

Refocusing Lutheran Education-Early Childhood

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One of the most fundamental challenges facing educators in Lutheran schools is how to instill in children the attitudes, knowledge and outlooks they require to function successfully as adults in the future.

Our ability to respond to this challenge will depend, to a major degree, on the extent to which we are able to be involved in shaping systems and curricula so that they are truly responsive to the long-term developmental needs of children in our care.

As Early Childhood Professionals we have a particularly important role to play in this process. We are optimally placed to lay significant foundations for children's lifelong development as they move towards adulthood and come to engage in a complex and often fragmented social environment. The earliest years of children's lives are a key to predicting ultimate success in school and life.

Young children already possess many qualities that will benefit their learning in the future. Their flexibility of thought, positive and constructive outlook on life, creativity and imagination are all qualities which our education system strives to re-instill in older children.

Recent evidence from research on the human brain has established that the early years of development from birth to age 8, particularly the first 3 years, sets the base for competence and coping skills that will affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life (Shore, R, 1997; McCain and Mustard, 1999).

BENEFITS OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

As Early Childhood Educators in Lutheran Schools it is imperative that we expose children to positive, stimulating experiences.

Children who attend high quality early childhood programs

- Have enhanced cognitive, verbal and social development, which is maintained through school (1)
- Have significantly higher IQs (2)
- Are less likely to exhibit later delinquency and antisocial behaviour (3)
- Tend to demonstrate higher levels of school achievement and better social adjustment (3)
- Are less likely to repeat a grade or be placed in special education classes (4)
- Are more likely to graduate from high school (5)
- Have better self-esteem (6)

Clearly, there are long – term benefits from quality early childhood education.

WHAT CONSTITUTES QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION?

Class size. Investigators who have examined the effects of program elements have identified small class size or small student-teacher ratio as vital to quality

programs. While different ratios are cited, most researchers seem to agree that the student - teacher ratio should not go above 18:1 and favour a 10:1 ratio for 4 year olds. Smaller class sizes benefit children by allowing for more individual attention and making possible teaching practices which are not feasible in larger groups. (7)

Program Continuity. Efforts made to increase program continuity also increase program effectiveness. Careful sequencing of materials and activities, based on knowledge of early childhood development, is a key factor in program success. It is also important that teachers work together to ensure program continuity from year to year. (8)

Professional development. General research on the effects of teacher in-service identified benefits particularly in the areas that focused directly on early childhood development, ways to achieve program continuity, and ways to involve parents (9)

Curriculum. Research reflects a growing consensus that the traditional scope and sequence approach to curriculum with its emphasis on drill and practice of isolated, academic skills does not reflect current knowledge of human learning. It also fails to produce students who possess the kind of higher-order thinking and problem solving abilities that are needed. Past success in improving basic skills in the 3Rs has not been matched by success in improving reading, comprehension, writing fluency or math problem solving ability. Emphasis needs to be placed on:

- Active, hands-on-learning-THE ROLE OF PLAY
- Conceptual learning that leads to understanding along with the acquisition of skills
- Meaningful, relevant learning experiences. Making sure that activities flow from previous activities and learnings into future ones; explaining these connections to the children as part of the activity
- Previewing lessons, giving clear directions, and checking children's understanding
- Monitoring children's activities and providing help as needed
- Interactive teaching and cooperative learning
- A broad range of relevant content, integrated across traditional subject areas
- Negotiation
- Multi ability groups

Curriculum development should take into account the many sources of curriculum:

- Child development knowledge
- Individual characteristics of children
- Knowledge base of various disciplines
- Values of our culture
- Parents' desires
- Knowledge children need to function competently in our society (10)

Development of the whole child-Spiritually.

Opportunities should be given for children to discover God and the world around them through their spontaneity, creativeness and uniqueness. The Christian Studies Outcomes Framework supported by L.I.F.E. opens up new pathways for children and teachers to construct knowledge together.

Relationships. When children are studied, either for the purpose of observation or in planning curriculum experiences, the uniqueness of each child in the class must be considered, and the children viewed in the context of their family, peer group and community. The challenge for us is to ensure that all children who receive our care are able to form quality relationships with their teachers and caregivers. For the program to be successful everyone needs to be involved-children, families and teachers in “the cirde of WE”. Every aspect of the program must strengthen relationships.

Environment. When planning an environment where children will spend long periods of time, consideration must be given to the effect this environment may have on children in their adult life. What we want children to remember is a feeling of family, lasting friendships, images of light and colour and strong relationships with teachers. SPACE DOES SPEAK! The power of environments informs and shapes the kind of learning that happens in the room.

The Role of the Teacher. What really is our role? More children, for the first time in the history of parenting, are cared for outside the home. With both parents working in an increasing number of homes, we are providing children with a major portion of their care. All aspects of our profession have to be given serious consideration because the impact on future generations. Our work is both complex and multifaceted. It has evolved as a separate discipline, perhaps somewhere social work and education.

The teaching program itself must allow children opportunities to become members of learning communities where relationships focus on supporting one another's learning.

Early Intervention. There is the need for teachers to have knowledge of and use coordinated services for

- Families needing some extra support-parent education, parenting support programs and respite care.
- Families needing specialized assistance for children with learning disorders.
- Families in crises-child protection.

The use of these services would mean children would be less likely to display developmental problems which require increasingly specialized treatment, as they grow older.

AS EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS IN LUTHERAN SCHOOLS WHAT DO WE WANT?

The demand for Early Childhood Care and Education programs continues to increase not only in response to the growing demand for out-of-home care but also in recognition of the critical importance of the early years. Several decades of research clearly demonstrate that high quality, developmentally appropriate

early childhood programs produce short and long term positive effects on children's cognitive and social development.

We must develop an integrated system of early childhood care and education. It will include comprehensive approaches that directly involve families and communities in program design, implementation, and evaluation.

We must invest now in children and families or pay the price of increased delinquency, greater educational failure, fewer adults prepared to be effective, loving parents to the next generation of children.

Does Lutheran Education highlight the advantage of investing in the early childhood years?

Do we provide a wide range of diverse early childhood services for children and families?

Is our ministry and mission relevant to families?

Are there appropriate levels of resources which are used to benefit children and families?

Is there adequate support and professional development to inform best practice?

Our goal must not simply be to defend the status quo but to set forth a vision for excellence in our system that is unparalleled.

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