

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: KEY COMPETENCES IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Teacher education is a complex field and requires high levels of specialization in diverse fields of knowledge. The formal preparation of early childhood teachers involve education in general aspects of teacher education, but requires a focus on specific components for a teaching that has its own specificity. Work with young children entail high levels of commitment, knowledge, skills and attitudes that should be developed in pre-service teacher education. The literature in early childhood teacher education highlights a number of key components including: general educational, professional foundations, formal knowledge and practice, and curriculum development. This paper aims to analyze the key components of early childhood teacher education programs and discuss their role on the preparation of competent and efficient teachers for a demanding 21st century society.*

Keywords: *teacher education, early childhood education, teachers' role.*

Introduction

The importance of early childhood education has been recognized for its own right, and because research has shown that when children are exposed to high quality practices from 0 to 6 years they perform better on academic tasks such as reading, writing, math, as well as, they become more capable on social interactions with other children and adults. The impact of high-quality practices in early childhood education has effects at short and long term as shown in several studies (Schweinhart & Weikart 1997; Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield & Nores, 2005; Kirp, 2007).

Research shows that teachers with more preparation for teaching are more confident and successful with students than those who have little training (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The literature pinpoints a connection between the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the staff employed in early childhood education and classroom outcomes (Whitebook, Howes, &

Phillips 1989; Arnett 1989; Lino, 2005; Colker 2008; Sylva et al. 2010; Sahin & Adiguzel 2012). The cause-effect relationship between teachers' education and student's success requires to know and analyse the key components of high quality programmes for early childhood teacher education.

Early childhood teacher education

The formal preparation of early childhood teachers require training in general aspects of teacher training, but requires a focus on particular aspects for a teaching that has its own specificities (Anderson, 2013). Work with young children requires high levels of commitment, knowledge, skills and attitudes that should be developed in pre-service teacher education (Spodek & Saracho, 1993). According to Saracho (1993) preschool teacher education programmes are organized around research, theory and practice.

Spodek and Saracho (2003), present a set of key components that should be addressed in early childhood education pres-service education in order to prepare these professionals with knowledge and competences to develop high quality practices in early childhood education. The authors present six components, namely: **recruitment and selection; general education and culture; professional foundation; instruction knowledge, practice and program modification.**

As regards the **recruitment and selection** of future early childhood teachers, Spodek and Saracho (2003) argue that it should be made a pre-selection of candidates to be accepted to a pre-service early childhood programme based on a set of personal characteristics and attributes evidenced by the candidates, and not based on ratings obtained through examinations, tests, or average of the previous level of education. This assumption is sustained by several studies that stress the relevance of personality traits, attitudes, values and beliefs which predict future success in the profession of early childhood teaching (Colker 2008; Erickson, Hyndman, & Wirtz 2005; Sahin & Adiguzel 2012; Serdyukov & Tatman-Ferguson 2011; Walker 2008).

The attributes of the candidates for early childhood teachers include personal characteristics such as: tenderness, enthusiasm and a businesslike attitude (Ryans, 1960, cited by Spodek & Saracho, 2003); patience, maturity, energy, encouragement for individual responsibilities; flexibility, and the ability to have fun and encourage children (Katz, 1969, cited by Spodek & Saracho, 2003); ability to plan and reflect, tolerate ambiguity and be able to make and correct inferences about children, and teaching techniques (Clark, 1988 cited by Spodek & Saracho, 2003). Despite the relevance of these attributes to the performance of early childhood teaching profession they are

hardly ever used in the selection of candidates for childhood teacher education programmes.

Another component considered crucial by Spodek and Saracho (2003) for early childhood teacher education programmes is the **general education and culture** of future educators. General education required for future educators includes a variety of knowledge areas and arts that are critical to the performance of the profession. The areas of knowledge are part of the human sciences, health, physical and biological sciences, history, social sciences, mathematics, etc. Within the arts, it is essential that prospective teachers have broad knowledge in the areas of music, literature and plastic, in order to identify the important sources to work with young children. Another crucial area for future educators is ICT, as these area is central to education in today's society. The general scope of knowledge is fundamental in teaching with comprehensive features such as teaching in early childhood education. In fact, to support the interests and curiosities of children about the physical and social world around them it is critical that early childhood teachers have a body of knowledge in various areas of scientific knowledge and the arts, in order to integrate this knowledge in the curriculum proposals that they organize for children they work with. It is also important that prospective early childhood teachers have a thorough knowledge of their own culture, the culture of the community where they work, and the culture of the children and their families in order to organize educational contexts that reflect the diversity of cultures of the educational protagonists: the children, the families, the teachers, and other professionals working in early childhood settings.

