

What we have learned about preparing personnel to serve children & families in early childhood intervention

Rationale/Importance of Personnel Preparation

Research has been consistent in demonstrating that the presence of competent, caring, responsive early interventionists is a critical component to family satisfaction with early intervention services (Able-Boone, et al., 1992; McWilliam, Lang, Vandiviere, Angell, Collins, & Underdown, 1995; McWilliam, Tocci & Harbin, in press). A major challenge for states has been ensuring that programs have a cadre of competent and caring professionals to serve young children with disabilities and their families (Harbin, Gallagher, & Lillie, 1991; Safer & Hamilton, 1993; Szanton, 1993).

Research in the field of early care and education has also emphasized the importance of personnel preparation. In fact, quality in early care and education programs is directly linked to the specialized training received by practitioners in these programs (Phillips & Howes, 1987; Cost, Quality and Outcomes, 1995). Studies have shown that the more training early childhood program directors have, the better the outcomes in improved program quality (Bloom, Rafanello, Eisenberg, & Britz, 1997; Bloom, Rafanello, Eisenberg, & Talan, 1998).

What We Know about Preparing Personnel at a Program/Practice Level

Natural Environments/Inclusion

Federal legislation (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997) has increased the possibilities that young children with disabilities will be served in natural settings, which in many cases are generic early childhood programs and settings. However, research indicates that:

- designing and implementing services to infants and toddlers with disabilities is a major concern for Early Head Start staff (California Institute on Human Services, 1998). Focus group data also revealed that Early Head Start staff do not feel comfortable with children with disabilities and are fearful about taking care of them.
- the content of training available to early childhood practitioners does not address the full spectrum of needs of the early childhood field. There are gaps in the following areas: infant/toddler; family child care; school age care; leadership; inclusion/special needs; diversity; and mixed age groups (Morgan, Azer, Costley, Genser, Goodman, Lombardi, & McGimsey, 1993); and
- adequate support including training, materials, and ongoing consultation is necessary to make inclusive environments work (Lieber, Schwartz, Sandall, Horn, & Wolery, in press).

Family-Centered/Interdisciplinary Philosophy

Family-centered, interdisciplinary approaches to early intervention are overarching themes of the federal legislation. For early childhood intervention to be successful, all personnel development activities should reflect and model these themes. Research indicates that:

- preservice personnel preparation programs across multiple disciplines are not likely to provide students with information about working with families or with teams (Bailey, Simeonsson, Yoder, & Huntington, 1990);
- interdisciplinary instruction rarely occurs in preservice personnel preparation (Bailey et al., 1990);
- although a family-centered approach is espoused in the literature, most early intervention services are child-focused (Harbin, McWilliam & Gallagher, 1998; Kochanek & Brady, 1995; McBride & Peterson, 1997; McWilliam et al., in press).
- direct service providers feel that working with families is important, but that family and systems barriers (support of administrators and colleagues, monitoring procedures, etc.) prevent them from being as family-centered as they would like (Bailey, Buysse, Edmondson, & Smith, 1992);
- team-based instruction, which includes families, administrators, consultants, and direct service providers, is a strategy for addressing the systems and family barriers to implementing family-centered practices (Bailey, McWilliam, & Winton, 1992; Winton, 1990; Winton, McWilliam, Owen, & Bailey, 1992); and
- personnel preparation programs that promote family empowerment also serve to facilitate interdisciplinary relationships (Rooney, Gallagher, & Fullagar, 1993).

Practical Experiences

Students need practical experiences that can assist them in developing a repertoire of strategies for working effectively with diverse families in diverse settings. They also need to have a variety of practical experiences with diverse yet capable role models from whom they can learn. Research shows that students are far more influenced by their student teaching (practica) experiences than by their course work (McCollum & McCartan, 1988).

Effective Instruction

Research and theories of adult learning provide important information about how to effectively engage an interdisciplinary early intervention audience. This research tells us that:

- being knowledgeable, well-prepared, enthusiastic and concerned about participants are attributes that are prized by inservice and preservice audiences alike (Wolfe, 1993; McKeachie, 1990);
- activities should be directly relevant to the practice context (Moore, 1988);
- activities should be varied and responsive to different styles of learning (Wolfe, 1993);
- strategies that allow for reflection and review of the content after the training are important (Wolfe, 1993);
- each participant should develop a specific plan of action for how they want to use the information provided as part of the learning experience (Brookfield, 1986);
- ongoing support, monitoring, and technical assistance should be provided to participants (Brookfield, 1986; Winton et al, 1992); and
- changes in early childhood intervention practices take time to achieve; evaluation of the impact of training must take place after participants have had a reasonable amount of time to try and implement their action plans (Winton et al., 1992).

What We Know about Preparing Personnel at an Early Intervention Systems Level

Planning Documents

One requirement for participation by states in the federal early intervention program (Part C of IDEA) is a comprehensive system of personnel development (CSPD), including the training of paraprofessionals. Research has documented that:

- states that developed and used a planning document made greater progress in early childhood intervention personnel development (Rooney, Gallagher, Fullagar, Eckland, & Huntington, 1992); and
- Part C CSPD plans should be written in tandem with certification standards (Bruder, Klosowski, & Daguio, 1989) and must also be consistent with Part B CSPD plans (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997).

Interagency Coordination/Collaboration

The federal early childhood intervention program calls for a comprehensive, coordinated, community-based system of services for young children with disabilities and their families. Policy research (Rooney et al., 1992) has documented that strategies for increasing interagency cooperation in the area of personnel development include:

- planning conferences that facilitate communication and semi-formal links among all invested parties; and
- collaboratively written plans that clarify roles, commitments and intentions

Higher Education/State Agency Cooperation

Policy reports have emphasized the importance of a partnership between higher education and state agencies in implementing early childhood intervention personnel development plans. Research has identified that:

- a lack of cooperation between higher education and state agencies is a major barrier to states' progress in implementing early childhood intervention personnel development (Bruder et al., 1989); and
- states that have made the most progress have established partnerships between these two major stakeholder groups (Rooney et al., 1992).

Certification/Credentialing

A major part of comprehensive personnel development is establishing a certification system that will monitor personnel quality. Research has shown that states that have established certification for early intervention personnel are farther along in personnel development (Rooney et al., 1992).

Preservice/Inservice Linkages

For early childhood intervention systems to succeed, family-centered, interdisciplinary personnel preparation planning efforts must occur across preservice and inservice audiences. It is imperative that those activities provide consistent messages and move toward a commonly held vision (Gallagher, 1993). Institutional barriers to training, especially for early childhood practitioners include cost, access, quality of training (Copple, 1991; Morgan, 1993) and the absence of a link between training and compensation (Whitebrook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989).

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