

Chapter 110

Early Childhood Programs as Professional Development Schools

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this chapter is on the establishment and maintenance of early childhood Professional Development Schools (PDSs). While the advent of PDS partnerships goes back to the 1980s and 1990s, very few of the PDSs have involved university partnerships with early childhood (pre-K) programs. This chapter outlines some of the opportunities and possibilities that early childhood PDSs offer, as well as some of the unique obstacles that are encountered when working with pre-kindergarten programs. Specific examples are provided of work in three different early childhood PDSs. The chapter concludes with an examination of future directions for early childhood Professional Development Schools.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Recent public interest in early childhood education has highlighted seminal research studies on the positive impact of high quality early childhood programs on young children, as well as future benefits to society (Heckman, 2013). In fact, federal initiatives, such as *Preschool for All* and the *Race to the Top: Early Learning Challenge*, demonstrate a national level of interest in early childhood education that is unprecedented since

the late 1960s, with the advent of Head Start. The positive outcomes of early childhood education result from programs that are of high quality, and those in the field have worked for years to improve the quality of programs that enroll young children. Improving the quality of early childhood programs involves on-going professional development for teachers/providers, which is, in fact, mandated in most states.

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, as educators attempted to implement reforms in

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P-12 education, one idea that received a great deal of attention was that of “simultaneous renewal” (Goodlad, 1988). Goodlad suggested that universities and schools collaborate to achieve the interrelated goals of professional development for practicing teachers and preparation of future teachers, both of which would lead to educational reform and excellent education for all children. The Holmes Group (1990) supported this type of partnership and a number of colleges and universities entered into relationships with K-12 schools, often establishing what were termed “Professional Development Schools.” By the mid-1990s, over 200 public and private schools had been designated as Professional Development Schools (Abdal-Haqq, 1996).

Connecting the educational reform movement that resulted in Professional Development Schools (PDS) with efforts to raise the quality of early childhood education seemed to make sense. However, while there were some attempts in the 1990s to establish partnerships between universities and early childhood programs in surrounding communities, very few of these were specifically designated as Professional Development Schools (Lundsteen & Harris, 1998; McMullen, 1996; Morse 1995). Ball State University developed three such partnerships, beginning in 1998 and continuing to the present day. Even now, 15 years after establishing our initial PDS partnerships, it is difficult to find other colleges and universities engaged in Professional Development School partnerships with pre-kindergarten early childhood programs.

This chapter will consider the challenges of establishing PDS partnerships with early childhood centers and discuss strategies that have been successful in overcoming some of the obstacles inherent in such partnerships. Additionally, initiatives that have provided opportunities and successes for teachers and teacher candidates involved in the PDS partnerships will be discussed. Finally, emerging trends and future directions will be considered.

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOLS

Description of Early Childhood Programs

Cambridge Nursery School (names of programs have been changed) is a full-service childcare and nursery school program located in the north-eastern section of Indianapolis, approximately 50 miles from the campus of the university. The center is registered with the state of Indiana as a Registered Ministry as the center is located in a church building. The facility offers full-time and part-time care of children from six weeks old to five years of age. Additionally, the program offers nursery school for 3 – 5 year olds. Cambridge has been in existence for over 40 years and serves approximately 250 families and children. The families are mostly professional, with middle to upper income levels. At one time many of the mothers were stay-at-home parents, but recently more families are dual income. The staff members represent diverse educational backgrounds (CDA to Master’s Degree) and cultures. The age range of full-time staff varies considerably as does the length of time employed in the program. Each classroom has 2 – 3 teachers depending on the age of the children in the group, the size of the group and the suggested staff/child ratio.

Hamilton Early Childhood Center is located approximately four miles from the university campus on the eastern side of Muncie. The center is licensed by the state of Indiana and offers full-time care to children from six weeks through age five years. The program serves a diverse population of mostly low-income families. The full-time staff is diverse in terms of ethnicity, educational background and experience. The age range and length of time employed by the program varies widely. Each class has 2 full-time teachers and a part-time teacher in the afternoon.

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