



# Targets for Strengthening Early Childhood Professional Development

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## Review of the Literature

- ◆ Presentation based on literature review completed for Evaluation of the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program for the U.S. Department of Education
  - Towards the Identification of Features of Effective Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators
  - U.S. Department of Education Contract #ED-04-CO-0038/0002
- ◆ Prepared by: Martha Zaslow, Kathryn Tout, Tamara Halle, Jessica Vick and Bridget Lavelle



## Targets

- ◆ Review identifies four targets for strengthening early childhood professional development
- ◆ Targets:
  - Areas where efforts are being addressed, or where the literature suggests efforts could be addressed, to strengthen early educator knowledge and practice.



## Targets of Early Childhood Professional Development Initiatives

**Strengthening  
Educator  
Human and/or  
Social Capital**

**Strengthening  
Practices at  
Institution or  
Organization  
Providing  
Professional  
Development**

**Strengthening  
Early  
Educator  
Practices  
Related to  
Specific Child  
Outcomes**

**Strengthening  
Overall Quality  
in Classroom  
or Group  
Setting**



## Targets of Early Childhood Professional Development Initiatives

### Strengthening Educator Human and/or Social Capital

- ❖ Increasing early educator educational attainment
- ❖ Increasing early educator training in early childhood education
- ❖ Improving early educator literacy
- ❖ Improving early educator psychological well-being



## Emerging Issues

- ◆ Findings from earlier vs. more recent research on the importance of educational attainment as a contributor to quality in early care and education differ
  - Several possible explanations, including who remains in early care and education with a higher education degree now vs. earlier; pressures on IHE to expand rapidly; more rigorous and consistent statistical analyses in current research
- ◆ Recent review of findings regarding training
  - Emphasizes need to focus on both education and training that does not provide credit towards a degree in higher education. This is underscored again in studies of early childhood curricula, where training is usually the PD approach



## Emerging Issues

- ◆ Literacy of early educators emerging as a potential target.
  - Low literacy among a portion of early educators an issue especially as supporting young children's early literacy becomes an increasing priority.
- ◆ Early educator stress/psychological well-being emerging as a target of PD efforts
  - Expulsions related to stress
  - Psychological well-being related to quality (Pianta and colleagues)
  - May be an issue especially among those working in low income communities



## Challenges

### ◆ Educational attainment:

- “Un-packaging” the labels and focusing directly on the content and quality of higher education degrees

### ◆ Training:

- Recent review of the evidence points to variation in effectiveness of training efforts, with about  $\frac{1}{4}$  showing no effects.
- Need to go beyond “none” and “any” training to describe dosage and characteristics related to evidence of effects



## Challenges

### ◆ Educator literacy:

- Develop approaches to support literacy of early educators, including components like book reading that are important in early education settings. Evaluate interventions to support educator literacy on both adults *and* children.

### ◆ Educator psychological well-being

- First rigorous evaluation directly aiming to reduce early educator stress is in process.
- Need to consider whether instructional time and child achievement increase when educator stress is lower



## Targets of Early Childhood Professional Development Initiatives

### Strengthening Practices at Institution or Organization Providing Professional Development

- ❖ Improving overall program quality in higher education ECE programs and training programs
- ❖ Aligning content of courses or workshops with research and standards
- ❖ Adapting IHE programs for nontraditional learners
- ❖ Modify approach to include all early educators and administrators in a site in professional development to create community of learners



## Emerging Issues

- ◆ Important recent work regarding issues facing higher education programs in early childhood
  - Concerns about quality in some programs. For example, about ¼ of EC higher education programs had NCATE applications rejected upon first submission.
  - Recurring reasons such as lack of appropriate placements or supervision during placements; lack of focus on early childhood development in course content.
  - Across all programs, issues of full vs. part time faculty, support from larger institution
- ◆ Evidence suggesting variation in extent to which course content aligns with research and standards
  - General concern with extent to which research is accessed in guiding higher education program priorities and coursework



## Emerging Issues

- ◆ Many higher education students in ECE are nontraditional learners.
  - Older students, working full time, family obligations, first in family to seek a degree, challenges in terms of academic writing and technology, financial challenges, need to coordinate with workplace on timing of courses and placements,
  - Emerging research on supports that can help them attain higher education degrees include cohort approaches and specific supports
  - There are strengths among this group of students that can be built upon, as well as challenges



## Challenges

- ◆ Need for evidence re implications of higher education program quality.
  - Are there differences in knowledge and practice of educators by quality of program degree is from (e.g., NCATE accredited vs. not)? Links with child outcomes?
- ◆ How to assure that courses and workshops completed by educators are informed by research?
  - Term “research base” is ubiquitous. Research by Hyson and colleagues raises concerns about whether this is indeed the case
  - Need for focus on this issue both re higher ed. coursework and training



## Challenges

- ◆ Now seeing descriptive longitudinal work on nontraditional learners.
  - Need also evaluations of which supports are effective and sustainable/cost effective
  - “Un-packaging” an issue here: Program elements are “bundled.”



