

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a light blue cardigan over a blue top, is leaning over a young girl with dark curly hair and a gold headband. They are both looking intently at a globe on a stand. The girl is holding a yellow pencil. The background is a bright, colorful classroom with a red circle on the wall.

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# PRACTICE AND PERFORMANCE:

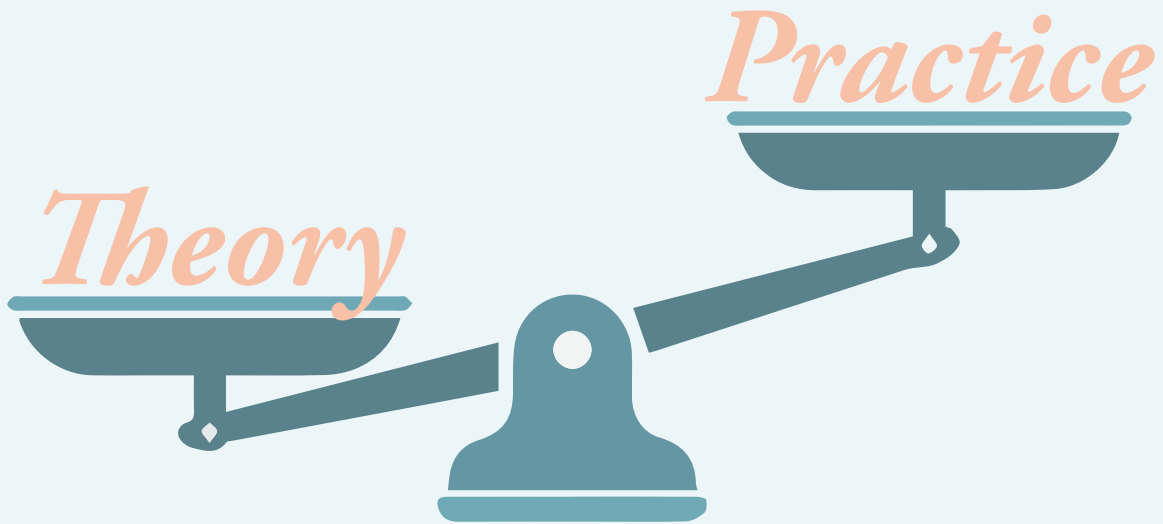
Building Competence at the  
Council for Professional Recognition

**“One does not learn everything by reading words on a page,” a Kentucky early childhood teacher said nearly 50 years ago. “Learning comes through living. The CDA gives one the chance to live and learn about young children.”<sup>1</sup> And the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Child Development showed that it agreed by launching the Child Development Associate<sup>®</sup> (CDA) Credential<sup>™</sup>. Early childhood teachers need both experience and education to provide children with quality care. And this was a source of concern as the department worked to expand Head Start, the massive federal program launched in 1965 to ensure equity in early learning. The supply of qualified teachers far exceeded demand as Head Start now strived to serve millions of low-income children.**

## **The Need for a New Credential**

In 1971, Edward Zigler, director of the Office of Child Development, responded to the issue by underlining “the need for the Child Development Associate,” meaning “an individual who has the competencies to care independently for children.”<sup>2</sup> And training educators like this demanded new competency-based standards for the early learning profession. Formal coursework, alone, did not make someone qualified to work successfully with young children. Instead, teachers had to actively show they had the right skills to help young learners reach successful outcomes, as the Office of Child Development pointed out in its Child Development Associate Training Guide from 1973.

