

Kids Need More from School? Utilize Assistant Teachers!

Communities across the United States are expanding early childhood education (ECE) with the goal of promoting children's development. Considerable scholarship and policy initiatives have sought to strengthen the ECE workforce to ensure these children attend



Figure 1 Photo by Stacy Sanchez. Public Domain.

classrooms with strong teachers, but most of this work focuses exclusively on lead teachers and overlooks the role of assistant teachers. At least one assistant teacher is typically staffed within each ECE classroom, and these teachers are important contributors to children's ECE experiences. In addition, many assistant teachers aspire to become lead teachers and progress in the teaching hierarchy, indicating that they are an important contributor to the lead teacher pipeline.

To maintain a strong assistant teacher workforce, it is critical to improve the quality of their practices and retain them within the ECE profession. We seek to better understand the people who comprise the assistant teacher workforce and how different forms of in-service professional support (i.e., training, coaching, and advice from colleagues) contribute to their stress and job satisfaction.

Highlights

Assistant teachers are more demographically like students in ECE Centers than lead teachers.

Despite assistant teachers' potential as a resource, only 10% of staff members in an ECE Center seek out their advice across content areas.

Professional coaching could support assistant teachers to increase capacity.

Methods

Assistant teachers completed a survey where they answered questions about their personal characteristics (e.g., race, income, family composition), professional qualifications (e.g., degree attainment, certification, teaching experience), and workplace experiences (e.g., professional support, stress). Assistant teachers worked at ECE programs representative of a large urban district.

Results

- Compared to lead teachers, assistant teachers' characteristics more closely align with the diverse demographic characteristics of children served by the ECE centers, which could be leveraged to support family engagement.
- Assistant teachers are asked for professional advice considerably less than other early childhood education professionals (e.g., lead teachers, administrators).
- Professional coaching for assistant teachers may contribute to their job satisfaction - potentially more so than in-service trainings or the professional advice they receive from colleagues.
- Coaching that addresses challenges related to classroom management may be particularly important for assistant teachers' stress and job satisfaction.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES, RESULTS, AND IMPLICATIONS?

Community psychology informed how assistant teachers were understood as an untapped resource with unique needs and strengths.

What Does This Mean For?

Practice— This study offers implications for how practitioners can work to support the needs of assistant teachers and leverage their strengths in promoting early childhood education.

Social Action— *Intersectionality Theory* considers the interlocking systems of oppression as part of strategies for social action. Our findings support this approach.

Research and Evaluation— Our study results highlight the importance of studying how to support and leverage assistant teachers in promoting early childhood education. In addition, the results indicate that social network methods can illuminate the ways ECE professionals collaborate with each other.

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