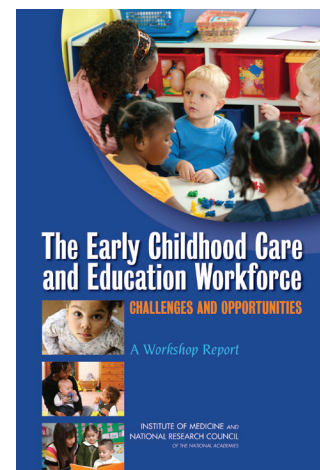


The Early Childhood Care and Education Workforce

Summary of a Workshop



Early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings offer a golden opportunity to provide children with a solid start in all areas of their development. The success or failure of ECCE to enhance children's development depends in large part on the individuals of the ECCE workforce. This workforce is sharing in the development of more than half of all children under age 6 in the United States, and nearly 85 percent of children before they enter kindergarten. Understanding the nature of this workforce is vital; yet, clearly defining its boundaries continues to present a challenge to the field.

In March 2011, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine hosted a workshop with more than 70 participants to describe the ECCE workforce and outline its parameters, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Sessions explored issues in defining and describing the workforce, the marketplace of ECCE, the effects of the workforce on children, and the contextual factors that shape the workforce. Presenters examined the challenges and the opportunities that exist in building ECCE as profession.

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Defining and Describing the Workforce

Defining and describing the ECCE workforce as a whole is challenging. ECCE encompasses a range of settings focused on education and caring for children of working parents. Within and across all settings, individual characteristics and work environments vary greatly. At the workshop, Richard Brandon of RNB Consulting presented a conceptual definition of the ECCE workforce, comprised of the occupation, sector, and enterprise of ECCE (see Figure). He

also presented highlights of a detailed description of the workforce, included as an Appendix in the report. According to Brandon, the 2.2 million paid workers in the ECCE workforce are mostly women and poorly compensated, but vary widely across many other characteristics.

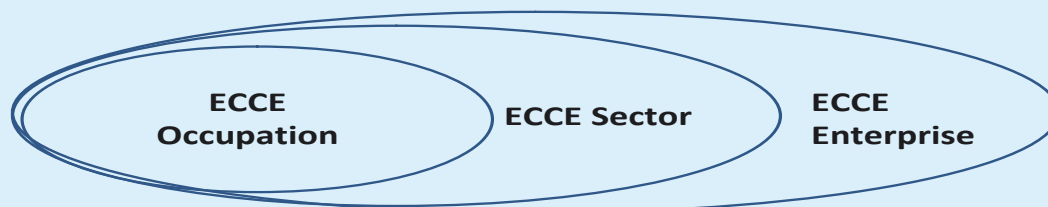
Brandon recommended developing ECCE workforce definitions that would enable comparisons with other types of occupations and industries using federal data systems. However, he and others noted the current limitations of existing federal data sources to provide an accurate picture of the workforce. Dixie Sommers of the Bureau of Labor Statistics described these federal data systems and discussed implications for the ECCE workforce. Harriet Dichter of the First Five Years Fund offered her perspectives on the lessons learned from the development of early childhood data systems in Pennsylvania, while Jerry West of Mathematica Policy Research used his experiences at the National Center for Educational Statistics to illustrate how various data sources can be combined to answer important policy questions. Many participants saw better data systems

as a critical step toward educating the public, targeting policies effectively, and determining the effectiveness of investments made in the ECCE workforce.

The Marketplace for Early Childhood Care and Education

Economic forces have significant influence on the availability, quality, and cost of the ECCE workforce. These forces have worked together to keep wages low, making it difficult to attract and retain well-qualified staff. According to David Blau of Ohio State University, market intervention will be most successful if it targets the relatively low demand for high-quality care. Lynn Karoly of the RAND Corporation presented evidence on the short- and long-term returns on investments for a number of ECCE programs, particularly for disadvantaged children. She emphasized the need to expand benefit-cost analyses to help policy makers weigh the most effective investments to make in the ECCE workforce.

Figure: Components of the Early Childhood Care and Education Workforce



Occupation: Individuals who are paid to provide direct care for or education of infants and children from birth through age 5.

Sector: The employers of individuals in the occupation.

Enterprise: All individuals involved in the ECCE sector as well as others whose paid work has a direct effect on caregiving or educational practice.

SOURCE: Brandon, 2011.

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Exploring How the Workforce Affects Children

Presenting analyses from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, Aletha Huston of the University of Texas at Austin described how teachers and caregivers can affect child outcomes. For infants and toddlers, a low child-to-adult ratio, small group size, and a high-quality physical environment were of prime importance. Preschoolers benefitted more when their teachers and caregivers had better training and education, more experience, positive attitudes, and non-traditional beliefs about child rearing. According to Huston, ensuring the effectiveness of the workforce “involves upgrading the environments in which people work, as well as upgrading their skills.”

Margaret Burchinal of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Steven Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) examined the impact of workforce qualifications on child outcomes. Burchinal presented evidence of the effectiveness of targeted training for teachers. However, she suggested, “Quality can be improved, when teachers receive carefully selected and implemented professional development, either during pre- or in-service training. We should move beyond a focus on whether the lead teacher has a B.A. to a focus on the content and quality of the higher education program.” Barnett reviewed evidence supporting bachelor’s degrees for teachers. Burchinal and Barnett agreed that teacher qualifications, or any other single factor alone, are unlikely to be enough to be effective for child outcomes. They offered their recommenda-

tions for a research and policy agenda to move the field forward.

Ellen Frede of NIEER discussed diversity among the workforce, emphasizing that high-quality interactions appear to matter more for children than whether they have a teacher who is demographically similar to themselves. Marcy Whitebook of the University of California, Berkeley presented data about how job turnover and working conditions can contribute to stress, and Deborah Phillips of Georgetown University presented new research on the detrimental effects of stress in ECCE for particular groups of children.

Building the Profession

Catherine Dower of the Center for Health Professions at the University of California, San Francisco presented a framework and lessons from nursing about developing a shared identity among individuals who work in a diverse range of settings, improving standards and entry requirements, and fostering means for improvement.

Sue Russell of Child Care Services Association, along with Whitebrook, described the need for clear career ladders where educational attainment is tied to compensation, and offered several specific policy recommendations. Pamela Winton of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill described challenges and promising practices in professional development and recommended developing shared definitions, cross-sector standards based on research, and a uniform licensure/certification program. Like others, she



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The Department of Health and Human Services

emphasized the need for rigorous research and attention to professional development providers. A final panel of discussants provided their views on the future of ECCE as a profession. Walter Gilliam of Yale University stated that “a profession has an identifiable body of knowledge and skills, but it’s also an identifiable body of knowledge and skills that most people value and most people feel they themselves do not possess.” The panelists emphasized that educating the public about the specialized knowledge and skills that teachers and caregivers need is a key challenge for the field.

For More Information

This brief is based on the workshop report *The Early Childhood Care and Education Workforce: Challenges and Opportunities* (National Academies Press, 2011). The responsibility for the published workshop report rests solely with the workshop committee and the institution. 

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