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By Default or By Design?

Variations in Higher Education Programs for Early Care and Education Teachers and Their Implications for Research Methodology, Policy, and Practice. Executive Summary

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By Default or By Design?

Variations in Higher Education Programs for Early Care and Education Teachers and Their Implications for Research Methodology, Policy, and Practice Executive Summary

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Introduction

Calls to reform teacher education figure prominently in the growing national conversation about teacher performance and children's learning outcomes (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010a, 2010b; Sparks, 2011). Thus far, however, most proposals have focused on teachers working in kindergarten through Grade 12, with scant attention to the *quality* of education for teachers in child care or preschool settings (Carey & Mead, 2011). For the latter group, the question of which higher education degree (if any) is an appropriate standard—rather than the quality of teacher preparation—has dominated the policy discussion of teacher effectiveness (Barnett, 2003; Bueno, Darling-Hammond, & Gonzales, 2010; Burchinal, Hyson, & Zaslow, 2008; Early et al., 2008; Fuller, Livas, & Bridges, 2006; Whitebook, 2003; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011).

Recently, however, the debate has begun to shift, in response to increased expectations placed on teachers in publicly-funded preschool and Head Start programs. Proposals to investigate the quality of teacher education programs, and their influence on teacher practice in pre-kindergarten settings, are gaining traction (Bornfreund, 2011; Chu, Martinez-Griego, & Cronin, 2010; Hyson, Tomlinson, & Morris, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2011; University of Chicago Urban Education Institute & Ounce of Prevention Fund, 2010; Whitebook, Gombay, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011).

But understanding how higher education contributes to teacher performance is a complex undertaking, requiring researchers to determine differences among teacher education programs along a variety of dimensions, and then to identify which variations are most relevant to student learning and teacher practice with young children. It also requires determining appropriate research methodologies that can illuminate important variations in program content and delivery, and provide solid evidence to inform policy and practice.

While such methodological challenges also face researchers of K-12 teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), they are particularly pertinent to the early care and education (ECE) field, in which, historically, any course of study within one of several disciplines focused on children of any age has been considered an acceptable form of teacher preparation (Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006). As indicated by the ubiquitous “early childhood-related” label widely used to describe the educational backgrounds of teachers of young children, there is no accepted and agreed-upon standard for what constitutes a high-quality program of study for ECE practitioners. Too often, highly diverse higher education programs are assumed to produce equivalent results.

This report draws upon a case study (Yin, 2009) of two early childhood B.A. completion cohort programs in order to illuminate the limitations of current ways of conceptualizing and studying early childhood teacher education. Focusing on four dimensions—

program content, clinical experiences, faculty characteristics, and institutional context—we examine challenges encountered and lessons learned in seeking to understand differences in educational experiences among students attending these two programs. We then offer a series of recommendations for more nuanced ways of describing and evaluating the quality of higher education programs for early care and education practitioners. A full report is available at: <http://www.irlle.berkeley.edu/cscce/>.

Lessons Learned

Not all higher education programs for early care and education practitioners are alike. The first step, therefore, in developing and assessing strategies for reform is to collect more nuanced information about variations among programs than prevailing research methodologies have managed to generate—with the goal of identifying the types of early childhood-related programs that are more or less successful in preparing teachers. Indeed, research conducted without an adequate accounting of such distinctions has fueled a series of recent rejections of the need for higher education degrees for ECE practitioners at all (Early et al., 2007; Fuller et al., 2006). As our case study suggests, even two programs classified as “early childhood-related,” and receiving public dollars to prepare ECE practitioners, can vary substantially in their degree of focus on children younger than age five and their emphasis on building teaching skills. Evidence-based policy making is only possible through research that adequately captures these programmatic variations.

1. Assessing variation in program content

In order to distinguish between programs focused on teacher preparation and those focused more exclusively on child development, and to compare how programs with similar or different objectives relate to student outcomes, stakeholders need information on programs’ goals and objectives for student learning, the courses they offer to help students achieve these goals and objectives, and the teacher competencies or standards, if any, to which program content is aligned.

