

The Source of Child Care Center Preschool Learning and Program Standards: Implications for Potential Early Learning Challenge Fund Grantees

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Abstract

The proposed federal Early Learning Challenge Fund (ELCF) aims to improve the quality of early care and education programs by promoting the integration of more stringent program and early learning standards than are typically found in child care centers. ELCF grantees also must outline their plans for professional development and technical assistance to support these efforts. With the aim of informing potential ELCF grantees, this article reports the results of a statewide survey of 391 child care center directors focusing on the source of their preschool learning expectations and program standards. The majority of surveyed directors report that the state's child care licensing standards are used. Additional directors report that the state's prekindergarten program standards or early learning standards serve as their current source. However, other responses indicate that the terms "program standards" and "learning standards" themselves may not even be part of the current child care vocabulary. These results suggest that potential ELCF grantees might be better positioned to help child care centers incorporate stricter program and learning standards if they design varying levels of training and technical assistance based on the variety of child care quality "starting points."

Introduction

In September 2009, the U.S. House of Representatives approved legislation supporting the Early Learning Challenge Fund (ELCF) (H.R. 3221). If approved by the Senate, ELCF will award \$8 billion in competitive grants based on states' progress in improving the quality of programs serving young children through such mechanisms as integrating early learning standards and adopting more stringent program standards. Similar to their K-12 counterparts, early learning standards outline what 3- and 4-year-olds should know and be able to do after participating in preschool education programs. Many also are designed to improve the quality of children's early education experiences. Coupled with program criteria for length of day, class size, teacher-child ratio, and curriculum, these two sets of standards aim to ensure that all prekindergartners receive an effective kindergarten readiness experience no matter where they are enrolled (Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003a).

Making sure that all programs serving preschoolers can enhance children's kindergarten readiness is critically important. The state-funded preschool education sector—referred to here as PreK—has experienced tremendous growth over the past decade, with most states using classrooms in public schools, Head Start programs, and child care centers (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd, & Hustedt, 2008). Utilizing a "mixed auspice" approach enables states to take advantage of existing resources and facilitate parental choice. Yet, traditionally, these programs have had differing emphases on custodial care vs. early education (Ackerman, Barnett, Hawkinson, Brown, & McGonigle, 2009). Program standards for child care and PreK vary widely, as well, with child care centers generally being governed by less stringent requirements than those for PreK (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies [NACCRRA], 2009). Furthermore, no state requires child care centers to follow early learning standards unless the center participates in the state's PreK initiative and usage of such standards is mandatory (Scott-Little, Lesko, Martella, & Milburn, 2007).

Today, over 1.1 million children—the majority of whom are 4-year-olds—are enrolled in PreK programs in 38 states (Barnett et al., 2008). However, approximately 2.7 million preschoolers are enrolled in child care programs (NACCRRA, 2009). Given the gap between child care and PreK regulations and expectations, as well as the potential to compete for a relatively small number of

ELCF quality improvement awards, knowledge about which program and early learning standards currently guide child care centers could inform the work of potential ELCF grantees. This paper reports on a preliminary study focusing on this issue. To begin, we highlight the standards-focused aspect of ELCF. We then provide a brief overview of the current learning and program standards aimed at the majority of PreK programs, as well as the differences in standards for child care centers. We follow with a description of the study and its results. The paper concludes with suggestions for policy makers who aim to promote higher standards in child care centers as part of their ELCF efforts.

ELCF and Standards for Programs Serving Preschoolers

ELCF is part of Title IV of what is known as the *Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009* (H.R. 3221), which primarily focuses on college lending. Recognizing the need for child care and preschool education programs to coordinate efforts, the program will be administered jointly by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. The current House-approved bill gives states the opportunity to compete for \$8 billion in grants based on their plans to both improve the quality of programs serving children ages birth-5 and increase the number of disadvantaged children being served. States also would be required to work toward implementing an early learning system (PreK Now, 2009).

As part of their ELCF proposals, states must demonstrate how they will build on current licensing requirements to improve the quality of Head Start programs, child care centers, and public and private preschool providers. This effort would include implementing stricter program standards for teacher-child ratios, group sizes, and teacher credentials. In addition, states must explain their plan for integrating early learning standards into the instructional and programmatic practices of programs serving young children. State stakeholders must outline the professional development and technical assistance that will be provided to programs as they work to improve their quality and implement these new standards, as well (PreK Now, 2009).

