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Teaching America's Young Children

by Karen Arneson

(English 1102)

The Assignment: Choose a profession that you want to pursue or find interesting, and research it.

America's most valuable resource is at risk: our young children. Unless our nation begins to change its attitudes toward young children, we risk under-development of this precious resource. Children pass through various stages of development that follow a predictable continuum loosely related to age. They need teachers who understand early childhood development. They need teachers who are able to provide an environment that stimulates the process of learning. They need qualified teachers with degrees in early childhood education and care. Early childhood education is the foundation on which a life-long love of learning is built. As a student of early childhood education and care, I have repeatedly seen the need for qualified teachers go unmet. It was only in the process of researching the profession that I began to understand why child care centers are settling for under-qualified staff and mediocre practices. Once fired up with the passion to make a difference in the lives of their students, preschool teachers find themselves burnt-out. Under-compensated and lacking in resources to do the job well, many leave their first love. Those who remain settle for simply providing basic care, rather than providing the best educational opportunity. This situation will remain unchanged until our nation begins to understand the wealth we have embodied in our young children.

Apathy toward children is nothing new. Advocates of early childhood education are raising their voices against a history of misguided and harmful attitudes toward children. Jeffrey Trawick-Smith points out that until the 1600s the personhood of children under the age of seven was not recognized. Child abuse, abandonment and even infanticide were common. If children survived to the age of eight, they were considered to be little adults and expected to behave as such. These beliefs gave way to an acknowledgement of childhood as a unique period of development. Though closer to the truth, harsh application of religious beliefs led to the mistreatment of children who were labeled inherently evil. Through physical punishment, parents sought to break the will of the child in order to save the child's soul. The 1800s ushered in a period of enlightenment and the emphasis shifted to the socialization of children. It wasn't until the 1900s that children were more often seen as unique individuals to be cared for, protected and educated (18).

As we move into the 21st century, teachers are guided by theories of development birthed from years of research. Theories such as "Erikson's Eight Ages of Emotional Development" (Trawick-Smith 46) help early childhood educators understand how to best support emotional/social health. Piaget's findings on the stages of intellectual development offer insights into the ways in which young children learn. Vygotsky's research gives parents and teachers an awareness of the "zone of proximal development" (54). This is the point at which children face problems just beyond their mastery. The educated parent or teacher knows this is a time to use indirect promptings or questions to help the child discover the solution to the problem. Young children need teachers who have learned how to apply these theories in practice.

The Foundation for Child Development sponsored a national study focused on the workforce in early childhood education. The authors, Stephen Herzenberg, Mark Price and David Bradley released a summarization of that study under the title "Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education, Declining Workforce Qualifications in an Expanding Industry, 1979-2004." The study revealed low

wages and benefits, as well as expanding opportunities for women with college degrees, as the reason behind the declining workforce qualifications. The most educated age cohort, now in its 50s, will be retiring in the next 15 years. The summary asserts “as more educated teachers retire, maintaining a qualified early childhood workforce will grow yet more difficult” (2). Parents’ tuition fees alone will not support paying well-educated teachers. The authors suggest that “if the United States wants children to receive high-quality early childhood education..., it needs policies that will produce the teachers essential to high quality” (3). Those policies must address educational requirements and equitable pay. Without raising compensation, it will be impossible to maintain the educated teachers needed to ensure excellence in early childhood education.

A professional organization, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), agrees. The disparity between the amount families can afford to pay and the actual costs of a quality program are discussed in the association’s “Guidelines for Compensation of Early Childhood Professionals.” The guidelines state:

NAEYC is committed to working for strategies that acknowledge the full costs of quality early childhood program provision and that distribute these costs more equitably among all sectors of society. NAEYC believes that parents and early childhood professionals have borne a disproportionate burden in the provision of early childhood programs. All of society – children, families, employers, communities, and the nation as a whole – benefits from the provision of high-quality early childhood programs. It is time that the full cost of this essential public service be shared more equitably by all sectors of society. (2)

By investing in the education of young children, everyone benefits. Children reap the fruit of success as qualified teachers provide the essential foundation for future performance in school. Teachers are able to continue in their chosen careers. Society saves money that may have been spent on remedial or special education services. Society benefits as children do better academically and as their emotional/social needs are nurtured in preparation to participate in their communities.

