

Introduction

Early childhood education encompasses day care, nursery, kindergarten, and primary school years. There has been a great deal of ferment in the field in the United States recently, and a number of social trends are turning national attention increasingly in this direction. To begin with, many more children than ever before attend these programs. In 1966, for example, fewer than 30 percent of three- to five-year-olds were enrolled.¹ By 1980, 53 percent were in attendance, and well over that are enrolled today. There has been a steady increase in enrollments in early childhood programs of all types since the mid-1960s, and kindergarten has become nearly universal. Today more women with young children are working in the paid labor force, either out of choice or by necessity. About one-third of women with preschool children work full time outside the home, and this rises to more than one-half when part-time workers are included. Thus the need for some type of early childhood programs has increased significantly.

While it certainly is the case that many early childhood programs have a distinctly developmental focus, the role of such programs in broadening inequality in educational outcomes cannot be overlooked. By the time children reach grade three, the gap in achievement between minority and majority, rich and poor, and suburban and urban children is strikingly apparent. These differences only tend to be exacerbated during later years, leading to differences in track placements in high school, entrance to different sectors of tertiary-level education, and, ultimately, differential occupations and incomes. While it is certainly not the responsibility of early childhood educators to close the achievement gap by themselves, these educators are taking much more seriously the notion that they must do their part in lessening the gap by providing all students with a sound emotional and academic beginning. Thus potential inequalities in the early grades of elementary school, for example, are being scrutinized, and numerous programs being put in place in order to redress perceived problems.

Unfortunately it is becoming apparent that the early childhood sector as a whole may itself be contributing in an active way to these inequalities

despite what are at times the best intentions of early childhood teachers and caretakers. Although the number of licensed day-care centers has grown rapidly within recent years, for example, this growth has not been sufficient to meet the needs of the growing number of two-earner or single-earner families in the U.S., causing many families to turn to nonlicensed centers or unlicensed family day care. In addition, many licensed day-care centers are well beyond the financial means of low-income families. Thus there is widespread inequality in the provision of day care, with poor children often in unlicensed settings, or those supported by federal assistance, and middle-class children attending relatively expensive, high-quality day-care centers and half- or extended-day private nursery schools. The very fact that children are being socialized in widely different settings serves to bring the early childhood sector into the debate on education and inequality in spite of the fact that the primary goal of many of these programs is not centered around academic achievement.

Currently there are a variety of key issues relating to early childhood education. It would be impossible for all such issues to be discussed in this volume. Rather, we have tried to touch upon a select number of such issues, ever mindful of the facts that important questions need to be asked in other areas and that some excellent work is being done that we have not included here. Important areas not covered here, for example, include compensation for early childhood teachers (how can we get the *best* for so little money?); the role and impact of family day care; and community participation in the definition, organization, and implementation of early childhood programs. We have not, in other words, tried to cover the field so much as present exemplary work in certain key areas.

Edward Zigler and Matia Finn-Stevenson offer an overview of the "problem" of childcare in America and suggest ways of remedying this problem. Deborah Phillips and Marcy Whitebook; William Ayers; and Kelvin Seifert and Laura Atkinson examine issues related to the early childhood teaching force, including the gendered nature of such teaching. Seifert and Atkinson examine specifically the way in which home and school combine in teachers' lives and they contrast the experiences of male and female teachers. Ayers draws from his larger study of preschool teachers to introduce us to the way in which teachers connect self and practice within the context of the preschool setting.

Bronwyn Davies, beginning the section of the book entitled "Within the Schools," explores the construction of genderedness, and Beth Swadener examines peer interactions in two day-care centers, focusing on the issues of race, gender, and exceptionality as they shape such interactions. Anthony Pelligrini and Mariajosé Romero focus on play in early childhood settings—Pelligrini from the standpoint of the utility of "rough-and-tumble

play” as distinct from aggressive behavior, and Romero from a critical perspective, in that she examines emerging definitions of work and play among preschoolers. Carol Hodges asks whether current standardized achievement tests ought to be used to measure instructional outcomes in kindergarten and suggests that alternative forms of assessment be sought.

In the last section of this volume, “Early Childhood Education in Broader Social and Economic Context,” Wendy Grolnick provides a rationale for reexamining the importance of affective goals in early childhood education, and Julia Wrigley explores the creation of various early educational programs for different clientele historically, suggesting that early childhood education is inherently unequal in its conception and distribution. Steve Barnett examines four issues related to early childhood education policy, with a focus on economic considerations. Sally Lubeck, in the final chapter, examines family policies in other countries and compares them to proposed United States legislation.

The editors of this volume are not in early childhood education. We came upon this issue out of a sense that the education of young children is an important area and that persons like ourselves, who are researchers in social and educational policy matters, ought to become more familiar with it. We do not claim, therefore, to be experts in the field and did not embark upon this volume with the intention of codifying the field. Rather, we wish to introduce others like ourselves to issues surrounding the education of young children and, at the same time, provide a volume which offers research on young children conducted by those in early childhood education as well as those in areas such as sociology of education and policy studies. We hope this serves to introduce researchers and practitioners to work conducted by persons in areas other than their own, thus broadening and strengthening the research agenda in this critically important area.

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