

Degree Programs: Progress and Pitfalls for ECE

by Valora Washington

As the chief executive officer for the Council for Professional Recognition, which assesses and credentials early childhood professionals through the Child Development Associate™ (CDA) National Credentialing Program, I'm often confronted with the question of whether a bachelor's degree better prepares an early educator relative to our CDA credential. Many employers openly state that their CDA-credentialed teachers are better prepared for the realities of leading a classroom than newly-minted B.A. staff, but let's take a deeper look.

Ideally, the CDA is the 'best first step' for many early educators, who then move on to obtain more formal education — and experience — working with young children and their families. This best first step leads to deeper confidence in people like Magdalena Monroy from

Brooklyn, New York, who, after being awarded her CDA credential, went on to earn a bachelor's degree and later work with the Council as one of our Professional Development (PD) Specialists. As a PD Specialist, she supported other CDA candidates through coaching and mentoring as they pursued their own CDA credential. Her role is vital in our ongoing efforts to professionalize and unify the profession.

The spark ignited through the CDA credentialing process often leads candidates to pursue more education as they become confident in what they know and are able to do with young children. Deeper knowledge leads many CDA credential holders to bachelor's, master's, and even doctoral degrees.

Calvin E. Murphy, Jr. shares his journey:

Nationally, we see increased emphasis on early childhood staff earning their bachelor's degree — there has been progress! This is not an argument for the CDA versus a college degree. We view obtaining both as part of a continuous progression of skills and competence for many early educators.

But there have been many pitfalls related to the actual competence and skills that some current baccalaureate degree holders may have. In a September 2008 paper, I characterized these issues as questions about the role and relevance of higher education, and its capacity to reinvent its interface to the field of early care and education.¹

Role

In a field that historically has relied extensively on informal apprenticeship, the role of college credentials as a qualifying element of workforce participation evokes passionate debate.

The intersection of the early care and education field with higher education is a place with multiple, competing adaptive pressures:



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In 1991, I was a teacher's aide for the Jefferson County Committee for Economic Opportunity in Birmingham, Alabama. Acquiring a CDA was a professional development requirement for the teacher's aide job — every teacher's aide had to earn one. Getting the CDA turned into a lifesaver for me . . . I then developed a passion for working with young children and that inspired me to continue my education. Today, I have a Ph.D.

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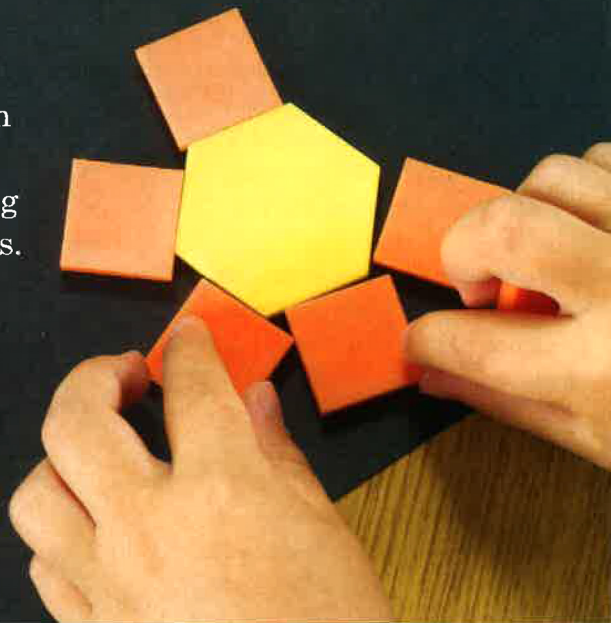
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- The need to prepare staff for a diverse population of children who spend time in many settings from birth through age five.
- Public policy that both promotes degree acquisition, yet fails to reward degreed teachers with adequate compensation.
- Inconsistent research on the value of a baccalaureate degree if that degree is not relevant to the specialized knowledge needed to provide high-quality early education.
- Persistent realities about the number of early care and education teachers with baccalaureate degrees in recent decades.

