

Preschool for All:
Issues in Higher Education

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Background & Summary

"If we make high-quality preschool available to every child, not only will we give our kids a safe place to learn and grow while their parents go to work; we'll give them the start that they need to succeed in school, and earn higher wages, and form more stable families of their own.

By the end of this decade, let's enroll 6 million children in high-quality preschool. That is an achievable goal that we know will make our workforce stronger."

-- President Barack Obama (Early Learning, 2015)

Obama has called for Preschool for All, but in order to enroll six million children, the country will need more than six hundred thousand preschool teachers, assuming a teacher-child ratio of 1:10 as recommended by the National Association for the Education of the Young Child (NAEYC, 2013). However as of 2013, there were only 352,730 preschool teachers employed in the United States (Dorning, 2015), leaving a gap of almost 250,000 early childhood teachers to be trained and hired by the end of this decade. While some preschool teachers, especially in home-based care, have had only limited education through high school, the majority of teachers have some higher education (Economic Policy Institute, 2005), and there's been a push in more recent years for an increasing number of teachers to have an associate's degree and even a bachelor's degree. Head Start, the federal funding program for preschools that serve low income families, added a new requirement in 1998 that 50% of their teachers should have associate's degrees by 2003, and then in 2007 that 100% should have associate's degrees by 2011

and 50% of teachers should have bachelor's degrees by fall 2013 (Head Start Act, 2007). Many states have already met or exceeded these requirements, and in the US overall, 67% of Head Start teachers had bachelor's degrees in 2014 (New America Foundation, 2014), but other preschool programs are also adding more higher education prerequisites, and given the trend, Head Start may up their requirements again, possibly such that 100% of teacher would need to have bachelor's degrees by 2023, thus matching the bachelor's degree requirement for all K-12 teachers. Given the increasing qualifications needed by existing teachers and the growing number of new early childhood teachers necessary for Preschool for All, institutions of higher education will play a key role in the success of President Obama's plan. High quality preschool education for young children requires high quality higher education for the adults who will teach them.

Educating that many new and continuing teachers will not be a quick and easy task for the approximately 1350 institutions of higher education (IHEs) offering an early childhood teacher preparation degree of some type (Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006). The IHEs will need to address issues with providing student services for early childhood degree candidates, as many prospective and current preschool teachers are non-traditional students who are older with work and family responsibilities. IHEs should consider how to assist students with financial & other access difficulties and how to make sure that articulation agreements are in place so that students can transfer credits and ease the transition between two year and four year programs. The institutions also need to think about the academic matters that will support the increasing numbers of early childhood students. IHEs may need to increase the number of faculty, and work to diversify faculty

in order to be more representative of both the preschool teacher population and the preschool child population. Also IHEs should evaluate their coursework to make sure that it's in line with the most recent research about how to improve teachers' skills to significantly boost children's school readiness. Several states and specific institutions have piloted different programs over the last two decades to meet the changing needs for early childhood teacher training in higher education. Looking at national research findings and examples from IHEs in New Jersey and California, other institutions can learn lessons in how best to work toward fulfilling Obama's call to provide 6 million children with high quality preschool through providing 600,000 preschool teachers with high quality higher education.

Financial & Access Considerations

While some prospective preschool teachers do go the traditional route of completing a degree full-time immediately after high school, the majority of early childhood students are non-traditional students in terms of age, courseload, or work & family responsibilities. They are also very diverse in ethnicity and language. For example, in California, the majority of ECE students are working full-time in addition to taking classes, with over 60% minority students and over 30% students who speak a language besides English (Whitebook et al, 2005). Early childhood students are more diverse than higher education overall, which is only a one-third minority (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011, pg 466). Successful early childhood programs often have various student support services in place to help these non-traditional students through their higher education path.

Non-traditional and diverse students often need financial assistance in college, and early childhood students can need even more help as their pay is typically very low. “An average pre-k teacher would need to spend more than one-third of her salary [on education costs] to attain a four-year degree” (Bueno, Darling-Hammond, & Gonzales, 2010). Thankfully in addition to regular financial aid available to all students, many private funders have created special early childhood funding streams. On a national scale, the T.E.A.C.H Early Childhood Project gave \$25 million to over fifteen thousand scholarship recipients at 318 two-year colleges and 165 four-year universities in the 2013-2014 school year (Child Care Services Association, 2015). In California, the Child Development Training Consortium has several funding programs to help ECE students, including the Career and Education Program which funds specific educational costs at 102 California community colleges as well as the Career Incentive Grant which provides reimbursements for educational costs at other California colleges and universities (Child Development Training Consortium, 2015). This additional financial aid can be extremely important to low income early childhood students. In one study of six BA completion cohorts in California, 95.8% of the students rated the financial assistance provided by the program as very important, and even though 60-100% of the costs were paid for by the extra funding, over 30% of the student would have liked more financial aid to complete their bachelor's degrees (Sakai et al, 2014).