Early Learning Standards

While *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) highlighted over 25 years ago the need for K-12 learning standards, the focus on similar standards for preschool-age children is a more recent development (Barnett et al., 2008). The relatively young history of such standards is related to policy makers' concurrent push in the last decade to increase access to publicly funded PreK programs. Putting such standards into place has been viewed by policy makers as a way to help ensure that individual programs have the capacity to produce the desired level of educational outcomes (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003b). Without such standards, teachers may rely on inappropriate beliefs about what young children should learn. This issue is particularly salient if teachers have not had specialized, college-level training in early childhood development and education. Even if teachers have participated in formal teacher preparation programs, the lack of clear expectations may result in the sense of being "adrift" in terms of what to teach (File & Powell, 2005).

The link between state PreK programs and the existence of an early learning standards document is not uniform. Twenty-four states providing PreK require all participating programs to follow their respective early learning standards. Twelve states with PreK offer these standards as "guidance" only. In two additional states, some PreK programs must follow the standards, but others are not required to do so (Barnett et al., 2008). The remaining states do not have publicly funded PreK programs but also have or appear to be on track for developing their own early learning standards (National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center [NCCIC], 2009).

States' early learning standards are not uniform in terms of their content and depth. Yet they do share common features. For example, each state has early learning standards that are specific to preschoolers rather than being aimed at young children more generally. Most are aligned to the K-12 standards within their respective states. In addition, the majority of state early learning standards focus on five key developmental domains, or content areas (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003a). These domains were highlighted by the National Education Goals Panel (1995) as part of its kindergarten readiness work. Key early childhood stakeholders promoted an emphasis on the wider

array of domains that are essential aspects of early learning and development, as well (e.g., NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2002).

The first domain addressed in most states' early learning standards is physical and motor development, which includes children's overall health and fine- and gross-motor abilities. Second is social and emotional development, or children's ability to successfully interact with their peers and with adults. The next domain is approaches toward learning, which focuses on children's initiative and persistence within the learning process. The fourth area is language development, which includes the oral and written forms of communication that underpin a child's early literacy skills. The final category is cognition and general knowledge and includes early math, science, and social studies learning (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2005, 2006).

Within the domains, some early learning standards documents have indicators to illustrate that a child has successfully acquired a particular skill. For example, in New Jersey's *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality* (NJDOE, 2004), a math learning standard states that "children demonstrate an understanding of number and numerical operations" (p. 42). This benchmark is then clarified by nine examples, including "learns to say the counting numbers" and "discriminates numbers from other symbols in the environment" (p. 42). New Jersey's early learning document also provides strategies for how teachers might assist children in reaching the standards. For example, another New Jersey math expectation is that "children [will] develop knowledge of spatial concepts, e.g. shapes and measurement" (p. 44). The state's standards document then advises teachers to provide materials to help children develop their understanding of geometric concepts, such as "items to fill and empty, fit together and take apart, and arrange and shape." They are also advised to "use positional words such as over, under, behind, in front of, and up to" (p. 44). By providing these suggestions, teachers have concrete examples of the types of activities that can help children master these skills.

Program Standards

While the relationship between regulable child care program elements and classroom quality is not straightforward, research generally demonstrates that such structural inputs help set the stage for the type of interactions that support preschoolers' learning (e.g., Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). Most states therefore also have specific PreK program standards to ensure that classroom practices and environments support children's development in the domains highlighted above. These standards often represent an upgrade to the licensing standards that are in place for child care centers. For example, 15 states require all publicly funded PreK teachers to have attained a minimum of a bachelor's degree. Some states require early childhood specific teacher certification, as well. Other states require PreK teachers in public school settings to have a bachelor's degree and in participating child care centers to have an associate's degree or Child Development Associate credential. In contrast, no state requires child care staff to have a college degree, much less specialized training in early childhood (Barnett et al., 2008).

