



Bank Street Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2019
Number 42 *Promise in Infant-Toddler Care and
Education*

Article 8

October 2019

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Recommended Citation

Longley, J. M., & Gilken, J. M. (2019). Preparing Infant-Toddler Professionals: A Community College's Perspective. *Occasional Paper Series*, 2019 (42). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58295/2375-3668.1303>

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Preparing Infant-Toddler Professionals: A Community College's Perspective

Jennifer M. Longley and Jennifer M. Gilken

Early childhood educators often experience inequality, earning less and having poorer working conditions and fewer professional requirements than K-12 educators. The disparity also exists among early childhood educators: those who work with infants and toddlers receive the lowest pay, have fewer professional development opportunities, need fewer preservice credentials, and are less respected by society than are K-2 teachers. These disparities impact the professionals, as well as infants, toddlers, and families.

Infant-toddler educators need to reclaim their profession. Reclaiming or reappropriating is a process of saving or recovering something that has been harmed or wronged and working to rectify the damage. Educator preservice training programs have the power to give teachers the tools to reclaim the profession because all members of a career community pass through the halls of preparation programs and are impacted by both the program's curriculum and their relationships with faculty. As Branscomb and Ethridge (2010) argue, teacher education programs are transformative because they influence how preservice educators view the profession, and they lay the foundation for teachers' identity. Consequently, the onus lies on infant-toddler teacher educators and preparation programs to begin reclaiming the profession.

Community colleges have a crucial role in preparing infant-toddler professionals and are therefore vital in the reclamation of infant-toddler education. Many infant-toddler teachers start their careers at community colleges or receive their initial credentials for the field at community colleges. Compared to preschool teachers, infant-toddler teachers are less likely to have bachelor's degrees (National Survey of Early Care and Education, 2013); consequently, community colleges serve as a gateway to the profession, specifically for infant-toddler educators.

This paper outlines the steps that one community college preservice teacher education program is taking to reclaim the profession of infant-toddler education. The Teacher Education Department at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) is a unique program, as it provides students enrolled in the Early Childhood Education Associate's Degree Program the opportunity to specialize in working with infants and toddlers. It is the only undergraduate teacher education program in the New York City metropolitan area that offers a specialization in infant-toddler curriculum and development. The program is part of a teacher education career pathway; people who have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential can transfer college credits toward their associate's degree at BMCC, and those who finish BMCC's program can transfer to four-year undergraduate institutions to continue pursuing New York State Teacher Certification. The efforts of BMCC's program to reclaim the profession focus on: 1) a relationship-based program, 2) fieldwork opportunities, and 3) a curriculum planned and

structured to impart to students the competencies they need to work effectively with infants-toddlers and families.

The day before, at her field placement, Yolanda had led an activity with a group of twos for the first time. "How did the activity go yesterday, Yolanda?" Professor Johnson asked.

"The activity was way too messy," Yolanda responded.

"How can it be too messy? They learn through messes," Jacinta, another student, chimed in.

"What was messy about it?" Andrea, another student who was placed at the same fieldwork site as Yolanda, but in a different classroom, interjected. Yolanda explained that the children had paint all over their clothes.

"What did the teacher do?" Jacinta asked.

"She changed them," Yolanda replied; "she acted like it was no big deal."

"Do you think this was the first time they got messy like that?" Andrea asked.

"No, it's just that one girl had on a white shirt, and it wasn't white after painting. If they just moved the table out some" Yolanda trailed off.

"Why do you think the table moves or doesn't move?" asked the professor, with whom the students had had classes in previous semesters.

Yolanda pondered for a moment, then said, "Well, the room is small. Maybe she didn't expect so many children to be interested in the activity. The light table needs a plug, too. But as a parent, I felt bad sending the clothes home."

Andrea asked, "How do you think the families felt when they opened the bag of clothes?"

Yolanda announced, "I would be mad. I want my child to wear a smock or change of clothes so their good clothes don't get dirty."

"I've never seen the families get upset when they pick up the kids and see a bag of clothes dirty from messy play," Andrea offered.

"Why do you think the families don't get upset?" the professor interjected.

