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**The Interdisciplinary Children's Studies Program: A Holistic Learning Perspective for All Children**

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**Abstract:**

Eastern Washington University has developed and implemented an interdisciplinary Children's Studies Program that combines the liberal arts and professional schools. Such disciplines as Sociology, Education, and Educational Psychology collaboratively created a holistic approach to the study of children and career preparation that focuses on the development, learning, and social issues of children from birth to pre-adolescence. The integrated perspective of Children's Studies emphasizes holistic studies of children's lives, respect for children's voices, and the diverse backgrounds of all children. Courses for a major have been instituted that encourage choice in a core area of study and from the concentration areas of early childhood education, program development, and research. In addition, a Center of Excellence is operational and supports research, access and recruitment, community partnerships, and early childhood education. The Children's Studies Program is working to change the education and the preparation of those who work with young children from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm that moves from specific disciplines to an interdisciplinary and integrated approach.

## **The Interdisciplinary Children's Studies Program: A Holistic Learning Perspective for All Children**

### **Introduction**

There is a great need for post-secondary education to take leadership in assisting institutions to see themselves as systems of relationships and communication located within and as part of the larger system of society but closely linked to the local community, including families and local government (Dahlberg, 1999).

Faculty from several colleges at Eastern Washington University has developed a collaborative Interdisciplinary Children's Studies Program consisting of a Children's Studies Major and a Children's Studies Center. The Children's Studies Major is an interdisciplinary degree that allows students to broaden and enhance their view of children as they prepare for professional careers working with children. Students have the option to concentrate on the areas of early childhood education, program development, or research. The Center encourages interdisciplinary research, organizes forums for interfaculty and community partnership dialogue, and provides an avenue for outreach and collaboration with local child-serving organizations. Access, Retention, and early childhood education issues are very important aspects of the Center.

### **The Rationale for an Interdisciplinary Approach**

Over 68% of children aged one to five years and 75% of school-aged children have working mothers. These children spend many of their waking hours outside the home with adults who are not their parents (National Women's Law Center, 2002). Many of these adult caregivers, teachers, and social service providers work in schools, social service agencies, childcare centers, recreation services, and the

justice system. The demand for professionals to work with children is increasing. Public schools are introducing universal preschools and full day kindergartens at unprecedented rates (Salmon & Grimsley, 2000). Nationally the call is for smaller classes, quality after-school care, and summer programs. Qualified teachers and other professionals are needed to provide quality education, and social services bring together many professionals, family members, and community workers to provide services. These programs need more and better-prepared professionals to work with all children in increasingly complex and high need situations.

Recent insights from neuroscience research (Perry, 1997) regarding the importance of the early years, worry parents and policy experts who now understand about the early windows of opportunity, and are demanding integrated services that will provide for children's well being and learning in all the places they spend time. The outcry has been particularly loud in the area of education of the youngest child. Quality education of young children seeks to provide for their cognitive, social, emotional, physical and moral development, and lays the foundation for future learning. Many children enter public schools having less than optimal development and learning experiences and only succeed in achieving minimal educational standards. Socially, educationally, and economically it makes sense to serve children when they are young; as longitudinal research has found that for every dollar spent on early childhood care and education today, nearly \$7 is saved in future costs of remedial education, criminal justice, and other social service intervention (Sweinhart, 1993).

Traditionally, the personnel who work with children, particularly young children, have been required to have only minimal professional preparation. That trend is becoming less acceptable. Children's organizations and other agencies (NAEYC/NCATE, 2001) have developed standards for educators and other professionals that work with and for young children. Using this base of knowledge, revised teacher certificate and endorsement programs for early childhood education (birth to third grade) are being

developed by many states. Federal Head Start with a high needs population is mandating that their teachers obtain associate or bachelor's degrees in the near future.

How do postsecondary institutions educate those who work with children and do so in ways that the professional will learn to provide children with the best life experiences? McMullen (1999) reports that many individuals "talk the talk" about Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Practices (DCAP), but few "walk the walk." How do postsecondary programs help students begin to "walk the walk" in their future professional lives?