The maximum group sizes and staff-child ratios in PreK also tend to be more stringent than those required by child care program standards. In New Jersey's Abbott PreK program, the maximum class size is 15, with two adults per classroom. In contrast, child care classrooms serving preschoolers can enroll a maximum of 20 children, with one adult staff member being responsible for no more than twelve 4-year-olds or ten 3-year-olds. Many states also require their PreK programs to offer a meal, health screenings, and support for parents and English language learners. A few states require kindergarten transition activities, home visits, or accreditation by such professional bodies as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Barnett et al., 2008). Child care standards typically do not focus on these types of programmatic elements.

In sum, states have established new standards for specific preschool programs as part of their overall efforts to improve children's kindergarten readiness. While the standards are not uniform in terms of content or which preschool programs must follow them, they generally focus on the gains that children should attain in five key developmental areas, as well as what program elements are necessary to support an educationally effective learning environment. The standards aimed at PreK programs tend to be more rigorous than those that apply to child care centers.

If states wish to compete for an ELCF award, they will need to outline plans for provider professional development and technical assistance as a means for incorporating higher quality standards. Given the traditional difference between child care and PreK standards and focus, it would be helpful to know which standards child care center directors currently rely on in their preschool classrooms. This article reports on a large-scale telephone survey of child care directors focusing on this issue. The results of the study follow a description of the methodology used.

Study Methodology

The study reported here was part of a larger research initiative taking place in New Jersey and was designed to assess the capacity of child care centers to participate in an expansion of the state's full-day PreK program for 3- and 4-year-olds living in select school districts. The results are from a telephone survey of 391 child care directors in districts across the state that do not participate in the program but would need to do so if the expansion were to be funded.

The survey focused on directors because they tend to be the administrative leads for the daily operations of child care centers serving children who are not yet in kindergarten (Hewes, 2000). While the experiences that children have in their classrooms largely rest on teacher actions (Howes et al., 2008; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007), their classrooms are nested within the norms of child care centers (Bloom, 1991, 1999b). Center directors contribute to program quality and norms by establishing the standards and expectations for teachers and staff (Bloom, 1999a; Morgan, 2000). Child care quality can improve when directors receive administrative training (Bloom & Sheerer, 1992) and possess core administrative competencies (Brown & Manning, 2000). Directors also play a key role in getting their centers "up to speed" when participating in a publicly funded PreK program (Whitebook, Ryan, Kipnis, & Sakai, 2008).

Sample Recruitment

We recruited directors to participate in the survey through a three-step process. First, we used a statewide database of licensed settings to determine which child care centers were located in the districts of interest and served children ages 5 and under. This process gave us a total potential sample of 444. Second, we sent a database of these programs to the New Jersey Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NJACCRRRA), who then added the names of each site's respective director. Third, each director received a phone call from their local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency alerting them to the study, as well as a follow-up letter from the first author describing the study's purpose and asking for their participation. The letter included a list entitled "Director Survey Topics," which, as the name suggests, listed the survey topics, as well as the "how many" specifics that would need to be provided (e.g., number of preschoolers served; number of full-time teachers). Fifty-three child care center directors elected not to participate in the telephone survey, which gave us a final sample of 391 directors—an 88% response rate.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred through a 6-minute structured telephone interview. The protocol was designed by the first author, colleagues from the National Institute for Early Education Research, and stakeholders from the New Jersey Department of Education and NJACCRRRA. It contained 24 questions, with the majority requiring directors to provide a "yes," "no," or "how many" answer. These questions focused on director and center demographics and characteristics. Three additional questions asked about preschool learning expectations, program standards, and curriculum. We focus here on the learning expectations and program standards questions, as well as the director demographic data and center enrollment statistics. The remaining questions will be detailed in future reports.

After piloting the survey, the interviews were conducted by a professional data collection firm using a computer-aided telephone interview system. All participating directors were mailed a \$10 gift card to a national bookstore chain upon completion.

To analyze the directors' responses, we calculated means and overall percentages for each question. We also performed cross tabulations and chi-squared analyses to determine correlations and statistically significant differences between responses for related questions.

Results

In this section, we report the characteristics of the directors participating in the overall study, as well as their center enrollment demographics. We follow with the responses that we received to the questions about preschool program standards and learning expectations.

Director Demographics

In New Jersey, the minimum qualification to be a child care director in centers serving children ages birth to 5 is dependent on the total licensed capacity of a facility and when the director was hired (State of New Jersey Department of Children and Families, 2009). As a result, directors may have a little as 45 clock hours of administrative training or, conversely, possess a graduate degree.