# Challenges

- ◆ Community of learners issue
  - Potential of approaches in which administrators and all early educators participate together emerges as a theme in multiple studies
  - However, do not have systematic examinations of benefits



## Targets of Early Childhood Professional Development Initiatives

### Strengthening Early Educator Practices Related to Specific Child Outcomes

- ❖ Provide training on implementation of early childhood curricula focusing on specific content areas:
  - Language & literacy
  - Math
  - Social and emotional development
- ❖ Provide on-site follow-up support
- ❖ Use targeted measure of quality to improve practices in specific domains
  - Language & literacy
  - Math



## Emerging Issues

- ◆ Work in this area focuses on introducing early childhood curricula and on improving practice through targeted observational measures, such as measures specifically focusing on supports in early care and education for language and literacy
- ◆ This is where there is the greatest accumulation of evidence from rigorous evaluation studies, including the Preschool Curricula Evaluation Research studies and the Interagency Consortium on School Readiness Studies



## Emerging Issues

- ◆ Curricula have centered on early language and literacy, early mathematics, and to some extent also on early social and emotional development
- ◆ We have moved beyond the point where it is viewed as inappropriate to introduce content into early childhood daily activities
- ◆ But still learning about specific content and how best to introduce it into early childhood settings



## Challenges

- ◆ Focus on tools (curricula) vs. preparation for use of tools (professional development)
- ◆ Really do see progress here in terms of aligning specific elements of early childhood curricula with research base and standards. Use of NAS reports and NCTM standards.
- ◆ Variation in breadth or scope, with some PD interventions quite narrow (e.g., preparing early educators to do dialogic reading) and some broad (e.g., reading with children but also phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle). Important implications for intensity or dosage.
- ◆ How long does it take to have sustained change in practice? Studies do not always examine.



## Challenges

- ◆ There is variation in terms of evidence of effects of early childhood curricula.
- ◆ But not always clear why: Is it curriculum or preparation for use of curriculum? Difficult to distinguish.
- ◆ Need for a vocabulary to describe professional development elements in sufficient detail
- ◆ In some instances, lack of effects may be due to curricula or professional development already in place in contrast or control group.



## Targets of Early Childhood Professional Development Initiatives

### Strengthening Overall Quality in Classroom or Group Setting

- ❖ On-site coaching or technical assistance to improve overall quality, using quality measure to set goals
- ❖ Introduce comprehensive or integrated curricula and assure fidelity of implementation



## Emerging Issues

- ◆ Potential for overload of early educators with multiple separate curricula
- ◆ Growing acknowledgment of need for clear goals in terms of overall quality, for approaches that strengthen early learning irrespective of the curriculum, and of integrative curricula
- ◆ Emerging focus on what should be included in measures of overall quality.
- ◆ This is important because what is focused on in terms of quality will be important to PD efforts.



## Emerging Issues

- ◆ Widespread emphasis on on-site approaches to improve overall quality: coaching, mentoring, induction. This is a major emerging hypothesis about how to help assure that what is learned is translated into practice (and some argue for going directly to practice as the focus of PD).
- ◆ Beginning to see rigorous examinations of differing on-site approaches



## Challenges

- ◆ Tension between going into depth in particular content areas, such as language and literacy; early math, and need for integration.
- ◆ There is a need for direct examination of the potential for content in different areas to be mutually reinforcing
- ◆ Clear need to acknowledge that we have multiple approaches to on-site work emerging
  - How best to distinguish among these?
  - What are key dimensions of difference and how are these related to outcomes?’

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## In Conclusion

- ◆ Important progress in recent years in understanding characteristics of effective early childhood professional development
- ◆ But work hindered by focus on tools, such as curricula, rather than preparation on *use* of tools. We need a vocabulary for systematically describing and evaluating what is occurring in professional development for early educators.
- ◆ While evidence is growing for specific target areas of professional development, there are still some in which the research is very limited.



## In Conclusion

- ◆ We need to understand how professional development initiatives can combine targets for the greatest effectiveness. For example, an initiative may include: (1) coursework anchored in research (2) for early educator teams (3) followed by on-site coaching.
- ◆ Policy initiatives need analyses of costs in relation to benefits as well as evidence of effects.



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