

FROM RESEARCH TO POLICY

Professional Development for Those Who Educate and Care for Florida's Children

Brief



For many reasons professional development is a key issue related to quality early care and education. Education and training has been directly linked to quality of child care in numerous studies and reports¹. An early childhood teacher's knowledge of early care and education settings, evidence-based practices, as well as competence in their ability to provide care to children with disabilities and special health care needs, children diversified in ethnicity and culture, as well as children in specific stages of development such as infancy, preschool, or school age have direct implications for children's acquisition of knowledge and social skills². Therefore, professional development of early childhood teachers is a current policy topic with tangible meaning for children and families served by early care and education services.

From Research to Policy: Professional Development for Those Who Educate and Care for Florida's Children was a recent study designed to assess the availability and accessibility of formal professional development programs that offer college credit. Researchers identify strengths and weaknesses in early childhood program dynamics and to examine the provision of course offerings and articulation of credit among institutions of higher education (IHE) in Florida. Findings include descriptive information on curricular content and coverage for early childhood or child development programs in Florida and comparisons of two-year versus four-year programs. Results are presented in terms of the early childhood student and implications for accessibility, availability, and comprehensibility of the early childhood or child development programs within Florida institutions of higher education.

FINDINGS WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR WORK FORCE DEVELOPMENT

On the whole, institution representatives reported having students who want to be educated, faculty with expertise to provide quality education in a good working environment with adequate compensation and support. These indicators reflected positively on Florida IHE faculty in the provision of child development and early childhood programs. Outlined below are some of the critical findings that require consideration and potential action because of the implications for preparing a quality early childhood work force.

Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs in Florida

While the majority of Florida IHE report offering coursework focusing on the development of children birth to four, only 61 percent of the respondents reported offering infant and toddler related courses. In Florida, early childhood teacher preparation specific to infant and toddler development and care is limited. Consideration of early childhood educator expertise is significant on many levels. Early childhood educator proficiency and knowledge about child development is critical to children's learning and care³.

Given the increasing need for infant and toddler care and the lack of quality provision in many infant and toddler programs, it is somewhat surprising that most early childhood teacher preparation programs do not require multiple courses on the topic. Researchers support that the training and education of early childhood teachers is a structural indicator of quality and impacts children's development⁴.

In the early childhood workforce, infant and toddler care is necessary. Further, the provision of care must be of high quality to support children's healthy development and growth, to support families need to work, and to support the professionalism of a valuable service industry. For all of these reasons, it is critical that students in early childhood teacher preparation programs receive adequate education on the development and care of infants and toddlers.

Half of the respondents reported that programming related to family child care was not available. A similar consideration should be made for family child care, as it also was not covered heavily in most early childhood teacher preparation programs. However, it is a prevalent setting for the provision of early care and education and students would benefit from knowledge of this type of care. In a review of studies comparing the quality of care in family child care with that of center-based care, Howes and Hamilton (1993)⁵ concluded that family child care environments were less safe and provided fewer opportunities for children's learning, play, and social interactions. Similarly, Kontos, Hsu, and Dunn (1994)⁶ reported less frequent involvement with children by teachers in family child care compared to center-based care. In addition, researchers of the Study of Children in Family Child Care and Relative Care (1994)⁷ reported that only 9 percent of homes were of good quality, while 56 percent were rated as adequate or custodial, and 35 percent were rated as inadequate or growth harming. The level of education and training in child development is lower for teachers in family child care settings than teachers in center-based care⁵ and this may account for the lack in quality. For these reasons, it is important that early childhood students have access to coursework on family child care and alternative settings to center-based care in greater quantity than was reported by institution representatives.

