

**Special Role of the Early Childhood Practitioner: A Pedagogical Model for All Teachers at All Levels**

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Focus Audience: All educators at all levels. Emphasis: special role and dispositional qualities regarding assessment skills of early childhood educator as pedagogical model for all instruction throughout the lifespan.

## **Introduction: The “Big Picture” Model of Teaching**

What is the heart of teaching? This is the opening question that the first author asks at the beginning of each semester, in her graduate methods course at the University of Hartford, when introducing the varied models of educational pedagogy. The “advance organizer” and attention grabbing “hook” for this presentation model demonstration is: “I am going to give you all an idea to help you better understand this question. *Teachers need to know a lot about their SUBJECT in order to influence student achievement.*”

Various statistics are provided including the National Assessment of Educational Progress 1997 report (NAEP, 1997) that 40% of American fourth grades are reading below basic expectation and that the educational future of these children are imperiled because they do not read well enough to ensure sufficient comprehension for their future content courses in middle and secondary school. The antidote according to the National Research Council (NRC, 1998) is that quality classroom instruction in the primary grades is the single best weapon against reading failure. We agree with this, and as college professors who prepare candidates for teaching licensure, fully understand that the development of quality teachers is our top priority. But we also believe that the antidote must begin much earlier at the pre-formal schooling level with high quality teachers who are outstanding experts in individualized assessment planning and capable of providing individualized early intervention strategies to meet the specific learning needs of each child. We further believe, that this expertise is an attitudinal and dispositional “gift” that must be “bottled” and universally distributed to all teachers at all levels of the education continuum. This closely adheres to our reflective practitioner conceptual framework

(University of Hartford Institutional Report, 2002) and is also consistent with the philosophy embedded within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997)) but we believe, however, that it should not be limited to just those with categorical special needs, and young pre-school children, but rather is applicable for all students. This paper will explore the thinking that highlights our beliefs concerning the special qualities implicit in the training of an early childhood practitioner, and how this provides the essence for quality teaching at all levels.

### **Knowing Your Subject**

A quality teacher must know his/her “subject”. In the graduate methods course this becomes a play on words. First, knowing your “subject” is discussed regarding the individual students learning styles and specific life profiles. This is not presented as a snap-shot assessment but rather as on-going and continuous process that is consistent with authentic assessment as found, for example, in the work sampling methodology of Sam Meisels and colleagues (Dichtelmiller, M.L., Jablon, J.R., Dorfman, A.B, Marsden, D.B., & Meisels, S.J. 2001). An individualized educational plan based on continuous and comprehensive assessment (BOCCA) model is introduced (Kremenitzer, J.P., 2000) where an informal IEP is created for each student. Early childhood candidates are immersed in assessment strategies that require them to learn to pay careful attention to the individual skills and behaviors of each child with whom they work so that from the beginning of their training they have the need to analyze the individual variations that are found in young children across all developmental domains. This whole child/student

approach that is a “given” in the preparation of the early childhood teacher candidate, must be continued by the teacher candidates seeking licensure at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels as well as those who teach in higher education.

Second, knowing your “subject” is discussed in relation to the content specific knowledge that a teacher must have. Following a multiple intelligence viewpoint (Gardner, H., Feldman, D.H. & Krechevsky, M, 1998) this would include the: logical-mathematical; verbal-linguistic; visual-spatial; bodily-kinesthetic; musical; interpersonal; intra-personal; and naturalist to name a few. This is also something that the early childhood teacher is highly trained in from a developmentally appropriate practice of integrating content knowledge while addressing the needs of the whole child. The elementary teacher candidate must be well versed in the traditional subjects of: math; science, art; social studies; language arts; movement skills; and social-emotional skills. The middle and secondary level teachers, while perhaps specializing in one of the previous categories, must also come to realize the inter-disciplinary embedding that is required to similarly teach to the whole student.

Finally, knowing your “subject” is presented from the concept of knowing the various pedagogical methodologies (cooperative learning, direct instruction, problem-based discovery, etc.) and thereby knowing the subject of how to teach. Sarason (1999) refers to this knowledge of the subject matter involved in teaching as knowing how to integrate and motivate students and thus teaching is seen as a performing art. The early childhood educator has to be a born performer and has to know how to integrate a balance of large

muscle and small muscle activities throughout the day. This performer skill/mentality is something that must also be found in the high school teacher of algebra or biology.

So, what is the heart of teaching? Knowing your “subject”(students, content, and craft). The early childhood educator’s training coming from a quality higher education setting involves all of this and more. Lessons learned from the specifics of this type of training should be generalized across grades and levels of schooling. Unfortunately, not all early childhood educators have either received this high quality training or have not been sufficiently recognized and supported for the extremely significant role they play in establishing the early critical piece for life long learning. What follows is a discussion of the crucial new role of the early childhood educator in the global context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning community. The next focus of our lens is on the special role of the early childhood educator in leading the way for all educators.

