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Analysis of relations between "equality of life chances" and "early childhood care and education", as foundations for social justice and human development: a case study of Mauritius[1]

Christian Morabito

Department of Social Welfare and Social Pedagogy, Ghent University

In this research, we have analysed the relations between equality of life chances and early childhood care and education (ECCE). During the last decades we have seen a constant growth in socio-economic inequalities world-wide. Yet, in the same period, we have acknowledged an increasing attention, among scholars and policy makers, to early childhood education as a prominent (and consensual) equalizing policy. We critically reviewed this claim, by using a mixed method research, including a theoretical analysis through a critical literature review, quantitative analyses of a longitudinal database, and qualitative focus groups with parents in Mauritius. Findings suggest ECCE can only be an equaliser if accompanied by a change in the educational and social structures. Conclusions highlight the need of focusing further research on detecting complex mechanisms of accumulation of disadvantage in specific groups, and assessing the equalising effects of diverse interventions during early years, including income redistribution.

Key words: equality, education, early childhood, Mauritius

The argument of ECCE as the greatest (and consensual) of equalizers, is advocated by scholars and notably international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank. The claim is contingent with a shift in the focus of the equalisandum from 'outcomes' to 'opportunities', inspired by the work of contemporary egalitarian philosophers, notably John Rawls (2001), Amartya Sen (2009), Ronald Dworkin (1981a, 1981b), John Roemer (1998). These philosophers share the idea that equality must account for

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individual responsibility. To define a few concepts, opportunities are goods, services, resources that every individual has to have in order to responsibly choose and pursue his or her life plans. Equalizing opportunities basically means to reduce the influence of 'circumstances', which are factors beyond individual responsibility, in order to ensure substantial freedom. Scholars, echoed by international organizations, outline that opportunities in life are to be associated with 'human capital' – cognitive, non-cognitive and physical skills – which are moulded in early years, before entering schooling, and influenced by inherited circumstances such as gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, family socio-economic status, geographical and housing conditions (Cunha & Heckman, 2006; Heckman, 2008). As a result, redistributive policies should focus on early years, in order to yield significant savings in the welfare system later, and also enable to generate political consensus. This thesis has been reinforced by a number of longitudinal studies conducted in US and Europe (Barnett, 2007; Heckman, 2008; Heckman & Masterov, 2007). Together with cross-sectional studies from developing countries (Engle *et al.* 2011; Gormley *et al.*, 2011), they show positive effects of participating in high quality early care and pre-schooling, in particular for children at risk, compared to those not participating.

In the theoretical part of the research, we have critically reviewed main arguments in favor of ECCE as the greatest (and consensual) of equalizers, from a methodological and ethnical standpoint.

We outlined that assessments of equalizing effects of ECCE interventions are characterised by a perfect homology in terms of socio-economic background of children, providing only a partial picture of inequality dynamics. Actually, in few studies where comparison of low vs. higher socio-economic status are made, the impact of ECCE in reducing, as an example, educational inequalities is less evident and sometimes adverse (Burger, 2010). Moreover, such 'deterministic' approach of the relations between equality of opportunity and ECCE does not account for 'systemic' circumstances, such as cultural discrimination, which are difficult to measure, yet they may strongly influence life chances, beyond childhood (Burchardt, 2004; Rigg and Sefton, 2006). We have also have raised ethical concerns vis-à-vis the association of opportunities with human capital, and the emphasis on the 'return of investments', which 'narrows' the child as a mere future productive adult. We believed that this angle would ultimately denaturise the very meaning of early childhood itself (Moss, 2009). In addition, we contested the claim of ECCE as consensual: since one generation income is the foundation for children's opportunities, ideological cleavage might emerge when designing redistributive policies for children which might eventually incorporate parents' income support.

