007), “without some common beliefs or values, organizations could not exist; people need a common set of beliefs to come together and create social organizations” (p. 37). Shared values are important frameworks for the decision-making and behavior of citizens.

As noted, document analysis revealed more differences between the countries in the category of educational values than in the category of individual and relational values. Certainly, *respect and consideration* are highly valued by all of the selected countries. Of course, each country used its

own terminology and reflected individual nuance. Both New Zealand and Australia referred to maintaining respectful and reciprocal relationships. Israel emphasized mutual respect, while Japan highlighted the need to respect others as worthy individuals. Norway referred to respect for human dignity, Spain prioritized tolerance, and the US highlighted the value of social responsiveness. Brazil noted the need to respect the differences between people, while Puerto Rico underscored the values of respect and kindness. Meanwhile, Morocco referred to respect for diversity; Eswatini prioritized care and support; Ethiopia pointed to the need to respect the values of other people and cultures; while Kenya emphasized respect, understanding, and tolerance.

Different countries also use different terminology for similar individual and relational values. For instance, with respect to the values of *compassion and empathy*, nearly all of the examined countries employ terms like love, care, support, generosity, friendship, humility, solidarity, forgiveness, and sharing. Like respect and consideration for others, compassion and empathy are easy to relate to a moral framework guiding living together in peace and tolerance. Similarly, the value of *responsibility*—specifically mentioned by Australia, Brazil, Ethiopia, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Morocco, New Zealand, Norway, Puerto Rico, Spain, and the US—is a core value in all personal relations and society, facilitating people’s trust in one another.

The aforementioned values are included in Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which asserts that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” It is not surprising that most of the countries included in this study highlight values such as respect, consideration, compassion, empathy, and responsibility as foundational values in their ECE policy documents. This may be because these values are essential to successful human interaction and the prosperous function of society.

The policy documents of Israel, Japan, Kenya, Morocco, Puerto Rico, and Spain mention the value of *honesty*, which essentially means that one should not lie and seeks to ensure that individuals are trustworthy, loyal, fair, sincere, and truth seeking. Such values can be expressed with different terms and have varying connotations based on a society’s traditions, culture, religion, and history. For instance, Kenya and Spain use the term “honesty,” while Japan refers to this value as “seeking the truth” and Puerto Rico as “trustworthiness.” That only these countries explicitly refer to honesty is interesting given the importance of this value in most cultures and societies. Observing the different values prioritized by different countries should prompt deeper reflection on the values promoted in the policy documents of one’s own country’s and what values should be included going forward.

Some values were mentioned by only one or two of the selected countries. Puerto Rico and Israel mention *patience* as a value, with Israel combining this value with tolerance. Given that Israel is a cultural melting pot for people from all over the world, patience and tolerance are key values in nation building. Patience is also a necessary value given the situation in the Middle East.

Certainly, in a rapidly changing world, the ability to wait and persevere can be very important, particularly insofar as it is widely acknowledged that changes in education and development take a long time. Norway and Morocco are the only countries to mention *forgiveness* as a basic value. As an alternative to revenge and family honor, forgiveness can be of great importance in both personal life and politics, as demonstrated by the reconciliation process in South Africa (Tutu, 1999).

Elsewhere, Japan values *zest of life*, Morocco mentions *gratefulness*, and Norway prizes a *sense of wonder* as a core value. With respect to the latter, Norway emphasizes the need to cultivate a sense of wonder in children toward life, nature, and the things happening around them. This may also be related to the *spirituality* mentioned by Puerto Rico and Norway, possibly indicating an openness toward reflection on the religious and spiritual dimensions of life. Norway also places emphasis on outdoor and nature experiences. Meanwhile, New Zealand mentions “respect for Tikanga,” which means to behave in a way that is culturally appropriate and follow the rules about not harming others and the environment. Finally, the US was the only country to highlight family engagement as a means of bringing family narratives and cultural traditions into ECE, thereby honoring and supporting diversity.

