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The Early Childhood Workforce

by Julie DellaMattera



Julie DellaMattera describes how the strongest predictors of high-quality care and early education are the educational preparation of early educators, their continued training, compensation, and recognition of their professionalism. She presents information on the current patterns of educational preparation and poor compensation of early educators and offers recommendations to improve training and compensation. DellaMattera notes the need to also change public perceptions of those who work in the field of early care and education so that they are respected for their specialized knowledge. 🐞

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION ACROSS THE NATION

There is growing public awareness of how quality early childhood experiences influence later success in education, employment, citizenship, and personal satisfaction. President Barack Obama is proposing to spend \$10 billion on preschool programs to help states to provide voluntary, universal preschool for all children. He also plans to increase spending for Head Start and quadruple support for Early Head Start.

Children who have high-quality early care and education experiences are nearly 30 percent more likely to graduate from high school, about 40 percent less likely to repeat a grade, and 32 percent less likely to be arrested as juveniles. Every \$1 invested in high-quality early childhood programming produces \$7 to \$16 in savings for local and national governments, mostly from avoiding special education and welfare costs later in life (Schweinhart et. al. 2005). (See Trostel this issue, for further discussion of the economics of “investing early.”) Young children exposed to high-quality settings with educated and knowledgeable staff exhibit better language and mathematics skills, better cognitive and social skills, better relationships with classmates, and fewer behavioral problems, all of which have lasting effects into adulthood (Kauerz 2001).

Currently, there are about 2.5 million people working in early care and education programs across the country and of these, 97 percent are women. Center-based early care and education programs employ about 920,000 workers; 735,000 people are self-employed early care and education professionals, and an additional 153,000 work in other types of early care and education programs. About 431,000 early care and education professionals are working specifically in preschool programs with three- to five-year-olds (Herzenberg, Price and Bradley 2005). Additionally, there are hundreds of thousands of specialists and therapists who work with young children and their families, offering counseling, developmental therapies, health and wellness assistance, and dozens of other early childhood support services.

Ensuring that young children have quality early childhood experiences has become a priority of U.S. society. There are nearly 21 million preschool-age chil-

dren between the ages of birth and five in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Across the nation, approximately 55 percent of children under three, 68 percent of three-year-olds, 78 percent of four-year-olds, and 84 percent of five-year-olds are enrolled in some type of early care and education program on a regular basis, which translates to more than 12 million children (childstats.gov 2009; Johnson 2005). This current preschool population is the most culturally diverse age group in our country and includes an increasing number of children with developmental delays, disabilities, and English language learners (Lee and Burkam 2002.)

Government economists are projecting that jobs for early care and education professionals will grow much faster than the average for all careers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008a). To best serve this rapidly growing and diverse population, early childhood professionals must have a solid knowledge base of appropriate early childhood development, teaching methods, and an understanding of a wide variety of cultural norms. Further, something needs to be done to entice qualified early care and education professionals to enter and stay in the field.

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN MAINE

There are approximately 70,700 preschool-age children (birth to age five) living in Maine, approximately 5.4 percent of Maine’s population (Governor’s Economic Summit 2007). More than 48,000 preschool-age children in Maine have parents who work. Quality early care and education services are essential for these working parents. There are about 51,600 licensed early care and education spots. These numbers may suggest that early care and education needs are being met across the state. These numbers are deceiving, however, because it is not only parents of preschool-age children who need child care. Currently there are an additional 92,000 children ages six to 12 who also need care while their parents work. That



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TABLE 1: **Children in Licensed Early Care and Education**

	Early Care Programs		Early Education Programs		
	Center-based	Home-based	Public School-based Pre-K	Nursery School	Head Start
Number of licensed programs	778	1,830	125	212	208
Number of children served	22,300	19,600	2,100	3,900	4,000
Number needing care	140,000 (Birth to age 12)				

means that there is a total of 140,000 children birth to age 12 vying for 51,600 licensed early care and education spots (see Table 1) (Maine Child Care Advisory Council 2007).

Maine's licensed early care and education accounts for only one-third of all child care needed. The remaining two-thirds of all children are in unregulated care. State numbers reveal that about 23 percent of the children are taken care of by another family member such as a grandparent or aunt, or by a family friend, what is known in the field as "family friend and neighbor" care. An additional 44 percent of Maine's children are being cared for by ever-changing babysitters and nannies, older siblings, illegal early care and education providers who have not passed basic state requirements, or perhaps they are receiving no care at all.

