The SAGE Encyclopedia of Contemporary Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Teacher Education

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There are certain issues of importance for all students in the field of early childhood education. Those training to be early childhood care providers and teachers will work with society's youngest members at a critical time period of their lives. Work in this field is often seen as nothing more than playing with or babysitting infants and young children. However, students of early childhood education need to recognize the rich history and wide-ranging research supporting the field. Students also need to understand the importance and long-lasting effects of this significant work in a young child's life—as well as in the lives of a child's family.

Working in the varying environments serving families with young children requires solid education with guided practical experiences. This education includes knowledge of the 200-plus-year history of early pioneers in the field as well as knowledge of the recent theories guiding the knowledge of child development and early childhood education. How are best practices understood? Why is it vital for the early childhood workforce to strive for cultural competence? And how do family systems models help inform the practice? Highlighting a number of important issues in early childhood educator training, this entry brings together critical aspects running through the field of early childhood teacher education.

Roots of Child Development

The roots of early childhood education as a field of study cover a period of 200 years from England, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and the United States. Significant pioneers offer multiple contributions to the field, including John Comenius and John Locke, who were both interested in parent interactions with children, and what it meant to be individuals and citizens in the 17th century. In the 18th century, Johann Oberlin and Johann Pestalozzi organized schools as one way to help prevent poverty and work toward social justice. Robert Owen's work was influenced by Pestalozzi's idea of introducing schools for infants, reducing the use of children as laborers. Owen also started schools in both Europe and the United States for children of working parents. Educators Margarethe Schurz and Elizabeth Peabody, who had both studied with Friedrich Froebel, helped extend Froebel's kindergartens in the late 1800s in the United States. And Maria Montessori, one of Italy's first female physicians, developed schools for children of the poor, introduced child-sized furniture and materials in school environments, and helped identify strengths in all learners—both able-bodied children and those considered disabled in the early 1900s. These are just some of the men and women whose pioneering work contribute to our understandings of current societal views related to infancy, development, and other issues of early childhood education, according to Harry Morgan, in *Early Childhood Education: History, Theory, and Practice*.

The work of modern psychologists, discussed below, has also influenced the field of early childhood. Additional influence came from a group known as the Transcendentalists, including Horace Mann, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau. The Transcendentalists were interested in the education of young children and believed people were at their best when they were self-reliant and independent. Educators coming out of this group believed in a child's ability to self-direct and capacity for self-understanding, both principles of constructivism discussed later in this entry. The Transcendentalists also argued for various freedoms—intellectual, moral, and inquiry, as well as the following: "belief in human virtue and respect for all peoples [are] essential human values" (Morgan, 2011, p. 25).

Defining Child Development and the Field of Early Childhood Education

In addition to looking at historical roots of early childhood education, it is equally important to consider how child development is defined. Child development considers those processes in which a child matures in domains—physical, cognitive, and emotional—as he or she ages. This development includes the acquisition of skills, the ability to manipulate materials, working to achieve goals, and gaining an understanding of how to re-create actions or behaviors. Early childhood education focusing on the span from birth to 8 years is considered the most vulnerable and crucial time in a person's life. It is a time of incredible brain growth, thus laying the foundation for future learning and development. In the United States, early childhood education relates to the development and learning of young children, typically before the start of mandated education. It is important that the period of early education is not viewed as a time when young children are "taught" to develop and learn. Rather, a clear tenet of early childhood education is that through their own development children will grow, learn, and acquire abilities through their interactions with the world.

Early childhood education programs are referred to by many names, including infant and toddler day care or child care, nursery school, preschool, prekindergarten, and the early elementary years—typically kindergarten through third grade. Early childhood education and care can also be delivered in multiple settings: home or center based, and located in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Programs may be offered part-time or part-year, while others offer full-day, year-round services. Programs can also be run privately, as either nonprofit or for profit; they may be operated within local school systems or separately as state- or federally funded programs. Early childhood education programs often focus on guiding children's learning through play, with various activities and experiences intended to encourage and support developmental changes as children age.

Best Education Practices Defined

Best practices in development and learning in early childhood education concern what and how an environment or setting can best support a child's development. Looking at growth from the perspective of developmental goals (age, domains) allows parents, caregivers, and teachers to determine the best ways to provide support. Included within these guidelines are expected abilities for children within certain age ranges or time points.