“At present,” the guide explained, “many individuals who bear primary responsibility for the development and education of young children in child care programs have had insufficient preparation for the vital and complex task they have undertaken. Most staff members in child care programs have received preparation in two basic ways: they have been college-trained (with or without coursework in early childhood education and child development) or their training meets no specific standards directly related to the providing of high-quality developmental care. This lack of relevant standards for staff preparation merits serious concern in light of growing recognition that a college degree by itself is no guarantee that a person possesses the competencies necessary to foster intellectual, social, physical and emotional growth in children.”<sup>3</sup>



## Balancing Theory and Practice

Teachers are more likely to gain the actual skills they need through competency-based teacher education, an approach based on performance, not course hours plus student teaching like traditional teacher programs. A performance-based program requires a statement of outcomes. And this means that the knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies that prospective teachers should have at the end of the program are clearly defined. So are the criteria for assessing evidence of these outcomes. And this approach supports the broader goals of the early learning field. Competency-based teacher education and early childhood education share the common practice of defining success in terms of a learner's outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, success in both cases depends on active learning. Competency-based teacher education, like early childhood education, assumes that people learn best by doing. It requires rising teachers to go beyond doing a few weeks of student teaching by gaining extensive real-life experience in the classroom. So, competency-based education strikes a better balance between theory and practice than traditional teacher education programs. Students spend less time in class listening to lectures and more time applying what they've learned with young children. They become active rather than passive receivers of information.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, they also benefit from coursework. It's just that content outside the context of the classroom doesn't have much meaning, as educational thinkers had begun to realize by the 1970s when Zigler ushered in the CDA.

## Designing the CDA®

At the time, a few universities had constructed theoretical models for competency-based teacher education. The Evaluation Training Institute in Early Education at the University of Utah had designed systems to observe teachers' behavior and monitor how they performed in the classroom. The University of Kansas offered a graduate program to train classroom behavior analysts for early childhood classroom staff. And in Ohio, the University of Toledo had come up with a model of behavioral goals for early childhood teachers, plus activities and evaluation procedures to accomplish these objectives. But the model was a design that users would have to flesh out to put into practice.<sup>6</sup>

In 1972, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) would help bring these ideas down to earth when it convened a task force, the Child Development Associate Consortium (CDAC), to design the new professional credential. "The Consortium chose a performance-based assessment," explained Evangeline Ward, executive director of the CDAC, because it "believed that a person's ability to complete a certain number of courses or pass a written exam is not necessarily a determinant of ability to serve children in child care programs in competent ways. It presumes, rather, that day-to-day value to children will show in performance with them." In addition, performance-based assessment had an added advantage. "It is more flexible and inclusive than traditional systems, as it is designed to accommodate ethnic and cultural diversity."<sup>7</sup>

**So, competency-based education strikes a better balance between *theory* and *practice* than traditional teacher education programs.**

And that opened the door to talented people who couldn't afford a formal education, as one of the first CDA holders pointed out. "I think so many people have a natural knack for teaching children. If they had access to this program, think how much good they could do. With a little help, a little understanding, a little positive teaching, there are a lot of people who could help children."<sup>8</sup> The CDA provided a comprehensive system to support them.

The CDAC took a whole teacher approach to produce educators who could support the whole child. There was general agreement that competent teaching was more than a list of isolated teaching behaviors to be checked off. It involved decision and judgement based on mastery of six competencies that would lead educators to a high level of performance in the classroom: establishing and maintaining a

safe, healthy learning environment; advancing physical and intellectual growth; supporting social and emotional growth; building positive and productive relationships with families; ensuring a well-run, purposeful program; and maintaining a commitment to professionalism in their work.

## Overseeing the CDA®

The original set of competencies hasn't changed much over the years, though administration of the credential has passed through several hands. And the reach of the CDA has expanded beyond its original goal to serve Head Start children aged three to five. At the start, the Consortium administered the credential with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children, Youth and Families (ACYF). In 1980, the Consortium handed over the reins to Bank Street College in New York, which expanded the credential to meet the needs of new groups. In 1983, Bank Street began developing requirements and competencies for candidates working in home visitor, family child care and infant/toddler center-based programs. It also made assessments available in these settings as demand for their services rose.<sup>9</sup>

By 1985, the CDA program had the market and financial means to merit its own permanent home. So, ACYF worked with NAEYC to set up a separate nonprofit to administer the CDA. On September 1, 1985, the Council for Professional Recognition took charge of the program and

made several changes to improve it. The Council adopted educational prerequisites, so candidates had to have at least a high school diploma or G.E.D. It also required them to have 120 hours of formal coursework in the early childhood field, an innovation that linked the CDA with community colleges, so that CDA students could earn credits toward an associate degree. In addition, the Council developed the CDA Professional Preparation Program and published a CDA textbook, now called *Essentials for Working with Young Children*.<sup>10</sup> It has been through several revisions to keep up with changing needs in the early childhood field, as has the assessment process to make it more streamlined and efficient.