In view of these findings, we suggested that the claim of ECCE as greatest (and consensual) of equalizers, might be actually ideologically oriented, rather than evidence-based. In particular, we outlined that possible divergent interpretations might exist, on how to operationalize equality of opportunity in social policies, and specifically in early childhood, in relation to the role given to individual responsibility vs circumstances. The dominant discourse in last decade in policy making, has adopted a particular interpretation, that we defined Responsibility-oriented Equality of Opportunity (REOp), which

identifies childhood as the salient period in the lives of individuals, where outcomes are defined only by circumstances, and thus are entirely within the field of opportunities. As a result, public investments in education and in particular in early childhood, are preferable over income redistribution among adults; the latter considered to be less effective and potentially 'unfair' (Field, 2010). It is therefore assumed that the free market system is a 'fair playing field', thus guaranteeing that positions are or assigned entirely on a meritocratic basis. In addition, in searching for enhancing individual responsibility, this approach also tends to emphasise the role of parents' responsibility in children's inequalities and free choice in social policies, in concomitance with increasing market-based ECCE solutions (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2010). We severely criticized this approach, as it lacks empirical evidence, and also raises ethnical concerns about the meaning of children (and parents) in social policies. Instead, we advocated a Circumstances-oriented Equality of Opportunity (CEOp) perspective, assuming that in a free market system, circumstances continuously influence opportunities as well as efforts and choices throughout individuals' life paths. Therefore, excessive inequalities of income among adults should always be considered unjust. In addition, since one generation's outcomes are the foundations – circumstances – of the next generation's opportunities, income redistributive policies, through wage solidarity and post taxation transfers, can be considered as equalising opportunities for children as well. This approach also disagrees with the excessive focus on parents' responsibility and the consequent conceptualisation of the welfare state as residual (Biesta, 2007).

Arguments questioning the dominant discourse, have been reinforced by the empirical part of the research and notably the analysis of data from the Joint Child Health Project (JCHP).

The JCHP is composed by 1,795 children from heterogeneous socio-economic and demographic backgrounds, assessed for more than 40 years, starting in 1972 (age 3 of the children), on cognitive skills and educational outcomes. Moreover, 200 children have been randomly drawn respecting heterogeneity of socio-economic conditions to undertake a more intensive study, with 100 children participating in a high quality pre-school programme offering a wide range of services, while the other 100 were enrolled in existing traditional Mauritian community pre-schools of lower quality (Raine *et al.*, 2010). The study design enables to broaden the understanding of root causes of inequalities, before entrance into the primary school system, and the role of early childhood care and education in overcoming gaps, by accounting for realities where coverage of pre-school is extended, and comparison can be made among different types or early education.

Mauritius represents an ideal case study for these dynamics. Mauritius is an island in the Indian Ocean with an area of 61 km from north to south and 47 km from west to east. It gained independence from the UK in 1968. Its population was 1.3 million at the time of the 2012 census (Government of Mauritius & UNDP, 2013). It is the third most densely populated country in the world. The majority of the population consists of descendants of the indentured labourers. The other major ethical group is the so-called 'Creoles', descendants of continental African slaves. The population also includes descendants of

European colonialists and Chinese immigrants (Addison & Hazareesingh, 1984). Various post-independence governments have essentially adopted the same socio-economic development strategy, based on generous welfare state provision, but focused on health and education, not income (i.e., free and universal primary education and health care since the 1970s), within a free market system with little state intervention in business (Dommen & Dommen, 1997; Salverda, 2010).

Mauritius differs from the rest of the sub-Saharan Africa region, as it has been characterized since independence by stable and democratically elected governments and a rapid socio-economic development (Dommen & Dommen, 1997). In the early 1970s, thus at the time of the Joint Child Health Project, the economic and social development of Mauritius was undergoing unprecedented expansion which was mostly due to substantial growth in sugar industry exports and the setting up of export processing zones. The economic growth favoured employment and rising salaries. The GDP per capita almost doubled during the 1970s (Dommen & Dommen, 1997). Economic dynamics were accompanied by progress in education, health, and social security; in the 1970s Mauritius was the only country in the sub-Saharan Africa region to have reached 100% coverage of primary education for both boys and girls. Family planning effectively reduced the family size from an average of six children at the beginning of the 1960s to three in 1973, thus supporting the financial sustainability of welfare provision. An extensive system of primary health care covered the entire island and was accompanied by specific family-child support programs (as an example, child immunization coverage was 80% in 1974) (Dommen & Dommen, 1997). In addition, Mauritius is one of the few countries in the region that has placed ECCE at the centre of its national development agenda since the mid-1980s (Parsuramen, 2006), with an expansion in the last decade – reaching 98% coverage in 2012 (Ministry of Education of Mauritius, 2009). At present, according to the Human Development Index 2013, Mauritius is in the category 'high human development', with an index value of .771 (63rd in the world rankings) compared to the sub-Saharan African average of .502 (UNDP, 2014).

