

The Beliefs and Practices of Early Childhood Educators in the U.S.: Does Specialized Preparation Make a Difference in Adoption of Best Practices?

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In this study, the role of specialized professional preparation in early childhood education in determining the adoption of developmentally appropriate practices as both a philosophical orientation and as a guide to actual classroom practice is explored. How do those who receive specialized preparation in early childhood differ from their otherwise prepared colleagues? While preschool teachers in general scored higher than elementary school teachers on instruments that measured developmentally appropriate beliefs and practices, teachers with specialized early childhood background preparation, regardless of teaching environment, held significantly more "highly appropriate" beliefs and practiced in ways that were more "highly appropriate." This research confirms the assumption that teachers' qualifications impact the quality of the early childhood classroom and that it is important to understand early childhood as a unique period of development and to acquire the body of knowledge and skills that define the field.

"Given the well-established fact that young children learn differently, the conclusion that educators must draw is straightforward one: the education of young children must be in keeping with their unique modes of learning" (Elkind, 1986, p. 631).

Young children do not learn in the same way as adults, or even older children (Bredekamp, & Copple, 1977; Elkind, 1986). Early childhood professionals need to have specialized preparation that helps them understand how young children grow, develop and learn during this distinct developmental period that spans birth through age eight (Goldstein, 1997; Phillips, 1986). Although there is clearly a body of knowledge and skills that defines the field (Bredekamp, 1995; Snider & Fu, 1990), there are no widely accepted profession-

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wide standards that ensure adequate preparation or proper mentoring during induction into the field. This is despite repeated efforts to define and refine such standards (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1982; 1985; 1991; 1992).

The nature and the variety of the background preparation found among early childhood educators is a distinctive feature of the profession (Phillips, 1986; Wise & Leibbrand, 1993). However, this very distinction (i.e., the variety represented in terms of required background education and experience among its ranks and the multitude of possible entry points into the field) is cause of much concern among the early childhood leadership about what it means to be an early childhood "Professional." Although various definitions exist for the word "profession," most definitions share several common features, most notably, a shared body of knowledge and skills that people outside the profession don't possess (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997), that the professionals are privy to ".....by virtue of long study and by initiation and apprenticeship under masters who are already members of the profession" (Wise & Leibbrand, 1993).

Specialized Preparation

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1982; 1985; 1994) and Bredekamp (1995) specialized preparation for educators who work with young children should include both theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the growth and development of young children. Such specialized knowledge and skills would include how to:

- facilitate development in all areas of development (including cognitive, physical, social, emotional, moral and aesthetic development);
- carry out authentic assessment of children for the purposes of planning and individualizing instruction;
- design appropriate curriculum and implement instruction;
- develop techniques of guidance and management for children in groups;
- establish and maintain healthy and safe environments;
- respond to the needs of developmentally and culturally diverse children and families (recognizing that children are best understood in the context of family, culture and society);
- establish and maintain positive parent-teacher relationships; and
- would encourage the development of an active role in the profession (e.g., by becoming involved in professional organizations, public policy, advocacy issues, ethics of the profession, etc.).