While some of Maine's largest industries are having trouble finding skilled workers, lack of accessible and affordable early care and education programs for their children creates an obstacle for people hoping to enter the state's workforce. Women, in particular, find it difficult to get the occupational training and education they need to join the workforce. Many mothers are forced to make less than optimal career choices because they cannot find care for their children.

We know who Maine's youngest children are and we know where they are, or are not, being cared for. But who is caring for and educating Maine's preschool-age children? Children who have high-quality early care and education experiences are more likely to be

physically and emotionally healthy, have higher self-esteem, and achieve higher levels of academic and social success. In a profession where people work long hours, make little money, have minimal or no health benefits, and suffer from a lack of recognition, how can we assure that all of Maine's preschool-age children receive a quality early care and education experience?

Lahti et al. (this issue) discuss in detail what research has to say about the quality of child care, and they describe a new Maine effort to improve quality in licensed child care settings. This article focuses on the critical component of the child care workforce. The strongest predictors of high-quality early care and education programming are the educational preparation of the early educators, continued training, compensation, and recognition of professionalism and quality in the early care and education field. Better-educated early care and education professionals are more responsive, positive, and sensitive to individual needs; they offer richer language and cognitive experiences, and are less punitive and more egalitarian with children (Early et al. 2006).

EDUCATIONAL PREPARATION FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

The defining feature of a profession is the existence of a common core of knowledge. In the U.S., early care and education professionals do not share this common core of knowledge. The recent federal legislation set forth in *No Child Left Behind* calls for "highly qualified" teachers. The Eager to Learn committee defines a highly qualified early care and education professional as someone with a four-year bachelor's degree and specialized education in early childhood. Recent reports found that less than half of early educators have a four-year degree and, of those professionals with a four-year degree, less than half have a four-year degree specifically in early childhood development (Mims et al. 2008). Recent policies on improving school readiness cite studies showing that quality early care and education is strongly influenced by the educational level of the early educator. Yet, 30 states have no educational requirements for beginning professionals in early care and education programs.

In most states a high school diploma and little or no experience is sufficient for many early care and education jobs (Barnett et al. 2008).

If universal public preschool were made available to all 3,610,000 four-year-olds currently living in the U.S., we would need more than 200,500 early educators with four-year degrees in early childhood. Estimates put the number of highly qualified early care and education professionals currently working in preschool classrooms at about 27,780. This number is far from the hundreds of thousands that will be needed to offer quality preschool programming for all four-year-olds.

In Maine, as in other states, educational requirements for early care and education professionals vary widely depending on the job. In private early care and education programs, where young children can spend up to 50 hours per week, state licensing requirements demand only a high school diploma. One-half of all center-based early educators have only a high school diploma and only one-third have a bachelor's degree. In home-based programs approximately two-thirds of early educators have only a high school diploma and a little over one-tenth have a bachelor's degree (Governor's Economic Summit 2007). Further, bachelor's degrees are not necessarily in education or even a related early childhood field.

Interestingly, in public early care and education programs such as school-based pre-K programs and kindergartens, early educators are required to hold a bachelor's degree and certifications or licenses specific to their field. For example, in school-based pre-K programs, early educators must have a bachelor's degree in early childhood, a state of Maine teaching certificate, and an additional early childhood teacher endorsement, the Endorsement 081.

In addition, Maine has numerous statewide early care and education programs designed to provide support services to young children and their families. Educational requirements for these professional positions vary, but many require only a high school diploma (see Table 2, page 110). One such program, the Maine Home Visiting Program, serves approximately 5,000 families and until 2007 required only a high school diploma and training. Newly hired home visitors since 2007 are now required to have a bachelor's degree,

while those hired earlier with high school degrees are "grandfathered." This program offers information and support to first-time parents of all ages and income levels anywhere in the state. Other state-supported agencies, such as Child Development Service (CDS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), have various educational requirements depending on the specific job. Case managers and educational technicians may need as little as a high school diploma and training; social workers and child protective workers need a minimum of a bachelor's degree; therapists need a degree and specific Maine licensure; and mental health counselors are required to have a master's degree.

These varied educational requirements have implications for early care and education professionals, programs, and more importantly, for Maine's preschool-age children. A select number of early care and education professionals are required to meet high educational standards, but this requirement is for the minority of early care and education professionals and therefore has an impact on only a select group of preschool-age children. Prior to kindergarten, where educators must have a minimum of a four-year college degree in education, early educators are typically far less prepared, with fewer than half having a bachelor's degree. However, despite the considerable research evidence (e.g., Early et al. 2006), public policy has yet to fully acknowledge the value of well-educated, professional early educators. If a four-year degree is the standard for a highly qualified early educator, then here in Maine we have a long way yet to go before all children in early care and education programs have highly qualified teachers.