Individual and relational values can be both conscious and unconscious, as well as linked to our emotions. The values that we are aware of providing the basis for our assessments, preferences, and choices (Williams, 1979). For example, some might say “I cannot do this because it goes against my values” or “this is okay because it aligns with my values.” Of course, we also make decisions based on values we are unaware of possessing. Such values may also exist as an unconscious or core state with which we can have an emotional relationship. Individual and relational values essentially guide our moral conscience. For example, if we hold the values of responsibility and justice, we may feel guilty if we witness unfair treatment or action without doing anything to stop or prevent it.

The influence of globalization on values

The countries mentioned in this study have very different cultures and histories, which means that their identified values work in and reflect different contexts. This explains the divergence in prioritized values from one country to another. However, there is also striking parity between the various countries in this study, one that may be best explained as a consequence of globalization. It is an undeniable fact that concepts and values are spreading globally—a phenomenon demonstrated by the number of values shared by multiple countries in this study’s sample. There is also a growing amount of evidence indicating that convergence is occurring on the structural level, with increasing economic and political interconnectedness leading to the standardization of educational systems (Hassi & Storti, 2017). A clear example of such standardization is the holistic Early

Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) model compiled by UNICEF and adopted by countries such as Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and the Kingdom of Eswatini.

In comparing the statements of values by different countries, this study identified some common trends in values in ECE policy. Analysis revealed several values represented in the majority of the sampled countries. These values are generally understood as vital and important. In some cases, policy texts made direct reference to international documents like the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* or to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (e.g., Morocco and Norway). In many cases, policy texts made indirect reference to these documents through recourse to values like respect, equality, and democracy, as well as freedom of thought, expression, consciousness, and religion. The impact of various UN conferences or programs was also apparent, especially the MDGs (2000) and SDGs (2015), in policy documents, including references to values like gender equality and the protection of nature and biodiversity. The presence of these values can be considered the result of a top-down process, as they are due to international influence.

With respect to the issue of standardization, Wiborg (2007) poses the question of whether schools worldwide are becoming more convergent or divergent. According to Wiborg (2007), school systems appear to be growing more similar worldwide, with significant international influence on education content and values. However, countries do adapt such international values to fit their own national culture and tradition. Such structural convergence and content divergence are illustrated in policy approaches toward indigenous people. Through the *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention*, the rights of indigenous people have been recognized internationally in many countries, demonstrating convergence. However, the cultural content and language of instruction is unique to each culture, demonstrating divergence. Another example is how different countries define democracy in relation to their own traditions.

This study illustrates the influence of globalization on values. Significantly, globalization can be seen as two parallel processes: convergence and divergence. Convergence is evidenced in the structure of school systems and ECE institutions, as well as the numerous examples of common values mentioned above. This study also observed the process of divergence. Although countries have similar values, they tend to employ concepts with different connotations. For example, the value of protecting the environment and nature was articulated as “sustainable development” (Eswatini); “caring for nature and preserving the environment” (Japan and Norway); “preservation of environment, of biodiversity and sustainability of life on earth” (Brazil); and “value of reusing and recycling” (the US). Moreover, this study observed several values particular to the policy documents of just one or a few countries. These values were typically related to the culture, history, tradition, or religion of that country. Such values—including patience (Israel), peace (Japan), and forgiveness (Morocco and Norway)—are examples of a down-up process in policymaking as well as of divergent processes in the development of values. It seems that globalization, in all its

complexity, has influenced the ECE sector and the values mentioned in policy documents. However, this is not necessarily indicative of the convergence of values, with the sample in this study indicating significant divergence between countries in terms of ECE values.

Conclusion

This article identified the values promoted in the ECE policy documents of thirteen countries. In doing so, this study found a number of values that were common across most countries. As these documents are often referred to as international texts or conferences, they can be seen as examples of a top-down influence in the process of setting policy goals for ECE. This study also found numerous examples of countries adapting or reinterpreting these shared values to fit their own sociocultural and political contexts. Document analysis also revealed several instances of values proposed in just one or a small number of the sampled countries. Such examples are indicative of a bottom-up influence on the process of setting policy values. Significantly, the findings of this study illustrate convergence and divergence as two parallel processes in the setting of values in ECE policy documents.

