

**FIELD OF DREAMS:  
HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PREPARATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS**

**Preparing Highly Qualified Prekindergarten Teachers Symposium  
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*"If you build it, they will come."* This paraphrase of the mysterious request in the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams* reminds us of the power of a vision—in that case, a vision of a baseball diamond in the middle of a cornfield. Its construction by the befuddled but dedicated Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella was enough not only to attract the spirits of long-ago stars, but also to transform the small-town world where the stadium appeared.

Within the framework of this conference, I have been asked to focus on pre-service education as a tool for expanding the supply of well-prepared professionals in the rapidly growing prekindergarten field. There is no lack of promising future teachers, or of current teachers who need further education in order to meet new expectations. But in order for them to come—to participate in and benefit from baccalaureate preparation—we must build something that will attract and develop the kind of educators that tomorrow's children require.

Strong consensus exists about the essential features of early childhood professional preparation (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). All of us know the challenges in making that vision a reality. But despite the challenges, we are convinced that the quality of preparation for those who teach 3- and 4-year-olds should be as high as for those who teach in K-12 classrooms. In many respects it should be higher because of the early years' crucial developmental significance.

When considering issues of professional preparation, we will do our best thinking if we keep our eyes focused on the children—those children in our country's prekindergarten programs today and in the years ahead. They, of course, are the reasons we are trying to build something in the first place, and their well-being will be the ultimate test of whether the building is worthwhile.

A system of pre-service education that will effectively promote good outcomes for young children requires innovations to support three components of that system: *pipelines*, *programs*, and *policies*. I will propose a few ideas within each component—not as fully developed strategies but as invitations for further discussion and analysis. Some have been tried on a small scale in the early childhood field, some are borrowings from other fields, and some are simply gleams in my eye.

## PIPELINES

We cannot build a better pre-service system without two pipelines: one of teacher education students and the other of faculty to teach them. Diane Early and Pam Winton's national survey of 2- and 4-year colleges (Early & Winton, 2001) reminds us both of the sheer numbers that will be needed and of issues about who is, and should be, in the pipeline. Below are some thoughts about how we might address the pipeline issues.

**High school is not too early.** Some successes have been realized in K-12 teacher recruitment by attracting future teachers when they are still in high school. "Teacher academies" for talented, eager, diverse high school students can link these students with early childhood higher education programs as well as with apprenticeships in prekindergarten classrooms (Recruiting New Teachers, 2002).

**Reach out to the undecided college student.** Many talented college students spend several years searching for a major and a career path. Attractive feeder courses for non-majors can emphasize both the intellectual rigor and the joy of teaching young children, especially if observation and field experience components are woven in. Yes, the low pay and working conditions in many prekindergarten programs serve to dampen the enthusiasm of some, but this *is* a field of dreams and colleges are full of dreamers.

**Nurture the associate degree student.** Articulation or alignment between 2- and 4-year programs is important (Winton et al., 2002) but so are new ways of identifying and promoting the professional development of talented associate degree students, including those who may not have considered going beyond a two-year degree. Linkages with local 4-year programs including shared courses, faculty, and student organizations may make it easier to picture one's self on a 4-year campus.

**Look closely at who's teaching children now.** Drawing from the experience of the K-12 system, paraprofessionals or, in many child care programs, non-degreed lead teachers are a promising source for the preK pipeline. The Child Development Associate (CDA) credential has set many early childhood teachers on a professional development path that already aligns with degree-granting programs in many settings (Council for Professional Recognition, 2002). Experienced and motivated, many of these practitioners would eagerly enter the higher education community if offered supports and realistic delivery systems.