### **Discipline Specific to Interdisciplinary Relationships**

Currently, those who work with children – teachers, social workers, counselors and psychologists, childcare providers, health care providers, and those in the criminal justice system – each receive education and training specific to their disciplines. Disciplines such as Child Development, Education, and Family Studies have traditionally assumed authority on children's issues. Training by the various disciplines is by definition specific and narrow in breadth and offers perspectives on children and families that infrequently overlap with other disciplines. As a result, those who work with or advocate for children may have fragmented and sometimes contradictory perspectives of best practices.

Nationally, training programs that educate personnel who work with young children are competing more and more for limited resources. The disciplines compete for students, credits, and space. A perceived need to survive leads to an unwillingness to work together, resulting in a duplication of courses, fragmentation of efforts, and a lack of coordinated endeavors. Fragmentation of efforts exists as disciplines teach their own research methods, techniques and strategies, and practicums. With a lack of coordinated efforts, the disciplines miss helping students view children in a holistic perspective. Disciplinary power is one of the reasons why recognizing the need for interdisciplinary work has been slow to emerge.

The Children's Studies Program encourages interdisciplinary collaboration to strengthen the study of children at Eastern Washington University. All courses and programs relating to child populations are invited to participate in the Children's Studies Program. The new interdisciplinary program assists students to think globally and reflectively, and programs and services for child populations on campus and in the local community are supported and promoted with a collective voice. Metaphorically, children and those programs that prepare students to work with children, will "move out of the basement and into the light" with more visibility, credibility, and voice.

The experience faculty developing the children's studies approach, working over two decades with students who are preparing for careers working with children, envisioned that interdisciplinary studies have distinct advantages for educating professionals who work with children. Students gain understanding of many factors influencing a child's life such as changed family structures, developmental and learning differences, and/or social inequities, by using a holistic perspective and applying such strategies as reflective practices or metaphorical analysis on field-based experiences. Using such learning opportunities, students begin to identify their values and attitudes as the first step in the process of changing perceptions about their changing roles in a society where there are ever increasing and challenging goals for helping all children.

Most importantly, interdisciplinary studies encourage future child professionals to honor the diversity of children. Children have different experiences, learning styles, and home lives. They have different temperaments, strengths and challenges. They come from different cultures and different socio-economic groups. To deal with the inherent diversity of children, students need to learn to view children not as objects that are to be manipulated and changed, but as individuals in their own right. Children can have a voice and can speak for themselves (Runeson, Elander, Hermeren, & Kristensson-Hallestrom, 2002), but are we listening? The rich diversity of children needs to be appreciated and respected, instead of trying to change the child's behavior to fit the average and dominant cultural norms. The following incident illustrates one example of the process of listening to children.

Brock is a first grader who is becoming more and more frustrated with the literacy activity assigned by the teacher. As the student teacher attempts to guide him through the directions, the child suddenly puts his hands in his lap and with a determined tone says, "If you will just listen to me." The student teacher literally steps back, and Brock explains how he is working through the process as it makes meaning for him. As he constructs knowledge, his understanding isn't what the teacher expected but it makes sense, and from that point the interactions change. The student teacher is now respecting the way Brock needs to learn instead of insisting Brock learn the way the student teacher believed he should learn.

Students at Eastern Washington University who have informally studied an interdisciplinary Children's Studies program through the normal electives process have reported excellent success as they move into their professional lives. Students report a broad understanding of family contexts, developmental challenges, and educational processes of children, and how such a global perspective gives them confidence and develops problem solving skills in dealing with a myriad of situations. The employing agencies have been delighted with such vision and they report that these new employees see the world as an interdisciplinary whole. This is the type of professional that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2002) supports when they advocate for an integrated system of early childhood care and education that includes comprehensive approaches directly involving families and communities in program design, implementation, and evaluation.

### **The Program**

This program differs from Child and Family Studies in several ways. First, the Children's Studies Program offers a Children's Studies major that empowers students to construct their own knowledge from integrated and interdisciplinary opportunities from both the liberal arts and professional schools. Second, the model tears down disciplinary walls to make an interdisciplinary program possible. Three years ago faculty in Education, Child Development and Sociology began meeting almost weekly to discuss the myriad of programs for children that were being offered on campus. Through these discussions, the idea for a Children's Studies Program and major emerged, but, at EWU as everywhere, disciplinary concerns were

paramount. For example some of the concerns expressed included the fear that existing programs and courses would be compromised, that some programs would lose students, and one college would compete with another to house the program and ultimately benefit from the credits taught. The solution is a stand-alone program, advised by a steering committee, with departments receiving credits for the courses taught from their departments.

