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Subject Area - Childcare

Early Years

What do you consider to be the most important elements in the in the education, preparation and training of those wishing to work in the early years?

Introduction

The early years of a child's life are the most important in terms of their general well being, their emotional and social development, and their physical, intellectual and emotional growth. Children develop at different paces and a very high proportion of what they learn takes place in the first five to seven years of life. What happens in the home is extremely important to development in early childhood. There is also a growing perception that this is a time when children are most open to high quality care and learning experiences.

In light of this Government have developed policy for the early years that aims to provide a full and comprehensive range of services for the very young. This involves the integration of childcare provision with early years education. It is thought that this approach will provide a positive foundation for children's early development and will enable them to build on this throughout their lives. The provision of high quality care in the early years sector also provides parents with peace of mind and contributes to their efforts to balance work and family life.

This paper will outline what might be considered to be the most important elements in the education, training and development of those who wish to work in the early years sector. Beginning with a general overview of the early years sector pedagogy's of play, role modelling, and inclusive practice will be examined as elements that are vital to the education, training and development of those wishing to work in early years education.

The New Labour Government which came to power in 1997 used as its pre-election catch-phrase the words 'education, education, education. Certainly things have improved in some areas. In 1997 Government Policy has been to promote a series of educational reforms. As a result of the National Childcare Strategy launched in 1998 all four year old children, whose parents require it, are entitled to free part-time early years education. There has also been a growth in the proportion of three year olds in part-time early years education. These places are available in a number of settings, from reception centres in primary schools, through local authority nurseries to pre-school settings such as those offered by the Pre-School Learning Alliance. In 1999 Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships were set up in each local authority to promote the expansion of early years education. Delivery of services was to be co-ordinated through Sure Start, local authorities and voluntary organisations.

Working in the Early Years Sector

Those who work in the early years sector come from different backgrounds, do different jobs, and range from those who are fully qualified with a degree in early years care, or with NVQ level 3 or equivalent such as the Alliance's CPP and DPP to those with no qualifications at all. A report by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (September, 2004) entitled Early Years: Progress in Developing High Quality Childcare and Early Education Accessible to All highlights the view that there is a lack of appropriately trained staff in the pre-school sector. Appropriately qualified staff must be a priority if the sustainability of expansion in early years is not to be undermined. The report further highlights the

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need for all local authorities to work in partnership with colleges and the voluntary sector to provide improved training opportunities to potential childcare staff.

Basic Principles in Early Years Training

In Britain the major discourses of Early Years Education are largely concerned with the views of developmental psychology which concentrates on the immediacy of experience and a child-centered learning environment (Anning et al, 2004). The Government commissioned a number of studies into early years provision (Sylva et al, 1999 and Siraj-Blatchford, 2002) to gain evidence of effective practice in the early years sector. A study by Moyles et al, 2001 found that effective practice is characterised by an ability to apply knowledge of a child's learning with curriculum knowledge to the planning and evaluation of a child's progress across a number of areas. Much of the practice in the early years sector has generally been to follow the interests of the child (Anning, 1997). In order to be effective, education needs an effective and workable curriculum with practitioners who are capable of implementing its requirements. It should build on what children know and on what they can already do. Most especially it should bolster their confidence by enabling them to develop their existing skills. The curriculum should not be thought of in terms of work, as opposed to play because young children do not make such a distinction and neither should practitioners. The first and most important element of training for work in the early years sector is therefore to learn how and why children play, and to understand that for the young play is work. It is therefore important to recognise the contribution that parents make to their children's education.

Practitioners need to be aware that education begins in the home and thus parental involvement, particularly in the early years should be encouraged. One of the Government's aims has been to work with both parents and children through initiatives such as Sure Start and Early Excellence Centres, to support children's development and to ensure their continuing success when they start primary school. Parents can make a useful contribution to a practitioner's knowledge of a child and their preferences, they are the people who most often watch their children play, and as has already been mentioned play is a crucial aspect in a child's development and thus an important element in the training of those who work in childcare.

Pedagogy and Play

Pedagogues are teachers, pedagogy, however, is a much wider term and relates to the process of interaction between teacher and learner and home and community. Children develop very quickly during the early years. They change rapidly intellectually, physically, emotionally and socially and they need provision that helps them to overcome any disadvantage and which extends their knowledge, skills, understanding and confidence. It should build on what they already know and on what they can do for some considerable time educationalists have been convinced of the fact that children learn through play. Thus there has evolved what has become known as a 'pedagogy of play'.

One of the fundamental principles in early childhood pedagogy is the importance of play to children's learning and development. The commitment to a play-based curriculum can be traced through theory and ideology into early childhood programmes in many different countries (Saracho, et al. 2002).

Jump Start and Getting Started Courses which are run by both Sure Start and the Pre-School Learning Alliance introduce parents and would be practitioners to how and why children play. These courses demonstrate how children learn through play and how they develop skills that will help with talking, listening, reading and writing. It is therefore vital that early

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years practitioners learn and recognise the importance of play to the early learning process. Play is a natural activity for children and teachers are needed in a supervisory and organisational capacity. A study of reception children (Wood and Bennett, 2001) found that developing an environment where good quality play learning could take place can be a considerable challenge. This is particularly the case in the current climate where requirements such as making ready for an Ofsted inspection, and the necessity to be accountable for achievement and performance, can make teachers' and practitioners' lives quite complicated.