## Advances in Assessment

In the early stages of the CDA, responsibility for assessment rested with a local assessment team, whose members each had defined roles. The team included an adviser, who was an early childhood professional charged with watching the candidate while they worked with children and completing three lengthy reports that they brought to the LAT meeting. The candidate played a role by preparing a portfolio with physical documents and resources to support their claim to competence in the classroom. A parent/community representative collected feedback from parents or guardians who had children in the candidate's care. And lastly, a CDA rep, another trained early learning professional, conducted the team meeting to ensure the validity and reliability of the process.<sup>11</sup>



This system lasted until 1990, when the Council made more changes to advance the credentialing process, including a direct assessment system to replace the use of local assessment teams. The new assessment system consisted of three steps. The candidate prepared a professional portfolio; was observed by a CDA advisor, an early childhood professional whom the candidate chose; and participated in a verification visit conducted by a representative of the Council. During the verification visit, the candidate engaged in an interview with the Council representative, took a written exam and reviewed feedback from families with children in the candidate's classroom.<sup>12</sup>

## Embracing Technology with CDA<sup>®</sup> 2.0

Some of these elements, like the portfolio, family questionnaire and exam, stayed in place in 2013, when the Council took steps to

support CDA candidates even better. Following years of study, the Council launched CDA 2.0, which updated the CDA knowledge base and added new elements, including candidate reflection and the creation of a nationwide network of professional development specialists who provided candidates with mentoring and coaching. They also assessed a candidate's competencies and guided the candidate's self-reflection during the verification visit.<sup>13</sup>

CDA 2.0 also embraced technology, making it simpler for candidates to apply online and keep track of the credentialing process. Candidates now select a PD Specialist from an online directory and schedule an electronic CDA exam at a convenient time at widely located Pearson VUE testing centers. Pearson VUE delivers exam scores and the PD Specialists' verification visit scores electronically to the Council, so credentialing decisions now take days instead of months as they did in the past.<sup>14</sup>

## Raising Skills and Reducing Debt

While these changes were taking place, competency-based teacher education was gaining more traction. This development in teacher training reflected a slow but steady growth for competency-based education as a whole. As of 2020, 128 higher education institutions in the U.S. had already adopted 851 undergraduate and 206 graduate competency-based education programs. Moreover, 82 percent of respondents in the 2020 National Survey of Postsecondary Competency-Based Education said they expected additional and exponential growth over the next five years.<sup>15</sup>

This response reflects a strong belief in the benefits of competency-based education for students. Competency-based education allows students to incur less debt and spend less time than they would on a traditional college degree. Meanwhile, they're gaining the skills they need to embark right away on a career. And this has been essential for the early learning field since 2020, when the pandemic shuttered child care centers and sent young children home to finish their education online. Even now, many centers remain short-staffed and unable to accommodate all the children who need early education. This ongoing issue has highlighted the importance of quality early education not only to children's development, but also to the early childhood workforce, many of them women of color.<sup>16</sup>

Across the early childhood field, rising teachers face many barriers to getting the education they need. Competency-based education can help

clear the way by providing flexible pathways and focusing on what a student knows and can do, rather than the time they spent learning or even when they learned their skills. Competencies are measured and assured by well-defined assessments instead of time spent in class. This means that students can prepare more quickly for the early education field. A competency-based approach also allows faculty to focus their teaching and mentoring on filling gaps in students' existing knowledge rather than trying to cover a prescribed set of content. And it frees students to focus their efforts on the parts of the curriculum they don't know.<sup>17</sup>

This can be especially important for lower-income workers who need to quickly increase their skills if they are to advance in their careers. "Time is the enemy of the poor," said Charla Long, director of the Competency-Based Education Network. "When we remove time-based measures of learning, it helps on the diversity, equity and inclusion piece."<sup>18</sup> Having a diverse group of teachers also promotes equity in early education for young children, who learn best from teachers who look like them and understand their culture.

