

## **Essential Elements for Preparing Future Teachers in Early Childhood Education Using Common Core Standards** *RESEARCH*

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss suggestions on what pre-service teachers need to know in order to be ready to teach in today's kindergartens where the implementation of the Common Core State Standards reflects best practice. The introduction of the Common Core State Standards in Kentucky has ushered a new culture in kindergarten. Kindergarten used to be seen as a preparation year in which children could be equipped in listening, walking in lines, getting along with others and learning letters. Today, children in kindergarten are expected to begin reading, writing, adding and subtracting. Rigor begins early in the school year as kindergarten children are screened and assessed to determine groupings and which children will need additional supports to meet the CCSS expectations. Teacher education programs, in turn, need to ascertain how to resolve the challenges of this new culture. The teacher candidates will need to be prepared for what they will experience or face in schools. In this paper, the authors will provide suggestions on what pre-service teachers need to know in order to be ready to teach in today's kindergartens where the implementation of the Common Core State Standards reflects best practice.

**Keywords:** essential elements, teacher preparation, early childhood, common core standards

### **Impact of Common Core on Teacher Preparation Programs**

Not all that long ago, kindergarten was seen as a preparation year for entry to school – a year in which children could be taught about listening, walking in lines, getting along with others and learning letters. Not so much anymore. Young children entering kindergarten in 2013 are expected to know these basic skills already or at least teachers hope they do. The introduction of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which represents the “culmination of an extended, broad-based effort to fulfill the charge issued by the states to create the next generation of K-12 standards in order to help ensure that all students are college and career ready” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 3), has raised the stakes for all grade levels including kindergarten.

Children in kindergarten are expected to begin reading, writing, adding and subtracting. Rigor begins early in the

school year as kindergarten children are screened and assessed to determine groupings and which children will need additional supports to meet the CCSS expectations. In many kindergarten classrooms, there is little time for play as teachers are scrambling to fit a full day curriculum of academic expectations into half-day programs. The CCSS describes for the kindergarten teacher the content and skills expected of their students and suggests that although “the use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, ... it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 6). The recognition of play as a teaching tool in the CCSS for young children raises the question of the impact of kindergarten teachers' professional background on children's learning.

Teachers in Kentucky who obtain a position in a kindergarten classroom come from a variety of pre-service backgrounds,

and the teacher preparation route kindergarten teachers choose may impact their orientation to teaching. The teacher preparation routes for kindergarten teachers in Kentucky are Elementary Education (Elementary) or Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education (IECE) certification programs. The focus and content for Elementary certification is primary through grade 5, while IECE certification programs focus on birth to primary. Experiences in these two programs will reflect the age range or grade scope of the teacher licensures. Thus, Elementary certified teachers may emphasize whole class instruction and teacher-directed method more than IECE-certified teachers; whereas IECE-certified teachers may not be as comfortable teaching subject area content or skills, but are competent in implementing developmentally appropriate one-on-one or small group instruction in kindergarten.

The purpose of this paper is to provide suggestions on what pre-service teachers need to know in order to be ready to teach in today's kindergartens where the implementation of the Common Core State Standards reflect best practice. The next section begins with a historical look at kindergarten.

### **Historical Review of Kindergarten**

Kindergarten, or a child's garden as envisioned by Friedrich Froebel, the father of Kindergarten in 1837, was for children ages three to six years old, and children used gifts and occupations for play and self-activity (Morrison, 2008; Osborn, 1991). The specific skills Froebel wanted children to learn in kindergarten were "habits of cleanliness and neatness, courtesy, punctuality, and deference toward others" in addition to "language, numbers, forms and eye-hand coordination" (Osborn, 1991, p. 44). Froebel believed in "a divine essence, a

sprit, within the child" (Nell, Drew, & Bush, 2013, p. 12) and viewed the teacher's function as "engaging and guiding the whole child as an intelligent thinking and feeling being, growing into self-consciousness through play" (Nell, Drew, & Bush, 2013, p. 12).

In 1863, Mary Mann and Elizabeth Peabody, the authors of the first book on kindergarten, advocated teaching via objects and moral instruction. She designated the kindergarten teacher to be the child's friend rather than a judge (Osborn, 1991). The objectives for kindergarten education, according to Patty Smith Hill, the director of the Louisville Free Kindergarten Association 1893 to 1905 and head of the kindergarten department at the Teacher's College of Columbia in 1910, are "the cultivation of social adjustment (learning to work and play together), habits of purposeful work, self-reliance, and good thinking" (Hill, 1923, p. 56). Hill also suggested the provision of additional materials like dolls and miniature furniture to Froebel's gifts (Osborn, 1991).

By 1900, Vandewalker (1908) reported as many as 400 kindergartens in public schools, with 23 states offering public funds for kindergarten and total of 5,000 kindergartens in the United States. However with the increased presence of public school kindergartens, integration of child development principles within the kindergarten curriculum became essential (Osborn, 1991). By the 1990s, attending kindergarten became an expectation for 90 percent of the children as kindergarten became a part of the state's educational system (Robison, 1987).

