

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

WE COVER WHAT MATTERS...EVANSTON

Tuesday, August 31, 2010

Teachers' Education Improves Learning in the Very Young

By Mary Helt Gavin, Meredith Newman and Anna Sanders

Tuesday, August 31, 2010

As education research uncovers the roots of learning, it focuses not only on the earliest learners but on how parents, caregivers and teachers foster cognitive and social development. Parents are of course the first teachers, but with increasing numbers of very young children in day-care centers, nursery schools, family day-care homes and other pre-kindergarten settings, that role is often shared.

Thus the role of teachers and caregivers of very young children is central to their educational and social development. The benefits of quality early childhood education are reaped not only by the family in terms of having engaged and productive children but by the community in social "cost savings." Several studies have attempted to quantify these savings: For every dollar invested in early childhood education, the community saves \$7-\$14 that would have been spent on social services, including remediation and incarceration, said Martha Arntson, executive director of Childcare Network of Evanston (CNE).

A study from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University recently concluded: "Very high-quality early care and education programs for vulnerable preschoolers can produce short-term gains on

Professional Development and Commensurate Salaries

A recent report from the Pew Center report also says the lack of training requirements and the low pay for early-childhood educators – many make less per hour than a bus driver or a mail carrier – has "encouraged the perception that early childhood teaching does not demand a high skill level. This, in turn, has undermined efforts to develop more productive public policy. The Pew report suggests that raising the education level of the pre-k workforce ... may help change the profession's image from one of menial labor to one demanding advanced skills and knowledge." Making training and education accessible for potential early-childhood professionals – and finding ways to compensate them for their professionalism – remain challenges that dovetail on one another. Many early childhood providers lack training and receive low wages; professionalizing early childhood education would require not only increasing the pay scale but also expanding the college (both community and four-year) curricula to offer training that merits increased pay.



Children at Reba Learning Center are "interested in bugs, so we're focusing all of our activities and lessons on bugs," says teacher Kelsey Haavig. The Reba Early Learning Center opened its doors 43 years ago and 20 years ago became a not-for-profit organization. The center's director, Marsha Ettema, said being a non-profit organization allows "a broad spectrum of students, both economically and socially." The center is open to children from 2 ½ to 5 years of age weekdays 7 a.m. - 6 p.m.

standardized cognitive and social-emotional increased pay.
measures and long-run reduction in grade
retentions, suspension and referrals for special education services. Evaluations of such programs have shown that, as a group, this form of intervention can produce benefits that outweigh costs when provided to three- and four-year-olds from low-income families.

Maintaining high-quality programs entails maintaining a high-quality teaching staff; yet early childhood educators are among the lowest-paid in the teaching profession, said Ms. Arntson.

Moreover, Illinois standards for early childhood professionals are quite low, said Cass Wolfe, executive director of Infant Welfare Society's Baby Toddler Nursery.

A study released last spring from the Pew Center emphasizes the need for all teachers in early childhood programs to obtain certification – and preferably a bachelor's degree. Long-term benefits of having educated professionals teaching the youngest learners include "positive effects on students' academic achievement, high-school graduation rates and later life success," according to the report "A Matter of Degrees: Preparing Teachers for the Pre-K Classroom," by Marisa Bueno, Linda Darling-Hammond and Danielle Gonzales, part of Pew's Pre-K Now campaign.

A meta-analysis by the National Institute for Early Education Research cited in the Pew report found that "students whose teachers had higher levels of education attainment showed greater gains in cognitive, social and emotional development than those taught by teachers with less education." Further, teachers with training in early childhood development were found to be "better-equipped to facilitate young children's language-, cognitive- and social skills development," according to the Pew report.

To get a highly trained professional workforce into early childhood classrooms, the report recommends "professionalizing" the field of early childhood teaching: increasing the capacity of four-year and community colleges to provide training and education for early childhood educators and strengthening the academic requirements for early childhood educators – a measure that could in turn increase theirayscale and prestige.