### **Preschool Abilities Development**

The early childhood years are receiving renewed interest as a critical period for the development of significant abilities. The acquisition of early language skills during the birth to five period of development is now being recognized as a significant factor for future success in school. These abilities are the precursors for the most critical tasks regarding reading and reading for comprehension (Scarborough, H.S., 2001). Children who have acquired superior reading abilities at age five will consistently maintain this advantage throughout their teen years whereas those who initially have lower abilities appear to maintain this lower level (Francis, D. J., Shaywitz, S.E., Stuebing, K.K.,

Shaywitz, B.A. & Fletcher, J.M., 1996). The federal education bill, “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001”, has a strong emphasis on early reading and literacy for all children with the intent that if a greater effort can be placed on higher skill acquisition before formal schooling, then more children will be successful during the school-aged years. Interest is now also being directed toward the precursors of social-emotional skills via greater awareness of emotional intelligence (Salovey, P. & Sluyter, 1997). In fact, many of the essential abilities, whether seen from Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, H., 1993), or from Sternberg’s triarchic theory (Sternberg, R.J., 1996), can be viewed as having been initially formed and shaped during the pre-school years. All of this important focus and activity points to the critical role of the early childhood educator and the attention that needs to be paid to the education and training of these professionals.

### **New Role of Early Childhood Educator**

With so much at stake happening before kindergarten, it is essential that we must now reemphasize the critical role of the early childhood educator. While the model of specialty training might be seen as similar to that found in the disabilities or special education field, the model of inclusive early childhood preparation with a wide spectrum abilities continuum, is needed. What does the well-trained early childhood educator then look like? A super-person who is “fluent” in abilities theories, especially skilled in early literacy, knowledgeable about assessment, a keen observer of and a diagnostician regarding individual learning styles, a practitioner who can optimally implement the individual “IEPs” of all the children in the class, and a conductor who can do this simultaneously without missing a beat. If in addition, the current thinking regarding

“Backward Design” models (Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J., 1998) is added to the array of what needs to be accomplished, then this educator should also know the specifics of elementary curriculum and be able to converse with school system educators regarding how their curriculum is related to the “big picture” curriculum. In many instances, there is little articulation between preschool early childhood educators and the K-12 system. Pathways to create opportunities for these conversations to take place need to be established. The current disconnect between early childhood educators and elementary educators does not help the teachers, the children or provide for the continuity that needs to be established for young learners to succeed. There is much to be learned from recognizing that the well-trained early childhood educator can do considerable good teaching of children in the early years of schooling. This benefit has spill over impact throughout the remainder of the school years and will serve as a model for teachers at different levels.

### **What is Different?**

While we have posited that there is much commonality to be found in all teachers “knowing their subject”, we have also pointed out the significant differences inherent when teaching different age groups and levels (elementary, middle, secondary, college). We can see that issues of content knowledge preparation are significant. Early childhood educators and elementary educators are prepared differently. There is a vast difference between a kindergarten age child and a sixth grade child. To have teaching experience at either end of a seven year grade span does not prepare a teacher for every grade along

that continuum. Development, behavior, and skills are not the same across the continuum of growth and development. Despite the philosophical similarities, one teacher cannot be prepared to be all things to all children across their schooling. What should happen to ensure appropriate teacher preparation for appropriate teacher placement? Individuals in supervisory and hiring positions should assess their needs when hiring and/or placing teachers. Plugging holes with any available teacher is not always the answer for creating positive learning environments for children and teachers. The emotional climate of a classroom contributes greatly to the success of the learners in that classroom. Having the right teacher in the classroom is a critical component to achieving success.

### **The Role of Teacher Preparation Faculty: Making the Right Match**

Good early childhood teacher preparation and the employment of well –trained early educators will help to support the following issues/goals: (1) our number one national educational goal, that all children will begin school ready to learn; (2) our understanding of what that means has been expanded by the recent early literacy research base (Neuman and Dickinson, 2002); (3) our President’s wish to “leave no child behind”; and (4) technology and the information age has increased the level of expected abilities/skills of the future work force. All in all, a paradigm shift in social policy appears to be needed to keep up with the paradigm shift that is now awakening in education regarding the significance of early skill development during the early childhood years.

Recognition must be paid to the vital role higher education plays in the preparation of early childhood educators. These educators need to be able to: (1) understand the nature and needs of the young learner; (2) plan for and implement appropriate curriculum for

these children; (3) assess children and the environment to maximize learning potential of each child and group of children, (4) work effectively with parents to complete the picture of each child and his/her potential; and (5) to enlist the assistance of whomever it takes to create successful early learning experiences for our children. The early abilities focus that is now strengthened by solid research requires such “special” educators for all children to reach optimal individual abilities success throughout their schooling years and beyond. It is a vital role that the Teacher Preparation program plays in making sure that there is a good match between the student/candidate’s attitudes and dispositions and the intended “subject” of choice. While all student/candidates must understand that the heart of teaching involves “knowing your subject”, it is equally important that they have chosen a compatible level to employ their skills.

### **Conclusion**

All eyes are on the early childhood years. Taxpayers, school boards, superintendents, parents, government officials, and funders all desire to see solid beginnings for children in the early childhood years. Success in these years depends on a variety of contributing factors. Successful early childhood experience enhances the potential for successful elementary years. The cycle of a positive and successful education begins with the early childhood teacher, the professional specifically prepared to create the best learning experiences possible for our youngest learners. This is where it all begins and this is where critical resources should go. Well-trained early childhood teachers are the most critical component in these resources. The essence of their skill and training is, however, applicable for all learners at all levels. Teacher training institutions must assess the

specific attitudes and dispositions of their candidates to ensure the best “fit” is made on an individual basis for meeting the needs of the future “subjects” they are choosing to service.

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