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Strengthening the Knowledge, Skills, and Professional Identity of Early Educators

The Impact of the California SEIU Early Educator Apprenticeship Program Executive Summary

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Educational requirements for early care and education (ECE) professionals have historically been inconsistent across settings and funding streams (e.g., public preschool, Head Start, family-based and center-based child care).¹ Concurrently, educational expectations are rising across the field as a growing body of research demonstrates the critical importance of early educator knowledge and skills in promoting children's development and learning.² Ensuring that early educators have the skills, knowledge and experiences necessary to implement effective practices and the access to education that provides wage improvement remains critical to the field.

Traditionally, across occupations the apprenticeship model combines classroom-based learning and on-the-job training while allowing workers to continue to earn wages and incur few out-of-pocket expenses, as the majority of the costs are incurred by the employer or covered by federal or state grant funding. Additionally, apprenticeship programs typically require increased wages upon achievement of certain criteria or milestones. The apprenticeship model in recent years has gained favor with ECE quality improvement leaders and policymakers.

Background

A number of apprenticeship programs, collectively referred to as the SEIU Early Educator Apprenticeships, have recently been undertaken in California. The programs were supported by two California Apprenticeship Initiative grants, four Workforce Accelerator Fund grants, and in-kind donations from individual program sponsors. The program sponsors contracted with local institutions of higher education to offer special courses targeted toward current early educators and individuals new to the ECE field, and provided apprentices with stipends or wage increases associated with meeting certain criteria. All apprentices across programs received a set of academic and professional supports throughout their participation in the programs, including ongoing coaching and mentoring, tutoring, individual advising, and courses located in community settings. Apprentices also received financial assistance for Child Development Permit application fees, participated in no-cost college courses, and received textbooks and laptops used in their coursework.

1 Whitebook, M., McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., & Edwards, B. (2018). *Early Childhood Workforce Index – 2018*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from <http://cscce.berkeley.edu/topic/early-childhood-workforce-index/2018/>.

2 Limardo, C., Hill, S., Stadd, J., & Zimmer, T. (2016). *Accessing career pathways to education and training for early care and education (ECE) professionals*. Bethesda, Maryland: Manhattan Strategy Group. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/pathways/elcpi-accessibility-ada.pdf>

Table 1
Overview of Early Educator Apprenticeship Program Information

Type of Program	Early Educator Center-Based Apprenticeship Program	Family Child Care On-the-Job Training Program	Head Start Apprenticeship Program	Expanded Head Start Apprenticeship Program
Sites(s)	Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF)	Child Care Resource Center, MAOF, Bananas	YMCA of the East Bay	
Location(s)	Los Angeles	San Fernando Valley, Antelope Valley, Los Angeles, and Alameda County	Alameda County	
Workforce Sector	Teachers at state-funded child care centers	Licensed family child care providers	Unemployed Head Start parents	Head Start teaching staff
Number of Enrollees	56	183	119	
Permit & Degree Goals	Associate Teacher Permit and Teacher Permit	Assistant Permit, Associate Teacher Permit, and Teacher Permit	Associate Teacher Permit	AA degree and Teacher Permit, BA degree and Site Supervisor Permit
Financial Benefits	Hourly wage increases of between \$0.19 and \$1.09 based on attaining ascending Permit levels, number of hours worked, and tenure in role	Monthly stipend based upon meeting work and coursework requirements; ranging from \$100-\$450/month	Hourly wage increases of between \$0.29 and \$1.87 based on promotions/ higher positions after attaining ascending permit levels, number of hours worked, and tenure in role	

Methods

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) employed a mixed methods approach to evaluate the apprenticeship program. The data collection took place between January and April, 2019. The evaluation consisted of online surveys of previous and active apprentices; focus group discussions with active apprentices; and interviews and focus group discussions with key program informants.