Yolanda sighed, "I guess they know the kids are gonna get messy. I hear the director gives tours, and she explains to families how the children do lots of art with natural materials."

"So what I hear you saying is that families know the philosophy of the program—they chose to send their children to a program where the children will create a lot of art and get messy," Professor Johnson suggested, connecting the discussion to the program's philosophy and a family's choice of programs.

Relationship-Based Program

Those who work with infants and toddlers are often referred to as “caregivers” who provide “care” and work in a “day care.” This choice of words implies that anyone is capable of working with infants and toddlers, and that the staff do not need specific training to work with them. The opposite is true; infant-toddler educators need specialized skills that are differentiated from the competencies of those who work with children over the age of 3 (Lee, Shin, & Recchia, 2016; McMulllen & Apple, 2012; Polk & Bogard, 2016). The skills educators use with infants-toddlers are specialized because they are non-verbal or acquiring language, learning how to trust (Erikson, 1980), and making sense of the world around them. Infant-toddler teachers must learn the communication styles and preferences of each child through observation, responsively meet the needs of each child through the individualized routines of daily living, and support the rapid developmental growth that occurs in the first three years of life. These behaviors also facilitate the development of attachments between infants and teachers, which comprise the foundation of future learning and relationships (Bowlby, 1969).

Due to the particular needs of infants and toddlers, relationship-based practice is considered the best method to use when working with them in group settings (McMulllen & Apple, 2012), and “relationship-based care and intimate encounters are a unique part of working with infants” (Lee, Shin & Recchia, 2016, p. 347). Relationship-based practices involve developing individualized, respectful, responsive, reciprocal interactions with others that are culturally sustaining. Culturally sustaining practices involve embracing the pluralism and diversity of the cultures in a community and nurturing the growth of the heritage cultures of its members, while empowering people with tools to access the dominant culture (Paris, 2012).

Supporting future infant-toddler teachers in developing relationship-based practices is a monumental task. There is thus a need for high-quality infant-toddler preservice preparation programs (Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010) that prepare professionals to deliver high-quality, relationship-based practices. Several professional organizations that advocate for and research the quality of programming for young children—including Zero to Three (Dean, LeMoine, & Mayoral, 2016), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2019), the Collaborative for Understanding the Pedagogy of Infant/toddler Development (CUPID, 2016), and the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015)—have identified relationship-based practice as a necessary competency for those who work with infant and toddlers. While 20 states certify teachers to work with children from birth to kindergarten or birth to third grade (Education Commission of the States, 2018), research has found that early childhood preservice education programs are not adequately preparing professionals to provide high-quality, relationship-based programming to infants and toddlers (Chu, 2016; Lee, Shin, & Recchia, 2016; Recchia, Lee, & Shin, 2015; Rockel, 2014).

Most early childhood preservice education programs offer limited, if any, exposure to coursework, content, or fieldwork experiences with infants and toddlers (Beck, 2013; Chu, 2016; Rockel, 2014; White, Peter, Sims, Rockel, & Kumeroa, 2016). Consequently, the faculty of BMCC’s infant-toddler

preservice preparation program believe that infant-toddler professionals need to experience the elements of high-quality, relationship-based practice while they study theory and development. The faculty seek to embed a culture of relationship-based practice into the culture of BMCC's infant-toddler preparation program in order to create a parallel process in which students experience relationship-based practices while studying relationship-based practices.

Students both experience and learn relationship-based practices through their interactions with each other, their professors, and the infants and toddlers they work with in practicum. The program's policies and procedures that make this possible include continuity of care, the key teacher model, and diverse student groupings. Continuity of care in the early childhood setting means that young children and their teachers stay together as a group for two to three years (McMullen, 2018; Polk & Bogard, 2016). Children form strong bonds with their teachers, as well as their peers, and those relationships are nurtured by the continuing connection. BMCC's infant-toddler preservice teacher program teaches its students about the importance of continuity of care while simultaneously fostering continuity of care both among the program's students and between faculty and students. The students tend to take their infant-toddler courses together, often with the same professor for multiple semesters, developing an informal cohort that is nurtured by the program. Typically, students also take their early childhood education courses together and often try to take their other courses together as well. An online chatroom is created for each cohort so that the students can communicate outside of classes and after they graduate from BMCC. The chatroom is student-led and student-moderated. Two students who share classes and a fieldwork site, such as Yolanda and Andrea in the vignette earlier, could use the chatroom to compare their experiences in their field-site classrooms and let each other know if one will be absent, especially if they commute to class together.