The philosophical and pedagogical position of the proposed Children's Studies Program is unique and significant to the future training of professionals who work with children. The belief demonstrated through the program is that children are individuals that have rights and power over their choices as they learn, develop, and act in society. Children are not objects to be conformed into the latest label or norm, not to be viewed as having deficits that need to be fixed, and do not have only one way of knowing. Instead, students in the Children's Studies Program will be encouraged to view children as individuals with rights and inherent strengths. This view of children can be accomplished when we take the best from all relevant disciplines and respect and learn from each other, the higher education students and the children.

Students come into postsecondary preparation programs with very strong perceptions of what their role is when teaching children. This way of knowing leads very well into accepting the transmission of information from a specific body of knowledge. For example, Susan is in a teacher preparation program, but is a seasoned Head Start Teacher with a two-year associates degree. She has a very defined role of herself as a teacher, both as a student who has many hours of watching teachers and from the Head Start experience. When entering early childhood education classes she has a body of specific knowledge about teaching in an early childhood program and has conformed to the standards being presented. Her role is primarily the role of a technician, and she does what she is told and seems very comfortable with this role. For the most part she sees her main job is to socialize the child into the cultural norms of the school and wider culture so that later he/she can succeed in the real world of school.

As Watts (1997) points out, a body of specific discipline knowledge is only a small part of learning to work with children. In addition, it is very important for students to learn how to identify their own values, perceptions, and attitudes and to change those characteristics to more readily work with children in a more complex and enhanced society. The interdisciplinary approach encourages Susan to question, identify, and change her perceptions. The courses in the program will assist Susan to reflect, inquire, take power over, and to change her perceptions about how she views children with their own rights and ways of knowing. The learning opportunity for Susan comes as she begins to question current assumptions and practice and begins to work with children in an interdisciplinary manner as she has experienced in the Interdisciplinary Children's Major.

<b>Comparison of Discipline Specific and Interdisciplinary Approaches</b>		
	<b>DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC</b>	<b>INTERDISCIPLINARY</b>
Perspective	Narrow perspective	Holistic perspective
Knowledge	Discipline Specific	Broadly Integrated
Student Characteristics	Conforming to standards	Open-ended potential through reflection
Expectations	Doing what they are told to maintain Disciplinary Power: Instructional Paradigm	Power-over their decisions: Learning Paradigm
Role Perceptions	Technician: Role as Described by the Discipline	Professional: perceptions influenced in order to apply a global approach
Programs	Child as object	Child as agent

### **Advocacy**

The Children's Studies Program is also significant because it empowers students to act as advocates for children. Our culture talks about the importance of children, but in our political and economic culture children frequently are invisible and without a voice (Dahlberg, 1999). Those children that need intervention or have difficult social experiences are labeled with behavioral disorders, emotional deficits, or

developmental delays. Our society wants to fix and change children's behavior, and children seldom have power over their own learning experiences.

Post-secondary students need to see advocacy as a wellness approach for children and themselves. The national, state, and local initiatives that support the development of policy and advocate for children in various ways are vital for the health, welfare, and education of children. The Children's Studies Program is a catalyst that promotes a wellness approach by students, faculty and community organizations to empower individuals to become involved and build on the strengths of children and families. By working through the Children's Studies Approach, students seek examples of the strengths of individuals and families and become involved and build on the observed strengths. The "ripple effect" is powerful.

To be an effective advocate one must work collaboratively for the good of the child and programs. Collaboration goes beyond an organized team structure. The principles of collaboration range from making use of each others talents to do what we either could not have done at all or as well alone, solving mutually defined problems through a method of group exploration and discovery, or understanding that if one individual or entity is viewed as the authority then collaboration is not possible. The collaboration model that is being used to develop and implement the Children's Studies Program will be used to enhance and broaden the learning opportunities of faculty, students and community partners. (Bruffee, 1995)

The Children's Studies stand-alone program focuses on the unique issues pertaining to children and is organized in a parallel fashion to the Women's Studies Program, and like the Women's Studies model it is based on, an interdisciplinary program that will work to treat children as individuals in their own right and not just as objects of research or learning. There are several ways in which Women's Studies serves as a model for the Children's Studies Program. First, the Children's Studies program treats children as active agents and seeks to incorporate children's perspectives. Second this program validates children's cultures and creativity. Third, it examines the complexities of children's worlds and experience, social structures, and interactions.