In addition to the early childhood pioneers, major influences on what is understood as best practices currently stems from 20th century influences from the field of psychology. This includes works of Sigmund Freud, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Erik Erikson, according to Morgan (2011). Through the lenses of these theorists, we can note differences between early childhood education and public education. Historically, prior to 1970 "college education and training for early childhood teachers included an early childhood framework, foundations of sociology, and psychology of early childhood and practice based on 100 year old childhood tradition" (Morgan, 2011, p. 97). This earlier training focused on "how children learn"; however, early childhood teachers trained after 1980 were educated in programs that combined early childhood education along with elementary education teacher training. The training focus changed from how children learn to "what children should be taught" (Morgan, 2011, p. 97). Blended training programs, including elementary, middle, and high school teachers, ignored the significant traditions of early childhood education, something that is currently a struggle within the field, states Morgan.

Following the more recent formula of "what children should be taught" eliminates the early

childhood development foundations common to theories of Freud, Piaget, Montessori, and Erikson. These foundational ideas include the notion that individuals pass through phases where a child's growth and development move ahead in chronological, age-sensitive stages and that by missing some experiences at certain time points development discontinues. Additional to this framework is the idea that development is influenced by the multiple relationships children have including those between peers, teachers, parents, and other significant adults and by the environments in which a child lives. The "what children should be taught" philosophy denies both children and teachers the opportunity to discover "how children learn" (Morgan, 2011).

Other aspects involving the history of the field of early childhood education and influences on best practices in education include issues of human rights—that all children have these rights and that these human rights have been ignored toward certain populations, in particular Native American and African American children. Additional historical events influencing early childhood education include the freedom movement to end slavery, the women's rights movement, social concerns including child labor practices, care and placement of orphans, general interest in the education of young children, and the view that the practice of early education is also a human service. Even now many adults remain unaware of the education needs for society's youngest members. A common question around educating children aged 6 years and under remains, "Who needs special training to teach 'the little ones'?" (Morgan, 2011, p. xi).

National Association for the Education of Young Children

The leading organization focusing on early childhood education, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), guides the field in defining best practices. A major emphasis of the organization is to disseminate information that outlines practices promoting optimal learning and development in young children. The following list, while comprehensive, is not all-inclusive and is a rendering of NAEYC's (2009) best practices for making decisions and meeting the needs of young children:

- Development and learning follow sequential patterns and build on previous skills:
- Can occur at varying and uneven rates in individual children;
    - Occur with interactions between maturation and experience;
    - Happen best in children within secure and consistent relationships among adults and positive peers;
    - Happen and are influenced by social and cultural contexts;
    - Progress when children are challenged just beyond their ability and when they have multiple opportunities to practice new skills.
- The physical, social, emotional, and cognitive domains are important and interrelated with development in one area influencing other areas.
- Early experiences can have profound effects on development and learning, and there are "optimal periods" for some categories of development to occur.
- Development evolves from less complex to more complex.
- Children learn in multiple ways, responding to various strategies and interactions.
- Play helps develop a child's language and cognitive skills, as well as social competence.
- Experiences affect children's motivation and approach to learning (e.g., persistence, initiative, flexibility).

Along with best practices, the following NAEYC guidelines list five key and interrelated areas of practice for early childhood professionals' decision making:

1. Creating a caring community of learners
2. Teaching to enhance development and learning
3. Planning curriculum to achieve important goals
4. Assessing children's development and learning
5. Establishing reciprocal relationships with families (NAEYC, 2009)

Important Issues in Educating Early Childhood Teachers

Constructivism

Some authors state that any discussion of best practices in early childhood education would be incomplete by not addressing constructivism or constructivist learning. Although not a theory of teaching, constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning, and serves as the basis for many current reforms in education, according to Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Martin Brooks. In opposition to more traditional views of education, constructivist learning allows schools to implement practices that encourage students to think, rethink, demonstrate, and exhibit their knowledge or understanding. Traditional educational process tends to emphasize either rightness or wrongness; however, with the constructivist model these divisions are no longer helpful. The constructivist classroom offers a new approach to what goes on within schools.

The National Science Teachers Association calls for education reform based on hands-on experimentation, learner-generated questions, and investigations. This description matches well with NAEYC's best practices listed above.