## A Dream that Leads to Real-Life Results

A central tenet of the early childhood field is that children develop in different ways. So, it is important for competencies to address the cross-cultural skills needed to work with diverse groups. The competencies should include considerations for adjusting practices to meet the individual needs of children from marginalized groups and ensure a strength-based approach to supporting dual-

language learners. In addition, competencies should account for the unique context of an early childhood program, organization and community, along with the unique situation of an early childhood teacher.<sup>19</sup>

This is the essence of equity in the early learning field, as we have increasingly come to see in the past few decades. Along the way, we've gained a better grasp of the difference between equality and equity. Providing students with equal access to experiences and resources is not enough, we now know. Our goal has shifted to notions of equity and fairness that require us to respond to students as individuals and personalize their learning. For every student to be college and career ready, we must employ learning strategies that account for the economic and racial inequities that have shaped communities nationwide. And competency-based education succeeds in doing this because it's based on a system in which every learner, whether students or teachers, can thrive.<sup>20</sup>

That encourages rising teachers to complete their education, according to Johanna Darragh Ernst, a professor of early childhood education at Heartland Community College in Illinois. Ernst explained that early childhood programs at the college have enjoyed a 7.7 percent growth in recent years by using a competency-based approach. "It provides the opportunity for personalized learning," she said. And that's allowed faculty like her to be more agile in responding to individual student needs. Her institution is now reaching out to students who dropped out and asking them to come back and finish their degrees with a competency-based approach. As an educator, she said, it's "what you dream of."<sup>21</sup> And this dream can

lead to real-life results, as shown by studies of CDA programs and their impact on teachers' classroom practice.

## Successful Results for the CDA<sup>®</sup>

CDA programs were already showing positive outcomes in the credential's first decade. In 1984, researchers at Penn State University studied 55 Head Start teachers with no prior college coursework who were enrolled in a two-year CDA program. The researchers measured the teachers for characteristics of quality teaching, including child-centered beliefs, self-confidence and self-control before and after about a year in the CDA program. By the end of that time, over two-thirds of the teachers showed positive changes in self-assessed job performance and self-confidence and child-centered beliefs. On these important measures, the CDA students did not differ from undergraduate students completing four-year teacher training programs. And these results suggested that the CDA is a viable alternative to college coursework for producing qualified teachers.<sup>22</sup>

There are added benefits to earning a CDA, according to a 2008 study of CDA students at technical colleges in Georgia. The findings showed that CDA training led 87 percent of the teachers to hold more developmentally appropriate beliefs about children, which translated into higher classroom quality. The teachers' embrace of a child-centered approach also suggested that there is no firm basis for the "more is better" philosophy in teacher education. And that matters because teachers without four-year degrees are often put into positions where





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they direct or assist with the daily planning and decision-making of early childhood classrooms. Teachers like these are often from marginalized communities and lack opportunities for higher education. So, providing them with alternative pathways to education not only ensures they are adequately trained; it also leads to more qualified teachers who share a common background with the children they serve.<sup>23</sup>

This is an important consideration in Head Start, which mainly serves low-income children of color. And CDAs have shown their value there, too, according to a 2014 study from the North Carolina Head Start State Collaboration Office. The study collected information on the educational level of lead teachers and teacher assistants to rank the quality of Head Start programs in North Carolina, leading to the finding that the highest-ranking programs had more lead teachers with CDAs than other Head Start programs in the state. Furthermore,

rising classroom scores across all Head Start programs in the state reflected the number of teacher assistants with CDAs.