Today, kindergarten (at least half-day kindergarten) as the beginning of formal schooling for the majority of children in the United States is no longer in dispute. According to Kauerz (2006), 43 states

require school districts to provide kindergarten and 14 states mandate kindergarten attendance. However, for many children, the first day at kindergarten is not their first school experience. About 75 percent of four-year-old children attended preschools (state-funded or private) and/or Head Start in the 2010-11 academic year (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2011). As a result, the mission for today's kindergarten has evolved to preparing children for first grade (i.e., academic focus) rather than learning to transition to formal schooling (Graue, 2006).

Russell (2011) conducted a review of newspaper articles, policy documents, and professional association activities in California since the 1950s and reached a conclusion similar to Graue (2006) in that these "three sources of public discourse—newspapers, state policy talk, and organized professional activities—progressively recast the purpose of a kindergarten education from a vehicle for young children's development to the foundation for the individual child's future academic achievement" (p. 256). Others (e.g., Gallant, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Jacobs & Crowley, 2010) allude to increased attention to academics, standards and accountability in kindergarten and, in turn, for kindergarten teachers to have their children achieve the content standards by means of direct instruction and receive less time for play, socialization and exploration.

Pappano (2010) agrees that kindergarten has changed but children's cognitive ability has not, as evidenced in a study that compared the cognitive development of today's children with Gesell's 1925 findings of kindergarten-age children's intellect. The next section will examine more closely the developmental level of children who are enrolled in

kindergarten classrooms today in the United States.

### **Developmental Level of Kindergartners**

Children qualify for kindergarten if they are five years old at the beginning of calendar year, but states have different cutoff dates for kindergarten eligibility (Kauerz, 2006). This means a kindergarten classroom can consist of four-year-old children at the beginning of the year. Berk (2006) asserts the age range for a kindergarten classroom can be 4 3/4 to 7 1/4 years; thus, spanning over two years.

Both preschool and kindergarten age children fall into Piaget's Preoperational Stage (Morrison, 2008). Children in the preoperational stage are increasing in their ability to use symbols (e.g., words) to internalize events and problem-solve through mental representation (Morrison, 2008). However, Piaget (1952) indicates there is a cognitive shift between five and seven years of age. Whiting and Edwards (1988) describe this shift as "achieving the age of reason," and kindergarten-age children are more like school-age children than preschool age children as they become less egocentric and increase in logical thinking (Tomlinson, 2009). Play continues to be an important learning tool for kindergarten-age children, but four to seven years olds enjoy playing games with rules, not just symbolic play (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Tomlinson (2009) summarizes kindergarten-age children's development in the following ways:

- Physically, kindergarten-age children are more coordinated and have gained control over their small and large muscles, which facilitates their writing skills.
- Socially, kindergarten age children become better at controlling their

emotions, following rules, and interacting with their peers.

- Cognitively, kindergarten age children have increased memory, attention, and self-regulation ability.

Thus, the developmental level of kindergarten-age children suggests they benefit from a learning environment that encourages active exploration, positive relationships, and schedule that allows for active and quiet times, as well as hands-on activities and concrete materials (Copple & Bredekamp (Eds.), 2009).

### **Implication for Preparing Successful Kindergarten Teachers**

As stated above, kindergarten students are more competent socially and emotionally than they have ever been in their life. They have made great advances cognitively but still need adult assistance in achieving more complex, higher-level thinking and sense of self. Thus, a good kindergarten teacher will foster children's natural approach for or desire for learning by incorporating historical purpose for kindergarten, building foundation for formal schooling through socialization and play, in addition to introducing the academics needed to be ready for first grade content.

Graue (2006)'s assertion of kindergarten being at a crossroad is more valid today with the introduction of the CCSS. Recently, IECE teacher candidates at Northern Kentucky University (NKU) have been observing more direct instruction and time spent on CCSS in their kindergarten placements. The university supervisors have also been noticing heightening of cooperating teachers' concern for as well as knowing how to facilitate kindergarten students' learning of CCSS content through teacher directed/led instruction. The kindergarten classroom setting, indeed, has changed regarding expectations for teachers

and students, and teacher candidates must know the CCSS and how it fits in with their teaching.

With today's kindergarten classrooms consisting of students who are still very much a preschooler in their cognitive processing and who benefit from concrete experiences and opportunities to play with new information and content, especially at the beginning of the school year, teacher education programs preparing kindergarten teachers must provide curriculum that focuses on CCSS but also "standards of experience" (Katz, 2007). Katz (2007) defines "standards of experience" as extended interactions and sustained investigations that allow children to be intellectually absorbed and challenged so that they can gain confidence in their ability to purposefully apply skills they are learning and understand their part within the classroom community. Thus, kindergarten teachers who will be ready to teach in today's kindergarten classrooms are a combination of traditional early childhood educators—who value play and the use of centers, and are well-versed in developmentally appropriate practice—as well as traditional elementary school teachers, who value content teaching, whole class instruction, management, and masterful integration of student groupings. Below is a list of suggestions that should be considered by teacher education programs that prepare future kindergarten teachers.