Learning through a constructivist perspective is a self-regulated process with the learner resolving cognitive conflicts by way of concrete experiences, collaborative discourse, and reflection. This is an eloquent description of early childhood education's focus on how children learn and puts the learner in charge. Constructivist pedagogy brings a view of the student as thinker, creator, and constructor, highlighting many educators' and parents' concerns with the current campaign in the United States focusing on universal standardized curriculums and assessment. Five overarching principles to constructivist pedagogy are offered:

1. Posing problems of emerging relevance to learners
2. Structuring learning around "big ideas" or primary concepts
3. Seeking and valuing students' points of view
4. Adapting curriculum to address students' suppositions
5. Assessing student learning in the context of teaching (Grennon Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. viii)

Again, with these principles it is clear that the students are placed in the forefront of the education process. With constructivist education, students come to understand that they are responsible for their own learning within an environment that follows these principles. This view of education is in opposition to the habitual rehearsal approach to learning so often found in elementary teacher training programs and school classrooms—where the education focus more closely fits the "what children should be taught" philosophy. Basic to creating environments that support constructivism, teachers must become constructivists, providing environments where students are allowed to search for meaning, appreciate uncertainty, and inquire responsibly.

Emergent Curriculum

Continuing with the idea of best practices brings us to a brief look at emergent curriculum. In its own way, early childhood education is constructivist in nature and so very appropriate. Emergent curriculum is curriculum that is co-constructed between children and teachers, based on the students' interests and passions. It is a nonlinear task, and can be messy in operation with no prescribed end point, all which allows children to enter and pursue the curriculum as they wish. The process requires a great deal of flexibility and creativity on the part of the teacher, as well as giving up a certain sense of control on where things will lead. Goals for emergent curriculum include addressing and respecting individual children's interests, keeping the focus on where the learner's interests lead, which may be nonspecific and without predetermined end points. This outcome is often the complete opposite of curriculum goals prescribed by teachers or school boards. Emergent curriculum is based on the premise that children are capable navigators of what they want to learn, and as Carolyn Edwards notes, "Teachers honestly do not know where a group will end up" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, p. 159).

Rather than an "anything goes" approach to learning, constructivist teachers can and should help steer the process of learning. An example from this author's experience revolves around a prekindergarten class's interest in stories. While exploring stories and the various ways they can be expressed, students read multiple books by a favorite author and took a trip to a children's theater to see the story presented as a play, and this led to the group's desire to write its own book. This curriculum project emerged from students' strong interest in and early abilities to read and write. Not initially viewed as a long-term project by the teaching team, at the end of a 3-month period the students wrote, illustrated, and created a book about their classroom pet rabbit. Different areas of interest were included and investigated as they arose from the students who had a long history with the rabbit.

A writing center, art center, and classroom library were constants in the classroom, as were regular trips to the local library to check out books. In the dramatic play area, children spontaneously acted out stories from books read as well as doing reenactments of the theater production. The group even investigated how books are put together with a children's book illustrator and came to understand the multiple processes used by writers and illustrators. Children entered and exited the process as their interests guided them and in the end all children participated in and had ownership of the process and final product of the classroom book.

Cultural Competence

The issue of cultural competence and its importance in early childhood teacher education programs cannot be overstated. The term *cultural competence* reflects two ideas: *competence*

being the ability to do something successfully, while *culture* can be described as the customs and social behaviors of a society. Placed together, cultural competence can be understood as the ability to successfully interact with the various customs and social behaviors of a society. As our world population continues to become more and more diverse, recognizing the inherent worth of all its members is vital. For early childhood educators, one goal of cultural competence is that we become more aware of and more respectful of multiple cultures and customs. As such we must "look closely at our views, feelings, information, and behaviors in relation to the many issues of race, racial identity, and racism" (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011, p. 19). One of the most important aspects for early childhood teacher education is to learn about and be comfortable among the various cultures that make up the children and families served.

For preservice early childhood teachers, addressing issues around diversity is one of the most intimidating aspects of their education, according to some researchers. Asking young people to be culturally competent often raises anxiety—especially for those with limited life experience. Students typically have two main concerns. They ask, "How can we know everything about every different culture we may deal with?" And they often have the belief that "all of the children we work with are the same." Both concerns are misguided—first as educators with cultures and histories of their own, teachers do not need to know or be expected to know everything about all other cultures. Teachers do, however, need to recognize and respect differences and be aware of biases toward lifestyles or behaviors that they do not know about or understand. This includes lifestyle choices, skin color, behaviors, languages, and religious beliefs, to name a few. Second, no matter how similar teachers may think others are—their peers, the children in their care, or their families—they all have their own perspectives, beliefs, and understandings of what is viewed as normal. Understanding and working toward letting go of these issues are important steps in gaining cultural competence. As educators, "We must also help children develop individual and group identities that recognize and resist the false notions of racial superiority and racial entitlement" (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011, p. 3).