Given this range, the survey asked directors to report whether they had a college degree, and if so, whether their highest degree was an associate's (AA), bachelor's (BA), master's (MA), or doctorate (PhD or EdD). As can be seen in Table 1a, 18.4% of directors report that they do not have a college degree, and 7.7% say that they have attained an AA. Half of the directors report having a minimum of a BA. An additional 22.5% state they have an MA.

For the group of directors with any college degree, 46.5% report that their major was related to early childhood. However, this result varied by degree, with 79.3% of all directors with an AA having an early childhood focus versus 57.2% and 53.4% of BA and MA holders, respectively.

The survey also asked directors to indicate how many years they had served in this role at their center (see Table 1b). Their average experience is 8.3 years. Just over one-third have three years or less of director experience. An additional 31.8% have between 4 and 9 years of experience working in this capacity. The remaining third have worked as the director in their center for at least 10 years.

Table 1a
Directors' Educational Background ($n = 391$)

Education	%	Years (<i>M</i>)
College Degree Status		
No degree	18.4	
AA	7.7	
BA	49.9	
MA	22.5	
Doctorate	1.5	
AA, BA, or MA related to early childhood ($n = 319$)	46.5	

Table 1b
Directors' Years of Experience ($n = 391$)

Years of Experience	%	Years (<i>M</i>)
Years of experience as director in current setting		8.3
0–3	35.5	
4–9	31.8	
10+	32.7	

Number of Children and Staff in Each Age Group

Directors were asked to report on whether they enroll infants/toddlers and/or preschoolers in their center. Of the 391 child care centers participating in the survey, 82.6% enroll infants and toddlers ($N = 323$), 97.2% ($N = 380$) enroll 3- and 4-year-olds, and 78.8% ($N = 308$) currently serve both age groups.

Directors were queried about how many infants/toddlers and preschoolers who were not yet in kindergarten were enrolled in their center. Overall, directors report enrollment of between 1 and 95 infants/toddlers and 2 to 150 preschoolers. Despite that large range, the majority of centers have much smaller average enrollments, with the mean number of infants/toddlers enrolled being 21.5 and the average number of preschoolers enrolled being 33.4. These center enrollment numbers are typical for the United States in that centers tend to serve a larger number of preschoolers than toddlers (Ackerman & Barnett, 2009).

An additional question asked directors about the number of staff in their infant/toddler and preschool rooms. Centers employ on average 5.6 infant/toddler and 4.6 preschool full-time teachers and assistants. When combined with the enrollment data, these averages suggest that most child care centers meet New Jersey's child care licensing staff-child ratio regulations of 1 to 4 children under the age of 18 months, 1 to 6 toddlers between the ages of 18 and 30 months, and 1 to 10 or 12 preschoolers (State of New Jersey Department of Children and Families, 2009).

Source of Preschool Program Standards

The first purpose of the study was to determine which program standards are currently relied on in centers that enroll 3- and 4-year-olds. Therefore, the survey asked directors: "Are your preschool program standards, such as your group sizes and teacher credentials, based on any specific document or documents?" If directors responded, "Yes," they were then asked: "What are your preschool program standards based on?"

We anticipated a total of 10 possible answers to this second "naming" question. The primary presumed answer was New Jersey's child care licensing standards (State of New Jersey Department of Children and Families, 2009). The second presumed response was New Jersey's *Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* (NJDOE, 2003), which the state's PreK programs (located in both public schools and contracting child care centers) are required to follow. Child care centers that do not participate in the PreK program are not required to implement these more stringent guidelines, but doing so is permissible, as centers would therefore meet and exceed licensing standards. We also anticipated that some directors might cite NAEYC's accreditation standards (NAEYC, 2008). In addition, there were categories for "other," "don't know," and "refused to answer." In all cases, the telephone surveyors were directed not to read the potential answers and instead simply ask directors to name which document or documents they might use.

While our anticipated categories did not include "I don't understand the phrase 'program standards'," anecdotal information from the telephone surveyors, as well as the surveys that the first author monitored on the initial day of data collection, indicated that this category would have been useful. We did not keep track of how many times this occurred, but the telephone surveyors often needed to repeat the question, putting an emphasis on the phrase "such as group sizes and teachers credentials" to help define "program standards." It also should be noted that the phrase "program standards" was included in the list of topics sent to all directors prior to the survey.