### **Essential Elements for Teacher Preparation Programs**

1. *Understanding kindergarten-age children's development* - Pre-service teachers can learn about the developmental level within the cognitive, social, emotional and physical areas of kindergarten-age children by observing children within the

kindergarten classroom age range.

Because the purpose is to observe and note the developmental ability of kindergarten-age children, this observation does not have to occur in kindergarten classrooms but can be conducted with any children between the ages 4 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> to 7 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> years. This observation assignment can be incorporated into a child development, human development or programming course within early childhood education programs, and in a specific subject area methods, human development, or class management course for the elementary education programs.

2. *Linking CCSS to Appropriate Pedagogy* - CCSS content should be introduced after pre-service teachers gain an understanding of kindergarten-age children's developmental abilities so that they can analyze CCSS expectations in relation to children's developmental abilities before designing lessons that incorporate CCSS expectations in different subjects. Written lesson plans should demonstrate pre-service teachers' ability to connect CCSS expectations to developmentally appropriate practice principles of balancing adult- and child-guided experiences. These include play, group work, learning centers, teaching methods using hands-on materials, posing thought-provoking questions, providing specific feedback and cues, creating optimal level of challenges, modeling, individualization for each student, as well as direct teaching through provision of information and directions (Copple & Bredekamp (Eds.), 2009).
3. *Assessment Structures and Differentiation* - Knowledge and application of assessment and instructional strategies for differentiating

curriculum is essential for the fast-paced culture of kindergarten. Teachers entering the kindergarten classroom need an expertise in understanding how screenings, Response to Intervention (RTI), and ongoing assessment are used for data-based decision-making and curriculum development so that this process reflects Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith and McLean's (2005) statement: "The styles, methods and content of assessment must become compatible with, rather than at odds with, the behavior and interests of young children" (p. 47). Assessment of a group of students should be based on the developmental needs of the children; planning curriculum as well as groupings should be based on those assessments.

In particular, pre-service teachers need time to practice using assessment data to create a variety of grouping formats befitting the students, content, and context (Epstein, 2007). The first step in gaining this competence is by talking to teachers about when and why they use certain groupings. This can be completed in any of the subject methods courses, a classroom management course in Elementary programs, in a kindergarten programming course or interaction/guidance course for IECE programs either as an assignment or guest speaker option during a session. The second step is to have pre-service teachers practice appropriate group learning experiences with classmates through role-playing during a class session or requiring them to try with children. Regardless of the format, pre-service teachers would benefit most if this interaction were videotaped for later analysis.

4. *Collaboration ability* - Understanding children's social and cultural context is important (Copple & Bredekamp (Eds.), 2009); therefore, kindergarten teachers' expertise of the Common Core State Standards expectations, developmental abilities, and pedagogy reflecting best practice for kindergarten-age children is not sufficient. Kindergarten teachers need to be able to collaborate with their students' families and their own colleagues to meet children's needs. Children's relationships to their parents are very important to children's self-concept and mastering CCSS expectations. IECE pre-service teachers can gain this ability in a family involvement course by writing a position paper that helps them think through the relationship. The Elementary pre-service teachers can work on this in their methods courses as they design lesson plans. One additional requirement for writing lesson plans can be to add an extension activity section that articulates the family's and teacher's role. The mission for these assignments is to have the pre-service teachers recognize and respect a family's contribution and gain understanding that teachers alone cannot ensure kindergarten students' learning.

Pre-service teachers also need experiences working in collaboration with colleagues, paraprofessionals and specialists. Multiple perspectives result in better decision-making and

programming for children (Sandall, et. al., 2005). This experience could come from Elementary and IECE students working in collaborative teams on a leadership project during their field placements or attending IEP meetings and analyzing the collaborative process required for supporting children with special needs.

In summary, the introduction of the Common Core State Standards in Kentucky has introduced a new culture in kindergarten. Teacher education programs, in turn, need to ascertain how to resolve the challenges of this new culture. The teacher candidates will need to be prepared for what they will face in schools. Pre-service teachers' ability to engage in intentional teaching strategies that are based on solid foundation in development and how young children learn will be essential. While Elementary licensure programs have traditionally focused on content-driven direct instruction, Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education programs have focused on development and learning through play. Now they must join forces and share the knowledge about this unique stage of childhood in order to meet these children's learning needs. Sharing expertise across programs using the suggestions given in this paper will be essential to preparing teacher licensure candidates to teach kindergarten.

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