The conclusion of the study was that education alone did not determine the quality of teaching. Instead, what mattered was the mix of theory and practice that the CDAs received.<sup>24</sup>

And Megan, an early education and care associate commissioner of workforce development in Massachusetts, agreed. “It’s a combination of education and work experience that’s key,” she said. “I think child growth and development speaks to caring about the child and understanding their psychology and emotional status”—knowledge that teachers don’t necessarily gain by earning a bachelor’s degree. “The CDA and associate degree programs often have more relevant content for educators than bachelor’s degree programs,” she said. “There’s strong evidence that the

CDA is a very effective credential because it focuses squarely on the work that an educator does in the classroom. Preparation for the early childhood profession needs to be centered in practice.”<sup>25</sup>

It also needs to be efficient and cost effective to reach the maximum number of educators, said Pam, who worked for Massachusetts in its division of early education and care workforce and educational technology. “We do everything face-to-face,” she pointed out a few years back. “It’s resource heavy, so we need to think strategically about how technology could provide more training across the state. It’s not enough to say we have this great CDA program at our community colleges that you can attend,” she explained. “We also need to think about how we can build economies of scale and ease of access to CDA training by moving into the technology space. What do we want to overhaul? What do we want to tweak? It’s a constant process for us.”<sup>26</sup>

It’s also a constant process for the Council as we work to boost the impact of educators who hold CDAs. Our efforts focus on three related spheres: the national CDA credentialing system, early childhood workplace resources and supports, and advocating for the early learning profession. These areas build on one another and begin with the initial application process. So, the Council is honing its customer service to give CDA candidates more support and ramping up the online systems they use to apply. We’re working with training groups to provide candidates with a consistent level of preparation that will ensure the integrity of our credential and enhance equity in teacher training. We’re also advocating for state and federal policies that would offer CDA apprenticeship and high school programs that bring more young folks

into our field. And we’re using our voice to speak out for CDA holders, so they receive the pay, respect and promotions they deserve. These educators are at the core of everything we do, whether we’re making our call center more responsive or campaigning for new regulations and rules on Capitol Hill.

## Boosting Equity and Quality by Design

The Council’s ruling passion is to serve our CDAs, so we have been listening to them, learning their concerns and asking them to lend their input as we tackle a bold endeavor: reimagining the CDA process to produce more of the competent educators our country needs. The Council is drawing on the tactics of design thinking, an approach to innovation that blends people’s needs, the possibilities of technology and the requirements of business. It leads you to empathize with your users, define their needs, create a prototype and then repeatedly test.

Drawing ideas from design thinking, the Council has enhanced the CDA process in recent years. The Council has a new website that offers a streamlined, user-friendly experience. Revised exams in English and Spanish are now on hand, and Pearson VUE is preparing to put them into its system. The Council’s board has agreed to the purchase of an electronic portfolio and design of the English version is nearly complete, with a Spanish one to follow. And the Council has published a new edition of its *Essentials* textbook, with a greater emphasis on equity in education. A design team is working on mockups for a new dashboard that will let candidates track their steps toward completion and provide ways for PD Specialists to monitor



candidates' progress. The Council has also begun allowing virtual verification visits to scale up the assessment part of the CDA process and make it more efficient.<sup>27</sup>

These steps will allow the Council to do even more to support professionals in the early learning field through our competency-based credential. And they're needed in the wake of the pandemic that led so many early childhood programs to close. Now, as in the early days of Head Start, we're working to open the doors of our field to people who don't have a college degree but do have a knack for working well with young children. The innovations the Council is making will let us reach a maximum number of educators nationwide and give them a fair chance at gaining productive careers. They in turn will have the skills to help young children succeed since the assessment process is proof that a teacher can perform. And our credential gives teachers the chance to show just what they can do.

Competency-based teacher education like the CDA removes constraints of money and time that often stop talented folks from joining or advancing in the early childhood field. Now the Council is striving to do even more to support them and young learners nationwide as we boost quality and equity by design. In the next phase of our competency-based credential, we'll be making added tweaks and harnessing the power of technology even more. Yet we'll remain faithful to the founding principle of the CDA. Formal coursework, alone, does not make someone competent to work with young children, as the Office of Child Development pointed out in 1973. Instead, teachers must show that they have the concrete skills to help young learners achieve successful outcomes. And that reflects a mix of experience and education. When it comes to teacher training, real-life practice leads to the best performance in the early childhood classroom.

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