Toward Better Definition and Measurement of Early Childhood Professional Development

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The Good Start, Grow Smart initiative has asked states to examine their training and educational plans for early childhood professionals across both formal and informal care and education environments. At the same time, federal policy makers have asked researchers to help identify how to invest most effectively in early childhood professional development. Unfortunately, the research literature pertaining to the early childhood workforce precludes researchers from making confident and consistent recommendations to policy makers because the literature is riddled with a fundamental problem: poor definition and measurement of the early childhood professional workforce. The chapters in Section I describe the problems with definition and measurement and identify suggestions to increase clarity and agreement.

Chapter 2 turns from the issue of who should be included when defining the early childhood workforce to the problem of what criteria researchers should use to measure professional development. Across studies there is little consistency regarding measurement approaches, which hinders the field from determining what aspects of professional development matter most for promoting quality care environments and positive child outcomes.

The authors of Chapter 2 conducted a detailed classification of measurement approaches used in large federal studies and studies published in peer-reviewed journals. The authors characterize professional development as having three components: 1) education (professional development that occurs within the formal educational system), 2) training (professional development that occurs outside of the formal education system—e.g., through child care resource and referral agencies), and 3) certification (the attainment of specific state and local credentials with specified requirements). They note problems with measuring all three of these components, but the most serious problems are in the measurement of training. Although researchers often collect detailed information (e.g., the number of workshops, number of course credit hours, training hours), there is no standard method to summarize the amount
of training a provider has received. As a result, researchers often collapse the more detailed information into simple binary categories such as training and no training. Furthermore, there is a lack of agreement as to what the term training encompasses. One researcher may use it to refer to both community-based workshops and to higher education degrees in early childhood; on the contrary, another researcher may use training to refer only to community-based workshops. As suggested later (in Chapter 4), such measurement problems prevent researchers from reaching appropriate conclusions regarding training when summarizing results across studies.

Chapter 3 notes that it is essential to have accurate estimates of the size of the early childhood workforce in order to effectively determine how many professionals are needed to care for children younger than age 6. It is also important to have an accurate estimate of the characteristics of the workforce in order for policy makers to strategize about how to strengthen professionals’ knowledge and skills. Across both national and state data collection, however, there is a lack of consensus as to who should be included when defining the early childhood workforce. For instance, should estimates include only those working in the role of primary and assistant caregivers/teachers, or should estimates also include early childhood specialists, such as those helping children with special needs?

These definitional issues are compounded by the fact that researchers conducting state and national surveys may word questions in a manner that inadvertently excludes individuals in particular sectors of the early care and education field. For example, questions specifically addressing teachers may unintentionally exclude providers who do not self-identify as teachers or educators, such as paid friends and relatives or family child care providers.

Many states have collected data to estimate the size and characteristics of their early childhood workforces, but there is a lack of agreement in the categories and definitions used across state surveys, which prevents the use of state surveys to arrive at a cross-state picture. In addition, the authors’ review of the state level surveys indicates that some surveys have low response rates and that states do not frequently update the survey information.

The two final chapters in this section examine the links between professional development and the quality of care and education settings. Chapter 4 applies the Chapter 2 distinctions among education, training, and certification to the existing research. When the terms for the components of professional development are used in a clear and consistent way, the gaps in the existing research become much more clear. It becomes evident, for example, that researchers have focused on education rather than on training. This review points to the need for research to address different questions, going beyond the issue of “Is more professional development better?” to “What types of professional development are most effective?”

Building on data collected by a consortium of Midwestern states, Chapter 5 examines the links between provider-level qualifications and quality of
early childhood environments. The chapter authors use the metaphor of a bread basket to describe 14 markers of professional development. Their research indicates that at least eight servings from the bread basket are needed in order to observe higher quality in early childhood settings. They suggest that it may not be necessary to have particular markers of professional development but, rather, to surpass a threshold in terms of the total number.

The chapters in Section I clearly delineate the problems with defining and measuring professional development in the early childhood workforce, and the authors provide insightful suggestions for future directions. Chapter 2 suggests gaining further insight into the measurement of professional development by carrying out new analyses with existing datasets where the raw data on professional development were quite detailed. Another proposed suggestion, put forth in Chapter 3, is to extend the federal and state data collection efforts on the early childhood workforce to involve all sectors of the workforce, including those paid family, friend, and neighborhood providers who do not label themselves as teachers. Because so many children receive care from family, friends, and neighbors, researchers and policy makers need to understand the characteristics and needs of these providers in order to successfully reach and support them. Chapter 4 suggests the need to examine thresholds, or levels, of professional development, rather than continuing to simply examine whether more is better. Finally, Chapter 5 introduces the important concept that specific facets of professional development need to be studied in combination.

Stakeholders from both the research and policy communities need to continue the discussion of how to define and measure professional development more effectively in order to agree on what next steps need to be taken. In February 2004, the Child Care Bureau and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of the Department of Health and Human Services sponsored Defining and Measuring Early Childhood Professional Development. This workshop articulated potential future directions that have become the focus of a steering committee consisting of policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. This committee includes representatives from federal agencies as well as the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRA), the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Registries Alliance, Council for Professional Recognition, and researchers with background in federal and state surveys and administrative data. Specific steps being explored include an effort by the National Registries Alliance to develop a consistent categorization of the content of training, and NACCRA's development of a survey for child care resource and referral agency directors that focuses on the nature and extent of training activities. Such work has the potential to improve our estimates of the early childhood workforce, to increase our understanding of which components of professional development contribute most to quality, and to enhance our design of a career lattice that will facilitate the progress of individuals in the workforce.