The faculty in BMCC's program work to develop individual relationships with students and take time to get to know each student personally. This is akin to the key teacher or primary teacher model (Beck, 2013; Lee, Shin & Recchia, 2016; Polk & Bogard, 2016) that develops in infant-toddler classrooms. As BMCC's preservice teachers are taught in a program that utilizes a key teacher model, one teacher is assigned to three to four infants. This teacher is primarily responsible for meeting the needs of those infants, getting to know the children and their families, and facilitating the formation of a close relationship between the key teacher, child, and family. In BMCC's program, relationships between students and faculty often form inside and outside of class. These relationships are based on the unique needs and interests of each student. Faculty strive to be available, responsive, and attuned to students, following the student's lead regarding the nature and depth of the relationship. Some students prefer that the relationship stays within the confines of class, while other students like to use faculty office hours or faculty-supported forums, such as the *Remind* app or discussion boards on the college's online learning platform to communicate outside of the classroom.

Fieldwork

During her regular meeting time with her cooperating teacher after she led an activity with a small group of children, Yolanda's cooperating teacher posed questions that helped Yolanda to reflect on the experience, the

children, and Yolanda's role leading the activity. The teacher began the conversation by asking, "Why do you think your focus child was initially reluctant to join in the activity?" Yolanda responded that she believed the child had a slow-to-warm up temperament style and was hesitant to engage in new activities. She explained that the child stays by Yolanda's side when new activities are introduced, but because Yolanda was facilitating the activity with a group of children, she could not support her focus child the way she normally does. Yolanda added that seeing her in the role of leading the activity may have been surprising to the focus child and that could have also contributed to her hesitancy. The conversation continued, with the cooperating teacher asking Yolanda, "What did the children learn from the activity? How do you know? What would you have done differently? Why?"

Infant-toddler professionals traditionally earn the lowest pay, have the fewest credentials, and experience the highest burnout rates in the field of education (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). In an effort to help remedy these issues, BMCC's infant-toddler preservice program is preparing a qualified workforce that is aware of the demands and rewards of the profession. Providing intensive fieldwork experience in high-quality infant-toddler-care programs is a key element in this process. While fieldwork is crucial to the development and growth of professionals intending to work with infants, toddlers, and families, most undergraduate early childhood education programs offer few, if any, opportunities for fieldwork placements with infants and toddlers (Beck, 2013; Lee, Recchia & Shin, 2016; Recchia, Lee & Shin, 2015; White et al., 2016). At BMCC, by contrast, fieldwork or practicum involves placing students in positions to observe children, form relationships with them, and function as members of the teaching team one to two mornings a week throughout the semester at centers offering high-quality infant-toddler programming.

The quality of the programming at a field site is a crucial element for preservice infant-toddler educators (Recchia, Lee & Shin, 2015). Preservice teachers will adopt the practices of their cooperating teacher over what they have learned in college coursework (Agbenyega, 2012). Consequently, the faculty in BMCC's program has taken steps to ensure students are placed in fieldwork settings that deliver high-quality programming to infants, toddlers, and families. Faculty in BMCC's infant-toddler specialization created a rubric to review current and potential fieldwork sites. It has the following categories: 1) the site's use of relationship-based practices, 2) the mentoring offered to students by cooperating teachers, 3) the program's curriculum, 4) the center's hiring practices, and 5) the site's use of culturally sustaining practices. These elements are a lens through which to examine programs and begin the discussion among faculty about the quality of sites for fieldwork placements, with each program evaluated individually by faculty and assessed as unacceptable, acceptable, or ideal in each category. Because staff changes can influence the quality of programming offered, sites are reviewed yearly.