Instead, research about higher education for ECE practitioners has typically focused only on the topics included in a course of study. While counts of par-

ticular topics included in program descriptions may indicate what is missing from a course of study, they offer insufficient information for understanding the range and depth of student exposure to particular content. Even multiple mentions of a topic do not guarantee depth of coverage. And while examination of course syllabi, including assignments, may paint a more detailed picture of curricula, the usefulness of this approach is limited by the lack of equivalent and comprehensive materials for courses within and across institutions. Further, written documentation or even interviews may not yield an accurate record of what occurs in a course, as instructors often adapt their plans and interviews may not be feasible.

2. Assessing variation in clinical experiences

In order to evaluate the contribution of different types of clinical experiences to teacher development, particularly given the varied professional experience among students seeking degrees, stakeholders need detailed information about the objectives, structure, and intensity of such student experiences, rather than simply knowing whether these were focused on children of particular ages or characteristics.

Instead, research about higher education for ECE practitioners has typically asked whether or not a given program requires students to complete a clinical experience focused on young children. Further, the terms “practicum,” “field work,” and “student teaching” have often been used interchangeably in the research literature and in the ECE field overall, but this lack of distinction can blur significant variation in the objectives, intensity, and outcomes of such efforts. Much greater specificity about clinical experiences is needed for investigating the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches.

3. Assessing variation in faculty characteristics

Individual faculty members are the best source of information about their demographic characteristics, academic background, early childhood-specific professional preparation, ongoing professional development, and applied experience. Including them in ECE practitioner registries would permit the linking of faculty to the population of working students they teach.

Instead, research about higher education for ECE practitioners has typically relied on one person within a program to provide information about all relevant faculty members. To date, this limited approach has been useful in identifying a prevalent lack of diversity among ECE teacher preparation faculty, as well as the lack of academic focus or direct professional experience with children younger than age five (Maxwell et al., 2006). Such program representatives, however, may know only the level of education attained by a given faculty member, rather than its content, and may be unfamiliar with faculty members' child-related experience or ongoing professional development. They also may be unsure or uncomfortable about providing demographic information. As a result, stakeholders generally lack sufficient information to assess how variations in faculty characteristics might influence the design and quality of higher education programs for ECE practitioners.

4. Assessing variation in institutional context

As states are being directed to build comprehensive ECE professional development systems, the collection and maintenance of up-to-date information on the capacity and content of higher education programs should be an integral component of such efforts. Institutions of higher education should be required to report changes in teacher preparation program offerings, whether in response to state policies, changes in funding, or other institutional dynamics, any of which could dramatically impact program quality and services offered.

Instead, the field has typically relied on occasional surveys to learn about higher education offerings for ECE practitioners. Yet this approach does not capture potentially frequent changes in program design, content, student support, and/or staffing. Stakeholders need baseline and ongoing information about institutional characteristics in order to assess changing program features, the capacity of the higher education system to deliver relevant and appropriate ECE teacher training, and the efficacy of various approaches to teacher preparation.

Conclusion

Only when distinctions can be clearly drawn among varying approaches to the preparation of ECE teachers will researchers become able to delineate best practices and to determine the contribution of higher education to teacher effectiveness. To date, on-site professional development in the ECE profession has been more rigorously studied than higher education, despite the ECE workforce's widespread participation in both types of adult learning (Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Whittaker, & Lavelle, 2010). A precursor to this study (Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009) called for investigation of the multiple contextual factors that influence teacher learning and behavior, including how education, ongoing professional development, and workplace environments all interact to help teachers develop and maintain good practice. Such research is the precondition for moving from a default embrace of a potpourri of so-called "early childhood-related" programs to those that are intentionally designed and based on reliable evidence about effective teacher development. Establishing a rigorous and sufficiently funded research agenda will require political leadership that understands the importance of data-based decision making; without it, teacher education reform strategies run the risk of shortchanging the nation's children, teachers, and families alike.



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