**Take the long view.** Anxiety about the shortage of well qualified prekindergarten teachers can tempt us to turn to quick-fix solutions that will stuff more bodies into the pipeline. Yet if teachers are unqualified and under-prepared, both children and the system itself will suffer. It is possible that we will not be able to find all the future teachers for the pipeline immediately and will need more modest short-term targets--perhaps at least one degreed and certified early childhood specialist in each program rather than in each classroom. Yet our focus should remain on the long view. Research from studies of K-12 education suggests that it's actually less expensive in the long run

to invest in thorough professional preparation, in 4- and even 5-year undergraduate programs, than to resort to summer school crash courses and instant licensure for recent college graduates. Indeed, turnover among fully credentialed teachers is significantly lower than among teachers prepared with quick-fix, emergency programs—resulting in significant savings (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

**Expand the faculty pipeline, too.** Early and Winton’s study (2001) underscores the critical need for more, and more diverse, faculty in 2- and 4-year teacher preparation programs. Some strategies that address the student pipeline may help the faculty pipeline as well. For example, the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) has used foundation support to develop cohorts of diverse undergraduate students who aspire to faculty careers—bringing them to professional conferences and linking them with graduate student and faculty mentors from other institutions (Society for Research in Child Development, 2002). A similar approach could, over time, yield increased numbers of excellent future faculty in early childhood education.

We also need better support and career paths for adjunct or part-time faculty to gain the advanced degrees and experience that will prepare them for faculty leadership roles. And all faculty need continuing support to expand their own skills in content, pedagogy, and leadership. With the goal of creating expanded capacity to meet the higher education needs of Head Start staff, the Early Childhood Higher Education Faculty Initiative, funded by the Head Start Bureau, has already created opportunities for teams of faculty to experience high quality professional development through summer institutes and other supports (Early Childhood Higher Education Faculty Initiative, 2002). Such approaches might be strengthened and expanded.

## **PROGRAMS**

Many people react to the “BA” recommendations of the *Eager to Learn* report (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000) by asking what it is about the bachelor’s degree that confers benefits on young children. Research has not provided a clear answer, but there are probably several interacting reasons for the correlation between having a degreed teacher and having better educational outcomes. Baccalaureate-degreed teachers are more likely (but certainly not guaranteed) to be broadly educated people with a wealth of background knowledge, concepts, and vocabulary to share with children. They also are more likely to have strong reading and writing skills as well as strong, research-based knowledge and skills about early childhood development, curriculum, and pedagogy—the kind of knowledge and skills that a good undergraduate program can provide.

However, many higher education programs do not measure up to this image. Pressure to expand these programs both at the two- and four-year levels may add letters to future teachers’ names without adding the underlying knowledge that should be associated with the degrees. How might we strengthen existing programs and ensure that new ones are of the highest quality?

**Support and showcase the best.** As the Carnegie Corporation (2002) is doing with a full range of teacher education programs, the early childhood field might seek ways to identify and support a small number of flagship programs that agree to promote a common set of research-based standards and design features. These programs then become laboratories for innovation as well as sources of ideas and emulation by other institutions.

**Create ripple effects through consortia.** Perhaps using the “flagships” as the hubs, we might link groups of higher education programs into consortia of 2- and 4-year programs, including larger and smaller institutions and those that have been professionally isolated. Opportunities for interaction and collaboration would have multiple benefits for faculty and students, diffusing reform ideas across programs.

**Support faculty development.** Professional isolation and overloaded schedules have resulted in many faculty lacking relevant, up-to-date knowledge and skills. Building on and expanding the Head Start initiative (Early Childhood Higher Education Faculty Initiative, 2002), we can enhance teacher preparation by providing faculty with a variety of professional opportunities and resources. These should include those cited in other publications (infant/toddler curriculum, diversity, and disability studies) (Early & Winton, 2001) but should also emphasize research-based content and effective pedagogy in areas such as language and literacy, mathematics, social studies, and science, and in social and emotional learning. Much of this material is already available but needs to be packaged and shared with faculty in easily used formats. A major focus should be helping faculty to make the most of their time with students by integrating content in new and powerful ways, rather than simply adding separate courses on isolated topics.

