

Research Notes

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What's in a Name? Practitioners' Preferences About Terminology

Unlike elementary or secondary education, early childhood education has long suffered from a lack of clarity in the terminology used to describe the field and different program types. To the public, terms like *nursery school*, *preschool*, *day care*, *Head Start*, *child care*, or *prekindergarten* are confusing in contrast to terms like *kindergarten* or *elementary school*. The confusion is the result, in large part, of two intersecting traditions – care and education. Some child advocates have begun using terms like *early care* and *education* or *educare* to describe the field and acknowledge and celebrate this merging of traditions.

The lack of consistency in role nomenclature has also plagued the field. Caregiver, aide, assistant teacher, associate teacher, lead teacher, head teacher, curriculum coordinator, assistant director, director, and administrator are just some of the many terms used to describe the various roles in early childhood settings. Individuals with similar responsibilities often have different role titles depending on the auspice of their program.

The wide variety of names used to describe different program types and practitioner roles speaks to the rich diversity of the field, but may also be impeding workforce efforts for greater professional status, compensation, and career development. In the July 2000 issue of *Young Children*, NAEYC President Lynn Kagan suggested that a common nomenclature would signal our unity and force and “alert the American public to the common set of challenges we face no matter what program shingle hangs on our door.”¹ More recently, Kathy Thornburg, the new President of NAEYC states, “We need a precise way to describe our profession and the components related to it.”² She argues for the overarching descriptor *early childhood programs* to describe all home- or center-based programs regardless of setting, auspice, or funding source.

Practitioners' Perceptions About Terminology

As part of a larger study looking at the status of the early childhood workforce in Illinois, the Center for Early Childhood Leadership recently conducted a survey to assess practitioners' perceptions about preferred nomenclature.³ A survey titled *What's in a Name?* was sent to 2,250 teachers, administrators, and support staff working in 150 early childhood programs throughout Illinois in December 2000. Centers represented all program types – public and private, part-day and full-day, for-profit and nonprofit. In addition, approximately 175 surveys were distributed to family child care providers and others attending the Chicago Metro AEYC conference in January 2001. Of the 1,250 surveys returned, 166 were incomplete. A total of 1,084 surveys were used in the data analysis.

Workforce Perceptions About the Field

The findings of the *What's in a Name?* survey documented mixed preferences regarding the terminology used to describe the field and specific program types. While 77% of practitioners favor the term *early childhood education* to describe the field, and 60% prefer the term *preschool* to refer to a part-day program, there is less agreement about terminology for full-day programs.

Early Childhood Practitioners' Preferences for Terminology Used to Describe the Field and Different Types of Programs

QUESTION	PREFERRED DESCRIPTOR (percentage of respondents selecting each descriptor)
When the public or media refer to the field , what term would you like them to use?	77% early childhood education ; 11% early care and education; 6% child care; 6% other.
When the public or media refer to a part-day program in a center or school , what term would you like them to use?	60% preschool ; 13% prekindergarten; 13% day care; 14% other.
When the public or media refer to a full-day program in a center or school , what term would you like them to use?	32% preschool ; 28% child care; 17% day care; 16% prekindergarten; 7% other.
When the public or media refer to a full-day program in a home , what term would you like them to use?	52% family child care ; 19% family day care; 14% child care; 15% other.

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Workforce Preferences About Role Titles

The results of the survey showed that 79% of respondents expressed a desire for greater consistency in role titles across different early childhood settings. Practitioners expressed a strong consensus in their preferred titles for certain positions, but less agreement for other titles. The terms *assistant teacher*, *teacher*, *assistant director*, and *director* appear to be favorite choices of titles for these positions. Respondents were less in agreement about their preferred term for the individual on staff who coordinates the curriculum and mentors those directly responsible for the care and education of children.

Workforce Preferences for Role Titles

SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITY	PREFERRED ROLE TITLE (percentage of respondents selecting role title)
Works under the direct supervision of another teacher in the care and education of a group of children.	69% assistant teacher ; 11% aide; 10% support teacher; 10% other.
Has direct responsibility for the care and education of a group of children.	93% teacher ; 4% caregiver; 3% other.
Coordinates the curriculum and mentors those directly responsible for the care and education of children.	49% education coordinator ; 18% head teacher; 17% lead teacher; 7% master teacher; 4% mentor teacher; 4% other.
Assists with the administration of the program and management of a center.	71% assistant director ; 14% assistant administrator; 8% associate director; 4% assistant manager; 2% other.
Provides leadership and oversees the administration and management of a center.	60% director ; 17% center director; 11% administrator; 7% site director; 4% manager.
Manages a home-based program and provides care and education for a group of children.	51% family child care provider ; 35% home day care provider; 6% teacher; 5% caregiver; 3% other.

Respondents were also less in agreement about the preferred role title for individuals who manage home-based programs and provide care and education for a group of children. In general, practitioners do not favor the term *caregiver* as a descriptor for any of the positions, yet that term is used consistently by the public and media when referring to the early childhood workforce.

Moving Forward

The results of this study indicate that early childhood educators in Illinois recognize the need for greater consistency in nomenclature to describe the field and workforce roles. They tend to prefer traditional school-based terminology (*early childhood education* to describe the field, *preschool* to describe a part-day program, and *teacher* to describe the individual responsible for the care and education of a group of children) as opposed to other descriptors being used by the media or public.

Based on comments by practitioners, this consensus signals an awareness that greater occupational status and better leveraging for funding will result by emphasizing the educational aspects of professional practice. While respondents to the *What's in a Name?* survey acknowledge the political realities of the times, they also understand that all high-quality early childhood programs provide *both* nurturing care for young children and stimulating educational experiences.

1. Kagan, S. L. (2000, July). What's in a Name? *Young Children*, 55(4), 4.
2. Thornburg, K. R. (2001, July). How can we be better advocates? *Young Children* 56(4), 4-5.
3. Krajec, V. D., Bloom P. J., Talan, T., & Clark, D. (2001). *Who's caring for the kids? The status of the early childhood workforce in Illinois*. Wheeling, IL: The Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University.

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