To this last point, New America's *Subprime Learning* report points out that pre-K teachers are not always required to have a bachelor's degree — and training standards often vary by state — which

clearly impacts teacher quality.² Additionally, of the 1.8 million early care and education workers in the United States, according to a 2009 American Community Survey, about 72 percent lacked an associate's degree or higher. What is equally troubling is the fact that almost all — 93 percent — of the ECE workers and directors with a bachelor's degree did not possess a degree specifically in early childhood education. Twenty-nine percent had a degree in other education, 7 percent in psychology, and 3 percent in sociology.³ *Subprime Learning* also points out recent studies that show that observation-based measurement, especially when combined with coaching, can lead to improved teaching, but requires a substantial investment of time and money.⁴

So, given current public policy, the status of compensation, and concerns about the adequacy of degree programs, there is a paradox: there is both an escalating demand for, and deep concerns

about, college preparation within the field of early care and education. There is considerable evidence that college curricula has neither kept pace with nor incorporated these new realities about how children are being raised and educated in our country. How our children are 'schooled,' and the preparation of staff to work with children and families, have barely begun to appreciate a young child's phenomenal and untapped capacity to learn, and recognize that their 'babysitters' are really 'teachers' requiring commensurate preparation, compensation, and support.

Relevance

The relevance of teacher education programs to the effective, developmentally appropriate preparation of staff serving diverse young learners in a variety of settings is questioned.

The professional development and preparation of staff is offered under the auspices of a wide range of organiza-

tions, resulting in a fragmented system characterized by multiple constituents and varied goals and standards. The relevance of 'traditional' higher education is frequently challenged by emergent alternatives, some which have been developed within the colleges themselves. So, what is the collective capacity of higher education to meet growing enrollment demands, offer a highly-qualified collegiate faculty, or present useful content for a wide range of children?

- Of the more than 4,500 institutions that offer degrees in any field, only about one-third offer an early childhood teacher preparation degree.
- Many early childhood departments have a disproportionate number of adjunct and part-time faculty, many of whom are near retirement or need additional professional development support of their own. Additionally, teacher education faculty is far less diverse than their students or child population.
- Issues of relevance involve whether the curriculum is rooted in a current knowledge base, has an appropriate diversity focus, and facilitates sufficient practice experience.⁵

Reinvention

Will — and how will — institutions of higher education adapt to these leadership opportunities in the field of early care and education?

The Council for Professional Recognition, in its efforts to increase opportunities for CDA holders to continue a career pathway, has opened up to partnerships with state community college systems and institutions of higher learning.

- **Ivy Tech Community College System:** The CDA credential is embedded in a partnership between the Ivy Tech Community College

System and the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children. Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana has also partnered with the Indiana Department of Education to enable high school early childhood education programs to offer credits to high school students who are also eligible for the CDA process. Indiana Ivy Tech faculty also serve as CDA Professional Development Specialists, a cadre of qualified early educators that coach and mentor CDA candidates. In fall 2011, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education granted Ivy Tech permission to issue an early childhood education certificate that focuses on CDA coursework and supports students in their professional development.

- **Tennessee State University:** The faculty at Tennessee State University's Early Childhood Training Alliance, also known as TECTA, serve as Professional Development Specialists who support CDA candidates in early childhood centers, career and technical high schools, and home visitation programs. The Council's partnership with TECTA offers many advantages, including motivating practitioners toward continuing education, and providing a platform for professional and career opportunities. CDA course preparation, document preparation assistance, consultation, and assessment scholarships are made possible through funding to TECTA by the Tennessee Department of Human Services.