**Strengthen and more closely integrate field work into early childhood professional preparation.** Boston’s former mayor James Michael Curley encouraged his constituents to “vote early and often.” Taking the Mayor’s advice, our future practitioners should be with young children early and often, throughout their preparation programs. Whether they are already working in the field or not, students should be experiencing supervised, reflective clinical experiences closely connected with course work. K-12 models of professional development schools (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education/ERIC, 2002) can be even more widely adopted in the prekindergarten world than they have been—delivering courses on site (allowing both college students and non-college staff to be involved in a variety of ways) and creating career paths for staff in preK programs who supervise and mentor future teachers.

**Support research-based innovation in program structure and delivery.** We still know far too little about the relative effectiveness of various models of professional preparation—and our judgments of effectiveness have not always given enough attention to outcomes for children (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Research and evaluation should be built into all new initiatives, and these must be justified on the basis of scientific knowledge about effective professional preparation. Distance learning and other uses of technology are only a few examples of

potentially valuable variations in professional preparation. Thoughtful expansion and testing of these delivery systems are essential.

## **POLICIES**

Beyond the Field of Dreams, good ideas don't get enacted without policies and other structures to support them. Here are some preliminary thoughts about policies to support the pre-service pipelines and programs suggested earlier.

### **Use compliance with national standards to improve professional preparation.**

NAEYC has newly revised standards and performance criteria for high quality early childhood professional preparation at the baccalaureate or initial licensure level (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2002). Its standards for associate degree and advanced graduate programs are currently being revised to align with the initial standards. Through the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), NAEYC reviews programs and determines compliance with Initial-licensure and Advanced standards; a similar accreditation process is being considered for associate degree programs with the support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. From a policy perspective, incentives could be created to encourage higher education programs to apply for and receive national recognition.

**Use teacher licensure as a tool.** State early childhood licensure patterns need to be addressed (Ratcliff, Cruz, & McCarthy, 1999). The goal is to ensure that licensure patterns do not create disincentives (and may create new incentives) for institutions to develop, and students to seek, degrees in early childhood education. NAEYC, the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), and the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) have a strong position statement on licensure (National Association for the Education of Young Children, Association of Teacher Educators, and Division for Early Childhood, 1994) that might, with repackaging and better dissemination, be a helpful policy tool.

**Expand scholarship support.** Again adapting strategies from K-12 teacher recruitment efforts, states and foundations might develop greatly expanded scholarship programs for those intending to teach in preK, especially in underserved areas. T.E.A.C.H. (T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Project, 2002), discussed later in this conference, offers an effective model on which to build.

**Look to teacher unions.** Others have noted the historic power of unions to create positive change, not just in salaries and working conditions but in the status of the profession. Higher education programs will respond to market demands for well-qualified and well-compensated teachers; unions can play a significant role in creating that demand.

**Develop differentiated staffing models in preK with clear links to higher education pathways.** There is consensus about the value of degreed teachers, and yet there is also consensus about the continued need for differentiated staffing in early childhood

programs. With national leadership, more consistent state policies could be developed, linked to child care licensing standards, national accreditation criteria (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998), and reimbursement procedures, to create incentives toward the bachelor's degree but also to build diverse yet coherent professional pathways for aides, assistant teachers, and other members of early childhood teaching teams.

## **CONCLUSION**

Any effort to envision this Field of Dreams comes to a full stop in the face of compensation challenges. At the same time that we move to raise the bar on teacher qualifications and program quality we are faced with shrinking resources and an apparent lack of political will (accompanied by an abundance of political rhetoric) when it comes to our youngest children. The belief that prekindergarten programs will solve problems of school failure is widespread and yet is not accompanied by a belief that these programs must be staffed with the very best-prepared teachers. Strategic communication with a broad range of audiences should be at least as prominent in our efforts as creative thinking about pipelines, programs, and policies.

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