

Why 4-year colleges may want to rethink their early childhood programs ^[1]

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Over the course of about nine months, researchers sent nearly 11,000 resumes to apply for 2,772 childcare job openings. They were testing a number of hypotheses about how childcare providers make distinctions among candidates with varying work and education experience as well as personal characteristics. Among several major findings was that childcare providers do not favor applicants with a bachelor's degree over those with an associate degree.

Across 14 large cities throughout the United States, childcare providers consistently preferred candidates with some type of post-secondary credential versus their competitors with a high school diploma or its equivalent alone. But a candidate with a Bachelor of Arts was no more likely than a candidate with an Associate of Arts to get a call for an interview.

Why isn't an extra two years of education being valued in the industry?

Chris Herbst, an associate professor in Arizona State University's School of Public Affairs, said this tendency could be because center directors don't want to pay for the higher credential. Herbst said lead teachers with a BA earn about 47% more per hour than their counterparts who have AA degrees, and the bachelor's degree program may not give prospective preschool teachers enough of a boost in readiness or performance to justify the cost. In that case, the hiring decisions would be particularly rational.

"From a hiring manager's perspective, if the BA isn't giving 47% more in quality, the best business and child development decision is to go for the AA-level teacher," Herbst said. He conducted the study, "The Demand for Teacher Characteristics in the Market for Childcare: Evidence from a Field Experiment," with Casey Boyd-Swanson, an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Kent State University.

In anecdotal conversations with childcare providers since seeing these results, Boyd-Swanson said hiring directors have been frank. The material covered in BA programs for early childhood education simply doesn't make a candidate substantially more attractive than one with an AA.

This finding bucks decades of theory in labor economics and goes against common sense about the value of higher education. But it's not surprising to many in the field.

Marie Donovan, an associate professor of teacher education at DePaul University and a founding member of a Chicago consortium that brings together early childhood program leaders from two- and four-year institutions, said there is a lot of program variety across colleges. Associate degree programs tend to be more technical, almost exclusively preparing students for actual work in childcare centers. Bachelor's degree programs, though they vary widely, can cater to the learning needs of people who want to become childcare center directors or work in early childhood policy or public health.

What's more, in many states, bachelor's degree programs serve as a route to teacher licensure, giving students more preparation to teach in the primary grades rather than work in preschool. For childcare providers whose job candidates come from schools like this, Donovan said, it makes sense they don't value the extra two years of experience.

Still, she said brain research continues to reveal how important high-quality early care is, which is making providers and policy makers think more about educator credentials.

"In order to really make a difference in that child's life, you really need to know a lot about child development ... about how to work with parents, how to educate parents," Donovan said. "The two-year programs just don't have enough time to do that."

Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education and founding director of the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia, pointed to strong evidence that when teachers get focused training on skills that are relevant to their work, classroom quality and student learning increases. The problem is, there are more than 1,000 bachelor's degree programs that could prepare someone for a career in early childhood education and the quality of these programs is uneven.

Pianta said the movement toward microcredentialing might have a place in the field as policymakers aim for higher quality. Much of the current workforce in early childhood is undereducated and paid very little. Stackable, competency-based credentials could boost specific skills that have an impact on classroom performance and also lead to degrees that could help people ultimately move into higher-paid positions.

That requires building “relevant and rigorous skill-focused and knowledge-focused training,” according to Pianta. He calls it the critical issue in early childhood education right now, after years of focus on access has greatly increased the number of children in formal care.

“We’re pretty good on access right now so it’s all going to be about quality and impact, and the pathway there is the workforce,” Pianta said.

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