More than 40 licensed child-care centers in Evanston offer a variety of programs and services for parents of infants, toddlers and pre-kindergarten children. In addition, several licensed family day-care (also called home day-care) providers care for children in their homes.

The majority of children entering kindergarten at School District 65 have been in preschool or day care: Last year, only about 15 percent of the 797 kindergartners either had no preschool experience or it was "not known" whether they had had that exposure.

Professional Education and Development at Local Childcare Institutions

Childcare center directors in Evanston seem to take as a given the idea that professional development and education of staff will reflect positively in the development of the young children they serve.

The education level of the teachers and caregivers in these early childhood settings can range from certification (which entails coursework but no degree, generally at the community college level), to a community college degree (generally an Associate of Arts, or A.A.) to a bachelor's (four-year) degree or higher.

All 13 staff members at the Total Child Center, 516 Church St., hold a bachelor's degree, said executive director Sue Ruhl. Such a highly educated staff is "not unusual" in Evanston, she said. In past years, staff members have achieved professional development by attending the annual conference on early childhood education at Oakton Community College. This year professional development will be offered in-house, Ms. Ruhl said. "We'll have people come in and talk about topics we think would be helpful for our staff."

At Reba Learning Center, 740 Custer Ave., all the teachers hold a bachelor's or associate's degree in fields related to early childhood development, said director Marsha Ettema. Activities and lessons there are focused on a project approach. The philosophy of Reba Early Learning Center is that "all learning [focuses] on social and emotional development. The project approach enables children to explore a topic that they're interested in," Ms. Ettema said.

The Child Care Center of Evanston (CCCE), 1840 Asbury Ave., was established during World War II for mothers who were going back to work. Bettye Cohn, staff and family education manager, told the *RoundTable* that "almost all the teachers have early childhood education, training or experience." The majority of the teachers hold either a bachelor's or an associate's degree or are at present working on a degree, she added.

Linda Hermes of Just S.E.W., the family day-care organization of Skokie, Evanston and Wilmette, said all the providers in Just S.E.W. are licensed.

The Beth Emet Early Childhood Program, 1224 Dempster St., is one of the few preschools in Evanston that incorporates Jewish values into everyday learning. Beth Emet's philosophy is that young children base their knowledge of the world on engaging their surroundings. "We have a highly qualified staff here," said Kathy Kaberon, one of the directors of the Early Childhood program. "The majority of our teachers have a bachelor's or master's degree in early childhood education or psychology," she said. The teacher-child ratio is one to seven, and the focus on child development stands alone. "We focus on development. We will work with families on any developmental step," said Ms. Kaberon.

Nearly all the teachers at Baby Toddler Nursery and Teen Baby Nursery – the two centers operated by Infant Welfare Society of Evanston – also hold a bachelor's degree, said executive director Cass Wolfe.

Preschool teachers connected with educational institutions – such as those in School District 65's early childhood programs – must have "bachelor of arts degrees, specialized training, and certification, and the State's higher education institutions have been actively involved in increasing teacher quality," according to the Illinois State Board of Education.

Opportunities for Professional Development: Workshops, Classes and Coursework

There are many opportunities for professional development and training for early childhood educators and caregivers in Evanston. They can attend in-house or local workshops, large-scale conferences, such as the annual infant-toddler conference at Oakton Community College, or college-level courses.

The Child Care Center of Evanston offers in-house workshops every other month – most conducted by Ms. Cohn – as well as the opportunity to attend local conferences. In-service workshops, she says, can be tailored to the needs of the staff, such as CPR training, training in how to deal with children with epilepsy and literacy training, which is offered to parents as well.

For the past 15 years the Learning Network of the Childcare Network of Evanston has offered professional workshops for early childhood educators. These workshops, called "Learning Together," are held the third Wednesday of the month, September through June, and offer practical advice for caregivers and educators to engage their children, said Chris Baer, who supervises the program.

Many of the local workshops offer the training necessary for the caregivers and educators to maintain their licensing from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), which mandates 15 hours of training annually. "Some of the providers will attend a workshop just to get the hours," said Ms. Hermes of Just S.E.W., "but others come for the information as well."