Through the **professional foundations** prospective early childhood teachers learn and organize their beliefs about children, school and education to work with young children. Professional foundations are developed within various disciplines, such as history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc., and allow the prospective teachers, building knowledge to explore and recognize the goals, ideas, values, influences and assumptions of an educational system, and also become more sensitive to cultural differences of the children, which should be integrated into teaching practices (Skinner, 1968, quoted by Spodek & Saracho, 2003). The child's development is a essential component of early childhood education. Prospective teachers need to know the developmental characteristics of children in order to select appropriate materials and developmentally experiences to address children's needs, interests and rights, and create provocative learning environments that challenge the children and promote their learning and development. Although if the knowledge of children's developmental characteristics is essential to the organization of high quality educational contexts, it is also needed to understand individual differences

and being sensitive to the heterogeneity and diversity of children's development patterns. Therefore, to organize educational contexts early childhood teachers should be based on knowledge of the developmental characteristics of the group and the individual child in order to respond properly to their needs, interests, and rights.

Instructional knowledge is one of the essential components of early childhood teacher education programmes highlighted by Spodek and Saracho (2003). This type of knowledge requires that teachers master the theories of teaching and learning, pedagogical methodologies, and curriculum models. Instruction knowledge integrates curricular knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. The curricular knowledge refers to knowledge of the structure and program content. The pedagogical content knowledge requires a "practical wisdom" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) to apply and contextualize the knowledge constructed within the various disciplines to create developmental and culture appropriated practices for young children. In the construction of the "practical wisdom" it is crucial that the prospective educators develop a reflective thought (Dewey, 1929; Shön, 1983; Zeichner, 1993; Khortagen, 2001). Reflection supports the liaison theory and practice, and allows teachers to make appropriate choices to work in diverse educational contexts, incorporating the theory and the characteristics and needs of all children and adults which attend these contexts. Thus the practical training is developed in continuous interaction between theoretical knowledge and practice, and is mediated by the reflective process. Reflection is therefore a central dimension in the construction of the practice, allowing the development of effective pedagogical knowledge (Loughran, 2002), and sustaining the professional development of early childhood teachers.

Dimensions of early childhood education teacher's role

Teaching in early childhood education is a truly demanding profession, different in many aspects from teaching in general (Mahmood 2013; Oliveira-Formosinho, 2000; Katz, 1993).

Oliveira-Formosinho (2000), highlights three specific dimensions of the profession that are also identified by other national and international researchers, namely: 1) the characteristics of the young child; 2) the characteristics of the early childhood contexts and their missions; 3) the nature of the tasks carried out by early childhood teachers. Another author who emphasizes the specificities of childhood teaching profession is Lilian Katz. The author enounces eight principles that characterize the profession, and examines them in the context of teaching in early childhood education. The principles identified by Katz (1993) are: 1) social need; 2) altruism; 3) autonomy; 4) ethical code; 5) away from the client; 6) practice standards; 7) extended training; 8) expertise.

The young child (0 to 6) has specific developmental characteristics that somehow make her vulnerable and therefore dependent on the family and adults who interact with, and in particular the early childhood teacher.

Childhood development takes place holistically, that is, emotional, social, cognitive, and motor development occur integrated and globally. This global dimension has implications for the role of the teachers, and especially for the interactions that he or she establishes with the children. Another feature of the young child is its physical, social and emotional vulnerability. In fact, the child from 0 to 6 years is strongly dependent on the adult to perform their routine of care, and needs a special attention to the emotional and socio-emotional aspects which are the foundation for growth in the various areas of development. However, the competence of the young child cannot be ignored (Malaguzzi, 1998). As shown by various studies, from birth young children are extremely competent in several areas. It is the duality of vulnerability and competence in different areas, which moves the teacher's role, recognizing the needs and capacities that the child manifests from an early age.

