Policy Brief: Penn State Study of Early Childhood Teacher Education

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Introduction

Pre-Kindergarten classrooms, Full Day Kindergartens, and the primary grades, organized as an aligned and coordinated system of education, are increasing in public schools. This PreK-3rd initiative is a significant part of an answer to the problem of the achievement gap according to national leaders. The PreK-3rd approaches stress the developmental continuity of early learning and individual differences, and shows a balanced appreciation of young children becoming ready for school, and schools becoming prepared for them through heightened focus on developmentally appropriate practices, transitions between grade levels, collaborations among school districts, communities and universities, and family engagement.

An important research question is how teacher education programs are aligned with the PreK-3rd approach. Researchers at The Pennsylvania State University recently completed an investigation of 42 Early Childhood Education Teacher Education (ECETE) programs housed in major research universities within 38 states that support publically-funded Pre-Kindergarten.

Results

The results demonstrated a considerable range of programs when examining them with respect to faculty size and make-up (e.g., full-time and part-time...
positions, use of adjuncts, number of faculty from under-represented groups, etc.), as well as the actual programs offered. ECETE programs most often were housed in Colleges of Education (N=24 out of 42), but this too varied. As to the composition of course work and practicum, again was found an array of offerings. Topics were presented in different ways, either embedded in courses or field experience or covered in an entire course. Cutting through this program variation, however, one is left with the distinct impression that ECETE at Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) in this study were meeting or surpassing their state standards and national goals and are making progress in responding to the challenges we face in preparing teachers for the 21st century to work in inclusive settings and with diverse children.

ECETE programs have been designed and implemented to meet national standards such as those set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). The course work and field experiences covered the key areas of child development and family relations, for example. Similarly, course work in math, science, and literacy was always taught. ECETE programs had course content emphasizing early learning standards, assessment, technology, and professional ethics. Some topics no doubt deserved more attention (e.g., infant-toddler development, professional leadership and advocacy). ECETE programs were in accord with NAEYC and NBPTS standards for teacher education programs.

ECETE programs’ responses indicated that programs are very concerned about helping new teachers become prepared for working with children with special education needs; the importance of teaching in classrooms serving all
children was apparent. Courses and field experiences were devoted to these subjects, and faculty research pertained to early special education issues more than any other research topic. The second most common faculty research area was on topics relating to education that is multicultural. ECETE programs prepared new teachers to work with multiple diversities: culturally, ethnically, social class and linguistically diverse children.

About half the ECETE programs reported impacts of the PreK and the PreK-3rd movements on program changes within the past three years, with the former movement more influential than the latter movement. The moderating factor was how recently the state began to emphasize public funding for programs in school and in communities for preschool children. Program changes were due to a host of other reasons as well, such as a state’s adoption of early learning standards, a new teaching license or changing requirements for teacher certification. Still, programs were affected by PreK expansion, and to a lesser extent PreK-3rd.

The clearest sign for this was the response to the interview question about how new teachers are being prepared for working in PreK-3rd settings. All programs immediately grasped the significance of what was being asked. Interviewees came up with a variety of answers—such as courses in teamwork and coordination, efforts to align program with national K-12 teacher education standards, placing trainees in diverse settings, etc..

The ECETE programs showed a high level of teacher and student engagement and possessed the following positive features:
• Collaboration across departments and colleges within the university
• Dedicated and experienced faculty
• ECE and elementary programs in constant open communication
• Strong PreK or early childhood activity at the state level
• Grounding in developmental principles
• Emphasis on teaching children from diverse backgrounds and inclusion of children with special educational needs

Moreover, the ECETE programs showed dynamic and adaptive responses to significant challenges, involving some form of faculty cooperation between ECE and elementary teacher education programs, with collaboration across departments and colleges. Committed and experienced ECE faculty, even if relatively small in number compared to elementary faculty had designed and were implementing successful programs, especially with central university administration support and when staff and other resources were readily available.

To illustrate, ECETE programs responding to current educational realities included the following:

West Virginia University is an excellent example of a growing ECE teacher education program. The state has revised certification bands and the university has responded with new courses and modes of delivery. The program has a wonderful rapport with community schools and programs and serves as a consultant for programs. Strong community connection plus study of international ECE distinguish this program from others in the study.

The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill’s School of Education and the Frank Porter Graham Center co-lead The First School Initiative in association with schools in North Carolina and Michigan. This initiative is an innovative approach to seamless education addressing collaboration across professional and institutional settings; examining greater communication and collaboration across home, school and community settings to insure greater coherence and
continuity across the preschool and primary grades; and exploring the potentials of inquiry-oriented curriculum to support children’s home-school transitions and involve children’s families in their early education.

