

At the Core: Advocacy to Challenge the Status Quo

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In the early 1970s, I taught in an underfunded community-based child care program housed in a church. Eager to pursue professional training, and anxious for guidance about how to manage the many challenges of the job, I entered the local university's early childhood education extension program. This innovative program permitted me to arrange a part-time student teaching experience in the university lab school while continuing to work at my other child care job (an unusual opportunity because most university programs are relatively inflexible).

There was a world of difference between the student teaching and daily work environments. The lab school was rich in staff role models and materials. The community program was ill-equipped with both. At the lab school, there were almost enough wheel toys for each child to have one, while at the child care center, about a dozen children vied for the opportunity to ride one working vehicle. It was almost impossible to translate what I was learning at the university into practice at my job because the basic ingredients were so different. Discouragement and frustration were the result.

Several years later, as an instructor in a university lab school, my frustration reappeared. How could I prepare students for the world of work? Competent student teachers should experience a well-endowed program, but must also be alert to the obstacles they would face in most programs. The lab school had a one-to-five ratio of adults to preschoolers (sometimes more), yet students went on to be hired with sole responsibility for a dozen 3-year-olds. When the first group of graduates returned to visit, they made it clear that the realities of their work environments made it difficult for them to apply what they had worked so hard to master.

These stories are not the exception, but are symptomatic of early childhood education as it faces the 21st century. Lack of well-prepared practitioners is just one part of the problem. Many of our best-trained teachers are not adequately prepared for the challenges they face on the job—the realities of a drastically underfunded service. What are some of the barriers to implementation of developmentally appropriate practices?

- Too little, and often damaged, equipment, and materials.
- Unmanageable adult-child ratios.
- Co-workers with little or no training.
- Extraordinarily high staff turnover which is demoralizing and demanding for those who remain.
- Lack of familiarity with the cultures and sometimes the language of children and families.

- Increasing numbers of children and families living in poverty or facing other stressful conditions such as escalating community violence.
- The practical hardships, the assault to self-esteem, and the erosion of hope for a viable career choice that accompanies working for poverty-level wages, inadequate or non-existent benefits, and with little respect for the skills demanded by the job.

All of these realities undermine the ability of many early childhood educators to be effective. These conditions are a logical outgrowth of this nation's lack of genuine commitment to quality early childhood education opportunities as a basic entitlement for children and families.

Given this situation, the core curriculum for early childhood practitioners must incorporate knowledge and skills to enable them to challenge and reshape the conditions for effective teaching. Professionals must be prepared to be agents of change as well as competent practitioners. Some may argue that the goal of our core curriculum should be limited to preparing effective teachers. If the profession's goal is to ensure the well-being of young children, however, then it is unprofessional to allow the status quo, which is harmful to children, to go unchallenged.

The Anti-Bias Curriculum (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989) encourages staff to examine the hidden assumptions about race, sex, sexual preference, and class that are embedded in teaching practices. We also must examine these assumptions with respect to our profession and the services we provide. By failing to prepare people to become what Takanishi (1980) calls "articulate practitioners," early childhood educators are far more likely to condone the status quo of inadequate services for children and the untenable livelihood for themselves and their colleagues which reflect class and gender biases.

More than piecemeal efforts are needed to remedy this situation. Just as an anti-bias curriculum for children cannot merely be a series of disconnected activities about different cultural customs, but must be an integral part of the entire curriculum, change agents cannot be created by a few idle exercises such as writing a letter to a lawmaker. Rather, advocacy efforts must be woven through the curriculum for early childhood practitioners.

This is not to suggest that learning about child development theory or developmentally appropriate practice be abandoned. In addition to the core knowledge of the profession, practitioners must be armed with the weapons to enforce these theories and implement treasured practices. These are strong words, but reality requires a bold response. Understandings of these topics must be addressed during the course of an integrated professional development experience:

- Why early childhood professional identity involves working for change, and the development of critical thinking skills to evaluate the child care delivery system.

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- The regulations that govern child care work environments, and knowledge of remedies if violations are encountered.

- Why and how practitioners have and must continue to join together to address the problems facing their profession.

Many students are already being prepared to be change agents as well as competent teachers. During the Worthy Wage Campaign, many college instructors dedicated class time to introduce students to the staffing crisis in the field. Students were encouraged to become involved in this exciting new effort to address the crisis. College campuses have been among the most active sites in carrying out the campaign during its first three years. Many young teachers are committed to making early childhood teaching a career they can afford to pursue.

Preparing early childhood professionals to be change agents will be a departure from standard practice for many. However, it is the only alternative if the work of caring for children is to be valued in our society and if children are to experience the quality of care and education they deserve.

Resources

The National Center for the Early Childhood Work Force, formerly the Child Care Employee Project, is a policy, advocacy, and research organization dedicated to enhancing the compensation, working conditions, and training of child care teachers and family child care providers. The Center also acts as national coordinator of the Worthy Wage Coalition, a grassroots mobilization of caregivers, parents, and others working to confront and reverse the child care staffing crisis. The Coalition sponsors the Worthy Wage Campaign, the focal point of which is a nationwide Worthy Wage Day, held annually during the Week of the Young Child. The National Center also publishes a curriculum, *Working for Quality Child Care*, designed to help students and child care staff become effective advocates for improving quality, salaries, and working conditions in child care programs.

References

- Derman-Sparks, L. & the A.B.C. Task Force. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Takanishi, R. (1980). *The unknown teacher: Symbolic and structural issues in teacher education*. Keynote speech presented at the Midwest AEYC Conference, Milwaukee, WI.

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Suggested Citation

Whitebook, M. (1994). Advocacy to challenge the status quo. In Johnson and McCracken (Eds.), *The early childhood career lattice: Perspectives on professional development* (pp. 68-70). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.