

Early Childhood Teachers Often Ill Prepared to Care for Children with Disabilities

WHILE THE MAJORITY OF PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS HAVE AT LEAST ONE CHILD WITH A DISABILITY, teachers often have little or no training in education and caring for these children. A survey of those overseeing early childhood teacher preparation programs reveals that even though early intervention and special education is part of many programs' missions, coursework and training often fall short, according to new research published in the *Journal of Early Intervention*.

The right of young children with disabilities to be cared for and educated with typically developing peers is one of the most radical and profound outcomes of federal disability legislation. As a result, the number of three to five year olds with disabilities in regular classrooms has been on the rise for the past decade—increasing by 32 percent between 1992 and 2001, according to the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs.

As one might expect, teachers with coursework and practicum experience in working with children with disabilities are more confident in their skills and express more positive attitudes toward inclusion. However, large numbers of graduates are leaving programs without having had a course or field experience in working with children with disabilities.



A Matter of Degrees

The amount of coursework and experience schools provide varies by the type of institution and the degree offered—bachelor's degree, associate's degree, or child development associate certificate (CDA).

The survey examined each degree program in four content areas identified by those in the field as critical to the family-centered, interdisciplinary approach that best serves young children with disabilities. They include:

- Educating and caring for young children with disabilities,
- Working with families,
- Home-visiting, and
- Collaborating with professionals in other disciplines.

CONTINUED



Of early childhood teacher preparation programs surveyed, 60 percent include training early childhood special educators as part of their primary mission. Yet, 40 percent of bachelor's programs, 38 percent of associate's, and 62 percent of CDAs did not require a course in educating and working with children with disabilities.

Field experience fared slightly better. Programs were more likely to require practicum experiences related to working with children with disabilities. Therefore, some students are working with children with disabilities without having had any coursework to prepare them. Students were even more likely to have no coursework or field experience in the remaining content areas.

Teacher preparation programs that do not identify early special education as part of their mission do even less to prepare teachers in this area. A third of those with bachelor's degree from such programs go on to work in early childhood without any experience in working with children with disabilities prior to teaching. Lack of coursework for associate programs is of particular concern as three-fourths of graduates pursue jobs in the early childhood field.

Recommendations

The findings show that improvements are needed and reiterate the importance of monitoring standards of early childhood teacher preparation programs as the movement toward inclusion continues. Universities and colleges need to align their program content with standards and recommended practices for early childhood professionals. Because so many existing teachers have not had coursework, more in-service training is needed.

Two-year institutions in particular need support as larger percentages of their graduates go on to work in early childcare settings. Currently, most federally funded personnel preparation grants go to four-year institutions. Of 192 early childhood personnel preparation grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs between 1998 and 2005, only two focused on training in community colleges. (NECTAC Projects Finder database of OSEP-funded early childhood projects, www.nectac.org/search/projfinder.asp.)

Conclusion

Teacher preparation is a significant component of high quality early childhood programs. The findings from this study suggest that teacher preparation programs should examine whether or not they are providing the foundation for their graduates to work with children with disabilities. Doing so will generate better prepared teachers and better served children. ■

To Learn More

"Early Childhood Teacher Preparation in Special Education at 2- and 4-Year Institutions of Higher Education" appears in the winter 2005 issue of the *Journal of Early Intervention*. Authors are Florence Chang, Diane M. Early, and Pamela J. Winton from the FPG Child Development Institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Recent research indicates that the early childhood workforce does not feel prepared to implement inclusion. The National Center for Education Statistics found that almost 70 percent of all public school teachers feel under prepared to meet the challenges of working with children with disabilities. Studies of preschool teachers find that teachers lack confidence in their ability to educate and care for young children with disabilities.^{1, 2, 3}

¹Buysse, V., Wesley, P., Keyes, L., & Bailey, D. (1996). Assessing comfort zone of child care teachers in serving young children with disabilities. *Journal of Early Intervention, 20*(3), 189-203.

²Hilton/Early Head Start. (1999). *Evaluation report*. Rohnert Park, CA: Author.

³Miller, P. S., & Losardo, A. (2002). Graduates' perception of strengths and needs in interdisciplinary teacher preparation for early childhood education: A state study. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 25*, 309-319.

STUDY BACKGROUND

In 1999, 438 institutions of higher education with early childhood teacher preparation programs were surveyed. Programs were located in 47 states, Washington, DC, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Of those surveyed, 47 percent were four year institutions, 53 percent were two year institutions, and 76 percent were public institutions.

Data was analyzed to determine:

- If early childhood teacher education programs include a part of their mission preparing students to work in early childhood special education;
- The number and type of courses available related to children with disabilities, working with families, collaboration with professionals in other disciplines, and home visiting;
- The amount of field experience related to working with children with disabilities; and
- If the level of the degree offered related to the coursework available.