

Barriers to Staff Participation in Training

Dr. Peggy Roanne Moreno
Institute of Excellence in Early Care and Education
Palm Beach Community College
September 15, 2008

Recent research initiatives have pushed workforce professional development to the forefront of early education endeavors. Research has consistently demonstrated that high quality early childhood experiences are key to realizing good outcomes for children, and the extent of education and training of workforce members is essential to providing good care. An education and training needs analysis for early care and education practitioners in Palm Beach County, Florida, was conducted in 2006. Personal and institutional barriers to participation in education and training are the focus of this paper.

Survey Methodology

The survey used random selection to identify the participants. A listing of licensed child care centers was provided by the County Department of Health. Eighty-four centers (20%) were selected using a table of random numbers. A packet including the cover letters, surveys, and collection/return envelopes were mailed to these center directors. The directors were asked to distribute the Workforce Cover Letter and Survey to their staffs. Returns were received from 37 directors and 595 staff. A second mailing to 40 centers (randomly chosen from those not selected in the first sample group and using a table of random numbers) was done, representing 40 directors and 438 staff. A total of 65 Director Surveys and 749 Workforce Surveys were returned for analysis.

Professional Development

The survey yielded much data that can be used to design a professional development system, modify it, and measure the success in meeting the needs of the community for training and education. A baseline is needed on the number of practitioners already holding credentials and/or degrees in early childhood education. The survey yielded an estimate as follows;

- 85% (598) of the responding practitioners reported holding a high school diploma or GED
- 77% (549) of the responding practitioners reported holding a 40-hour certificate
- 48% (341) had the CDAE
- 15% (103) held the CDA National
- 4% (31) reported holding an AS degree in early childhood or a related field
- 5.5% (38) reported holding a Bachelor's degree in early childhood or a related field

The percentage holding a high school diploma (85%) may be overestimated. Information was not gathered on the type of diploma and the country and/or accreditation status of the issuing institutions. Community colleges do not accept all high school diplomas when

determining admission. This impacts access to both CDA and Associate degree programs at the community college level. It is likely that the percentage of the workforce not holding a “qualified” high school diploma is greater than 15%..

Education Goals

Practitioners were asked to select one immediate education goal that best reflected their ambitions:

- 30% (211) had no immediate education goal
- 3% (19) selected a high school diploma
- 9% (62) selected the 40-hour certificate (high school diploma is not a prerequisite)
- 20% (136) selected the CDAE or National CDA
- 12% (84) selected the associate’s degree in early childhood
- 6% (42) selected a bachelor’s degree in early childhood

Almost a third of the group had no immediate education goal. The CDA is the first step on an articulated career path, and CDA coursework was the most frequently selected immediate education goal. This was followed by the AS degree and then the Bachelor’s degree. It appears that despite the fact that 30% of the practitioners had no immediate education goal, a substantial number do have aspirations for following a formal career path in early childhood. The 30% who have no immediate formal education goals may be enticed to follow the informal career path that is now being developed.

Barrier: Low Wages

Many barriers have been identified that affect access to both formal and informal education. The most frequently suggested barrier is wages and benefits. The median hourly wage for a child care practitioner in Palm Beach County is \$9.00. Almost 1/3 of the workforce does not have health insurance. Twenty percent of the directors said CDAs wanted too high a wage, and 31% reported no raise in wage for obtaining a CDA; 37% reported no increase for obtaining an Associates degree. It does not, therefore, come as a surprise that lack of incentive in terms of pay and promotion was identified as a barrier in Palm Beach County to obtaining further education.

It is surprising, though, that this was not the most frequently identified barrier. For practitioners, this was the fourth most frequently selected barrier, and then it was identified as a barrier by only 16% (89) of the respondents. The picture was somewhat different for directors. For directors, this was the second most frequently selected barrier, and it was selected by 54% (32) of the respondents as a major barrier.

On the other side of the coin, 414 or 59.8% of the practitioners indicated that increased earnings in the future would cover their investment in education. Almost 41% (282) indicated they would be more likely to seek additional education if they were assured a raise or bonus. Almost 35% (239) believed they would receive a substantial raise from

their employer if they got more education, and 22% (152) indicated they would seek a different job if they got more education. Contrast this with the 20% of the directors who said CDAs wanted too high a wage, and the 31% who reported no raise in wage for obtaining a CDA, and the 37% who reported no increase for obtaining an Associates degree. Expanding WAGE\$, a salary supplement program, should be explored. In addition, director training is needed in the development of salary schedules and job descriptions that link education to salary.

Barrier: Paying for Education

The most frequently selected barrier to following a career path for practitioners was lack of sufficient funds to pay for it. Approximately 40% (226) of the respondents selected this choice. Approximately 69% (451) of the respondents indicated they would need full financial aid in order to participate in higher education opportunities. By contrast, only 33% (20) of the directors said this was as a major barrier, and the rank was 8th out of 11 choices.

Palm Beach County has two scholarship programs for early childhood practitioners: TEACH and SEEK. Practitioners were asked how they would pay for their education, and 169 selected TEACH and 238 selected SEEK. Respondents could check more than one source, so this is not an unduplicated count. Directors, in contrast, were not as likely to select TEACH or SEEK as a way to support the practitioner. When Directors were asked how they supported employee's educational goals, "participate in TEACH" was ranked last. A little over 25% (17) of the directors responding to the survey participated in TEACH; almost 50% (31) used SEEK, but still SEEK was ranked fourth out of six choices. Possibly, SEEK was selected more often because it pays for both informal and formal training. TEACH pays only for formal training following the articulated career path. However, TEACH is available to all early childhood practitioners pursuing a formal career path. SEEK is available to a subset of community providers.

