Supporting Early Childhood Teachers: A Reflection on the Kentucky Teacher Internship Program

Karen E. Diamond
Purdue University

The first article in this issue, “Mentoring the New Professional in Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education: The Kentucky Teacher Internship Program,” by McCormick and Brennan provides a model of how one state has supported the development of new teachers in order to help them become competent professionals. An important goal of this program is to reduce the current rate of attrition for early childhood educators during the critical first years of their teaching careers.

Our country needs new strategies for developing and supporting teachers of young children. This article provides a statewide model for nurturing beginning teachers. As the authors note, the early childhood teacher workforce is beset by problems, including high teacher turnover and a high rate of attrition during the first 3 years of teaching. As more young children enter childcare and education programs, we need more well-trained early childhood teachers who will teach and care for them. The difficulty in finding and retaining well-qualified teachers in childcare programs that serve both typically developing children and children with disabilities is especially troublesome. In fact, many early childhood teachers with the highest levels of education, training, and experience are leaving preschool programs for better-paid positions in elementary schools (Whitebook & Phillips, 1999). Although privately supported programs designed for typically developing children have the most difficulty attracting and keeping well-qualified teachers, there are growing concerns about the pool of qualified interventionists who are trained to teach young children with identified disabilities. In addition, substantial evidence indicates that if all of the teachers in early childhood programs (including Head Start) without bachelor’s degrees were to re-enter the higher education system, there would not be sufficient faculty in all of the colleges and universities in the United States to meet their educational needs (Early & Winton, in press). In this context, a state-supported program designed to support the development of new early childhood teachers and to retain these teachers in early education is especially welcome.

Katherine McCormick and Sharon Brennan provide a detailed description of Kentucky’s mentoring program, a program that can serve as a road map for other states interested in developing strategies to support beginning teachers. The combination of assistance from a mentor who has expertise in the beginning teacher’s field, sometimes teaching in the same school, and the involvement of a committee of educators who provide guidance during the first year of teaching is likely to prove especially effective in refining teachers’ skills and supporting their commitment to the field. Although all of the members of the intern’s committee provide support, the mentor/resource teacher is clearly most critical to fostering the development of the beginning teacher. The authors note that one of the major challenges to this program is finding time. One suspects that time may be a particular challenge for the mentor teacher, who must commit “a minimum of 20 hours in the intern’s classroom [and] 50 hours...outside of class time” (this issue) in addition to his or her own teaching responsibilities. The ways in which resource/mentor teachers are recognized and supported within their local school communities will be key to the success of this program.

According to McCormick and Brennan, the goals of the Kentucky Teacher Internship Program are to “ease transition, reduce attrition, and strengthen effectiveness” (this issue). Particularly in this era of increased scrutiny by policymakers and the public regarding expenditures for education, it is important that we evaluate the effectiveness of model programs such as this one. Thus the...
next step is to document whether or not this program (or others with similar goals) that is supported with public funds actually improves teaching effectiveness, reduces teacher attrition, or meets other program-identified goals that are critical for enhancing the effectiveness of early childhood education. Even demonstrating (with data) that the program meets its goals will not be sufficient. Once there is evidence that a specific program is effective in meeting its goals (such as reducing the numbers of beginning teachers who leave the field), we need to focus more carefully on what makes the program effective. What aspects of the program or characteristics of the participants result in changes that lead specific teachers to be more effective teachers of young children and more committed to the profession? Just as we have moved from studying whether early intervention is effective toward more clearly defined questions about the types of interventions that are effective in promoting specific outcomes for different groups of children and under different circumstances, we need to move toward more specific questions about programs designed to educate and support teachers. Careful attention to such questions will help us develop models for supporting beginning teachers that are both effective within a single community and translatable to others. Furthermore, addressing these questions is a way to respond to the challenge that public funds be used wisely.

The components of the Kentucky Teacher Internship Program that apply to early childhood include standards of competency for both early childhood education (identified by the National Association for the Education of Young Children) and early childhood special education (identified by the Division of Young Children of the Council for Exceptional Children). The combination of these two sets of standards underscores the importance of training teachers to teach all young children, whether or not the child has an identified educational disability, using approaches from both early childhood education and early childhood special education. Not only is early childhood education recognized in the content of the internship, beginning teachers who are eligible for this program may be employed in Head Start, private early childcare and education programs, home-based early intervention, and public school classrooms designed for preschool children with disabilities—the whole gamut of settings in which young children are educated before entering kindergarten.

As the authors note, however, “significant barriers exist for [the internship program’s] use by prospective interns employed within early childhood . . . systems outside the public school” (McCormick & Brennan, this issue). Since a majority of infants, toddlers, and preschool children receive much or all of their education and out-of-home care in programs not operated by the public schools, we need to develop strategies that effectively support teachers in these types of nonpublic school settings. The authors are careful in noting this limitation. This may be a situation in which one size—one mentoring model—does not fit all.

Although it is not an issue addressed directly by the Kentucky Teacher Internship Program, providing support for beginning teachers and improving the early education workforce require that we attend, in addition to professional development, to issues of teachers’ pay and benefits. This issue is especially critical for teachers who are employed in early childhood programs other than Head Start and those operated by public schools. As the Bureau of Labor Statistics noted (2000, p. 170), “Job openings in [childcare and early childhood education] should be numerous because of rapid employment growth coupled with high turnover—reflecting few benefits, low pay, and occasionally stressful working conditions.” Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, and Abbott-Shim (2000) recently found that higher teacher wages were a significant predictor of better quality childcare, even after controlling for child-to-teacher ratios, teacher training, and group size. Higher teacher wages were also associated with lower teacher attrition. These data suggest that we may be most effective in supporting beginning early childhood teachers in all settings if we attend to the qualities of their employment—wages, benefits, and working conditions—as well as to their interactions with children and families.

REFERENCES


