

Chapter 5

Enhancing Early Childhood Education Teacher Candidates' Experiences: How Undergraduate Research Enriches Preservice Practice

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education programs face many challenges preparing teacher candidates for the early childhood education classroom. Initiating undergraduate research programs in conjunction with early childhood teacher education can provide a greatly enhanced experience for teacher candidates and bear great benefits to the departments sponsoring this. Undergraduate research initiatives provide pre-service teachers with tremendous opportunities to gain hands-on experiences with many of the theories and strategies they study in their coursework. Such initiatives also serve as tremendous recruiting tools, especially for those early childhood education programs seeking to recruit more males, teacher candidates of color, and those from low-SES backgrounds. Rigorous preparation must be completed before teacher candidates begin to conduct fieldwork, but the benefits to teacher candidates, mentor teachers, and children are many.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher candidates face a busy schedule of coursework, practicum hours, student teaching, and licensing exams (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Days are filled with coursework and fieldwork, all of which must be carefully monitored to ensure that each teacher candidate is gaining the experiences, knowledge, and skills he or she needs (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Green, 2014). Within the context of an early childhood education teacher preparation program this is especially so, as many candidates have not had a great deal of experience working with young children before deciding upon a major (Healey & Jenkins, 2006; Healey, Jordan, Pell & Short, 2010). Those charged with monitoring each

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teacher candidate's progress, and ensuring that he or she is obtaining the myriad of experiences necessary to be successful in his or her own classroom, often feel hard-pressed to make certain this occurs within the four-year time period many candidates, parents, and legislators feel is sufficient (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Green, 2014). Recent educational policy reforms have been made in a variety of states in an effort to make changes intended to improve the caliber of teachers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Schroth, 2015). These reforms have included the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards in 44 states (Green, 2014; Schroth, 2015). Teacher education programs in over 40 states have also adopted the edTPA, which is a consequential licensure requirement intended to assure that new teachers are "classroom ready" (Schroth, 2015). Together, these and other reforms have created pressures upon teacher certification programs, and teacher educators, that sometimes seem overwhelming (Schroth, 2015).

While this schedule often makes engaging in undergraduate research projects seem daunting if not impossible, a variety of reasons exist to incorporate these within an early childhood education teacher preparation program (Chang, 2005; Healey & Jordan, 2006). The benefits to the teacher candidate of conducting research are many—both to the candidates' development as scholars and as emerging professionals (Healey, Jordan, Pell & Short, 2010; Hitchcock & Murphy, 1999). Undergraduate teacher candidates who engage in research, for example, gain familiarity with the professional literature, an understanding of research methods, and acquire the ability to plan and analyze (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002; Healey & Jordan, 2006). Considerations of what encompasses ethical behavior, best practices, and professionalism also cause the teacher candidate to grow and develop in ways that are beneficial for her or his future career (Bauer & Bennett, 2003; Kardash, 2000). When instructional technology is used as part of the research project, teacher candidates also gain experience with and better understanding of a variety of programs, applications, and other tools that can enhance student learning (Ishiyama, 2002; Lopatto, 2004). Such research opportunities are perhaps most effective when they extend over multiple years, permit various opportunities for involvement, provide rigorous training in research methods, accommodate open-ended investigations, and allow for measurable outcomes, although a much shorter action research project can also pay tremendous benefits (Craney, McKay, Mazzeo, Morris, Prigodich, & de Groot, 2011; Waite & Davis, 2006). When these criteria are met, undergraduate research can be the defining task of a teacher candidate's experience (Garde-Hansen & Calvert, 2007; Waite & Davis, 2006).

BACKGROUND

Those charged with preparing the next generation of early childhood educators face a variety of questions identified within the literature (see, e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2013; Levine, 2006). How do teacher educators best prepare teacher candidates for ethical professional practices in an ever-evolving society? How can teacher educators best assist future teachers in developing complex understandings of larger issues such as access, equity, social justice, and diversity? How will this fit into our already overcrowded curriculum? While there exists no one-size-fits-all solution to these questions, engaging teacher candidates in the process of thinking about these issues assists in their development of ethical thinking, having a sense of community involvement, and proficiency as practitioners (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Green, 2014; Kinkead, 2003; Lopatto, 2003).

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