The TEACH Program provides an opportunity for adult learners already working in the early education field to access educational opportunities and receive counseling, academic advising, resource and referral, and application assistance. It also provides salary increases for practitioners reaching established benchmarks, and encourages retention. This survey revealed that directors of faith-based programs in particular were less likely than directors of other types of programs to participate in TEACH (and SEEK). This has implications for marketing and policy development.

Barrier: Lack of Personal Time

Almost 37% (204) of the practitioners selected "lack of personal time" as a barrier preventing them from acquiring further education. This was the second most frequently selected choice, and fell just behind "lack of sufficient funds," the most frequently identified barrier. Four percent of the respondents (23) also selected health issues as a barrier, and 14% (80) selected family issues. By contrast, when directors were asked to select barriers to staff participation in training and education, "conflicts with family/home

demands” was ranked last in a list with 11 choices. The disconnect between director and practitioner needs further exploration.

Other Barriers

“Lack of sufficient funds” (identified by 226 respondents) and “lack of personal time” (identified by 204 respondents) were clearly the two greatest obstacles to acquiring further education from the perspective of the workforce. The next most frequently selected barrier, “classes not available at times I can attend,” was selected by 110 respondents. Barriers are below arranged from most to least frequently selected.

- 40% selected lack of sufficient funds to pay the cost (226)
- 37% selected lack of personal time (204)
- 20% selected classes not available at times I can attend (110)
- 16% selected no incentives in terms of pay and promotion (89)
- 14% selected family issues (80)
- 13% selected classes not available at locations I can attend (76)
- 11% selected lack of computer skills (61)
- 7% selected not fluent in English (41)
- 7% selected lack of transportation (38)
- 7% selected lack of access to a computer (38)
- 6.6% selected difficulty in getting information about educational opportunities (37)
- 4% selected health issues (23)

The selection of “classes not available at times I can attend” is interesting. Almost all classes are offered on the weekends or the evenings. This response could be confounded with “lack of personal time.” Perhaps, this indicates that these practitioners want classes during the day, and release time from work to attend. Other studies have cited lack of substitutes as a major barrier to participation in training and education. In this survey, lack of substitutes was selected as a major barrier by 27% (16) of the directors. This could reflect the fact that most classes are offered evenings and weekends. Should classes be offered during work time? Can substitutes be found? What effect would this have on continuity of care for children? This is an area to explore in future focus groups and surveys.

Barriers: Director Knowledge, Skills, and Perceptions

Sixty-five directors were randomly selected from 406 licensed child care facilities to complete a survey on professional development of staff. Ten others participated in a focus group. Results indicate directors are aware of the importance of professional development, but prefer training through workshops to an articulated career path.

Directors appeared to value training, but a career pathway for practitioners is not important. Only three directors rated linking teacher training to a career pathway as very

important; 18 said it was somewhat important, but 43 said it was not at all important. When asked how they supported employees' education goals, "pay workshop fees" was the most frequently checked choice. "Participate in TEACH," a scholarship program that pays for coursework leading to a CDA credential and the AS degree in early childhood, was the least frequently selected choice.

A little over half of the respondents indicated that they supported employee's educational goals by providing career planning. At the same time in answer to a question asking them to select barriers to training from 11 choices, 35 said a major barrier was "not knowing what education and training was available;" 18 indicated that this was a minor barrier, and 7 said it was not a barrier. In addition, 25 directors indicated that "difficulty locating appropriate training" was a major barrier to training; 23 said it was a minor barrier; and 13 said it was not a barrier. This was clarified in the focus group where the directors were unified in their request for one central calendar/website that would consolidate all of the training/education available. Knowing available training and understanding the career path for early childhood practitioners would be prerequisite to providing career planning for staff.

Directors also were concerned that training was of poor quality. Almost half selected this as a major barrier. Directors also felt that it was not relevant, and again almost half selected this as a major barrier. The focus group participants indicated that training should be current, age-specific, practical, and applicable to the field. They also requested that training be hands-on and that it result in changes in behavior at the worksite.

In summary, directors indicated that:

- Training is valuable.
- Training is of poor quality.
- Training is not relevant.
- Career pathway for practitioners is not important.
- Paying for workshops is the first choice in supporting staff training (71%)
- Providing career planning for staff is the third choice in supporting staff (55%)
- Not knowing what education and training is available is a major barrier (59%)
- Difficulty locating appropriate training is a major barrier (41%)

Results indicate that Palm Beach County is moving in the correct direction by establishing training and trainer registries, developing a set of agreed-upon core competencies for early care and education practitioners, and initiating a trainer and trainee quality assurance system. Directors need information on career paths, scholarships, the practitioner registry and training/education calendar. They could benefit from mentoring in the provision of career planning to staff.

Ability to Understand, Read, and Write in English

While 115 of the respondents indicated their education had been in another country, 41 ranked “not fluent in English” as a major barrier to education. However, 71 indicated classes in Spanish were preferred to classes in English. When all respondents were asked to rate their ability to read and write in English, 27 reported low to very low ability and another 51 said moderate to good ability. When asked to rate ability to speak English, 23 reported low to very low ability; 140 reported moderate to good ability. A person’s ability to read, write, and speak their original language was not assessed.

A more in-depth assessment of this population is needed. What is clear is that English is not the first language for 25% or more of the workforce in early care and education in Palm Beach County. While these practitioners may have some ability to speak English, reading and writing skills are less polished. These practitioners as a whole would prefer instruction in their first language, even when they have some facility in English.

Conclusion

The needs assessment can provide guidance for the development and implementation of a professional development system in Palm Beach County. Suggestions are made for future survey projects.