Kansas’s emphasis on blending special and early education with a new unified license is served well by both the University of Kansas and Kansas State University. KU has a new birth to grade three unified program; and KSU offers an early childhood unified-birth through kindergarten license. Each is exemplary with multiple field placements and courses that integrate content areas with attention to individual differences and early learning standards. Team building is embedded in courses with a great deal of attention given to transition processes at both universities.

The University of Oklahoma’s program has recently added a second campus with the new Tulsa one sharing the same excellent characteristics with the Norman campus. The program has its students in cohorts taking field-work working with infants in the new Educare facilities in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, preschoolers at the Norman campus preschool program and at Educare in Tulsa, and primary-age children in carefully selected classrooms. The importance of teamwork and collaboration is highlighted in the preparation of teachers to serve the children and their families during the early learning years.

The ECETE programs studied acknowledged the importance of more attention to and greater effort in preparing new teachers to work with dual or multiple language learners. Another area of concern commonly reported was teaching about transitions into PreK, from PreK into Kindergarten, and between grade levels. In order to better prepare new teachers for the PreK-3rd approach to school organization, greater attention needs to be given to transitions. In addition, course work and field experiences dedicated to teambuilding and collaboration across the PreK-3rd continuum would be necessary.

The ECETE programs expressed themselves in various ways to suggest that other issues besides PreK and PreK-3rd are important to their vision and mission. Even as there is growing recognition of the importance of preparing teachers to
work in the public schools with three- and four-year olds, and to know how to teach in a PreK-3rd framework, ECETE programs stay committed to traditional goals as well. These include preparing teachers to work with infants and toddlers, teaching in non-public school settings, and instilling values such as social justice, concerns about compensation, adaptive leadership, and multicultural competence. While heralding the importance of PreK and PreK-3rd, ECETE programs see these two movements within the broader context of these other concerns.

**Reasons for Program Changes**

Program changes within the past three years traceable to PreK and PreK-3rd grade movements in the public schools depended on the state. Programs in states with recent PreK initiatives reported greater impact. All ECETE programs reported changes, but cited different reasons such as recent state early learning initiatives, changes in teacher certification grade level bands, and changes in state TE program standards. Informants reported professional development to better prepare new teachers for PreK and PreK-3rd, usually in the form of conferences, workshops, and faculty meetings. PreK field placements for students were commonplace. Programs were all trying to prepare students in some way for working in a PreK-3rd system of education. For example, such efforts included meeting the expectations for teacher education in ECE set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, certain kinds of field placement opportunities, course assignments, and keeping program portfolios or accumulative records of student performance.
Program Challenges

ECETE program informants reported some serious faculty challenges. First of all, faculty tended to be few in number with an average of 3.5 full-time persons. Usually they are helped by part-time adjuncts and graduate assistants. One university did not have even one full-time tenure-line ECE professor. Being under-staffed and under-resourced were frequently reported, as well as feeling a lack of understanding about what ECE really is about—that it is not a special interest or part of elementary education but is a distinct discipline in its own right.

ECETE faculty face significant challenges and operate under stressful constraints. Relative to elementary education TE faculty, ECETE faculty is small in size. Consequently, ECETE faculty have to cope with more limited human capital than elementary TE faculty, often having less influence when decisions are made because of their minority group status in those departments that house both faculties. At research universities, pressure exists for faculty to have external grants and to engage in research and publish in peer-reviewed journals. ECE faculty few in number have little wiggle room in coping with the important task of juggling their research obligations with running a TE program.

Shrinking budgets are now a primary concern. Fiscal constraints restrain the recruitment of new faculty members; positions are not being filled when faculty leave the program. ECETE faculty members report having to work harder, longer hours and having to take on additional responsibilities. In some programs, lack of
higher education administrative support as well as understaffing forced ECETE faculty to work longer hours doing paper work, leaving less time for research.

Another faculty challenge in many programs is the reliance on work carried out by adjuncts and non-tenure line staff. ECETE programs have a limited number of full-time positions. Under such circumstances, establishing consistent instructional practices is problematic. Opportunities for interaction among faculty members to plan and implement programs are limited, adversely impacting program quality; there is also pressure from the central administration to keep TE programs under four years.