- **Rasmussen College:** This for-profit college, with campuses in Minnesota, Illinois, North Dakota, Florida, Wisconsin, and Kansas, in partnership with the Council, supports early educators employed by Knowledge Universe. As the largest private early childhood education provider in the U.S., Knowledge Universe offers tremendous support to its

early care workforce and, in agreement with Rasmussen, plays a critical role in preparing candidates to earn their CDA credential and providing continued support toward a degree in early childhood education. In addition, Rasmussen has established an early childhood education career path designed to assist CDA students to earn their credential and advance their career in the field. By enrolling in this career track, they gain the core courses every step along the way so CDA students are prepared to succeed as early care and education professionals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The weak connections between higher education and the practice of early care and education are well known, particularly among the academic or policy elites, as well as the students and teachers saddled by limited access and low compensation. But, outside of these circles, few influential thought leaders seem to be aware of, or give attention to, either the opportunities or the challenges these present to the field. The key element for change lies in the emergence of new champions — people with the vision and leadership to elevate these concerns from an elite few to a more public dialogue.

For my part, I will continue to advocate for the attainment of a bachelor's degree as a necessary, but not fully sufficient, element of change. Additionally, the Council for Professional Recognition's Child Development Associate™ (CDA) National Credential is a great way to launch an early educator's career when they are new to the field, have work experience but little formal education, or hold an unrelated degree. The CDA represents the crossroad where education and experience meet. This pathway to competency includes real-world

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experience working with diverse populations, professionalizing and unifying the field, and adding value to the field at a time when the role of higher education in professional preparation is in flux. Further, I will advocate for a:

- stronger public role in financing and greater support for the workforce.
- actions by early educators to organize the field in order to articulate our values, knowledge base, and needs.
- clearer voice from accrediting bodies and national organizations on professional preparation.
- a wide variety of efforts to improve both access to and the quality of teacher education, including strategies to increase the diversity of faculty, and to strengthen the

link between credentials and staff compensation.

The shortcomings of teacher education cannot be resolved at the current level of dialogue, despite many innovative strategies currently in play to increase the supply of and access to higher education opportunities. Nationwide and statewide agreements about the field must be forged with high-quality teacher education founded on those agreements, and broader leadership throughout the entire higher education community.

Systematic thinking is required. And we now have historic opportunities to redefine early care and education's role in influencing our children's future and the future of our profession. I recommend that this thinking be directed toward a 'focus on competence'⁶ that includes elements comparable to those available through the CDA: multiple sources of evidence on teacher quality, including work experience, feedback from families, and observations that demonstrate effective practice, and content knowledge, and, when appropriate, assessment in the language of the communities being served. Both the CDA and college degrees are important components of an early educators' career pathway. The Council for Professional Recognition recognizes the value of both in developing a more effective workforce.

For more information about the Council for Professional Recognition or the Child Development Associate™ National Credentialing Program, please visit our website: www.cdacouncil.org.

Endnotes

- 1 Washington, V. (2008). Role, relevance, reinvention: Higher education in the field of early care and education. Boston: Wheelock

College. NOTE: This paper included the following signatory partners: The Aspire Institute, The CAYL Institute, The Council for Professional Recognition, The National Black Child Development Institute, The National Head Start Association, National-Louis University, Pre-K Now, and Wheelock College.

- 2 Guernsey, L., Bornfreund, L., McCann C., & Williams, C. (2014). *Subprime learning: Early education since the Great Recession*. New America Education Policy Program. Washington, DC, www.newamerica.org, p. 11. According to this source, the 2010 median pay for a teacher of children aged three to five was \$25,700, barely above the poverty level for a family of four.
- 3 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2012). Early childhood education: HHS and education are taking steps to improve workforce data and enhance worker quality (p. 11). Washington, DC.
- 4 Note: *Subprime Learning* cited — Guernsey, L., & Ochshorn, S. (2011). Watching teachers work: Using observation tools to promote effective teaching in the early years and early grades. Washington, DC: www.newamerica.org
- 5 Washington, V. (2008). Role, relevance, reinvention: Higher education in the field of early care and education (pp. 16-18). Boston: Wheelock College.
- 6 Washington, V. (2014). Why CDA? Why now? — A focus on competency. The Council for Professional Recognition. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from www.cdacouncil.org/storage/documents/WhitePaper_final.pdf