

Early Childhood Care? Development? Education?

The field of Early Childhood¹ goes by various names, in different countries as well as within individual countries, where different stakeholders may use different references. Nor do international agencies have a commonly agreed-upon term, sparking debate when an inter-agency document is drafted over which name to use. Researchers have tried to unify the field with a single label, but without success.

Primary education also has different names (It is called elementary or basic education)², but unlike with Early Childhood, there is a relatively common understanding of what it refers to and the way in which it is delivered. The terms attached to Early Childhood go beyond mere labels: they imply different purposes, pedagogical practices and forms of delivery, not to mention the varying social and economic status of the personnel involved. The variety of terms is so broad that the very identity of Early Childhood as a distinctive discipline is often questioned.

One commonly used name, *Early Childhood Education* (ECE), is favoured by education authorities or others who are inclined to see early childhood from an educational point of view. Learning is central to this tradition. *Early Childhood Care and Education* (ECCE) is an expansion of ECE, with the care component added. Or the order can be changed to *Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) to keep the emphasis on education. Then there is *Early Childhood Care* (ECC) without the education component. In the developing world, ECC tends to be associated with attention to the child's health, nutrition and hygiene, while in the developed world, it is often understood as a social service for working mothers with young children. Historically, ECC has also been associated with institutionalised social services for disadvantaged children, whereas ECE has been considered a service devoted to the child's early learning process.³ In an effort to assert the inseparability of ECC and ECE, researchers have coined the word *Educare*. But this term has remained mainly within the academic community and has not entered the policy discourse of governments.⁴

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is another term whose popularity is increasing. It emphasises a holistic

approach attending to the child's physical, emotional, social as well as cognitive development. Though elusive, by being comprehensive, and focusing on the child, not on the social agent or on the process of care or education, ECD is gaining ground as one of the most generic terms for the field. A common variant of this term is *Early Childhood Care and Development* (ECCD), which again tries to span the divide between care and development/education. Yet another variant is *Early Childhood Care for Development* which places the emphasis on the care which affects development and learning.

Several other terms are in use, but they are either variations or different combinations of the three key concepts – early childhood care, development and education – or specific programmes that are arranged for them (e.g., pre-school education for ECE).

From the child development perspective, these three concepts cannot be treated independently of one another. Early child development encompasses a series of learning processes during which the child learns about the environment and himself/herself. That the child's survival and growth has to be assured by appropriate provision of health and nutritional care goes without saying. But the young child's physical growth should also be accompanied by an appropriate learning process. Learning and growth cannot occur in sequence. They are integral parts of the process of nurturing a child's holistic development.

In reality, ECC, ECD, and ECE are not invariably institutionalised or practised separately. For instance, one can easily find a Department of Early Childhood Education responsible for the entire gamut of early childhood programmes including day care centres for children under three and kindergarten education for older children. In most of the developed countries, kindergarten education is child-centred, stressing the child's holistic development. In such cases, the need for a distinction between ECE and

ECD would not arise. In some countries in transition⁵, pre-school education is a generic term for early childhood programmes including those for children under three, which would be categorised as ECC in other countries.

Different labels become an issue in institutional politics. For agencies, the preference for one term over another is closely linked to the institutional mandate they are expected to fulfil. Such discrepancies that exist among agencies – not their understanding of child psychology or

¹ Early Childhood is capitalised to distinguish it as an area of profession and discipline from early childhood as the early period in one's life cycle.

² In some cases, elementary education refers only to the early grades of primary education, and the latter is reserved for the upper grades. Likewise, basic education can embrace other levels of education below and above primary education as well as other non-formal programmes.

³ See Haddad, L. (forthcoming), *An Integrated Approach to Early Childhood Education and Care. UNESCO Early Childhood and Family Policy Series.*

⁴ An exception is found in South Africa. *Educare* is used along with Early Childhood Development. (<http://www.isisa.co.za/isisa/esst/default.htm>)

⁵ In the former Soviet Union.

development – are often difficult to reconcile. At the country level, the education ministry may prefer ECE because it is easier to justify involvement and investment in education rather than in the care of small children. If the ministry makes a distinction between ECE and ECC or ECD, it may be because it intends to assign different responsibilities to the different areas. In this regard, it is no mere coincidence that in some developing countries ECD is often accompanied by community mobilisation strategies soliciting contributions from the community, while ECE gets priority in government funding. Educators working outside the field of ECE are less likely to be called teachers, since such a label would imply a certain level of remuneration by the government, which is unavailable, in most developing countries.

Given the multifaceted nature of early childhood, the existence of several labels may be inevitable. The range of the institutional interests is such that it may, in fact, be a futile attempt to seek a unifying label. Meanwhile, the same term or name can be interpreted differently in different social, cultural and linguistic contexts. And depending on school starting age, the concept of early childhood, or ‘early childhood’ as a policy construct varies. Thus comparing, let alone unifying, different names may be an elusive effort. In this regard, insistence on a common name may not be a constructive effort and what is needed would be an understanding of the common scope of Early Childhood. In making international comparisons, what is crucial would be an operational definition that can characterise countries’ policies regardless of the terms being used. More importantly, the focus on names for Early Childhood may divert attention from other equally important issues, such as how early childhood services, however they may be called, are related to other educational and social services for school age children.

But labelling aside, certain fundamentals stand out.

First, the ultimate concern of any early childhood programme should be the wellbeing and holistic development of the child, and regardless of the institutional setting, the programme should embody a developmentally appropriate practice, which attends to health, nutrition, security and learning. In fact, as long as such a holistic approach is practised, the physical or institutional setting of a programme is of little importance. Second, as children grow, they can move from one programme to another that may be named differently or located in different ministries. But the programmes must maintain between them a pedagogical, if not necessarily an institutional, continuity and integrity. Third, overlap between differently named programmes for the same age group must be co-ordinated as much as possible. Such overlap can cause administrative inefficiency and be wasteful of resources. Last, but not least, regardless of what label is accorded, the programme preceding a child’s primary education should be designed to facilitate the child’s preparation for and transition to formal schooling. Pedagogical continuity between the last year of an early

childhood programme and the first year of formal schooling is of great importance.

The issue of labelling is not purely conceptual to be discussed from the point of view of child development theories. Rather, it is inextricably related, among others, to institutional responsibilities and the mandates of the stakeholders involved, which cannot be handled effectively without a clear policy stance on Early Childhood. Preparing a government-wide position or a position that can be subscribed to by all stakeholders vis-à-vis the labels to be used may be a good starting point for policy development for Early Childhood.

*Soo-Hyang Choi, Chief
Section for Early Childhood and Inclusive Education
Division of Basic Education
UNESCO, Paris*

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For comments and inquiries, please contact:
Section for Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, UNESCO
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 PARIS 07 SP, France
☎ 33 1 45 68 08 15, fax: 33 1 45 68 56 26, sh.choi@unesco.org