At a workshop last April, guest speaker Lindy Rubin discussed how the childcare providers could use art – she uses reproductions of works in the Art Institute of Chicago – to get children to think and to express themselves.

Ms. Rubin said. "We like this because children can talk about it. They all have a bedroom, though it may not look like this," she added.

Other topics – such as ones on health and on child development – are more hands-on, said Ann Rappelt, one of two family childcare connection coordinators at the Child Care Center of Evanston. "[The providers] will learn why it is important to keep track of immunizations – how they can impact a child's growth and development," Ms. Rappelt said. They can share this information with parents, she said, also telling them how important immunizations are and how undetected diseases, such as asthma, can affect a child's learning.

Ms. Rappelt said the community in Evanston makes professional development easy. "In Chicago I had to go far out of my way for professional development, but not so in Evanston."

Infant Welfare Society's Ms. Wolfe has worked on professional development of early childhood caregivers and educators for several years. She now serves as co-chair of the statewide Professional Development Advisory Council on Early Childhood, one of whose projects is the Gateway to Opportunity Illinois Professional Development System career lattice – a way for caregivers and educators to progress laterally as well as horizontally in their careers.

The Gateways to Opportunity offers two-pronged support to caregivers: a way to register and track their progress in professional development online as well as career advice from professionals in the program. "I support all staff getting involved in Gateways to Opportunity," said Martha Arntson, executive director of the Childcare Network of Evanston. The program, she said, is for anyone working with children, except for license-exempt providers. CNE recently received a grant for teachers of Early Head Start to obtain their early childhood credentials through Gateways to Opportunity, Ms. Arntson said.

Professional development for early childhood caregivers and educators is necessary, said Ms. Wolfe, because "unlike other professions, we have very low pre-professional standards. ... Whereas to earn a nursing certificate or degree, one has to study certain specific areas, in our field the standards are pretty low." Because many early childhood workers take entry-level positions at pre-schools and child-care centers, she added, "The workforce ends up in school – working for [the agency], taking care of children and going to school."

Ms. Hermes says there are many opportunities for professional development offered by Illinois Action for

Children, the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership of National-Louis University and the Kohl Children's Museum.

Yet to Martha Arntson, executive director of the Childcare Network of Evanston, and to Ms. Wolf, academics are preferable: "Course work is the highest form of professional development," says Ms. Arntson. Research has proven that the higher the education level of teachers and staff, the higher quality the program, she added. Says Ms. Wolfe, "We know that people with a B.S. and specialized training produce greater results for the child."

The Pew report cited additional, indirect, benefits to raising the bar for early-childhood educators: "In addition to improving students' acquisition of critical skills, some argue that raising educational standards for pre-k teachers in publicly-funded programs could have positive, indirect effects on pre-k quality through professionalization of the field. More rigorous levels of preparation could support both higher compensation and earlier recruitment of well-qualified individuals who want to make a career in early childhood education. These synergistic effects could, in turn, aid pre-k providers in reducing turnover and improving program quality."

Basic Education

Those without a college degree but planning to enter the field of early childhood education can start at Oakton Community College, in whose district the City of Evanston lies. Oakton offers more than 40 courses in early childhood education, leading to either certification, an A.A. (associate of applied science) degree, said Sheila Kerwin Maloney, chair of early childhood education at Oakton. Only some of the course credits are transferable to four-year institutions, she said. Most four-year schools accept general-education more readily than they accept career-oriented credits, Ms. Maloney said. "The A.A. track is for a student who wants to be a pre-school teacher. Students who know they want to transfer to a four-year school and be a teacher will usually follow the A.A.T. track, but only National-Louis University will accept those credits." DePaul University, she said, accepts the transfer of some credits from Oakton.

Related Stories:

- [Early Childhood Experiences Shape The Brain's Physical Architecture](#)

Related Links:

">Content © 2011

">Software © 1998-2011 **Iup! Software**, All Rights Reserved