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A Survey: Quality Practices

Excerpts from "Quality Practices and Barriers in Early Childhood Settings: A National Survey," a paper presented in April 1999 at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Authors are Diane Early, Richard Clifford, & Carollee Howes of the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

Preschool teachers report engaging in practices they endorse

A national survey of 1,902 teachers of preschoolers reveals that teachers report that they are able, generally, to engage in the practices they endorse. Teachers were given a list of twenty-one practices and asked to rate to what extent a practice happened in their classroom and to what extent they would want the practice to occur "in a perfect world." Few discrepancies were found between reported practices and beliefs. Although different teachers endorsed different practices, on most items, teachers said that they are able to use the practices they endorse.

On many items teachers report almost no difference between their practices and their ideals. The four items with the smallest discrepancies between beliefs and practices are:

- All children in the group have to take part in all activities.
- Children practice skills on worksheets.
- Children are involved in group lessons.
- Children spend time playing.

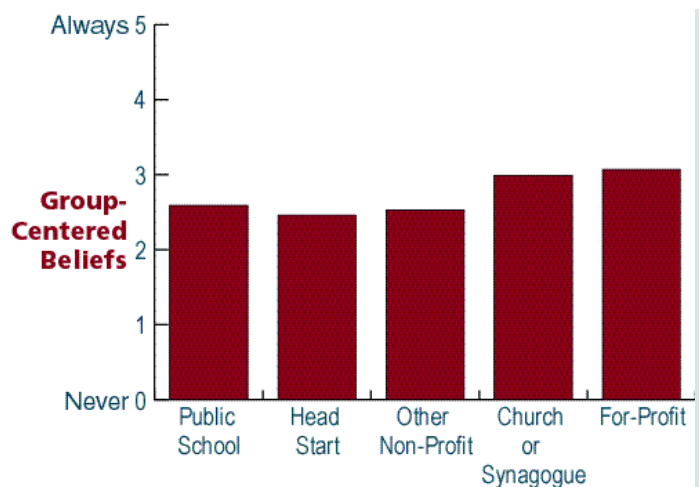
Teachers report that in a perfect world, they would engage in some practices slightly more. The four items with the largest discrepancies between beliefs and practices are:

- We have a daily science experience.
- Children have time to be alone when they want it.
- We have a daily math experience.
- We have a daily music activity.

Group-centered beliefs and demographic variables

There were significant differences found in examining which teachers endorsed group-centered beliefs based on the sponsorship of their center. Group-centered beliefs are those that encourage all children to engage in the same activities at the same time and at the same pace. It is the opposite of child-centered beliefs that encourage individualized activities and pacing. Teachers in public schools, Head Starts, and other non-profit centers endorse group-centered beliefs significantly less than do teachers in religiously affiliated or for-profit settings. Additionally, teachers with more education endorse group-centered beliefs less.

To measure group-centered beliefs, teachers were asked a series of questions about how often they believe certain practices would take place in a perfect world. Examples include: "Children have to complete all activities," and "All children in the group have to take part in all activities."



Barriers to Endorsed Practices

The survey asked teachers, "How often do the following prevent you from teaching/caring for your group in the way you would in a perfect world?" [1=Never, 5=Always]

The table to the right indicates the top-rated barriers to engaging in endorsed practice. Not surprisingly, all the barriers were given relatively low ratings. Earlier, the questions about practices and beliefs indicated that teachers see themselves as employing the practices they endorse.

Children with behavior problems interfere	2.8
Lack of planning time	2.3
My group is too large	2.2
Not enough adults in the room	2.1
Parents do not support my ideas	2.0
Not enough materials	1.9
Too little pay to put in the extra effort	1.9
High turnover & teacher absences make planning difficult	1.9
I get tired and irritable because I'm worried about money	1.8

Conclusions & Implications

Early childhood teachers largely see themselves as engaging in the practices that they endorse. On average, they do not report many barriers to conducting their classes in the way they think are best—as evidenced both by the small discrepancies between their reported practices and beliefs and by the low ratings they give to the barriers listed in the survey.

Different teachers do endorse different practices, especially with regard to group-centered versus child-centered practices. Although teachers uniformly agree that reading, math, science and music activities should take place daily, there is not uniform agreement with respect to beliefs about practices like involving children in group instruction and insisting that children complete all activities.

Attention should be paid to changing teachers' knowledge and values for child-centered practices. Other research has indicated that child-centered practices predict the best outcomes for children. These data indicate that teachers who endorse such practices, report being able to engage in them. However, teachers do not uniformly endorse child-centered practices. Changing teachers' knowledge and values may be a key to improving practice.

If you want more information on early childhood teachers

National Center for Early Development & Learning	www.ncedl.org
Center for the Child Care Workforce	www.ccw.org
National Child Care Information Center	www.nccic.org
National Association for the Education of Young Children	www.naeyc.org

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For more information, contact Loyd Little at (919) 966-0867 or email loyd_little@unc.edu
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