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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION NEWS | BIRTH THROUGH FIVE PROGRAM GRADS HAVE PASSION FOR EARLY EDUCATION

Birth Through Five Program grads have passion for early education

—by Claire Miller

Over the last few years, educators and policy leaders across the U.S. have put a greater emphasis on the need for training early childhood teachers and caregivers.

“There have been a number of state and national mandates to increase the educational requirements for professionals who work with very young children,” said Ruth Saxton, coordinator of the College of Education’s Birth Through Five Program. “The Office of Head Start, for example, has mandated that 50 percent of its teachers nation-wide must have at least a bachelor’s degree by 2013. This is part of a national trend to increase the qualifications, training and expertise of early childhood professionals.”

In response to this trend, the College of Education started one of the first Birth Through Five Programs in Georgia in 2008, which teaches its students to work with children from infancy through kindergarten age, including children who are typically developing and those with disabilities. The B-5 program is part of the Department of Early Childhood Education, which also offers teacher education programs for elementary school age students.

The program’s focus on birth through Kindergarten allows technical college graduates and other interested students to take classes specific to that age range rather than the more common teaching degree programs that focus on pre-kindergarten through fifth grade.

“Interestingly enough, the program appeals to several demographics,” Saxton explained. “We have very traditional, full-time students interested in teaching very young children, but we also attract older, non-traditional students, people who are career changers and want to open their own child development centers or people who have been working with young children for a long time and want to upgrade their credentials and knowledge.”

Many of the students already have part-time or full-time jobs in early education settings, with days split between attending class on campus and getting experience in the classroom. As such, Saxton and other faculty members teach, observe, supervise and collaborate with site supervisors at their students’ jobs to ensure they’re getting the most out of the experience.

The first five students to complete the Birth Through Five Program, who will graduate in December, are a varied group with different backgrounds and teaching experiences, but they have become a tight-knit unit during the two-year program.

As an instructor, supervisor and mentor to these students, Saxton has watched them grow as teachers and as individuals.

“It’s been an enjoyable and rewarding experience to build a program from the ground up and see the first group of graduates who are going to finish with such a tremendous set of competencies,” she said. “They’re very enthusiastic and passionate about their work with children.”

Keep reading to find out more about the COE’s first Birth Through Five Program graduating class.

Lindsey Harris

Lindsey Harris had her first taste of working with young children – particularly those with disabilities – when she was just 14 years old.

“I used to babysit for parents who had children with autism,” she explained. “They had two children who were four and six years old, and ever since then I wanted to work with children with disabilities.”

She started her college career studying early childhood education at Georgia Perimeter College but soon transferred to Georgia State after her friend and fellow COE classmate Eryka Quinn told her about the Birth Through Five Program.

“I was so ecstatic because I thought that the pre-K through 5th grade major was my only option, and that wasn’t exactly the set of children I really wanted to work with,” Harris said. “Once I read about the B-5 program, I thought, ‘This couldn’t be any more perfect for me.’”

Currently, she student teaches in a kindergarten classroom with significantly developmentally delayed students at Winn Holt Elementary School in



The first graduating class of the COE’s Birth Through Five Program poses with Program Coordinator Ruth Saxton, center. (l to r) Katelyn Mooney, Eryka Quinn, Rukia Rogers, Trameka Pass and Lindsey Harris.

Gwinnett County. This class allows her to work with children like the ones she used to babysit and put her classwork at Georgia State into practice.

Harris credits her success in the Birth Through Five Program to Saxton and her fellow classmates, who have supported her since her first class at Georgia State.

“Dr. Saxton has been our biggest cheerleader,” she said. “The combination of experience with a support system of students and teachers going through this journey together has been incredible.”

As she prepares to graduate and start job hunting, Harris is keeping her career options open.

“The nice thing about our degree is that we have some flexibility,” she said. “I really would love to get involved with early intervention, maybe working with Babies Can’t Wait or working with families and children with disabilities.”

Katelyn Mooney

In her undergraduate work, Katelyn Mooney had the opportunity to work with Early Childhood Education Assistant Professor Kyong-Ah Kwon to study the relationship between toddlers and their parents. They watched videotaped sessions of these children interacting with their parents and learned how to see families objectively.

Mooney, the daughter of a teacher, has been able to take this research and her experience watching her mother work with toddlers and apply them to her work in the Birth Through Five Program.

“I love observing young children from infancy to five and six years old learn something new,” she said.

The degree program not only appealed to Mooney’s desire to work with young children, but it also fits with her other academic and career aspirations.

“My ultimate goal is to be a speech language pathologist as well as an educator,” she explained. “When I found the B-5 program, I was elated because I noticed that I could earn a teaching certification with an endorsement for preschool special education. I thought, not only could I teach, I could work with children with special needs, in the age group I love and still get my master’s degree in speech.”

Mooney transferred from the University of West Georgia and was among the first students to be admitted to the B-5 program.

She’s particularly enjoyed the interactions with her fellow classmates, who she appreciates for their varied experiences in education and their thoughts on the best ways to work with children.

“Every member of this program brings a different outlook, not only on education but specifically on how to interact with children,” Mooney said. “I have loved learning from my peers.”

