Diversity in Early Childhood Services

Topic

Child care – Early childhood education and care

Introduction

There is a general consensus that children learn in context and that context include diversity in ethnicity culture and gender. The thrust of this essay is to discuss on the ways in which an early childhood development class can bee shaped to reflect cultural diversity such as the economic perspective, educational approach to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, social perspective and the effect for-profit perspective. Terms to be defined below are cultural diversity and early child development

The economic perspective

According to Canella G. (1997), the economic crisis of the late 1970s began a process of de-industrialization and globalization, accompanied by a growing awareness that the intellectual capital of a nation may be crucial for its economic welfare. This evolution led to a growing focus on lifelong learning and on early childhood as a particularly fertile ground to make a “head start” in life. Many studies show the positive impact of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on children’s development, especially for children at risk of educational failure through social disadvantage. In short, from an economic perspective, early childhood education is perceived as an important tool to overcome disadvantage. The return on investment is high, leading to better social and educational outcomes for at-risk children and later, better adjustment to the requirements of school, the workplace and society. However, the problem with this perspective is twofold. First, the economic paradigm may help to identify quantitative needs in early childhood education, but does not help us to address qualitative questions, including the following major questions: What is early education for? What kind of early childhood education do we need? Second, it reduces the child to the status of a future adult, and therefore may disregard the well-being of the child here and now, as well as the parents’ perspectives. The educational approach to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A fundamental principle here is that children from disadvantaged environments need services tailored to their backgrounds and specific needs. For many children, their enrolment in an early childhood service represents a first step into society. It presents them with a mirror reflecting how society looks at them and thus how they should look at themselves, since it is only in a context of sameness and difference that identity can be constructed. In this public mirror, every child is confronted with a critical existential question: Who am I? And is it OK to be who I am? A positive self-image is closely linked to well-being and the capacity to succeed in school. Because of this, a child centered curriculum needs also to be a family-centered curriculum. In this respect, an appropriate early childhood curriculum needs to balance between two pitfalls: denial and essentialism.10,11 Denial of diversity suggests that one treats “all children the same,” implying that the educator addresses what she (or occasionally, “he”) considers to be an “average” child.

The social perspective

A third possible approach to diversity in early childhood education is more social in nature. In this perspective, early childhood education is seen as an integral part of the social welfare mechanisms that states have put into place to ensure social justice, equal opportunities and the redistribution of wealth. However, many scholars have demonstrated that children from ethnic minorities and children from lower-income families are to be found more often in lower-quality care than those from middle-income and higher-income families.16,17 Their situation is further acerbated as education is downplayed in child care services because of the splitting of the early system into social welfare programs and early education. In this regard, the EPPE study8 has made it clear that only high quality ECEC makes a difference. For this reason, policy-makers and administrators must ensure that high quality services are available to all children. Average or even equal standards are not enough: children from poor ethnic backgrounds need the best equipped centers and the best personnel available, either free or at an affordable cost. (Berman, E. 2004)

Moss, P. (2004) state that the access of low-income children to high quality services is even less likely to happen when early childhood services are largely private.

Conclusions

Diversity and equity are central concerns in early childhood education. However, different approaches to these issues are possible. A comprehensive view would aim to integrate economic, educational and social perspectives rather than favoring one paradigm only. A narrow focus on the economic returns from early childhood services may disregard parental and child perspectives and the wider purposes of education.19 In turn, treating early childhood services as a purely welfare concern can lead to poor quality, with weakly qualified staff unable to meet the educational needs of young children. In similar fashion, a narrow educational perspective may lead to a “schoolification” of early childhood services that fails to take into account broader dimensions of access and curriculum that immigrant and ethnic minority children may need to succeed.

REFERENCES