During the supervised practicum, students receive coaching from faculty, as well as support from a designated cooperating teacher at their field site. BMCC faculty visit students three to four times each semester, while maintaining continuous open communication with field sites and cooperating teachers to support students throughout the fieldwork experience. The cooperating teacher often serves as the main point of contact for the student during their practicum experience. Fieldwork experience with regular support and mentoring from a cooperating teacher, coupled with opportunities

to reflect on the experience in a caring environment with non-judgmental, constructive feedback facilitates the growth of preservice infant-toddler teachers (Beck 2013; Chu 2016; Lee, Shin, & Recchia 2016; Recchia, Lee, & Shin 2015).

The vignette with Yolanda and her cooperating teacher illustrates what may happen during a meeting between a student and cooperating teacher; it is a time that allows students to reflect upon and process what occurs in the classroom and to ask questions. Students complete a mid-semester self-evaluation that they review with their cooperating teacher, and the cooperating teacher completes an end-of-the-semester feedback form for students, which encourages self-reflection. Being self-reflective is a necessary competency for infant-toddler professionals, according to CUPID (2016), Zero to Three (Dean, LeMoine, & Mayoral, 2016), and other organizations researching and advocating for quality programming for infants and toddlers.

The mentorship that students receive during their field experiences influences their practice in the classroom as well as their identity as a teacher. Therefore, carefully identifying and selecting cooperating teachers who will serve as mentors for students is another important facet of the fieldwork experience (Christensen, 2016). As Murray notes (2013), mentorship and feedback that builds preservice teachers' confidence supports the development of professional identity. The sites that BMCC's program uses for fieldwork placements hire BMCC graduates or current students. Intentionally partnering with agencies that hire students and graduates provides exemplars for students and supports the students' development of their identity as teachers. The field-site staff are also intimately familiar with BMCC's program, courses, requirements, and faculty, which facilitates a deeper connection between the student and their field experience. Because preservice teachers are tremendous resources and supports for their peers (Christenson, 2016), BMCC places multiple students at one site, with each student working in a different classroom.

The relationships between teacher-education programs and students' fieldwork sites should be reciprocal partnerships (Christensen, 2016). Collaborating with the fieldwork sites offers rich opportunities for BMCC's program and field-site staff. When requested, BMCC's faculty support fieldwork programs by offering coaching to site staff, leading professional development, and/or providing consultancy services. Staff from the fieldwork agencies are invited to BMCC's teacher education program to share their knowledge during special events, such as Teacher Education Day, an annual day-long event in which students have the opportunity to learn about various career paths in education; to speak on specific topics connected to their areas of expertise for BMCC's Teacher Education Club, a student-led club for education majors that has weekly guest speakers and/or activities based on student interests; to be guest lecturers on specific topics in classes; and to become adjunct faculty.

For their first semester of fieldwork, students are asked to select a focus infant or toddler. This allows the students the opportunity to spend time observing and developing a relationship with a specific child during their field placement. Focusing on one child specifically at their field site promotes a deeper understanding among the students of infant-toddler development, relationship-based practice,

responsiveness, and the uniqueness of each child (Recchia, Lee & Shin, 2015). Students complete assignments based on their experiences with the child and the information they gather as they learn more about the child. BMCC aims for this focus child project to be the bridge between coursework and practice.

In their second semester of fieldwork, with the support of their cooperating teacher, students develop and implement differentiated, sensory-based learning activities with small groups of children that follow the children's interests, such as Yolanda did in the vignettes above. The students then have the opportunity to discuss these activities with their cooperating teachers, as Yolanda did. These experiences are video-recorded (with permission) to offer additional opportunities for reflective practice. The faculty in the BMCC program have found that infant-toddler fieldwork placements are the most effective sites to prepare preservice educators to work specifically with infants and toddlers when those sites offer opportunities to deliver high-quality, relationship-based practices with infants, toddlers, and families; develop close relationships with infants, including a focus child; mentor students; and forge reciprocal partnerships with college faculty.

Curriculum

A high-school diploma is the entry-level educational requirement credential needed to be a day care teacher, and the median salary for this position was \$23,240 in 2018, whereas an associate's degree is the entry-level educational requirement for preschool teachers, and their median salary in 2018 was \$29,780 (US Department of Labor, 2019). Teacher training and qualifications are indicators of quality practice in infant-toddler education (Rockel, 2014). Miller and Bogatova (2009) state that "having a consistent well-trained and well-compensated workforce is the cornerstone of quality care and education" for young children (p. 258).