After graduation in December, Mooney plans to apply for the speech-language pathology master’s program at Georgia State and then find a job working with children one-on-one.

“I want to take my teaching degree and incorporate my future knowledge as a speech therapist to work with children in a non-clinical, play-based way,” she said. “I always find myself playing with children, and that’s where I need to be.”

Trameka Pass

The first teacher that made a lasting impact on Trameka Pass was her mother.

Pass didn’t attend day care or preschool before starting kindergarten – her mother spent time teaching her daughter important life lessons years before she ever set foot in a classroom.

This experience, coupled with friendly teachers and a positive elementary school experience, showed Pass that good teachers can make a difference in a child’s life.

“I had a first grade teacher who made school the most fun, happy place I could ever imagine,” she said. “I want to do the same for other children.”

Pass, who is the second oldest of nine children, is no stranger to educating and caring for kids. She spent countless afternoons watching her siblings after school before starting a volunteer job at Sheltering Arms, a nonprofit early childhood education program, when she was 14 years old.

What started as a volunteer job turned into a full-fledged career – Pass has worked there for 15 years and currently teaches in a toddler classroom with many of the children she had as infants.

When she’s not teaching, she’s taking classes with her fellow Birth Through Five classmates at Georgia State, who she’s become close to in the last few years.

“We’re like a little family,” Pass explained. “When you have problems with your work, there’s at least four people who I can talk to about it.”

In addition, Pass feels better equipped to care for children with disabilities – one of the cornerstones of the Birth Through Five Program.

“My favorite part is the knowledge that I’ve gained about working with children with disabilities,” she said. “Every year, I have a child with some type of disability. At Georgia State, I’ve learned so many methods and ideas to implement in the classroom.”

Pass will continue to work for Sheltering Arms upon graduation, but also aspires to put that newfound knowledge about children with disabilities to good use.

“I’ve noticed a lot of children get diagnosed in my class, so I’d love to work for a nonprofit where I work with children with disabilities and to get them diagnosed sooner,” she said.

Eryka Quinn

Eryka Quinn initially started her college career studying marketing, but it only took one little boy to change her mind about what she wanted to study.

“I loved working with this little three-year-old boy with autism and fell in love with the thought of helping children with special needs – more specifically, children with autism,” she said. “Everyone always asked me, ‘Why aren’t you working with kids for a living?’ Working with this child opened my eyes to my passion.”

She switched her major to early childhood education, and was reading online about the COE’s degrees when she found out about the Birth Through Five Program, which she said provides crucial information to those working with such a young age group.

“This is the first program Georgia State has developed to certify and educate students on the development of young children age birth through five years,” Quinn said. “It is important to know the signs of typical development to make it easier to spot warning signs and provide early intervention for children with disabilities.”

In addition to taking classes and student teaching, Quinn babysits a seven-year-old child with autism near her home and works with two other children with autism a few days a week.

Though she’s enjoyed babysitting and working with children in her student teaching and on her own time, Quinn hasn’t yet decided which path she’ll take once she graduates in December. She’s considering working in a classroom setting or getting a job with Babies Can’t Wait, a state agency that works with infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities and their families.

Quinn also hopes that the College of Education continues to expand and improve the Birth Through Five Program to ensure more people learn how to work with children in that age group.

“This is a great program and we need to recruit passionate students to provide great early childhood experiences in centers, nurseries and other early education schools,” Quinn said. “It is critically important to provide certified teachers for our young students. The first few years of a child’s life are critical to their development and this program allows graduates to be a positive influence on the development of young children.”

Rukia Rogers

In the late 1990s, when the Bosnian War was in full force, Rukia Rogers taught Islamic studies to children at a community center in Clarkston, Ga.

She could see the impact the war had on these children, and knew that teaching could be her way of making a difference in the world.

“The Bosnian War was going on, so we had these children who were refugees displaced by the war coming to the community center and I started thinking about the possibilities of education,” she explained. “I thought, what if we could teach these children to envision the world differently than it is?”

When Rogers writes her lesson plans, she designs them so that children learn to question and think for themselves rather than simply memorizing the material presented to them.

And through her fieldwork in the Birth Through Five Program, Rogers has been able to put these kinds of lesson plans into practice.

“The thing that’s really been great is that we have these correlating classes – you learn theory and methods of teaching, but then you have the practicums and field experiences to try them out,” she said.

This is particularly true for working with children with disabilities, Rogers said, since many children don’t get diagnosed until they’re well into elementary school. The Birth Through Five Program places an emphasis on learning to work with children with disabilities and gives students the opportunity to do so during their fieldwork.

With graduation around the corner, Rogers is hoping to open her own early childhood center and work with small groups of children. But she also plans to speak at some workshops and conferences and encourage local leaders to make education a top priority.

“I’m really interested in educational policies,” she said. “To have more progressive education, we can’t continue to do things the way they’ve been done for a hundred years. I want to continue advocating for our profession and for young children and their families.”

For more information about the Birth Through Five Program, visit <http://education.gsu.edu/ece/BirthThroughFive.htm>.

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