A second dimension with specific characteristics of early childhood profession relates to the work contexts and their missions. The scope of the educational role and the absence of a national curriculum in many countries, contribute to the emergence of a variety of educational ideologies and contexts with different missions. These two factors derives from the greater freedom in the organization of contexts resulting in a diversity of practice in early childhood education. The early childhood educational contexts for children from 0 to 6 years should be organized around education and care, integrating these two dimensions in their educational project. Although there are contexts just focused on care and with a custodial mission, and other focused on care and education. The custodial contexts, have a mission focused on care, and are designed to ensure the safety, nutrition and health of children, and provide a place for children to stay while parents are at work. The services in these contexts focuses around leisure activities and socialization. The pedagogical contexts have an educational intentionality, explicitly assumed that sets up an educational mission of the institution. This diversity of services naturally has implications for working conditions of teachers, which translate into asymmetries of styles of interaction with the children, practices of parental involvement, and the establishment of relationships and interactions with the community.

A third dimension of specificity in early childhood profession highlighted by Oliveira-Formosinho (2000) relates to the scope of the teacher's role. This dimension results from the developmental characteristics of the young child and/or the diversity of contexts. In fact, early childhood teachers are assigned a variety of tasks that cover both care (hygiene, safety

and welfare), and education (developmental aspects), that confer to this profession very specific characteristic. Under the tasks of the early childhood education teacher, the interactions have a vital role. In fact, the adult-child interaction is considered in the literature the core of early childhood education (Hohmann & Weikart, 1997, Lino, 2005).

The adult-child interaction is a central pedagogical dimension in early childhood education that is rooted on a constructivist or social-constructivist perspective. A strong body of literature stresses the importance of high-quality interactions for children's learning and development (Dewey, 1929, Freinet, 1973, Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1970). The High Scope curriculum model maintains that "the creation of an interpersonal support climate is essential for active learning, because this is basically an interactive social process" (Hohmann & Weikart, 1997, p.63). Malaguzzi (1998), the founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach argues that interactions and relationships between the three protagonists of the educational process - children, teachers and parents - are the basis of education and learning. In this sense, it is important that the teacher supports the development of interactions and relationships between these three actors of the educational process and thus create the conditions for the construction and co-construction of knowledge and learning.

Involving parents and the community in children's learning and development, and the design of the educational project is another important task of early childhood teacher's role. Indeed, to establish and maintain consistent, respectful and secure relationships with families and the broad community requires to understand that children's education is a demanding and serious task that needs the collaboration of school, family and the community. It also requires that early childhood teachers acknowledge children's and families diversity (social, cultural, ethnic, religious, etc.), and be able to integrate these differences into curriculum development. To develop an inclusive curriculum, that is to create culturally responsive learning environments provides opportunities for children to become aware of similarities and differences between themselves and others, assist them to experience and value diversity, and foster children's development and a sense of identity within their own cultural group, which promotes critical thinking and countering stereotypes and biases.

To create a developmental and culturally appropriated learning environment requires teachers to use observation, documentation and assessment to support planning decisions. The information that emerged from observation and documentation is used to organize a daily routine that provides rich educational experiences and positive interactions, giving voice to children and teachers, allowing a sharing of control between children and adults.

Conclusions

The early childhood profession is revealed as an important contribution to society to the extent that, the higher the level of quality of the professional performance of most teachers the benefits for children and their families, which is reflected in more value to society. The scope of the early childhood teachers' role requires a altruistic attitude to the profession (Katz, 1993). In fact the commitment of early childhood teachers focuses on the quality of care provided to children, families and the community emphasizes the social purposes of its function. The autonomy of this profession is revealed in the choice of opportunities to adopt pedagogical methodologies, which requires scientific knowledge and skills of analysis and reflection to decide what best suits the different educational contexts and communities they work with. Knowing that only high-quality practices have an impact on the present and future life of children, the standards of practice that are sought are those who fall in quality standards for early childhood education, widely cited in the literature, in order to ensure better care to children and their families. The requirement of the early childhood teachers' role requires a selective and demanding pre-service education that prepare them for a skilful performance of their profession.

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