## **Children's Studies Major**

A Children's Studies major has been developed, as partial fulfillment of a Bachelor's of Arts Degree that integrates curriculum from Child Development, Early Childhood Education, Sociology and other disciplines. The major is comprised of three parts including: a core curriculum, concentration areas in early childhood education, program, and research, and a culminating senior capstone. Many of the classes for the Children's Studies Major currently exist but a few new courses are being developed, as is the senior capstone.

## **Core Curriculum**

The curriculum core provides an opportunity for all students to develop a foundational and global perspective of children. An introductory course, EDUC 306 (Introduction to Children's Studies) outlines how the major is structured, as well as the purposes and scope of the Children's Studies Program. A portfolio assessment process provides a framework for planning and tracking student's learning. Another newly developed course for the core is EDUC 458 (The Learning Paradigm in Children's Studies), and the others (SOC 483 Sociology of Children and CEDP 313 Child Development) exist as foundational courses in their respective disciplines. Also included is a field-based component (Practicum) that ensures that students have practical experiences in which to begin and base their reflective practices. Practicums will be held at the University Preschool, the Children's Center, and with local community organizations such as the Single Parent Outreach Connection and Department of Social and Health Services.

## **Areas of Concentration**

Upon completion of the core, the students will choose a focus area depending on their interests, strengths, and career goals. The concentration areas are program development, early childhood education,

and research. Each concentration has its own required, as well as elective, courses. At present, all of these courses in the concentration areas exist. Faculty who teach the classes, however, will be encouraged to revise classes so the courses meet the student learning goals and perspectives of the program. To this end, regular interfaculty forums will be developed to help faculty consider ways to teach in an interdisciplinary and integrated approach. The Program concentration area gives students an enhanced and broadened perspective about children so they can flexibility work with children in social service agencies and other child-centered programs. The Early Childhood Education concentration allows students to earn a teaching endorsement in early childhood education. The Research concentration is designed for those undergraduate students who plan to do graduate work or work in the public or private sector that requires the collection and analysis of data.

### Culminating Capstone

The university requires all students take a capstone in their senior year. The Children’s Studies capstone will help students summarize and reflect on learning through a portfolio approach.

<b>Children’s Studies Major Curriculum Map</b>		
<b>Catalogue Description</b>		
The interdisciplinary Children's Studies major provides students a strong holistic background in the study of the development and learning of children (birth to pre- adolescence) in a variety of social contexts. Theory and practice from the disciplines of Sociology, Psychology, and Education form the foundation for this integrated curriculum.		
The Children's Studies major will fulfill partial requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree. Completion of 24 credits in Early Childhood Education, which include the Option C required courses, will satisfy the Washington State requirement for an Education Supporting Endorsement in Early Childhood Education.		
<b>I. Core Requirements (19 credits)</b>		
a) EDUC 306 Introduction to Children’s Studies	1 credit	
b). SOCI 483 Sociology of Children	5 credits	
c). CEDP 313 Child and Adolescent Development	4 credits	
d). EDUC 458 The Learning Paradigm in Children’s Studies	5 credits	
e) Practicum/Internship (Cross-listed)	4 credits	
<b>II. Concentration Areas (21-24 credits) (Choose A, B, or C)</b>		
<b>A. Research</b> (18 crs. Plus 3-5 elective credits)	<b>A. Program Development</b> (14 credits. Plus 8-10 electives credits)	<b>C. Early Childhood Education</b> (17 credits. Plus 4-5 elective credits)
a). CEDP 320 Developmental Theories and Applications 4crs b). Research Methods CEDP 321or PSYC 313 or SOCI 357 5 crs.	a).CEDP 324/325 Human Learning and Lab 4,1 crs. b). SOCI 370 Sociology of the Family 5 crs c). CEDP 402 Applied Learning	a). EDUC 455 Perspectives of ECE 3 crs b) EDUC 456 Integrated Early Childhood Practices 5 crs c). EDUC 457 Collaborative Reflective