Eleven directors were not asked this question because they did not serve any 3- and 4-year-olds. Two additional directors asked to skip this question. Of the remaining 378 directors, 52.4% report that their program standards are based on New Jersey's licensing regulations, 9% cite NAEYC standards, and 8.5% of directors state they use the *Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* (see Table 2).

Table 2

Source of Preschool Program Standards (n = 378)

Source	%
Presumed Responses	
NJ licensing regulations	52.4
<i>Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines</i>	8.5
NAEYC	9.0
Subtotal	69.9
Nonpresumed Responses	
No specific source	14.8
Teacher's discretion	5.6
Don't know	3.7
Other	2.9
Curriculum used	2.9
Do not have any program standards	.3
Subtotal	30.2

The remaining directors answered this question in ways that could indicate lack of awareness of the phrase "program standards" or the documents child care centers need to use to be in compliance with current licensing standards. More specifically, 14.8% of directors indicate that their program standards are not based on a specific source. An additional 5.6% cite an individual teacher's discretion. Just under 4% said that they did not know the source of their program standards. The directors in the final group cite the curriculum used or what we coded as "other."

We examined whether a director's college degree is related to reporting one of the "presumed" program standards responses (state licensing regulations, Abbott PreK guidelines, or NAEYC). As is displayed in Table 3, 73.6% and 74.4% of those having a BA or MA, respectively, cited any of the three presumed answers, in contrast to 60% with an AA and 58% with no degree. These differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 8.07, df = 1, p < .005$), such that directors having a BA or higher degree were more likely to cite the state licensing standards, the Abbott guidelines, or NAEYC as their source of preschool program standards. Those with an AA or lower degree were more likely to cite the nonpresumed answers of curriculum used, teacher discretion, or no specific source.

Table 3
Relationship between Director Degree and Major and Type of Program Standards Response (n = 378)

Type of Response	Director Degree (%)				Degree Major (%)	
	None (n = 69)	AA (n = 30)	BA (n = 193)	MA/PhD (n = 86)	EC-related (n = 178)	Other (n = 129)
Presumed	58.0	60.0	73.6	74.4	77.0	67.4
	58.6*		73.8*			
Nonpresumed	42.0	40.0	26.4	25.6	23.0	32.6
	41.4*		26.2*			

Note: totals may not equal 100 as a result of rounding. *p = .005.

In addition, 77% of directors with a major related to early childhood cited a presumed program standards answer (state licensing standards, Abbott guidelines, or NAEYC) versus 67.4% of directors that did not have an early childhood-related major. When comparing these differences using chi-squared analyses, the results indicate a nonsignificant trend within the data ($\chi^2 = 3.44, df = 1, p = .06$).

Source of Preschool Learning Expectations

The second purpose of the study was to determine the source of any learning expectations in classrooms serving 3- and 4-year-old children. Therefore, an additional survey question asked directors: "Are your expectations for what preschoolers should learn after participating in your program based on anything specific?" Again, if directors answered, "yes," they were asked the follow-on question, "What are your preschool learning expectations based on?"

We anticipated nine possible response categories for this question. Because New Jersey does not have a learning standards document specifically aimed at child care centers that do not participate in the state's PreK program, there was no "presumed" answer. However, child care centers may voluntarily use New Jersey's *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations* (NJDOE, 2004) for state-funded PreK classrooms, so this was our first anticipated response category. In addition, implementing a good curriculum can help preschoolers to develop the skills and knowledge benchmarks outlined in early learning standards documents (Frede & Ackerman, 2007). NAEYC also urges programs serving young children to use a high-quality curriculum that addresses the different developmental domains (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003). Therefore, the second category was the curriculum used. We also included categories for a district or town's kindergarten readiness guidelines and NAEYC/developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2009). Our "nonpresumed" answers for this question included a teacher's choice/discretion, "other," and "don't know." Once again, the telephone surveyors were instructed not to prompt the directors with any of these answers but instead to ask them to name whichever source(s) they use.

