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An Overview

Our goal in writing this book is to provide a guide for both social work professionals and social work students interested in early childhood education and care. We believe this to be an emerging and important domain for the social work profession. Our hope is that this book can not only offer important background information to interested readers but also inspire them to become involved in this field of practice. In addition, we elucidate the special skills that social workers bring to this field of practice. The social work profession is uniquely poised to make important contributions, particularly given the role of social work in the history of early childhood education and care and social workers' commitment to social justice.

It has become typical for children to participate in some form of early education before entering kindergarten (Magnuson & Shager, 2010). Although the use of child care and early education has increased for all socio-demographic groups, significant inequities still exist, with children from more advantaged families more likely to be enrolled than children from less advantaged families (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). The implications for society are immense. Significant evidence demonstrates the positive effects of high-quality early childhood education and care and the consequences of receiving poor-quality care, particularly for already disadvantaged children. Thus, the inequality that U.S. children experience in early childhood education and care is a problem related to poverty. So, although education can be a pathway for upward mobility, it needs to begin early. In this book, we demonstrate how early care and education, if it is of high quality, can be an effective antipoverty tool.

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Brain and developmental sciences have shown that the early years of a child's life are critical to her or his development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Those children fortunate enough to be born to parents in the upper quartiles of the income distribution reap far more educational benefits from day one, compared with those born to more modest circumstances. This better prepares them to begin formal education and to succeed in school and in adult life (Esping-Andersen et al., 2012). The good news is that participation in high-quality early education and care can have an equalizing effect, perhaps even closing the current achievement gap between more- and less-advantaged groups. The cycle of poverty can be broken.

Nearly 60 percent of children attend some form of early education program in the year preceding kindergarten (Brooks-Gunn, Markman-Pithers, & Rouse, 2016). However, Head Start serves only half of these children, and state prekindergartens (pre-Ks) serve less than 30 percent of all preschoolers (Barnett et al., 2016). In addition, children in families at the bottom of the income distribution are more likely than their advantaged counterparts to be in the care of a relative or in no weekly nonparental care arrangement at all (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2016). These children are also more likely to live in home environments that are less developmentally stimulating (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Gennetian, Castells, & Morris, 2010). In contrast, more advantaged children are more likely to be in center-based care arrangements, often of high quality (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2016), and live in more educationally enriching home environments. Children from more affluent families have a double advantage.

Fortunately, political leaders, policymakers, and even members of the public now acknowledge the research on the lasting positive effects of high-quality programs on children's cognitive and social development. Researchers have shown that early education is the best way to ensure that all children, regardless of race or class, begin school on equal ground (Takanishi, 2004). There is also strong and long-standing evidence that the variety of benefits associated with high-quality early childhood education and care far outweigh the costs (Heckman, 2006; Karoly & Bigelow, 2005): Every dollar spent on pre-K programs results in three to 17 dollars in benefits to adult individuals and society as a whole (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2016). Finally, it has been estimated that 70 percent of the public supports early childhood education and care (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2016), and many people want more government involvement (Dias, 2016).

Although consensus exists on the importance of early childhood education and care, words continue to fall short of actions. U.S. policies and practices are not yet well aligned with the research base (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, &

Thornburg, 2009). The country's fragmented early childhood education and care system is composed of both high- and low-quality settings. The current system rewards some students and disadvantages others. As is the case with many systems in the United States, there is no universal solution, but better systems could exist. The U.S. approach is in sharp contrast to that of other industrialized nations, where preschool coverage is extensive for most three- and four-year-old children and quality is more uniformly high.

One might think that given the United States' history regarding public education and the typical classification of children as worthy beneficiaries, this fragmented and uneven result might not be the case. Going back to the Progressive Era, when the settlement house movement began, social workers were concerned with the day care and education of those in impoverished immigrant families. For example, Jane Addams, cofounder of Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago, studied child development and understood the importance of education and social inclusion, particularly for those in need. Her work won her the Nobel Peace Prize and national and international attention, but this book will show that the social work profession has not continued to follow Addams's lead and has yet to make a significant impact in this domain. The United States has been considered a laggard in the provision of early childhood education and care, situated somewhere in the middle of other rich nations in 1975 but far behind them by 2002 (Garfinkel, Rainwater, & Smeeding, 2010).

Certainly, some progress has been achieved. The United States has made efforts toward universal early childhood education coverage with state-funded preschool, which is a relatively new development. Today, 29 percent of four-year-olds and 5 percent of three-year-olds are enrolled in state preschool programs (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, Brown, & Horowitz, 2015). Many additional children are enrolled in other forms of nonparental care, including Head Start, which has accommodated tens of millions of three- and four-year-olds since its start over 40 years ago (Kirp, 2007). Another estimate from the National Institute for Early Education Research (Barnett et al., 2015) indicated that enrollment across three public preschool programs (state pre-K, Head Start, and preschool special education) is at most (because some children attend multiple programs) 16 percent at the age of three years and 41 percent at the age of four years. At the current rate of annual increases, it will take decades for even 50 percent of four-year-olds to be enrolled in state pre-K programs (Barnett et al., 2015).