COMMON CORE OF KNOWLEDGE: EARLY CARE AND EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

The state of Maine, in an effort to improve early care and education experiences for young children, has invested much money and time in creating a comprehensive statewide system. This system addresses the important process of creating a common core of knowledge for all of Maine's early care and education professionals and offers cohesive early childhood

TABLE 2: **Who Is Working with Maine's Youngest Children?**

Job Title	Number of Workers	Starting Annual Mean Wage	Minimum Educational Requirement
Early Care and Education			
Early Educator: Home-based	1,830	\$15,700	High school diploma
Early Educator: Center-based, Nursery Schools and Head Start Programs	9,570	\$16,075	High school diploma
Public Schools			
Teacher Assistants and Classroom Ed Techs in Public Schools	8,510	\$20,630	High school diploma
Public Pre-K Teachers,	125	\$32,350	Bachelor's degree, teaching certificate, and Endorsement 081
Kindergarten Teachers	940	\$32,350	Bachelor's degree and teaching certificate
Professions Supporting Early Childhood Development			
Social and Human Service Assistants (i.e., case management aide, social work assistant, mental health aide, community outreach worker, home visitor [hired pre-2007], life skills counselor, or gerontology aide)	4,800	\$18,200	High school diploma
Child, Family, and School Social Workers (i.e., child welfare worker, family services, child protective services, occupational social worker, or gerontology social worker)	17,480	\$25,650	Bachelor's degree and appropriate licensure
Mental Health Counselors	850	\$26,690	Master's degree and appropriate licensure

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008b.

guidelines, training opportunities, and specialized credentials. These statewide opportunities have been put in place by various agencies such as the Muskie School at the University of Southern Maine, Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the Office of Child Care and Head Start to support early care and education professionals as they advance along a career path.

In the last four years, the state of Maine has created two sets of guidelines to improve early care and education practice and enrich programs for preschool-age children, birth through their entrance into kindergarten. The *Maine Early Childhood Learning Guidelines*, created in 2005, are intended to result in greater collaboration and consistency across systems by aligning practice across all early care and education settings and the early grades of public education (Maine Department of Education and the Maine Department of Health and Human

Services 2005). The 2006 infant and toddler guidelines, *Supporting Maine's Infants & Toddlers*, was designed to help individuals understand what to look for as a baby grows and develops and how natural learning can take place during everyday activities in homes or early care and education settings (Maine Department of Health and Human Services 2006). Both of these guidelines offer suggestions for parents, early educators, and other child development professionals on ways to interact with young children, organize their environment so it supports learning, and respond to individual differences.

To help early educators to better use the Maine guidelines and support preschool-age children's learning, Maine has yearly minimal training requirements for all people working in early care and education programs. Both center-based and nursery school early educators must have 30 hours of annual training; home-based early educators must have 12 hours;

and Head Start early educators must have at least 15. Public pre-K and kindergarten teachers must meet Department of Education recertification requirements.

To help address the annual training needs of early care and education professionals, the Muskie School, in collaboration with the Office of Child and Family Services and Maine DHHS, created a 180-hour state-wide training program: Maine Roads to Quality (MRTQ). MRTQ is designed to promote and support professionalism in the early care and education field and to advance the quality of early care and education. This core knowledge training can be used to meet national Child Development Associate (CDA) requirements, articulate into an associate's degree program, renew state licensing, or for ongoing professional development training. Another, more advanced training program, is offered by the University of Maine's Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies and College of Education and Human Development in collaboration with the Maine Department of Education. This graduate study, Training Opportunities for Personnel (TOP): Birth to Five, offers flexible training opportunities and emphasizes interdisciplinary, inclusive, family-centered, culturally competent approaches, and developmentally-appropriate and evidence-based practices.

In addition to supporting early educators, the state has tried to address the needs of parents, public schools, and community members by creating several new specialized credentials. These credentials will help to ensure that early educators have specialized training specific to the developmental levels of the children with whom they work. The first credential, the Endorsement 081: Early Childhood Teacher (Birth to School Age), is for pre-K educators. Endorsement 081 is intended to support appropriate early education learning experiences by ensuring that all educators working in public school pre-K programs have specialized knowledge of early childhood development. In 2011, all public school pre-K programs will be required to have a lead teacher who has both a valid Maine state teaching certificate and the new Endorsement 081.