Similar to the program standards question, anecdotal information from our data collectors, as well as the calls that the first author monitored during the initial round of data collection, indicated that the phrase "learning expectations" was a source of confusion for some participants. Although the question included the phrase "expectations for what preschoolers should learn after participating in your program" (and thus mirroring the title of New Jersey's learning standards document), no concrete examples were provided. It is therefore possible that some directors may not have fully understood the meaning of the phrase.

Three-hundred seventy-eight directors answered this question, as well. However, in contrast to the program standards questions, a larger percentage (23.3% vs. 14.8%) say that their learning expectations are not based on anything specific (see Table 4). Almost 24% report that their preschooler's learning expectations are aligned with the curriculum used, while 22% say any learning expectations are left up to their teachers' discretion.

Table 4
Source of Preschool Learning Expectations ($n = 378$)

Source	(%)
Presumed responses	
Curriculum used	23.8
<i>Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations</i>	11.6
NAEYC/Developmentally appropriate practice	9.5
District's kindergarten or readiness expectations	8.5
Subtotal	53.4
Nonpresumed Responses	
No specific source	23.3
Teacher's discretion	22.0
Don't know source	1.3
Subtotal	46.6

Just under 12% report that their preschool learning expectations are based on New Jersey's PreK *Expectations*. Nine and a half percent of directors cite NAEYC/developmentally appropriate practice, and 8.5% report use of their district's kindergarten or readiness expectations.

As can be seen in Table 5, director degree trends positively with the likelihood that a director will give a presumed response (*Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations*, NAEYC/developmentally appropriate practice, curriculum used, and a district's kindergarten or readiness expectations) to the

learning expectations question. Chi-square analyses show statistically significant differences ($\chi^2 = 14.84$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) in the relationship between director degree and citing one of the presumed responses, as well.

Table 5
Relationship between Director Degree and Major and Type of Learning Expectations Response ($n = 378$)

Type of Response	Director Degree (%)				Degree Major (%)	
	None ($n = 68$)	AA ($n = 30$)	BA ($n = 193$)	MA/PhD ($n = 87$)	EC-related ($n = 178$)	Other ($n = 130$)
Presumed	30.9	50.0	58.0	62.0	58.4	58.5
	36.7*		59.3*			
Nonpresumed	69.1	50.0	42.0	37.9	41.6	41.5
	63.3*		40.7*			

* $p < .001$.

These findings suggest that directors with a BA or higher were more likely to report that their center's learning expectations for 3- and 4-year-olds are based on the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations*, the curriculum used, NAEYC or developmentally appropriate practice guidelines, or the district's kindergarten readiness expectations. Conversely, directors with an AA or lower degree were more likely to report that the expectations were based on teachers' discretion or no specific source. There is no statistically significant difference in the relationship between directors' degree majors and the reported basis for their preschool teaching and learning expectations.

Given that 23.3% of directors state that their preschool learning expectations are not based on any source, we examined whether this specific answer varied by director degree and major. Our results show that the higher the degree attained, the less likely that a director stated "no source." More specifically, 38.2% of nondegreed directors, 30% of directors with an AA, 22.8% with a BA, and 11% of directors with an MA report that they do not have a preschool learning expectations source. However, having a college major related to early childhood does not appear to make it more or less likely for directors to essentially report "no source" for preschool learning expectations. This was the case for 19.1% of directors with an early childhood major and 20.8% of directors who did not have a similar major. The implications for potential ELCF grantees of these results, as well as those related to the program and early learning standards questions more generally, are discussed next.

Discussion

The purpose of this report was to share the results of survey questions asking child care center directors to name the sources of their respective center's preschool program standards and learning expectations. Given the traditional gap in program standards and early learning expectations between child care and state-funded PreK and the opportunity to compete for federal ELCF dollars to improve early learning, such information has the potential to inform the work of ELCF applicants and grantees. Because child care centers will most likely need to implement program and early learning standards that are more stringent than currently required, we offer two implications for future ELCF applicants.

Triaged Training and Assistance

First, our study suggests both good and bad news regarding current level of standards knowledge and practice. On the positive side, 70% of directors cite New Jersey's child care licensing standards, the state's *Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* for publicly funded PreK, or NAEYC/developmentally appropriate practice as the source of their program standards. Combined with the child enrollment and number of staff reported, these responses suggest that the majority of directors are already implementing the state's licensing standards. Similarly, 53% of directors could name a source for their preschool learning expectations that "made sense" in terms of being aligned

with one of our presumed answers.