There is also little consistency in the provision of care: The amount of money spent per child in state preschool programming varies from state to state, quality is inconsistent across Head Start programs, and many children

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still participate in low-quality and unregulated day care. It is often children from marginalized groups who participate in lesser-quality care, making these children “doubly disadvantaged”; in other words, they may be less likely to experience educationally stimulating homes that promote school readiness and less likely to participate in educationally enriching early experiences (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004). Thus, far more needs to be done. Although state preschool programs have seen increases in spending per child and in enrollment and more states are meeting quality standards, state pre-K remains largely a program for four-year-olds. Further complicating the matter is the fact that the transition from early childhood education and care programming to kindergarten through 12th-grade education (K–12) is not always a smooth one (Bornfreund, McCann, Williams, & Guernsey, 2014).

OUR AIMS IN THE BOOK

With this book, we aim not only to provide important background to those in the field of social work but also to inspire them to become involved. As social workers, we have the requisite knowledge, values, and skills to make a difference in this arena. We can play a multitude of roles related to direct practice, policy, advocacy, research, and education. We can assist early educators and administrators with assessments for and interventions with children and their families. We can advocate at the local, state, and national levels for increased attention and funding as well as evidence-based programming. Our training in research allows us to interpret research findings and conduct research to support those in the field and those who affect policy. Finally, social work educators can and should be involved in the education of social work students interested in working in this field of practice.

We believe that social work professionals and social work students can make important contributions to this growing field of practice, particularly in light of the role of social work in the early history of early childhood education and care and our constant commitment to social justice. Although social workers are employed directly by these programs and witness the unequal results (Kahn, 2014), we remain minimally involved in this field of practice (Azzi-Lessing, 2010a; Herman-Smith, 2013). Given that most children experience nonparental care at some point before they enter kindergarten (Magnuson & Shager, 2010), this is indeed a matter of social justice, one in which the profession must increase its involvement.

In this book, we use a social justice lens to give social workers and social work students an introduction to the benefits associated with high-quality

early education and care programs; a description of the evolution and history of day care and early education; details regarding current disparities with respect to income, race, ethnicity, and immigrant status; comparisons with systems in other countries; and finally, a call to action to become involved in the practice, research, and policy arenas of early childhood education and care. Throughout the book, this is accomplished using a strengths-based perspective. Each chapter also includes several text boxes, which provide additional, supportive material for the points discussed.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

We bring to this discussion a passion for both the work and the populations affected. As two professors of social work with over a decade of early childhood education and care research under our belts, we feel we are in a position to provide important background to those interested and also to shed light on ways in which they can become involved. We feel that this is part of a larger issue related to early childhood policies and programs overall. In other words, early childhood education and care should be one element of a more family-friendly society, a society that includes paid parental leave for both parents, adequate tax credits to offset the costs of raising children, and quality early childhood education and care for all. This benefits not only families with children but also society at large. Better early childhood education and care for more children can have a positive effect on employment, income, gender equity, and child development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016c).

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

We begin this book by providing a general outline of early childhood education and care and a description of the various arrangements children might experience. In chapter 2, we then trace the history of early childhood education and care back to its origins in the 1800s. This history reveals two distinct paths, the evolution of day nurseries and the development of nursery schools, which have led to today's patchwork system of services. Day nurseries originated primarily to facilitate maternal employment and served as precursors to today's child care. In contrast, nursery schools developed with the goal of providing educationally enriching environments. The chapter ends with a discussion of historical themes that continue to resonate today.

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Chapter 3 orients readers to today's early childhood education and care situation, which can be described as a fragmented system with unequal access and use, often based on sociodemographic factors. In that chapter, we discuss parents' decision making and use patterns, which are affected by access, supply, and demand, among other factors. We elucidate factors that predict differential use based on, for example, race, ethnicity, immigration status, income, and parental education. More often than not, the decision about an early education or child care placement is not so much a choice but an accommodation based on situational constraints.

Chapter 4 describes the outcomes associated with early childhood education and care. Specifically, we describe model programs and the effects of different care arrangements. This shows how effects depend on the type of setting and how benefits can be particularly powerful for certain groups of children.

Chapter 5 provides an international perspective for readers. We highlight how the policies of other countries contrast with those in the United States, which provides a context for how the United States is situated vis-à-vis peer nations. Other nations' approaches can provide models for more socially just systems that are universal, accessible, inclusive, and part of an integrated child and family policy framework.

Chapter 6 outlines the roles for social workers in early childhood education and care. These contributions can be made in direct practice and agency leadership, policy development and advocacy, research, and social work education. Each of these domains is discussed, with corresponding examples, so that social workers can better visualize the roles they can play.

Chapter 7 offers a case illustration so that social work students and social work professionals can envision social work practice issues and skills related to engagement, assessment, and advocacy when working with children in early education settings.

Finally, we conclude with a chapter we call "Moving Forward." In this final chapter, we draw on the major themes of the book to discuss current debates, such as universal versus targeted programming, and possible solutions to problems, such as access and quality, from a social work perspective. We reiterate the unique roles that social workers can play in the development, promotion, and maintenance of high-quality early childhood education and care policies and programs. We end with proposals for ideal early childhood education and care programs and policies, taking into consideration the realities of the country's current patchwork situation. We argue for a more holistic approach to child and family well-being. Our hope is that the social work profession can once again play an instrumental role in this field of practice.