In January 2008 another state credential was unveiled, the Maine Infant Toddler Credential. This credential, earned through the MRTQ professional development system, will be awarded to early educators

who complete specialized training that supports the development of children under the age of three. At the press conference announcing the new initiative, Attorney General Rowe pointed out that 85 percent of brain development happens in the first three years. Rowe said, "This new credential serves as a seal of approval of sorts. It tells parents that their providers have taken that extra step by completing formalized education, based on best-practices in education and child care today" (mobile.maine.gov/news/?sid=47963).

COMPENSATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS: TRYING TO MAKE A LIVING

Early care and education is the fourth largest industry in Maine, generating \$180.6 million annually (Governor's Economic Summit 2007). Approximately 44,000 people are employed in jobs that support Maine's youngest children: 12,000 in early care, 9,500 in public schools, and 23,000 in professions that support childhood development. There are a wide variety of early care and education careers, each with different education preparation and continuing training requirements, and with an even wider range of possible salaries.

Research clearly documents the correlation between recruitment and retention of well-qualified early care and education professionals and adequate compensation. Professionals who are more satisfactorily compensated in terms of pay, benefits, and working conditions are more likely to stay in their jobs and to provide higher quality educational experiences for young children. Additionally, poor pay and little or no benefits make it difficult to hire and recruit highly qualified early educators (Whitebook et al. 2001).

Jobs supporting early childhood development are varied. However, the one thing all early care and education jobs have in common is relatively low pay. In 2004, the median hourly earning of an early care and education educator was a dismal \$7.90, with the lowest 10 percent earning less than \$5.90, and the highest 10 percent earning more than \$12.34. Preschool teachers were averaging \$9.53 per hour (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008c). Cashiers at Starbucks make more money than many early care and education professionals.

In Maine, the highest paying jobs are in management, averaging more than \$79,000 annually. The food preparation and serving-related occupations group was the lowest paid, with an average annual salary of \$20,700 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008b). The average center-based early educator makes \$18,860 per year (Governor's Economic Summit 2007). Home-based early educators make about \$34,300 annually. However, after subtracting the estimated cost of using their home and out-of-pocket expenses such as food, toys, materials, equipment, and household supplies, the annual salary for home-based early educators is closer to \$15,700 per year (Marshall et al. 2004). For kindergarten teachers, the mean salary in Maine is \$44,390 with a range of \$29,000 to \$59,000 depending upon location, educational level, and years in the field. Mental health counselors, with a required master's degree, make between \$26,600 and \$59,200 annually (see Table 2, page 110).

...low pay, high staff turnover, and a dead-end career path are what most early care and education professionals face.

As a workforce, early educators' wages rank 596 out of a list of 647 for occupations. Early educators in Maine make less than manicurists and dog trainers (Governor's Economic Summit 2007). These low wages contribute to high turnover rates, which can impede educational effectiveness and waste resources spent on early education preparation and continuing education. Recent studies place the national annual turnover rate for preschool teachers at 30 percent, compared to 16 percent for parking lot attendants. Turnover in early care and education programs is second only to the turnover rate in the fast food industry (Jacobson 2005). In Maine nearly half of home-based early educators have been licensed for less than five years (Marshall et al. 2004). This constant shifting of early educators disadvantages preschool-age children by making it difficult for them to form attachments and feel comfortable taking the risks necessary to grow.

RECOGNITION OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS FOR A JOB WELL DONE

Early care and education professionals often get started in the field when they have their own children and are either unable to find quality care or unable to afford early care. Further, as there are little to no educational requirements to enter many of these jobs, early educators often have no more than a high school diploma. It is no wonder, therefore, that public perception is that anyone who has raised children is adequately qualified to care for and educate groups of young children. Both those working in the profession and many of those who create regulations governing the profession support this myth. This view that parental knowledge is enough is a major barrier to overcome.

At the national level, two early childhood organizations are honoring the hard work and dedication to quality that is needed to ensure that preschool-age children are receiving quality early childhood experiences. Both the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) award program accreditation to early care and education programs that complete an extensive and comprehensive self-study. Maine has only 49 NAFCC-accredited home-based facilities and 76 NAEYC-accredited center-based early care and education programs, or a total of 125 programs.

The state of Maine, in an effort to evaluate and recognize quality early care and education programming has created several quality rating systems. The data gathered by these rating systems may be used by parents to help them choose quality early care and education programs. One quality rating system, the voluntary Quality for ME (QRS) rating scale, is a tiered rating scale intended to increase awareness of the basic standards of early care and education, to recognize early educators who provide quality care, and to educate the community about the benefits of higher-quality care. Additionally, early care and education programs that receive a top-level rating are eligible for a higher percentage of state voucher reimbursement money (see Lahti et al. this issue, for further discussion of the QRS).

