

The Feasibility of a Common Course in Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs

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This study offers a glimpse into the feasibility and potential benefits of offering a common course across multiple institutions of higher education. The research-based course was designed to enhance students' knowledge and beliefs regarding intentional teaching practices in language and literacy instruction. Researchers found evidence that a standardized college course may successfully impact the knowledge and beliefs of students preparing to be early childhood educators.

Effective early childhood teachers adopt intentional instructional approaches, engage in sensitive and warm interactions, stimulate language environments, and provide responsive feedback to children within a classroom environment that is not overly structured or regimented. Recent studies have found that holding a higher education degree in early childhood does not necessarily mean that a teacher exhibits these characteristics, nor does it always translate to better outcomes for children.

Part of the problem may be that, although teacher preparation programs for early childhood in institutions of higher education graduate thousands of future teachers each year, the effectiveness of their professional development courses has rarely been rigorously analyzed. Little is known from the research about what constitutes effective and replicable approaches to teacher training that produce positive effects on teacher practices and, in turn, gains in children's academic performance.

The Study

Researchers from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia, working as part of the National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (NCRECE), have taken up this issue. They designed and tested a standardized college course offered in the early childhood education programs of three institutions of higher education. Given the independent structure of institutions of higher education and the decentralized nature of the early childhood teacher preparation programs, the idea of offering a common course across different institutions is new and untested.

Entitled "Support of Language and Literacy Development in Preschool Classrooms through Effective Teacher-Child Interactions and Relationships," the course was initially

developed for use in a large randomized trial of in-service professional development models and was adapted for use as a three-credit course for preservice teachers. The course content was built around the framework of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS), an observation-based tool for assessing teacher-student interactions. The course also presented information on children's language and literacy development, as well as instructional strategies to promote early language and literacy development in preschool-age children.

In addition to testing the course as an in-service professional development model, researchers wanted to examine the implementation of the course in teacher preparation programs at different institutions of higher education. Early childhood faculty at three sites volunteered to participate in the study and implement the course for students enrolled in their program. The three instructors who taught the course each had experience teaching language and literacy courses in higher education settings. Two held master's degrees and one held a doctorate degree, all in early childhood education or a related field. Across the three programs, 49 students, all females majoring in early childhood education, agreed to participate in the study.

Course instructors were provided with 13 units of instruction, including background information, PowerPoint slides, scripted discussion points, a complete description of in-class activities, directions for a capstone course project, as well as instructions and answers for all homework assignments and the midterm and final examinations. Course content was delivered via lecture and video exemplars of effective teaching strategies. The instructors received extensive training on the CLASS instrument and the course materials. The instructors also met weekly via phone with an NCRECE staff person to discuss the course content, class exercises, and assignments.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS™) is an observational instrument developed at the University of Virginia to assess classroom quality in PK-12 classrooms.

It describes multiple dimensions of teaching that are linked by research to students' positive social and academic development and has been validated in over 2,000 classrooms.

For more information visit
<http://curry.virginia.edu/research/labs/class>

At the end of the semester, researchers gathered instructors' perspectives about design and delivery of the course. Students completed measures at the beginning and end of the semester regarding their attitudes and beliefs about intentional teaching (that is, having a goal for student learning and a plan for accomplishing it) and language and literacy skills. They also completed knowledge measures for these areas of teaching. Their midterm and final exams were analyzed by the researchers, as well as a post-course survey of perceptions of the course and how students' felt the course would change the way they teach.

Results

During the process of introducing the course at the three separate institutions of higher education, the researchers documented several considerations and challenges to offering a standardized course in different teacher preparation programs. Factors considered in the implementation process were the teacher licensing requirements for each state, curriculum sequence within each program, and timelines for developing and offering a new course at each institution. At the end of the course, the instructors reported several advantages and disadvantages of offering a predetermined course with standardized content. The instructors reported high regard for the content of the course, but pointed out that there may have been too much content for one semester. The instructors also reported having implemented the course with a high degree of fidelity, but pointed out that the materials and activities in some cases were not a good fit for their own teaching style.

The study data indicate that students felt positively about the content and the format of the course. There was some variation in students' assessment of the use of video exemplars, with many students indicating that the videos were very helpful and some pointing out that there were too many videos. Results also indicated that students' beliefs

about intentional teaching and important skills for young children changed over the course of the semester. Many students reported that the course had made a positive impact on their teaching practices.

The most common response indicated that students had gained an increased recognition of the importance of intentional teaching. Also, a large number of the students' comments suggested that they had gained a better understanding of the importance of teacher-child interactions and relationships. The students' scores on measures of their knowledge of intentional teaching and their knowledge of language and literacy practices demonstrated significant improvements from the first of the semester to the end of the semester. Results from the midterm and final examinations for the course showed students were moderately successful in mastering the content of the course.

The research design for the study limits the interpretation of the results, and because there was no comparison control group, the noted effects cannot be conclusively attributed to the course. The data, however, seem to indicate that it is possible to implement a standardized course across multiple institutions of higher education and that students had more knowledge of course content after completing the course than prior to taking the course. However, the data reflect only how much knowledge students acquired and do not speak to how this knowledge will be implemented in the classroom. While we have some basis upon which we can reasonably expect that these changes in students' knowledge and beliefs are associated with more effective teaching practices, we do not have direct evidence from this study.

Linking Research to Practice

Results suggest that implementing a predeveloped, standardized course in multiple teacher preparation programs is feasible. Yet, designing a course that can be offered with fidelity across multiple institutions and, at the same time, can provide some flexibility for individual instructors remains a challenge. Instructors' different teaching styles and varying levels of familiarity with the content may be related to student outcomes. Institutional differences, teaching styles, and academic freedom, as well as accreditation and state licensure requirements are issues that need to be considered further before a predeveloped course—regardless of the evidence in its favor—is implemented across higher education settings.

NOTE: The study of this college course is part of NCRECE's larger effort to investigate the use of a conceptual model of teacher effectiveness as the foundation for efforts to help teachers learn strategies to promote children's language and literacy skills.

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