Yet the phrase “program standards” itself initially was confusing to many directors. In addition, 30% of directors stated that no source guided their program standards or cited an inappropriate program standards source (e.g., teacher’s discretion, curriculum). The phrase “expectations for what preschoolers should learn” was confusing to the directors, as well. Only a small percentage of directors report using the state’s PreK learning standards. Furthermore, 23% of directors report that no specific source guides the preschool learning expectations in their respective centers.

These results suggest that despite the general emphasis on standards in the state PreK sector, the extent to which this focus has penetrated the child care field varies greatly. Therefore, if ELCF grantees wish to improve child care center directors’ current standards knowledge and practice levels, it may be useful to propose varying levels of training and technical assistance. The majority of directors may need short-term, informal training solely on higher program and learning standards than typically are required for child care centers, followed by technical assistance in implementing such standards. A smaller group may need more intensive, explanatory training on the concept of program standards or learning expectations themselves.

Given the statistically significant differences in responses provided by directors with a BA or higher and those with an AA or lower, it may be beneficial for ELCF efforts to include formal coursework that leads to a BA for directors, as well. Our results admittedly do not demonstrate an overwhelming advantage for an early childhood major as a sole means for improving directors’ reliance on higher standards. However, because of the low profit margins in child care (Blau, 2001), this result may have less to do with directors’ college major and more to do with their respective centers’ current inability to afford implementation of early learning standards and higher program standards. Our survey did not ask directors why they relied on their current source versus a more stringent source, and thus we urge caution when interpreting our findings as an argument against an early childhood major.

“Starting Point” Research

Outlining exactly what this triaged training, college coursework, and ongoing assistance should look like is beyond the scope of this paper. However, to be relevant to and effective for individual staff across a range of early care and education settings, their training and assistance should reflect their current standards knowledge and practice (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). This is especially critical given what is known about the difficulty of applying what has been learned through any training initiative if child care staff do not have an educational background that provides a foundation in child development or early childhood pedagogy (Catapano, 2005).

Thus, the second implication of this study’s results for potential ELCF grantees is the benefit of pre-proposal research of the very programs whose quality will need to be improved. Having a clear picture of the current program standards and learning expectations in use (or not) will help to inform the content of ELCF-supported training and technical assistance, as well as the needed level of intensity. Such research also can map the geographic locations where different levels of support are needed to ensure that the appropriate trainings and technical assistance are easily accessible. In addition, by conducting ongoing research, stakeholders can document the progress made within child care programs, as well as how training and technical assistance should be adjusted to continue to meet staff needs.

Limitations

Although this study suggests the need for varying levels of ELCF-supported training and technical assistance, as well as research to ascertain child care centers’ starting points to inform the development of that support, its limitations should be noted. Our sample of directors was drawn solely from one state with a high-quality, publicly funded PreK program and may not be generalizable to other regions. In addition, no attempt was made to ascertain exactly how much early childhood-specific knowledge each director possessed. We also note that the teachers with “no degree” may actually possess quite a few college credits but not enough credits to graduate.

Furthermore, although directors received prior notice that they would be asked about “program standards” and “expectations for what preschoolers should learn,” initially these phrases were confusing to many directors. Directors’ responses might have been different if the survey asked more straightforward questions such as, “Do you rely on New Jersey’s child care licensing regulations to guide your program standards for such things as class size and teacher credentials?” However, given the tendency for self-report survey participants to misreport in response to sensitive questions (Lavrakas, 2008), rephrasing the question in this way may not have provided useful data. Yet this issue leads to our last limitation: the entire survey relies on unconfirmed self-report. It is possible that directors’ actual sources, knowledge, or the observed practice in their respective centers differ from the answers they provided. We therefore urge caution when interpreting our results.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study suggests that improving a state’s early learning initiatives as part of ELCF may require something more than a “one size fits all” plan. At present, child care centers will continue to play a key role in serving the custodial care needs of parents and enhancing children’s early education skills. The ELCF presents an opportunity to mitigate the traditional early care vs. education divide by promoting the integration of more stringent program and early learning standards than are typically found in child care centers. Basing a triaged ELCF training and technical assistance plan on rigorous research may help early care and education stakeholders realize that vision, and in turn, better serve this nation’s young children.

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