What If All the Kids Are White?, by Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia G. Ramsey, helps clarify what is required of early childhood educators on the issue of cultural competence. Society wants educators, families, and children to embrace diversity—but it is also important that teachers develop their own awareness about their relationships, feelings, and behaviors in dealing with issues of diversity, including race, racial identity, and racism. Doing any anti-racism work begins first and foremost with the individual self—through self-reflection and looking honestly at our own biases and prejudices. As stated earlier, teachers need to become constructivists in order to use it well. Similarly, to develop and use anti-bias multicultural curriculum, educators must accept that they all need to take the "anti-racism journey." This is another area where the work of reflective practice can be a powerful tool for early childhood caregivers and educators. When teachers expand and deepen their awareness and knowledge of the self, "pursuing [the] work with honesty, persistence, and humility," they not only move themselves along the anti-racism multicultural road but also provide models for others to follow (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011, p. 20).

Another way to look at working toward cultural competence is to ask the question, "What are children learning?" when an anti-bias multicultural curriculum is being used and when it is not. The saying "Children are always learning something" is a reminder that whether information is given intentionally or unintentionally, it is still given. Teachers must be aware of the messages children pick up from their teachers, families, and the wider society, including implicit and explicit messages of racial superiority and entitlement. There is a better chance

that negative images of the self and others will be noticed and changed if educators help everyone recognize how these ideas are spread.

The following anti-bias education goals help illustrate how children and adults can learn to build diverse communities and societies. Depending on the background, ages, and life experiences in a group of children, each child will:

1. Demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities;

2. Express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring human connections;

3. Increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts;

4. Demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions. (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011, p. 15)

Anti-bias multicultural curriculum education means holding the "hopeful possibilities and meeting challenges" (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011, p. 27) of living in a culturally competent world. In many ways, this hope is no different from what some of us expect all education to be—something that requires us to engage in our own ongoing growth and understanding about development, and learning about diversity and equity issues.

Application of Family Systems, Collaboration, and Transitions for Children

The final area to be addressed is the use of family systems theory and the collaboration and transitions that are used in various systems for children. What defines family continues to change and broaden in our society, making it imperative that early childhood education and care providers recognize that the children educators serve live within larger family dynamics or family systems. The significance of young children's families on their development is important to any discussion of early childhood education teacher preparation. An inclusive definition of family includes people living together who care for and support one another. Multiple configurations of people with various ties and commitments to each other (blood, legal, and religious) create modern families.

Parent make-up can involve same-sex, co-habiting, divorced, and remarried couples, or single individuals. Of course, not all members of one's family will live in the same household; home environments can include parents and one or more children, but may also include relatives of parents/children (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins). It is important to note that when early childhood education programs provide services to a child those interactions and services will in some fashion include other family members. Looking at families from a systems perspective allows educators and service providers to acknowledge and appreciate that the family may follow varying patterns of behavior. This information is important to how services are determined, presented, and received.

There are several aspects to how a family's make-up can affect how the particular family system will act. Family systems theory stems from the work of Murray Bowen, who suggests we cannot understand individuals in isolation from other members of their family. The family unit is a system in which members are interconnected with and interdependent on each other. Additional theoretical approaches stem from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of

human development, which offers five interactive levels or systems in which a person's life occurs. Viewed as concentric circles moving out from a center ring, the model begins in an inner circle with the *microsystem,* made up of the immediate context in which a child interacts. This is followed by the *mesosystem,* involving interactions and relationships that occur between individuals and settings of the microsystem. Next is the *exosystem,* composed of the contexts indirectly influencing the child, for example, the type of neighborhood (inner city, suburban) or the expectations of a parent's job. The exosystem exerts its influence by way of its impact on individuals and institutions in the child's microsystem. The *macrosystem* is composed of political systems, social policy, culture, economic trends, and so forth, and determines the resources, opportunities, and constraints present in the lives of children and families. Completing the model is the *chronosystem,* which interacts with all other aspects of the model representing the elements of time in the individual's life trajectory (infancy, childhood, etc.) and the historical context in which he lives (Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman-Nelson, 2010).