The second quality rating system is a Quality Certificate awarded by the Office of Child Care and

Head Start to early care and education programs that meet state-approved quality criteria. The Maine legislature passed a law that allows Maine taxpayers who enroll their children in a child care center or home with a Quality Certificate to receive a double child care tax credit on their state income tax return. The new law may result in a tax refund of up to \$500.

Additionally, MRTQ has created a career lattice and registry, a system that tracks employment, education, and training. The registry uses work and training histories to assign a level, one to eight, on the appropriate career lattice. This allows early educators to track ongoing training and educational accomplishments.

Unfortunately, 67 percent of Maine's home-based and 33 percent of center-based early care and education programs have no quality determination. Currently, only about 125 early care and education programs would qualify for the highest rating level on the QRS scale and only 6,400 children attend early care and education programs with a Quality Certificate. Studies have shown that 70 percent of Maine preschool classrooms were rated "less than good" and 70 percent of home-based programs failed to meet minimal benchmarks in basic care, such as always washing their hands after diapering or toileting a child (Governor's Economic Summit 2007).

DISCUSSION

The most effective predictors of high-quality early care and education programming are the preparation and compensation of early care and education professionals and their responsiveness and sensitivity to the children they support. To assure that all children can receive a quality experience, we need to find ways to encourage more highly qualified people to enter the field, and we need to find ways to support those already in the field to increase retention. To do this, we must first increase the minimum educational requirements for all early care and education professionals. Early childhood is an amazing time of growth and development and early educators with specialized education create high-quality environments that engage young children in the learning process. In Maine, as in other states, an increase in educational requirements has been slow to materialize. States often point out that

there is already a deficit in available early care and then argue that increasing educational requirements would further tax an already under staffed field.

Second, we must recognize that one of the most effective ways of ensuring high-quality early care and education experiences for young children and their families is to provide high-quality training programs and ongoing opportunities for personal and professional development for those involved in the early care and education field. In any profession, when one feels bored, overloaded, or unappreciated, burnout can result. Burnout reduces productivity and is the leading cause of turnover in the field of early care and education (Decker, Bailey and Westergaard 2002). For more than 10 years in Maine the Muskie School has designed and delivered a variety of training opportunities for early educators. However, many early educators are still not taking advantage of the training they need to keep them updated and rejuvenated. New training delivery systems must be designed: more on-line courses, more self-studies, more face-to-face locations. And, as with educational requirements, yearly training requirements should be increased.

Third, early educators must be compensated; their pay should reflect the vital and complex work that they do. A new kindergarten teacher, working 10 months, makes almost double what a new center-based early educator makes working for a full year. And, most early educators not working in a public school system have no benefits. Unfortunately, in Maine and across the nation, low pay, high staff turnover, and a dead-end career path are what most early care and education professionals face. Discouraged and disheartened early educators are not going to be performing at their best, and young children will pay the price in apathetic teaching. We stand to lose far more in educational benefits than we save by underpaying early educators.

One way to perhaps increase early educators' wages is to unionize the field of early care and education. In 2007, following a statewide vote of 790 in favor to 125 opposed, nearly 2,200 home-based early care and education professionals decided to pursue their case for joining the Maine State Employees Association. The reasons for unionizing are clear: to have more influence in the regulatory process, to have a greater say in rules, regulations and training, and to

obtain better health and liability insurance. Until this time, early educators have had little to no say in their highly regulated privately run businesses.

Finally, early care and education must be acknowledged as an important profession, a profession that is making a vital contribution to our nation's future. Only then will the professionals who work in early care and education get the support, recognition, and pay that they deserve. We need to change the public perception of those who work in the field of early care and education. The current view that "anyone can do that" must be replaced; those working with young children need to be respected as professionals with specific and specialized knowledge.

Maine is working hard to address and respond to each of these issues. There are numerous new initiatives, and many early educators are still trying to figure out how to make the best use of all that Maine has to offer. With early care and education professionals, experts in child development, and state agencies and organizations working together, we can make the changes that will support Maine's youngest children and ensure that they all have access to exceptional early care and education experiences. 🐟

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Her research focus is the underlying views of preschoolers' cognitive development found in current standards-based preschool policies and the influence these policies and standards may have on educators' teaching practices.