Values can be both targeted and instrumental at the same time. Education can be an individual, educational, and political value. Values typically serve as the means by which a society achieves overarching goals like social equality and quality of life. From a purely educational perspective, values are a matter of realizing various goals related to knowledge, skills, and competence. For the individual, education can be a value representing a liberating process whereby one can cultivate their abilities and contribute to social change for the benefit of others (Biesta, 2014).

All of the countries in this study expressed basic values for ECE in their policy documents, indicating that ECE is viewed as an important institution in these countries and that the ECE institutions have a role to play in social development going forward. We hope that this study will stimulate more research in the field of ECE values. Indeed, there are numerous issues related to ECE values that lie beyond the scope of this paper. One topic deserving further study concerns how these values are put into practice in different countries and to what extent such policy values influence the actual work of ECE centers. Another issue worth exploring further is how national history and culture are reflected in the values set in ECE policy documents.

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Arve Gunnestad took the initiative to start the study “Values in Early Childhood Education (ECE): A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of Values for ECE Expressed in Policy Documents.” He has been in charge of correspondence with most of the partners from the countries, analyzing the documents, and has been leading the writing process. Sissel Mørreaunet joined the process at an early stage and has been involved in analyzing the policy documents, taking part in discussing the different parts of the article, and taking responsibility for the part on individual and relational values. Sobh Chahboun (صبيح شهبون) contributed by taking part in the discussion of all parts of the article and taking the main responsibility for the part on relational values. Jolene Pearson came into the editorial committee toward the end of the process as our main language reviewer. In a back-and-forth process, the authors have contributed by identifying more relevant literature, discussing the findings, and editing the response to the reviewers.


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Appendix A

See Table A1.

Table A1. Government policy documents pertaining to early childhood education.

| Country | Official government documents |
|-------------|---|
| Australia | |
| Brazil | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para Educação Infantil (2010) (DCNEI). • Base Nacional Comum Curricular (2018 BNCC). |
| Eswatini | The National Education and Training Sector Policy (2018). |
| Ethiopia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, National Children's Policy. www.mowca.org.et • Early Childhood Care and Education Guidelines in Ethiopia, https://www.scirp.org • Ministry of Education, Education Sector Development Program III-IV. www.moe.org.et |
| Israel | <p>Framework Plan (1994/95): Ministry of Ed. Preschool Division (2010).</p> <p>Facts and Figures in the Education System. Chapter 1. Ministry of Education (2013).</p> |
| Japan | The Preamble of the National Curriculum Standard for Kindergartens. Chapter 1. (2017). |
| Kenya | Pillars of Basic Education Curriculum Framework (2017). |
| Morocco | Higher Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research (Moroccan Ministry of Education, 2017). |
| New Zealand | Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2017). |
| Norway | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the Kindergarten Act, §1. https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2005-06-17-64#KAPITTEL_I • Framework Plan for Kindergarten (2017), chapters 1 and 3 (pp. 7–11, pp. 19–25). https://www.udir.no/in-english/framework-plan-for-kindergartens/ |
| Puerto Rico | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leyes de Reforma Educativa de Puerto Rico • Ley Núm. 85 de 29 de marzo de 2018 • Ley Núm. 144 de 11 de julio de 2018 • Ley Núm. 1 de 2 de enero de 2019 • Ley Núm. 113 de 1 de agosto de 2019 |
| Spain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ley Orgánica de educación 2/2006 de mayo, de Educación • Ley del 2017 sobre pre-escolares |

(continued)

Table A1. (continued)

| Country | Official government documents |
|---------------------------|--|
| The United States (US) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="327 298 1099 365">• Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPS), Jan. 2017. https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/ind/<li data-bbox="327 374 1125 511">• Links to all 50 states ELG (Early Learning Guidelines) or ELS (Early Learning Standards): United States Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/state_elgs_web_final_2.pdf |