There are those who are beginning to understand the value of quality early childhood education, among them Senator Barack Obama. Recently the senator championed this cause by agreeing to speak at the 5th annual “It’s Good Business to Invest in Young Children” luncheon. The purpose of this annual event, sponsored by the Ounce of Prevention Fund, is to educate Chicago business leaders with the hope of soliciting support for early intervention. According to the Ounce’s website, it is their mission to “equip (and often inspire) practitioners, policymakers, and parents with the essential knowledge and skills necessary to help in the healthy development of more and more children and their families” (*Ounce of Prevention Fund: About Us*).

Senator Obama’s comments were taken directly from the website’s list of reasons to invest in educating young children. Perhaps the most compelling of those reasons is to take advantage of early brain development. The website list points out “the most important brain development occurs before age five, making the first five years of a child’s life critical to lifetime success” (*Ounce of Prevention Fund: Getting Involved*). By taking advantage of this optimal time to learn, early childhood education also increases the effectiveness of later schooling. Children enter elementary school primed and ready to learn. This website list goes on to claim “investing in early childhood is sound economic policy for our country: every \$1 invested in high-quality early education saves \$7 in later costs.” Providing young children with the best foundation of learning ensures a better future for all of us. Children grow up and become the decision-makers of our future. As each generation steps aside to make way for the new, let’s hope that those future generations have had the benefit of qualified teachers.

Through the efforts of the Ounce, as well as other interested groups, the message is getting

through. Governor Rob Blagojevich proposed a plan for universal preschool in Illinois. The plan, Preschool for All, would provide for voluntary, high-quality early childhood education for all three- and four-year olds in Illinois. Illinois isn't the only state recognizing the need. A report in the October 2005 issue of *Education Digest* points out:

A growing phenomenon in the United States is state-funded pre-kindergarten. As of the 2002-03 school year, nearly 750,000 children were in these programs, with hundreds of thousands more served in school-based Head Start programs. Georgia and Oklahoma offer pre-K services to all four-year-olds, and Florida is finalizing a similar plan. (Clifford, Bryant and Early)

This is good news for those currently teaching and those interested in becoming preschool teachers. State-funded pre-K programs could afford early childhood educators salaries and benefits commensurate with their education. By including pre-K programs in the public school system, preschool teachers could receive the same compensation earned by kindergarten teachers. In the current market, a beginning preschool teacher with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education can expect to earn about \$28,000/year as compared to about \$40,000/year earned by other female college graduates.

I've wondered if the emphasis on academics in later years has negatively impacted the early childhood educator. To the casual observer, preschool teachers may appear to do little more than baby sit. However, I agree with the comments of Libby Doggett of the Trust for Early Education, a Washington-based advocacy group: "Working with young children is very, very sophisticated work. It's not something that someone who has a GED and nine hours of training can do" (qtd. in Greg Toppo).

The U.S. Department of Labor addresses this misconception in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. In describing the nature of the work, the handbook states:

Preschool teachers capitalize on children's play to further language and vocabulary development (using storytelling, rhyming games, and acting games), improve social skills (having the children work together to build a neighborhood in a sandbox), and introduce scientific and mathematical concepts (showing the children how to balance and count blocks when building a bridge or how to mix colors when painting). (2)

Young children learn by exploring their environments in play activities. By observing the interests of the young child, a teacher qualified in early childhood education is able to support habits of the mind that results in a love of learning. This provides the essential foundation for future years of schooling (Helm and Katz 4).

It troubles me to know that unless our nation begins to understand the value of early childhood education, America's children will not develop to their full potential. What will be the impact on our future society? Over half of all mothers of preschoolers are employed outside the home: who is training the young?

For those with the vision to see the difference one person can make in the life of another, this profession provides ample opportunity to make that difference. Though I've felt discouraged by the present state of the profession, I've also discovered a growing public interest in early childhood education. I have hope for the future of America's young children and those who desire to teach them.

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