Access to quality field placement sites is another major faculty concern. A shortage of field supervisors and cooperating teachers besets many programs. Field placements are bound by restrictions; once the placement was set-up, it is difficult to move the student elsewhere. In addition, ECETE programs can offer to their students only a limited number of field visits due to lack of supervisors. Some faculty said that they worked over-time to do extra supervision to help their students during their fieldwork.

ECETE programs displayed varying relations with their elementary teacher education counterparts. Many programs appeared as separate or as functioning in a relatively independent way. Others had a favorable cooperative quality or mixed quality—in some ways okay or good, in other ways not so good or indifferent or irrelevant.
Tensions between ECE and elementary Teacher Education Programs

Several reasons for tension between ECE and elementary TE programs (and by extension to the public schools) were expressed.

1. From how well developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) are viewed in the public schools.
   Repeated examples were given about the conflict between what teacher candidates are taught in the ECETE program and what they will encounter in the public school placements where often there is an overly academic focus and testing antithetical to DAP.

2. What is missing in Elementary teacher education.
   Elementary TE programs do not have a family-school-community course or a child development course.

3. Competition over Placement Sites.
   Lack of control over placement sites or being in sites with a different background and orientation to teaching.

4. Inappropriate Methods Courses and Instructors.
   ECE students were forced to take methods classes serving an age/grade range beyond third grade. Instructors lacked ECE background.

5. Professional Development School.
   Professional Development Schools, which are internships or special final student teaching opportunities based on university-school district collaborations, are at odds with PreK-3rd when they exclude PreK placements and participation.
6. Disrespectful Attitude.

For example, ECE enrollments are growing because ECE is an easier program from which to graduate from than the Elementary TE program.

7. Philosophical Differences.

ECETE programs operate in accord with a child-centered philosophy, and the Elementary TE program is content-centered.

8. Different Professional Identities.

ECETE faculty engage in different state-level professional development activities than do elementary TE faculty.

Recommendations

1. Recognize ECE as a distinct and equal discipline.

   We must not view ECETE as an appendage or part of elementary TE, with a stepchild status within departments. Redefining ECE and elementary TE programs will not be easy due to their different traditions. However, we must strive towards a complementary relationship in which each realizes their interdependency in order to achieve their mutual goal of preparing highly qualified teachers for PreK to 3rd.

2. Administration support and leadership is needed.

   Immediate attention to the ECETE faculty shortages is required. As public schools serve ever increasing numbers of preschoolers a greater number of ECETE program graduates is needed. Resources at major research universities need to be found or re-directed from funds previously earmarked for traditional elementary TE faculties (e.g., K-6, K-8, etc.) in order to create new tenure lines in ECETE faculties
that specialize in preparing teachers for PreK to 3rd grade schools. State-level and university central administration attention is urgently needed to address this resource need. Eventually, the K-12 model will be replaced by a P-12 model of basic education; not only new teachers but also principals, school counselors, school psychologists and special educators and other personnel must be educated for P-12, and not K-12 public education.

3. Opportunities for Collaboration between ECE and Elementary TE Programs must be enhanced.

State and university policies and practices need to support and provide leadership for enhanced communication, cooperation and collaboration between ECE and elementary TE programs. Dialogue about topics common across ECE and elementary, by both faculty and students, will foster better understanding and shared commitment.

4. PreK-3rd grade certificates should not overlap or compete with elementary teaching certificates.

States can work towards having within their teacher licensure system non-overlapping PreK-3rd grade public school teaching certificates that are not in competition with other certification bands, such as K-8, K-5, etc. This means the eventual elimination of state certification bands for elementary teaching that begin with K and not PreK.

Final Remarks

The Pennsylvania State University researchers caution that their findings and conclusions are constrained and limited by their study’s methodology and the select
and small number of programs they investigated. They recommend that the research question concerning how teacher education programs are changing in response to PreK and PreK-3rd be further studied. For example, research is needed to evaluate ECETE programs in other settings, including four-year colleges and private institutions. In addition, further research is needed examining program changes and faculty plans and concerns from the point of view of Elementary teacher education.

Appendix

Study Methodology

Following a web-based search, key informants who were knowledgeable about their ECETE programs were identified. Usually professors, they completed an on-line survey and answered phone-interview questions about their program. These methods yielded a comprehensive description of current courses and fieldwork in the pre-service programs. The research also examined how and why any changes in the ECETE program occurred from 2006 to 2009, in response to the expansion of PreK programs and to PreK-3rd approaches. Informants also answered questions about program plans, challenges, and ECE faculty research.

1. This research was supported by a grant from the Foundation for Child Development.
2. The full research report is available by contacting jej4@psu.edu.