

Teacher Programs Surveyed for Special Ed Preparation

This Spotlight is based on 'Teacher Preparation in Special Education,' an article by Florence Chang, Diane Early and Pam Winton, all of NCEDL. The article was published in the *Journal of Early Intervention* (2005), Vol. 27(2), 110-124.

Abstract

The movement towards inclusion has increasingly made educating and caring for children with disabilities a critical part of the early education teacher's role. The goal of this paper is to describe and understand the extent to which early childhood teacher preparation programs are including early childhood special education/early intervention (ECSE/EI) as part of their core course and practicum requirements.

A nationally representative survey (n = 438) of chairs and directors of early childhood teacher preparation programs revealed that while a large proportion of programs consider early childhood special education/early intervention a part of their program's mission, the amount of coursework and practicum experience vary by content area and degree program.

Methodology

Researchers identified 1,387 institutions of higher education (IHEs) believed to have an early childhood teacher preparation program. From this, a random sample of 600 was selected.

At each IHE, an effort was made to interview the chair or director of the early childhood program, who were asked 100 questions regarding the program's mission, required coursework, and practicum experiences.

The high response rate in this study (over 80%) suggests that the data are a good representation of the general population of early childhood programs in the U.S.

Discussion of results

The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the Association of Teacher Educators recommend that all early childhood teachers have a common foundation of knowledge and that core knowledge should guide early childhood preparation programs.

The knowledge base should encompass a wide age range, and include skills for working with children from diverse backgrounds and with a wide-range of abilities. It is well-documented that there is a strong link between teacher attitudes towards inclusion, perceived competency, and teacher knowledge and skills. Teachers who have coursework and practicum experience with children with disabilities show significant gains in perceived knowledge and skills and also express more positive attitudes toward inclusion.

This study suggests that the lack of confidence teachers feel in their own skills in working with children with special needs may partly stem from their lack of preparation and experience in areas related to early childhood special education/early intervention (ECSE/EI).

Overall, it was encouraging to see that approximately 60% of the early childhood teacher preparation programs do include ECSE/EI as a part of their primary mission.

Programs with an ECSE/EI mission theoretically should structure and design their programs to require more special needs preparation than programs that do not have this mission. Data bear this out as both Bachelor's and Associate's degree programs with an ECSE/EI mission have more coursework and require more field experience in special needs areas than programs without an ECSE/EI mission. Nevertheless, about 40% of Bachelor's programs that say that special education is part of their mission do not require a course in educating and working with children with special needs.

Some students lack coursework

Data suggest that some students are working with children with disabilities in their practicum without having had a course in educating and caring for young children with disabilities.

This trend held true for other special needs areas; data indicate there are students of Bachelor's programs, with or without an ECSE/EI mission, who have field experience in working with families and other professionals, and in home-visiting without having had a course in these areas.

For Associate's degree programs, a stated mission in ECSE/EI was related to more coursework and practicum exposure in special needs areas. There was more required coursework and practicum exposure in the education and care of young children with disabilities and in collaborating with professionals from other disciplines and

more coursework in home-visiting for Associate's programs with a stated mission in ECSE/EI compared to those without this mission.

However, coursework and practicum experience in collaboration and home-visiting was low, overall, in Associate's degree programs.

Improvement is needed

Data for both Bachelor's and Associate's degree programs suggest that although an ECSE/EI mission relates to increased coursework and practicum experience in special needs areas, improvement is needed.

Teacher preparation is an important component of high quality early childhood programs and yet many training programs are not requiring a course on working with children with disabilities, their families, other professionals, or home-visiting.

Implications for policy, research

The data from this study reiterate the importance of monitoring the standards of early childhood teacher preparation programs as the movement toward inclusion continues. While it was encouraging to find a majority of early childhood teacher preparation programs including preparation in ECSE/EI as part of their program's mission, it appears that a large number of graduates are leaving programs without having had a course or field experience in working with children with special needs or in related areas, regardless of the mission of their preparation program.

The lack of coursework and practicum experience in key areas related to ECSE/EI suggests that practicing early childhood teachers need in-service training and support in working in inclusive settings.

Resources must also be directed to help support two-year institutions. The findings show that a much larger proportion of Associate's degreed graduates pursue employment in the early childhood workforce compared to Bachelor's degreed graduates, yet many of their graduates have not had practicum experiences in areas related to ECSE/EI.

Moreover, resources such as federally funded personnel preparation grants have been geared towards four-year IHE's rather than community colleges. Only 2 of 156 personnel projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs since 1998 were granted to community colleges, despite the fact that community college graduates are the group most likely to have daily contact with young children with disabilities in early childhood classrooms.

More research needed

Future research should specifically explore how the extent and depth of coursework and practicum experience in areas related to special needs translates to self-efficacy and to effectiveness in working with children with special needs.

Research is also needed on the increasing number of early childhood preparation programs that consider themselves blended or interdisciplinary programs, combining early childhood education and early childhood special education teacher preparation programs. Future research on teacher preparation programs should consider whether interdisciplinary programs offer more comprehensive coverage and require more practicum experience in working with children with special needs than non-blended programs.

Re-examination of programs suggested

Coursework and field experience provide the foundation and knowledge base for teachers to enter the workplace confident in their abilities. The findings from this study suggest that teacher preparation programs should re-examine whether they are providing the foundation for their graduates to work with children with special needs. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the individuals considering enrollment in early childhood teacher preparation programs to be good consumers by carefully examining coursework and practicum offerings when deciding on which program best meets their needs as educators of children with special needs. A stated mission may not translate into adequate preparation. ■

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