Two definitive substance areas were lacking from early childhood teacher preparation programs under investigation in Florida. While course coverage on these topics may not have been as necessary in years past, this trend of children being placed in care at younger and younger ages is likely not changing. In fact, for Florida, the number of children younger than age five potentially placed in child care has increased from 953,181 in 1999 to 1,019,328 in 2003⁸. Further, family child care is a growing sector in the early care and education industry⁴. Infant and toddler care and development and family child care have been identified, among others, as core knowledge topics for the provision of quality child care services². Because these topics were lacking in reported coursework offerings, Florida institutions of higher education faculty of early childhood or child development teacher preparation programs should consider increasing course coverage on these and associated topics that are relevant to quality early care and education services.

Diversity in early childhood programs

The racial composition of early childhood faculty clearly demonstrates a lack of ethnic diversity with 74 percent of full time faculty identified as white, non-Hispanic, only 11 percent identified as Hispanic, and no black, non-Hispanic faculty were identified. Interestingly, most lead faculty surveyed did not identify difficulty attracting and retaining ethnically and linguistically diverse faculty as a challenge facing early childhood programs. This may be indicative of a lack of awareness on the part of early childhood chairs/directors

in Florida IHE. Florida is a state with a diverse population of individuals. This suggests diversity in multicultural and bilingual needs of the families and children who reside in Florida. Like the families and children in Florida, the early childhood teachers represent a large variety of racial and ethnic types. The respondents in the current study did not suggest that diversity of faculty was a major challenge, however, from other studies with emphasis on diversity⁹ researchers have consistently reported that racial and ethnic similarities are key to professional development. To support cultural sensitivity, resources are needed to address the lack of diversity in early childhood faculty of IHE in Florida. While this does pose a considerable challenge for IHE early childhood and child development faculty, the current “lack of racial/ethnic diversity among faculty members means that students who might want to pursue advanced degrees see few models in these roles, which is a major factor limiting diversity in early childhood leadership”¹⁰. Continued emphasis is needed on the recruitment and retention of culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse faculty in early childhood.

Articulation

Problems with transfer of credit were identified as moderate challenges facing early childhood programs in Florida. The respondents in the current study did not suggest that articulation was a major challenge, however, very few IHE representatives reported having articulation agreements with other IHE or educational programs. Articulation agreements were identified between high school courses and community colleges; state mandated training hours and community colleges; Child Development Associate (or equivalent) and community colleges; and community colleges and universities. If articulation agreements were formalized for each of these venues across the system, a comprehensive early childhood teacher preparation program could exist in Florida. Thus, articulation becomes a workforce issue.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

Advocacy and policy efforts addressing the working conditions of early childhood professionals are needed on a larger scale than presently exists. Florida IHE faculty reported finding the recruitment and retention of early childhood students to be a challenge due to the poor employment situation currently affecting the field. Emphasis on career opportunities, professional development standards, and career paths could help alleviate the amount of turnover in the field. If not already doing so, Florida IHE early childhood faculty should consider working with early childhood field staff, policymakers, and advocates to address the issues of professional development standards and career options. Further definition of professional standards and career pathways might help with the recruitment and retention of early childhood teachers.

On the issue of standards, compensation commensurate with education level and experience must become part of the early childhood standards of professionalism¹¹. Only then can a workforce of educated, committed and high quality professionals with career development opportunities that ensure stability for the early care and education system in Florida be assured. As in the case of professional

standards and career options, IHE early childhood faculty should increase their involvement in advocacy to promote adequate compensation for early childhood teachers.

In the current study, IHE representatives reported the issue of workforce development (recruitment and retention) and compensation as a major challenge facing Florida IHE early childhood faculty. In the unique role of being both an early childhood professional and an educator of early childhood teachers, IHE early childhood faculty understand the complex dynamics of the early childhood system and can offer valuable insight to policy- and decision-makers¹⁰.

APPLICATION OF FINDINGS

In order for the data to be made useful, an online catalog of responding colleges was developed to serve as a resource for potential early childhood students (<http://www.thechildrensforum.com/HeadStartDatabase.htm>). Prospective students can search by degree and/or region and receive basic information about early childhood programs in their area. Links to the colleges are also provided enabling students to easily access more information on the college of choice.