Community colleges have an integral role in preparing infant-toddler teachers for the profession. According to the National Survey of Early Care and Education (2013), of infant-toddler teachers, 28 percent have a high-school diploma or less; 36 percent have some college, but have not obtained a degree; 17 percent have an associate's degree; and 19 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. Compared to traditional four-year colleges, community colleges offer an entry to college for more first-generation college students, as well as more diverse, underrepresented (Cassidy, 2015), and non-traditional students. The Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015) noted that the professionals recruited and prepared to work with infants-toddlers by community colleges often reflect the diversity of children and families in the communities in which they work.

Just as those who work with infants and toddlers require a specialized skill set, the faculty who prepare their teachers need expertise in infant-toddler development and curriculum (Chu, 2016; Rockel, 2014). The program at BMCC hires faculty who have experience in the field, including graduates of the program. Faculty are recruited from current fieldwork placements or from among those who have held roles in the field, such as classroom teachers, home visitors, infant-toddler program directors, curriculum designers, and professional developers. The depth of faculty experience is beneficial for students, as

faculty are able to provide a direct connection between the curriculum and actual experiences from the field. In the example above, Professor Johnson was familiar with Yolanda's fieldwork program, classroom, and cooperating teachers, so she could facilitate an in-depth discussion about Yolanda's experience. Faculty's expertise and knowledge of infants and toddlers impact both the intensity of the focus (Chu, 2016; Rockel, 2014) and the quality of the course. However, in most undergraduate early childhood education programs, there is limited, if any, course content concentrated on infants and toddlers (Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010; Chu, 2016; Rockel, 2014).

BMCC faculty, by contrast, has designed and implements a curriculum for infant-toddler preservice educators. The goals of the curriculum in BMCC's infant-toddler teacher education preparation include supporting a deep understanding of development; encouraging preservice professionals to begin to develop their professional identity; fostering culturally sustaining practice; utilizing a relationship-based, developmentally appropriate model; and building on students' strengths. These goals are realized over several semesters of specialized coursework and fieldwork, in which each course is purposefully connected to the subsequent course, and key concepts of the previous course are reviewed and expanded upon in the subsequent course. During their first semester, students enrolled in the program at BMCC have the option to specialize in working with infants and toddlers or children in preschool through grade 2. The program is structured into a seven-course sequence taken over four semesters.

The first course in the sequence is on child development from birth to age 8 and includes an eight-week seminar devoted to professionalism in the field of early childhood education. The goal of the seminar is to begin to facilitate the development of a student's professional identity. In the seminar, students explore the characteristics of an early childhood professional, create a professional development plan, review the NAEYC Code of Ethics (2005), and begin a conversation about culturally sustaining practice. The seminar sets the tone for the course sequence. Faculty model the goals of the course by implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy and professional behavior, and these constructs are continually revisited along the course sequence. Professor Johnson from the opening example may have continued the discussion with Yolanda and her classmates on the cultural implications of messy play for different families and/or on a family's ability to choose a program with a particular philosophy.

In their second semester, all students take a course about the social factors that impact young children and begin the first course dedicated to their specialization. For the infant-toddler preservice professionals, this course is about infant development, curriculum, and working with families. The course addresses the developmental and cultural needs of infants and families by exploring theories, methods, and materials used in infant classrooms. Students spend the semester engaging in an in-depth observation of one infant and family. Students tend to take the course about social factors in early childhood and the infant course as a cohort; it is then that the informal cohort begins to develop.

In the third semester, students take a course focused on toddler development and curriculum and a course focused on observing development. In the toddler curriculum class, students continue to focus

on addressing the developmental and cultural needs of toddlers and families by learning more about theories, methods, and materials used in toddler classrooms. The observation course is their first fieldwork experience; it is a 60-hour supervised placement. In their final semester, students take two courses, an Introduction to Special Education course that all early childhood education students take, and a seminar combined with a more intensive 90-hour supervised fieldwork placement.