c). Statistics CEDP 323 4 crs. d). Analysis of Data SOC 448 or CEDP 492 5 crs.	Theory 4 crs	Teaching in ECE 3 crs d). EDUC 479 Early Literacy 3 crs e). EDUC 480 Educating Young Children with Diverse Backgrounds 3 crs
Electives: a). COMD 331 Lang. Development 4 crs b). CEDP 324/325 Human Learning/Lab 5 crs c). EDUC 455 Perspectives in ECE 3 crs d). SOCI 370 Sociology of the Family 5 crs	Electives a). EDUC 480 Educating Young Children with Diverse Backgrounds 3 crs b). MGMT 326 Organizational Theory and Behavior 4 crs SOC 463 Complex Organizations 5 crs c). RCLS 260 Arts in Recreation or RCLS 385 Programming in Recreation 3 crs	Electives a). SOCI 370 Sociology of the Family 5 crs b). CEDP 476 Child and Family Guidance 4 crs c). Other courses approved by the Coordinator of ECE
<b>III. Capstone</b> 4 crs.		
Total 43-47 credits		

### Children’s Studies Center

In addition to offering an innovative, integrated, and interdisciplinary major, the Children’s Studies Program includes a Children’s Studies Center that is managed by a Project Director and Project Management Team. The Center provides interdisciplinary leadership for child programs both on and off campuses. Internships, work-study placements, and other field-based experiences for students are coordinated through the Center, office space has been provided in the Department of Education, and funding from the Department of Education was allocated to buy teaching materials.

The Center is responsible for faculty forums about issues and trends that concern children from an interdisciplinary perspective, and faculty from across the university, including all faculty who teach or wish to teach in the Children’s Studies Program, are invited to attend. Faculty can also choose to participate in book discussion groups that cover the latest thinking about children. Visiting researchers or advocates are invited to lecture and lead discussions in their areas of expertise for students, faculty and community based organizations. An important purpose of the forums will be helping faculty learn interdisciplinary teaching and research strategies, and how to integrate the curriculum.

The Children's Studies Center is becoming a catalyst for outreach and community collaboration. A Speakers Bureau is being organized for the purpose of connecting faculty with community organizations who are interested in the specific information offered by that faculty. The Center will be a place students can learn about child advocacy needs, volunteer opportunities, and research projects for possible internships and practicum placements. Community organizations that work with children can have a place to call to get assistance with needs. The Center communicates with community organizations about children's issues with a developed web site and a newsletter.

### **Goals for Assessment of the Program**

The two goals selected for the conference proceedings include building student understanding about the holistic perspective in working with children and strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration and understanding on and off campus.

Objectives for Building Student Understanding about Holistic Perspective in Working with Children include:

- Students will enhance their ability to draw from a variety of disciplinary knowledge in addressing children's learning, development, well-being, and other important child-related issues.
- Students will develop their ability to reflect on their own practices and interactions with children.
- Students will improve their understanding of children's cultures, children's perspectives, and children's places.
- Students will enlarge their understanding of children's diversity, including gender, race, and class differences.
- Students will increase their understanding of the different types of power relations between adults and children.
- Students will develop their ability to critically evaluate a variety of approaches of working with children

Objectives for strengthening the study and understanding of children through interdisciplinary collaboration on and off-campus include:

- Increase the number of students who demonstrate a sense of a child's individuality in the types of interactions and curricula designed.
- Raise the number of students who demonstrate respect for children's cultures and creativity through the activities and relationships formed with children and parents.
- Expand the number of students who demonstrate willingness to include children's perspectives in addressing child issues and education.
- Add to the number of students who demonstrate the ability to work collaboratively and reflectively with children.
- Increase the number of students who are able to effectively communicate and demonstrate new/alternative practices for working with children.
- Enlarge the number of students participating in the EWU Children's Center activities, such as The University Preschool and other community-based programs.
- Children's general learning, development and well-being will be enhanced in sites that participate with the Children's Studies Program.

## **Conclusion**

The Interdisciplinary Children's Studies Program is a movement away from only discipline specific knowledge and practices and focuses on an interdisciplinary and integrated approach of studying children's development, learning, and cultures. The goals of the Children's Studies Program for post secondary students and practitioners center on their education and empowerment as child advocates, service providers, and educators that use holistic and inquiry approaches in their work with all children. A service-learning component is emphasized in the work of faculty across the University with community-based organizations.

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