Financial limitations are not the only limit to access for non-traditional students. As mentioned previously, the majority of early childhood students are already working full-time, often as teachers' assistants or in other early childhood roles. It can be difficult

for these students to come to campus for traditional classes held multiple times per week during business hours. In the California BA completion cohort study, flexible class schedules and convenient class locations were rated as very important by 97.2% and 86.3% of the participants respectively (Sakai et al., 2014). These factors were as important as the financial support in allowing the teachers to be able to fit classes into their already busy schedules. With these extra supports, students in these six cohorts had a graduation rate of 81%, which is more than double the typical transfer-graduation rate (Lederman, 2010).

Access was also key in the restructuring of New Jersey's preschool teacher certification and preparation. Because of the 1998 Supreme Court decision in *Abbott v. Burke*, all the preschool teachers in the 30 poorest districts in New Jersey had to complete their bachelor's degrees by 2004. A state-funded scholarship program helped to pay for the teachers' tuition, and many of the colleges provided non-traditional classes. "Nearly 60% of the schools offer[ed] classes onsite at local school districts, 33% [held] classes at community-based child care centers, [and] 55% of universities offer[ed] classes at satellite facilities in local communities" (Lobman, Ryan, & McLaughlin, 2005). Interestingly, 42% of the higher education institutions said that lack of classroom space on campus was a large challenge in implementing the new P-3 certification preparation (Lobman, Ryan, & McLaughlin, 2005). As "public colleges' spending on their physical campuses has stagnated" (Carlson, 2013), these off-campus classes can have a dual benefit to institutions of higher education – increasing access for their non-traditional students as well as possibly easing some of the deferred maintenance constraints.

Articulation Considerations

While access is very important for recruiting and retaining non-traditional students, institutions of higher education also need to look at how these students are fairing as they go along their educational path. These non-traditional students are often starting out at two year institutions, and then transferring into four year institutions to complete their bachelor's degrees. But without a clear course plan and articulation agreements between institutions, students might end up needing to repeat classes, thus spending more money and increasing the time to degree completion. For example, at one bachelor's program in California, "a significant number of students in the candidate pool [did] not have the transferable units they need[ed] to transfer into an upper-division level, even though they [held] an AA degree (Dukakis & Bellm, 2006). The issue of articulation and course planning is important both for two year and four year institutions. Margaret Bridges, who is leading the development of a new Early Development and Learning bachelor's degree at UC Berkeley, noted the difficulties in designing the upper division requirements for the major, when the required courses for the California preschool teacher permit are all lower division classes (personal communication, March 27, 2015). Some four year institution faculty have "wondered about the ramifications of telling students that the local technical college offers many courses that can be used at [the four year] institution at a fraction of the cost" (File, 2001). While creating these articulation agreements is essential for coursework transferability for students, faculty and administration may be "loath to accept credits from other institutions" (File, 2001) and stakeholder buy-in must be gained before implementing a new articulation.

Faculty Considerations

To educate more preschoolers, the country needs more preschool teachers – and to educate more preschool teachers, institutions of higher education will likely need more early childhood faculty. Early and Winton (2001) estimated that “if all [the preschool teachers] began their education simultaneously and faculty to student ratios remained the same, an additional 8,169 full- and part-time early childhood faculty members would be needed”. While this calculation is from 14 years ago, research continues to show that lack of faculty, in particular difficulty in attracting and retaining diverse faculty, is a significant issue. In 2005, nearly half of the early childhood programs in California had 100% white full-time faculty (Whitebook et al., 2005), in stark contrast to the 60% minority student population described earlier. Maxwell, Lim, and Early found faculty diversity to be the most pressing issue for four year institutions in 2006. Hyson, Tomlinson, and Morris (2009) include “invest in having sufficient numbers of full-time early childhood-trained faculty” as their first recommendation for quality improvement in preschool teacher education. However, the same study found that 60% of ECE programs were not focusing on faculty capacity building, citing budget crises, hiring freezes, or lack of commitment to the program from the institution.

Hiring more high quality and diverse faculty is not a simple matter. Funding is key, and unlike faculty positions in the sciences, does not usually come from research. The new UC Berkeley major is seeking outside funding from foundations for new faculty positions (M. Bridges, personal communication, March 27th, 2015). The changes with New Jersey's new P-3 certification were partially successful because the initiative

received funding from two educational grants “that were specifically targeted for the hiring of faculty in areas of need, including early childhood” (Lobman et al., 2005). For recruiting diverse faculty, general diversity strategies can be employed, from an initial needs assessment to specific wording in job announcements to an ongoing campaign to reach out to and stay in touch with diverse candidates (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014). Although even with money and good recruitment tactics, “diversity among [early childhood] faculty cannot increase until diversity among Master's [and doctoral] students increases” (Early & Winton, 2001). So the first step to a more diverse faculty might be to identify and support talented diverse students coming out of the bachelor's programs, who might be good graduate candidates and eventual faculty.