The importance of children's play and talk is recognised in the Government's literacy and numeracy strategies where a commitment is stated to using these for reception children in their first year of school (Wood, E. 2004). The Association for Early Childhood Education recommends that practitioners make allowances for the fact that children learn at different levels and so activities need to be well planned and organised, thus providing opportunities for different children to shine in different contexts. The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage in England also recommends a play-based curriculum.

The practitioner needs to be able to plan and resource challenging learning environments and to support children's learning through planned play activity. The practitioner also needs to be able to extend and support the spontaneous play of children and help develop their language and communication skills through play. The practitioner also needs to ensure the child's continuity and progression (Wood, E. 2004:20). Moyles et al (2001) have argued that a learning environment that is dependent on play leads onto more mature forms of knowledge, skills and understanding. There is evidence to suggest that through play children develop high levels of verbal skill and creative problem solving capabilities.

Practitioners need to be resourceful and have a tightly organised environment if they are to integrate play into the curriculum and the child becomes a powerful player in constructing their own learning (Malaguzzi, 1993). In order that the process is meaningful the teacher needs to understand how and what the child thinks and knows, and to be able to engage with this (Wood, 2004). Vygotsky (1933) argued that what children learn and how they learn it is driven by the social experiences and social interactions that they encounter and the development of their thinking occurs as a result of the interaction between themselves, their environment, and more experienced others. Thus, learning is a collaborative process, practitioners need to be aware however of the power relationships that exist in educational settings. Children have no control over the world they enter, of the pre-existing cultural practices or of the power of the expectations of others, particularly their parents and teachers (MacNaughton, 2004). Training for those who intend to work in the early years sector should not neglect the issue of power or the contexts in which it operates. Practitioners need to be reflexive in their practice and a critical element of their training and resulting good practice is missed if they are not aware of these power differentials.

Good Practice

Many educationalists regard the early practitioner as an influential role model for a child. There are a number of teaching or pedagogical practices that are recommended by the CGFS outlining what the practitioner should do in each area of learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). The biggest group of these recommendations relates to what is called 'practitioner modelling' whereby the practitioner, in demonstrating appropriate behaviour, values and language brings about a positive approach to learning, or positive learning disposition. The practitioner, during training, may be involved in dramatic role play where they need to demonstrate that they do not use language or behaviour that demoralises children and frustrates their learning experience. Within the learning environment the practitioner may also act as a role model

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and in expressing their own enthusiasm for learning may encourage the learning of the children. The idea behind all this is to increase children's motivation to learn thus improving the learning disposition (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). In a study entitled Quality in Diversity (Siraj-Blatchford, 2001) the writer witnessed the use of practitioner modelling as an example of good practice in early years education.

Educational charities such as the Pre-School Learning Alliance have developed their own training programmes in line with the guidelines supplied by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Beginning with workshops on children's learning through play and with the Getting Started Course the Alliance presents people with an opportunity to train in childcare. This is the first step that can lead to the awards laid down in the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's National Qualifications Framework, including those that refer to the CPP and DPP. The charity has developed its own programme of training to ensure pre-school practitioners meet all of the relevant regulatory requirements and achieve satisfactory or better outcomes in the OfSTED inspections of pre-school settings. More than a million parents have successfully accessed and completed adult educational courses as a result of involvement in pre-school settings. This has resulted in both a better-qualified workforce and greater opportunities for pre-schools to expand and diversify their provision. It also means that in areas of economic disadvantage, the successful completion of courses provide opportunities for more people to find paid work. Training such as this includes what this paper considers to be essential elements for those who wish to work in the early years sector. That is they place considerable emphasis on the importance of play and how play and the learning environment need to be compatible. They make explicit the power relationships at work in the educational process and they emphasise the importance of role models and also of modelling what is acceptable behaviour and language in the learning environment. Not least such training emphasises the importance of inclusive behaviour and practice.

Cultural Awareness

Milner (1983) has argued that children learn about positive and negative racial responses from a very early age and that positive acceptance of others depends in part on whether they have been allowed to develop a positive self-concept and acceptance of themselves. Where this is lacking, and where significant adults display racial preferences then children as young as three can act in accordance with adult prejudice. Siraj-Blatchford (1996) contends that cultural identity should be an area of concern both in curriculum formation and in teacher training. This is especially relevant in the early years sector where negative experiences with others can result in children rejecting their own cultural identity. Practitioners need to be sensitively aware of a child's cultural background and make an effort to show all the children that difference is something to be celebrated and enjoyed rather than shunned. A critical element in the training of those who desire to work in early years education is thus the development of cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Children learn from those around them and practitioners who have been trained to be culturally aware and accepting of difference can be excellent role models for children who may have been exposed to the view that racial differences are a cause for prejudice. Having cultural awareness implies that practitioners will be conversant with the religious observances and dietary requirements of different cultures. It also needs an ability to deal with language problems that children might encounter. While all children and adults may identify with different racial or gendered groups children need to experience positive attitudes towards those who may be different to themselves.

Conclusion

Quality in early years provision is a necessary but debated area, what defines quality? It is the argument of this paper

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that one of the most important factors that contribute to quality in early years provision, is properly trained professionals. Again, what constitutes proper training is an arguable concept but the elements that are critical in training those who wish to work in the early years sector are those that have been in evidence since Piaget onwards, that is practitioners need training in child-centred learning. Piaget also argued that all of a child's relationships and interactions influence his/her development and that playing with others is especially important.

It certainly seems clear that it is essential that early years training should be developmental and centred on how a child learns. Stepping stones to becoming a fully trained and professional practitioner seem to me to be an effective method of training. This is a method that ensures the vital elements of play, role modelling, and inclusive practice are embedded in early years training.

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