Findings and implications will also serve other early childhood professionals. Early childhood teachers, program administrators, directors, and advocates will benefit from the practical and policy implications of this research. Reports will be issued and presentations made that will present the broad sweeping implications of professional development opportunities for early childhood teachers across the nation. Early childhood professionals will benefit from shared knowledge of strategies of assessing their state's capacity for professional development opportunities, implications for early childhood teachers, students, and faculty, policy implications related to course coverage, articulation, and faculty challenges, and how to use this and similar research to advocate for quality services that will ultimately support and assist children on their way to achieving their greatest human potential.

For the full report *From Research to Policy* and more information on the Children's Forum Professional Development Initiative please visit <http://www.thechildrensforum.com/ProfessionalDevelopment.htm>

The development of this brief was supported by the Florida Head Start Collaboration Office. This information was pulled from a larger body of work supported in part by the Children's Forum; Florida State University; the Child Care Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and the Florida Head Start Collaboration Office. For more information, contact Brittany Birken at bbirken@thechildrensforum.com or (850)681-7002.



REFERENCES

- ¹Cornelius, G. (1988). Critical skills for the early childhood educator. *Early Child Development and Care*, 36, 165-172.
- Ghazvini, A. & Mullis, R. (2002). Center-based care for young children: examining predictors of quality. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 163, 112-125.
- Hayes, C.D., Palmer, J.L., & Zaslow, M.J. (Eds.) (1990). *Who Cares for America's Children? Child Care Policy for the 1990's*. National Research Council.
- Howes, C., Galinsky, E., Shinn, M., Sibley, A., Abbott-Shim, M., & McCarthy, J. (1998). The Florida Child Care Quality Improvement Study: 1996 Report.
- ²National Association for the Education of Young Children Policy Brief (2001). Financing the Early Childhood Education System. *Young Children*. July issue.
- ³Bowman, B., Donovan, M., & Burns, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager To learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, National Research Council.
- ⁴Bordin, J. Machida, S. & Varnell, H. (2000). The relation of quality indicators to provider knowledge of child development in family child care homes. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, pp. 323-341.
- Dunn, L. (1993). Proximal and distal features of day care quality and children's development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 8, 167-193.
- Epstein, A. (1999). Pathways to quality in Head Start, public school, and private nonprofit early childhood programs. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 13, 101-119.
- Ghazvini, A. & Mullis, R. (2002). Center-based care for young children: examining predictors of quality. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 163, 112-125.
- ⁵Howes, C., & Hamilton, C. E. (1993). Child care for young children. In B. Spodek (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on the Education of Young Children* (pp. 322-336). New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- ⁶Kontos, S., Hsu, H., & Dunn, L. (1994). Children's cognitive and social competence in child care centers and family day-care homes. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 15(3), 387-411.
- ⁷Galinsky, E., Howes, C., Kontos, S., & Shinn, M. (1994). *The study of children in family child care and relative care: Highlights of findings*. New York, NY: Families and Work Institute.

- ⁸ Office of Economic and Demographic Research (2003). The Florida Legislature. County population by age and by race and by gender.
- ⁹ Early, D. & Winton, P. (2001). Preparing the workforce: Early childhood teacher preparation at 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 16, 285-306.
- Chang, H., Muckelroy, A., & Pulido-Tobiassen, D. (1996). *Looking in, looking out: redefining child care and early education in a diverse society*. San Francisco, CA: California Tomorrow.
- Moore, E. (1993). *Paths to African-American leadership positions in early childhood education: constraints and opportunities*. Washington, DC: National Black Child Development Institute.
- ¹⁰ Early, D. & Winton, P. (2001). Preparing the workforce: Early childhood teacher preparation at 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 16, 285-306.
- ¹¹ Blau, D. (2002). Rethinking U.S. child care policy. *Issues in Science and Technology*, 18, 66-72.