

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Teacher Development

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Introduction

This paper describes how Kamehameha preschool teachers' education level and ongoing professional development experiences influence their ability to use developmentally appropriate practices. Developmentally appropriate practices can be defined as activities, interactions and experiences that support children's individual and cultural patterns of development in an authentic, cognitively challenging and socially safe way. When instruction is designed to be developmentally appropriate children are engaged and active in the learning process. As a result they are intrinsically motivated to think and learn.

Background

The Kamehameha foundation has made a significant investment in early childhood education for native Hawaiian children. They have created a preschool program founded on principles of developmentally appropriate practice, staffed the classrooms with teachers who have at minimum a bachelor's degree in education, and provided materials and training to ensure that all their programs receive NAEYC accreditation. They subsidize the program so that annually 1300 native Hawaiian children in 30 programs on 4 islands can attend the preschools for \$600.00 a year. As part of their commitment to providing a quality preschool experience they commissioned an outside evaluation of the preschool programs. The program evaluation included a review of teachers' educational levels, classroom observations, child assessment materials, teacher interviews, parent surveys and focus groups (Author, 2004).

The classroom observations and child assessment scores and materials confirmed that the preschool programs implement developmentally appropriate practices and use authentic assessments to deliver a high quality program that has a significant effect on children's cognitive and language development.

As a program evaluator on this project, I wanted to know what were the key factors that attributed to these high quality programs. As I reviewed the data, two factors stood out as being noteworthy. The first was the education levels of the teachers in the programs and the second was the quality and quantity of professional development and support the teachers received.

Teachers Education Levels

Current research has shown that the most important factor in determining program quality is the level of the teachers' training. Teachers who have specialized training in early childhood education and child development are more knowledgeable and skilled at providing care and education to young children than teachers without any training in the field. Therefore, teachers with BA and MA degrees in early childhood education are the most effective preschool teachers (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2003).

This research has prompted preschool programs that serve low-income children like Head Start to require higher levels of training for its teacher.

All Kamehameha preschool teachers have a BA degree and 28.8% also have a MA degree. Only 12.3% of the teachers have their degrees in early childhood education.

The majority of the teachers have degrees in elementary education, social sciences and liberal arts. However, many of the teachers have taken additional courses in early childhood education beyond the BA and MA degree requirements to gain more expertise in child development.

Over 88% of the teacher aides in Kamehameha preschool have an AA or BA degree. In addition, most teacher aides have their AA degrees in early childhood education. The majority of teacher aides without early childhood education training are enrolled in early childhood credential programs or BA programs in education or psychology. Overall, the teacher aides have more training specific to early childhood education (46.8%) than the teachers (12.3%) in the Kamehameha preschools. Thus, the teacher aides have an important role in contributing to the level of program quality in the preschool classroom.

In sum, the initial training level of teachers and teacher aides in Kamehameha preschools is higher than teachers and teacher aides in other preschool programs serving low-income children. In addition, the data show that teachers and teacher aides are increasing their qualifications through getting additional degrees and courses in early childhood education.

Professional Development and Support

Six teaching teams participated in an interview and shared opinions on the assessment tools, curriculum, work climate, level of parental support, and overall impressions of the preschool programs' strengths and weaknesses.

Assessment

Kamehameha preschool has invested a significant amount of financial and human resources a comprehensive, authentic assessment system. Teachers use the authentic assessment system to document their observation, organize samples of students' work, and summarize their assessments of each child's growth and development three times a year. Teachers receive and initial training, follow-up training to "tune-up" their routines and ongoing classroom support as they gradually learn to fully implement the system. Teachers reported that the training and support they receive is excellent. They also receive positive feedback from parents about their portfolios and detailed summary reports. All teachers believe this is a useful tool for instruction and assessment.

Curriculum

Teachers report working very hard to individualize instruction for each student. They are satisfied with the preschool curriculum and enjoy the flexibility to be able to choose activities to meet the curriculum objectives. They believe the strengths of the curriculum are its focus on language, literacy, social skills and cultural awareness. They feel confident that the curriculum prepares children for kindergarten and beyond.

