

# Tensions between teacher preparation programs identified

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study conducted by researchers in Penn State's College of Education and College of Health and Human Development identifies several challenges and tensions for Early Childhood Education teacher education programs across the country. The report also makes several recommendations to alleviate these issues.

Governmental leaders have increasingly identified [Early Childhood Education](#), or ECE, as a vital component needed to close the nation's [achievement gap](#). Public schools have responded by increasing the coordination and alignment of pre-kindergarten, all-day kindergarten and the early elementary grades in a system known as PreK-3rd.

Teacher education programs at major research universities have, in turn, been adapting to PreK-3rd, as well as to the nation's increased emphasis on pre-kindergarten education referred to as the Universal PreK Movement. In 1960 only about 10 percent of the nation's 3- and 4-year-olds were in a classroom or classroom-like environment. Today, nearly three-quarters of all 4-year-olds and more than half of all 3-year-olds in the U.S. are enrolled in a some type of classroom or center with an educational goal.

To gauge how well teacher education programs are responding to the demands of PreK-3rd and the Universal PreK Movement, James E. Johnson and his colleagues at Penn State investigated 42 ECE teacher education programs at major research universities in 38 states that have publicly funded pre-kindergarten.

"What's new and challenging is the lifelong learning now demanded of early and elementary teacher educators working together in new ways to learn more about early learning from birth on up to middle childhood," said Johnson, professor of early childhood education in Penn State's College of Education.

The ECE teacher education evolution is struggling. It is bogged down by fiscal, curricular and staffing challenges, as well as sometimes uncomplimentary views of early childhood education itself, according to the study. The study specifies several challenges facing ECE teacher education programs and several tensions between ECE and Elementary Education teacher education programs, among them:

- There tend to be few faculty in ECE teacher education programs.
- ECE faculty positions frequently are not filled when faculty leave the program.
- ECE teacher education students have limited access to quality field placement opportunities because of a shortage of field supervisors and cooperating teachers.
- There is a perception among Elementary Education faculty that the increased interest in Early Childhood Education is due to the view that the ECE courses are easier.
- There are differing philosophical approaches to the disciplines. Early Childhood Education teacher education programs operate in accord with a child-centered philosophy emphasizing developmentally appropriate practices. Elementary Education teacher education programs are content centered with an academic and testing focus.

Johnson said, "We all need to become more complete teacher educators, as individuals and as a faculty group, border-crossing over the old ECE and Elementary areas to create a new whole where Elementary is part of ECE and ECE is part of Elementary as each retains some of its old self."

The report noted that with the ECE teacher education programs there exists significant collaboration across departments and colleges within universities, as well as dedicated and experienced faculty. Additionally, the ECE and Elementary Education programs typically are in constant, open communication with each other.

"Definitely," Johnson said, "there is awareness and movement in the right direction -- to find a balance in preparing new teachers for pre-k to fourth grade with what they need to know about families, child development, special needs, diversity...and combining all this with rich content knowledge in academic subjects."

The research team makes several recommendations to facilitate the movement even further, including

- recognizing ECE as a distinct and equal discipline;
- more support from administration and leadership, including new tenure lines in ECE teacher education faculties; and
- enhancing collaboration between Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education teacher education programs.

**More information:** The study is titled "A Study of ECE Pre-Service Teacher Education at Major Universities in 38 PreK States." It was funded by a grant from the Foundation for Child Development. To view the policy brief of the report, click [here](#).

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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