The philosophy, format, and methods used in early childhood teacher-preparation programs impact teachers and their teaching (Recchia & Beck, 2014). Over the seven-course sequence, content and skills are scaffolded and use real-life, hands-on learning opportunities to support students' understanding of infants, toddlers and families. While many of the students who are enrolled in the program are novices in the field, all of the students bring their own funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), or cultural heritages and experiences, which are used in the classroom to enhance learning. The students are from diverse backgrounds; consequently, there is always discussion about personal experiences of caregiving. As the discussion in the opening vignette continued, Yolanda shared that during her childhood she had to keep her clothes clean and neat, or she would be punished. She said that she has to stop herself from telling her own children and the children in her field site to keep their clothes clean, just as she was told.

Some students are currently working in the field or have extensive experience with infants and toddlers in informal settings. These students provide rich examples and bring their experience into class discussions. In the example above, Yolanda drew on her experience as a mother to analyze the curriculum, share her perspective with her peers, and empathize with families.

Reclaiming Infant-Toddler Teacher Education

Infant-toddler educators are marginalized by society and by undergraduate teacher preparation programs. Undergraduate early childhood education content and fieldwork experiences that focus on infants and toddlers are rare, despite the fact that 20 states certify or license teachers to teach children from birth to kindergarten or birth to third grade. Yet those working with infants and toddlers require a specialized skillset, which includes experience in developing relationships with infants and toddlers, the ability to use relationship-based practices, and content knowledge, as well as the skills learned from being mentored in high-quality supervised field placements. Consequently, infant-toddler preservice educators must work to change the landscape of the field and galvanize the next generation of professionals to battle the disparities in working conditions, salary, and professional requirements that infant-toddler educators endure. Infant-toddler teacher educators need to impart to their students the competencies needed for the difficult, specialized job of working with infants, toddlers, and families.

This paper describes BMCC's infant-toddler preservice program as a model of the steps one community college educator preparation program is taking to reclaim the field by focusing on the relationship-based practices, fieldwork, and curriculum. Community colleges are uniquely positioned to impact the field as many professionals receive their credentials at community colleges, often because they are financially accessible. The cost of pursuing degrees at four-year colleges, coupled with the limited

earning potential of infant-toddler teachers, prevents many educators from pursuing degrees beyond the minimal requirements for the field, which could result in accruing student loan debt. This creates a cyclical process in which the infant-toddler workforce, who are underpaid and not highly credentialed, cannot afford to pursue additional educational degrees because of the low salary standard in the field. Because community colleges are more affordable, they can help fill this accessibility gap by providing an economical path to credentialing for the infant-toddler educators.

However, more work is involved in reclaiming the profession and preparing infant-toddler professionals to meet the needs of the infants, toddlers, and families. The next steps in the process include research, faculty development, and strengthening preservice preparation. Teacher educators are in a unique position to examine and improve the quality of preservice education programs, so they must be able to conduct their own research and to develop as faculty in order to facilitate those improvements. Faculty should research the quality of coursework offered in infant-toddler preparation programs (Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010), the most effective methods to impart the necessary knowledge and build the required skills in a preservice teacher, and the ways in which community colleges serve as a vehicle for preparing infant-toddler teachers.

Research should also continue exploring how to best prepare infant-toddler teachers to use relationship-based practices (Lee, Shin & Recchia, 2016). Ensuring that undergraduate early childhood education infant-toddler course content is substantive and focused, rather than being embedded in courses where it becomes diffused, is essential (Rockel, 2014). Furthermore, identifying high-quality infant-toddler fieldwork placements (Beck, 2013; Lee, Shin & Recchia, 2016; Recchia, Lee & Shin, 2015; White et al., 2016) that offer students the opportunity to observe and use relationship-based practices, develop relationships with infants and toddlers, and provide mentorship, is also crucial. This requires recruiting, hiring, and retaining faculty with expertise in infant-toddler development and curriculum or building the capacity of existing faculty (Chu, 2016; Rockel, 2014). It is our hope that, with these principles in mind, more early childhood education programs with infant-toddler specializations will arise at the undergraduate collegiate level, including at community colleges.

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