In the context of this discussion on early childhood education, the idea of a child living within and affected by a system is an important one. As a child moves from the care of her immediate family, additional important caregivers and teachers begin a collaboration of relationships and transitions. These relationships will vary due to family needs and desires, and what types of care settings are available, including nannies, early childhood program teachers, and public and private schools including kindergarten through third grade. Care and education settings may vary and include one or more of the following: center- or home-based child care, nursery school, preschool, Head Start, and before- and after-school care. Each of these transitions creates the joining of one or more systems that will overlap, coordinate with, and affect each other. Morgan (2011) notes that this environmental transition brings up sets of human needs often unrequired before. Children move from the protective environment of home (parents, special privileges) into environments of strangers where they are all—children and parents—expected to conform to behaviors that can be difficult to acquire, for example, separating from parents while at child care, competition for caregiver attention, turn-taking rules, and sharing materials. It is also crucial to mention the difficulty of these expectations and changes for those children who do not come from protective home environments—adopted children, those in foster care, or those living in residential living environments.

Looking at children and families through the lenses of systems theory and the multiple collaborations and transitions for their early care/education highlights the importance of social policy. It also raises the significance of proposed policy effects. For example, having a national program providing subsidized child care for parents in the United States would make significant changes in the lives of families with young children. This would also represent a national acknowledgment of the importance of early childhood education by our society. By recognizing the various systems in which we all live, it is easier to understand how systems might affect a child's development and early learning. It is difficult to ignore the multiple effects—social, economic, culture, and history—in which the child is born and raised when viewed within the contexts of Bronfenbrenner's system.

Adding to Bronfenbrenner's model of family systems, we can include the ecology of family engagement. Both models occur across and within contexts that include home, school, and wider communities. These different contexts are made up from various systems influencing a child's development—both directly and indirectly. Key to both models is the interconnections and influences on other systems.

Similar to understanding certain traits of family systems, there is guidance around developing and maintaining family engagement, or the connections needed as a family system moves into collaboration and transition modes. The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) offers the following components in its framework for building family engagement (FE) in schools and communities:

- FE occurs as a result of shared responsibility and co-construction;
- FE matters from birth to adulthood but varies over time;
- FE occurs across contexts, in both homes and schools, but in other settings as well (afterschool programs, community centers, libraries). (Weiss et al., 2010, p. xx)

Family engagement with a child's education includes helping with homework, being an advocate for one's child, and helping the child navigate different school systems. Family engagement also includes the beliefs, attitudes, and activities that families hold in order to support their children's learning, a reflection of the significant roles families play in a child's educational life, according to Weiss and colleagues. When children perceive that their schooling is important to their parents they are motivated to do well. Engagement between home and school needs to be continuous throughout the child's education, adjusting to a child's and family's changing roles over time.

How are educators prepared to engage with families? Teachers need to know how to "think critically, quickly, creatively, and responsibly" (HFRP, 2003, in Weiss et al., 2010). These skills are best learned through practicing self-reflection and real-time problem solving in supported preservice field settings. It is important for early childhood education students to recognize that while schools and parents both want children to be successful there may be disagreement on how to achieve this. One way to approach these differences is by being able to reflect on situations from various viewpoints, those of parents, children, and self. This ability, along with respecting and valuing others (cultural competence), can help educators understand a child's needs from multiple perspectives.

Discussion

This entry began with a brief overview of early childhood education pioneers—men and women looking at and considering the period from birth through 8 years of age for children for hundreds of years. That history, together with more modern theories of development, learning, and relationships, leads educators to an important place in the field of early childhood education. So much is known about how children develop, what best practices are for children, and the specific needs of certain populations. Much of the history and research in this field inform educators: what they need to know in order to provide high-quality care, services, and education to young children. Educators have numerous choices of curriculum at their disposal, including emergent curriculum, discussed here. Looking at individual development within the wider contexts in which we live allows educators to better understand the range of care, advocacy, and educational environments children need. Coming to understand the family as a system helps educators see that they also develop within systems, helping them see the broader perspectives needed in their work. The metaphor of living and working in multiple systems is both practical and useful, especially as educators work toward consensus with families. Educators strive for social equality. Preparing children to be active participants in the world requires that educators see the inherent value in each other. This takes significant and continued commitment as educators reflect on their own practice and act as models for the children in their care.

There is an ongoing need for early childhood educators to continue to work toward learning "how children learn" and to allow children the privilege of self-direction, concrete experiences, collaborative discourse, and reflection.

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See also Constructivism; Family Engagement Models; Family Systems Theories

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