Curriculum Considerations

In the wake of the push for more education for preschool teachers comes the question of does finishing the degree actually help the children? For a while, the research seemed fairly clear. Whitebook's 2003 meta-analysis of eight peer-reviewed studies found that “these reports and studies all echo the same message: pre-K teachers who have at least a bachelor's degree coupled with specialized training in early childhood education provide the best preparation for pre-kindergarteners' advancement to the next level”. However, this link between bachelor's degree and academic gains was called into question in a couple later studies. Early et al. (2006) did find that teachers' education was linked to gains in children's math skills in preschool, but it was not related to classroom quality measures or to language gains. Early et al. (2007) looked at seven major studies and conducted 27 analyses, but only found a significant association in 8 of those

analyses, and 2 of those 8 were actually negative correlations where more educated teachers had lower quality classrooms. Even though the research seems mixed on the effectiveness of a bachelor's degree in general, policy makers are still pushing for more higher education and requiring degree completion for many preschool teachers. While some professors in higher education might think of the bachelor's degree as more liberal arts than career development and worry about rigor, faculty tasked with training the teachers can look to newer research about what aspects of degree programs and professional development seem to be the most effective in raising teachers' skill levels in addition to expanding their knowledge base.

In particular, innovative curricular designs that work to improve the teacher-child interactions seem most promising. Evidence shows that preschool gains in both academic and social skills are significantly predicted by the quality of interactions that teachers have with the child (Burchinal, 2008). In order for teachers to work on improving their interactions, they first need to have practice and feedback interacting with children. While most programs nationally do require practicum, surprisingly some do not, including 4% of associate's degrees, 4% of bachelor's degrees, and 33% of master's degrees (Maxwell et al., 2006). Finding in high quality practicum placements can also be an issue. Early and Winton (2001) found that programs rated placing students at quality sites as much of a challenge as finding full-time faculty. The new UC Berkeley program is considering professional development for the teachers at their on-campus preschool site, so that bachelor's students will have a high-quality place to observe and practice their skills (M. Bridges, personal communication, March 27, 2015). Also a new

course experimentally tested by the University of Virginia shows improvement in classroom quality and teacher-child interactions after teachers practice detecting effective interactions in video (Hamre et al., 2012). While real-life practice is still crucial, this course suggests a way to start building skills through online courses, which may be more convenient for the non-traditional early childhood students.

Conclusion & Review of Recommendations

President Obama has a strong agenda for early learning, which means that institutions of higher education must start planning and implementing strong agendas for the training of pre-service and in-service early learning teachers. The process must create both internal and external partnerships, and involve all the stakeholders, including interdisciplinary faculty and administration, as well as outside funders, early childhood employers, alums, and policy makers (Dukakis & Bellm, 2006). Other programs can be used as guidance for what's worked, but each institution or group of institutions, such as the University of California system, will need to look at their own mission and decide what to focus on in their planning. The institution can then start by doing an internal and external scan of their current program.

* Are their students receiving the financial support that they need to continue in classes? If not, is there funding available that isn't being utilized, or would outside funding or partnerships need to be developed?

* Are students able to attend classes conveniently? If not, are there options to hold classes at different hours at early childhood sites? Are faculty open to or resistant to teaching during non-business hours and off-campus?

- * Are articulation agreements in place between the institution and the other institutions that their students either transfer to or transfer from? If not, how are relations with the other institutions? Can an agreement be created first with the school where the most students go, rather than trying to tackle articulation with all other schools?
- * How is the faculty-student ratio and the faculty workload? Do the demographics of the faculty match the student demographics? Are there university-wide faculty diversity hiring initiatives in place or would the program have to work on their own?
- * Does the curriculum currently in place effectively train teachers to provide high quality interactions for children? Are the practicum sites giving the students good role models to observe, or do new partnerships need to be made? Are faculty aware of current research and using it in their classwork?

These are not the only questions to think about in the planning process, and the questions and priorities will differ based on the specific institution's mission and student body. For example, a research-oriented four year university might focus more on using the most current research in class and providing students with the opportunity to engage in action research, whereas a two year community college with a large Hispanic population might first explore offering classes in Spanish to provide better access for their students. Building up the early childhood programs in higher education will take significant time, effort, collaboration, and funding, but preparing preschool teachers to start young children off well on the path to school readiness and academic success will have payoffs for the kids and society. Obama's call for Preschool for All must start not in preschool, but in higher education.

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