Nevertheless, this progress has not been distributed equally among the population. As an example, Creoles are still suffering from negative stereotypes, which have been generated during slavery and transmitted across generations (Palmyre 2007). As a result, they continue to be the most marginalised group in Mauritius at both an educational and socio-economic level (Carosin 2013). In addition to the ethnical divide, socio-economic status also influences the life trajectories of individuals, starting from their education (Chinapah, 1983, 1987; MES, 1991).

Empirical analyses conducted on the JCHP cohort confirmed that circumstances at age 3 are important predictors of inequalities in early cognitive skills and educational attainments, measured at age 3 and 11. In particular, inequalities in cognitive development are significantly associated with sex, socio-economic status of parents, housing conditions, and malnutrition. Furthermore, we observed that inequalities in cognitive skills tend to grow during primary school. However, we also found that Creole children have poorer school performances compared to other ethnic groups, although no differences

were detected with reference to cognitive abilities (measured through cognitive tests at ages 3 and 11).

In addition, findings nuanced the equalising potential of ECCE. The JHCP intervention in Mauritius occurred when children where 4 to 5 years of age and it worked in opposite directions: school results for the children in the experimental group at age 11 and in the pre-school intervention were higher for those with low-educated fathers, but also lower for those with low-educated mothers. Hence pre-school compensated (and thus equalised) for the father's education level, but reinforced (and dis-equalised) for the mother's education level. In addition, no beneficial effects of the enrolment in high quality pre-school have been found; this is in contradiction to similar longitudinal studies conducted mainly in the US.

These findings puzzled the dominant discourse, by describing dynamics of inequalities, which are less deterministic than what is usually presented in mainstream literature, and suggested that ECCE could play an important role in redistribution, however it is certainly not the 'magic bullet', as presented by mainstream literature (Waldfogel, 2004).

Finally, a fundamental criticism of the dominant discourse is that it excludes parents from the debates regarding children's life chances, although they are identified as the 'solution' to inequalities. We complemented previous theoretical and quantitative research work by investigating the point of view of parents from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds in Mauritius. We explored their meaning making of inequality, opportunities, individual and collective responsibility and fairness through focus groups' discussions. Parents from diverse socio-economic and ethnical backgrounds adhered to the dominant discourse valuing education and early childhood as an equaliser and emphasising parental responsibility. However, they also advocated collective responses, such as increasing the quality of the educational system for all, notably the public provision, and also income redistribution measures. In this respect, the qualitative study reinforced our suggestion that ECCE can only be an equaliser if accompanied by a change in the structure of the school system and the social welfare (also through more equal income), which at present is unable to accommodate children from poor families or other circumstances, such as, in our case study, ethnic discrimination.

To conclude, our research supports the claim that alternative, and more progressive, social welfare policies towards early childhood could and should exist. The search for alternatives might be one way for social work to regain its essence as an agent of change, to promote social justice, collective responsibility and the overcoming of structural inequalities, whereas contemporary policy making towards equality and fairness tends to focus instead on individual responsibility (Lorenz, 2005). The challenge for progressive social welfare policies is to consolidate their stand as a compelling alternative. This means an alternative that enables them to address structural causes of inequalities without neglecting individual responsibility. In particular, by focusing further research on detecting complex mechanisms that perpetuate the accumulation of disadvantage in specific groups, and assessing the equalising effects of diverse interventions during early years and throughout childhood, including income redistribution.

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