Administrative and Parent Support

One of the main reasons teachers enjoy their work at Kamehameha preschools is the supportive work environment. Teachers report that they receive support and help from their colleagues. Teachers work together and share ideas. The regional managers are encouraging and give teachers useful feedback on their performance. Regional managers

expect teachers to be creative and improve their skills through obtaining additional training in the early childhood education.

Teachers gladly take advantage of the multiple professional development opportunities available. They report that they have used the tuition reimbursement to get additional degrees, attended conferences and workshops, taken sabbatical leaves and participated in the inservices offered by Kamehameha schools.

Parent support is strong. Most participate in the morning parent-child activities, if their work schedules allow them to. Attendance at parent meetings and workshops is high. Teachers receive numerous offers from parents to volunteer in the classroom, on fieldtrips and to organize special events.

Impressions of the Program

Overall, teachers feel the preschool is a premier program. The strengths of the program are its abundant financial resources, developmentally appropriate curriculum, facilities, teacher support, parent education component and focus on Hawaiian culture.

Outcomes

An important outcome of developmentally appropriate practice is that children are excited about learning. Parents of the children in the Kamehameha preschool confirm that this outcome is present in the program. Parents reported that their children enjoyed

coming to preschool. Their children were comfortable with the teacher and excited about the activities and routines. They were pleased that their children were learning self-help, social and motor skills. They knew their children would have meaningful experiences that would help them learn letters, numbers and name writing. But most of all they were excited to see their children develop a love for learning.

Parents reported that their relationships with the teacher started with the home visits and have continued through daily conversations, newsletters and conferences. They feel informed about what goes on in preschool and their child's progress. Parents shared that they value being able to have several opportunities to participate in the program. Parents are involved in morning activities, fieldtrips, workshops, Ohana (family) Committees, Keiki (children's books) bag program and some volunteer in the classroom and office. Overall, parents feel honored to have their children in Kamehameha preschools. They report that the reputation of Kamehameha preschools is outstanding. They are impressed with the stimulating learning environment, individualized attention, cultural awareness, low ratios and caring teachers.

Preschool Policy Recommendations

1. Change state licensure and certification

State mandates would need to be in place to ensure that all preschool programs have highly qualified teachers. Some states are offering certification in early childhood

education that covers birth through age 8. This level of certification allows early childhood professionals to focus their training on young children and provides a career ladder for teachers who start out with a 2-year degree in child development.

2. Provide more funding to increase teachers' education levels

Programs that provide funding for teachers to increase their education and training are crucial. A major obstacle for early childhood professionals who have low salaries is the cost of higher education. Increasing the number of scholarships available for pursuing a degree in early childhood education is essential.

3. Increase state funded preschool programs

If teachers make a commitment to the field of early childhood education by obtaining more specialized education, than the field must make a commitment to them by providing jobs with salaries and benefits comparable to K-12 teachers. Many states have incorporated their preschool programs into K-12 school districts. Thus putting their preschool teachers on the same salary scale as K-12 teachers. Moving toward state-funded preschool would increase this opportunity.

4. Leverage professional development funds by focusing on comprehensive programming and training

Many preschool programs have a budget for professional development. Each program should carefully examine how they use this budget. The Kamehameha preschools focused their professional development resources on the authentic

assessment system they adopted. They aligned their curriculum to the assessment system, which determined the activities they would do with their children. This unified focus allowed them to leverage their professional development resources so that their program core was always being improved. Rather than making improvements to separate pieces of the program and hoping that teachers would make the connection and put it all together to improve the overall program.

Summary

The program evaluation of Kamehameha preschools concluded in fall 2004. We recommended changes in policy that would enable them to serve more students. Currently, ethnically and economically eligible children are admitted based on a lottery system. Therefore, many eligible students are not admitted to the program. Financial support is given to these students to attend other quality preschool programs in their region. Teachers in the other programs are invited to attend workshops for Kamehameha preschools and receive technical assistance to receive NAEYC accreditation.

References

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