A total of 101 apprentices responded to the online survey, representing a 38 percent response rate. A total of 26 active apprentices participated in five focus group discussions. Two of the focus group discussions consisted of Head Start providers, two included family child care providers, and one included center-based providers. A total of 21 key program informants participated in six one-on-one interviews and four focus group discussions. Key program informants included child care center, Head Start, and apprenticeship program directors and apprenticeship program staff (e.g., academic advisors, success coordinators), as well as community college faculty and deans.

Specifically, the evaluation sought to answer the following research questions:

- Who has participated/is participating in these programs (demographic characteristics, previous education, and employment experience)?
- What impact(s) do participants perceive as a result of their participation in the program regarding their: (a) knowledge, skills, and practice; (b) commitment to the field of ECE; (c) commitment to their current place of work; (d) career goals and aspirations; (e) personal/family well-being?
- What impact do sponsors/employers perceive as a result of their implementation of these programs?
- What elements/aspects of the program were most beneficial to participants, employers, and families?
- What challenges did participants face in participating in the apprenticeship program?
- What challenges did employers/sponsors face in implementing the apprenticeship program?

³ The vast majority of apprentices participating in the apprenticeship program and the evaluation identified as women, as is typical of the early care and education field. Only two survey respondents and two focus group participants identified as male. Therefore, this report will refer to all evaluation participants in the feminine, reflecting the overwhelming preponderance of women in the early care and education profession.

Highlights of Findings

Program Participants

Nearly all (98%) of the apprentices that responded to the online survey identified as female³, and the average age was 45 years. Seventy percent of respondents identified as Hispanic/Latina, while another 25% identified as African American. Apprentices varied in terms of their prior educational attainment. About one-third (30%) of participants had completed some early childhood education training and another 27% had completed coursework toward an associate degree. Slightly less than one-quarter (22%) had earned an associate degree and another 9% of participants had earned a bachelor's or graduate degree. On average, apprentices had worked in the ECE field for 11 years. Furthermore, 60% of Head Start assistant teachers, 75% of center-based assistant teachers, and 67% of center-based lead teachers reported earning between \$12.51 and \$15.00 per hour. Of Head Start lead teachers, 70% reported earning more than \$17.50 per hour.

Program Impact

Impact on Apprentices' Practice with Children and Families

Nearly every apprentice who responded to the survey (98%) reported that the program helped increase their understanding of child development. Additionally, 90% noted that the program helped to enhance their knowledge of child development theory and its relationship to teaching. Apprentices explained that this knowledge led them to change how they physically interacted with children. They shared that they learned to be more intentional in their interactions, and to turn each one into a learning opportunity. Apprentices also credited the program with enhancing their quality of care and instruction. This included making changes to their lesson plans to align with the developmental stage of the children, and regularly tracking their developmental progress. Furthermore, apprentices shared that the program improved how they communicated with parents and boosted their confidence when interacting with parents.

Impact on Apprentices' Professional Identity

Ninety-seven percent of online survey respondents agreed that they were more confident in their ECE role after participating in the program, and 95% noted being more satisfied with their role. During focus group discussions, apprentices mentioned feeling more confident thanks to their participation in the program. Related to professional confidence, apprentices spoke about gaining from the program a sense of being an ECE professional. In speaking about their heightened sense of professionalism, apprentices rejected the notion that their work could be reduced to the term, "babysitter". Furthermore, key program informants discussed the support network the apprentices had gained from the program, which contributed to the apprentices' professional identity. Key program informants cited the apprenticeship program's cohort model as key to creating such strong support networks among the apprentices.

Impact on Apprentices' Professional Mobility

Apprentices spoke about the impact the program had on their professional permits. They implied that they would be professionally stuck or worse off if they had never participated in the program. Key program informants also discussed witnessing apprentices increasing their Child Development Permits.

More than 86% of apprentices completing the online survey noted that they planned to seek a role with more responsibility as a result of participating in the program. Additionally, apprentices in three of the focus groups commented that the program opened up their career pathways. This theme did not emerge in focus groups with apprentices in family child care settings, likely because these apprentices were small business owners or worked for their family's business.

Impact on Apprentices' Well-Being

Apprentices responding to the survey noted their expectation that the program would result in greater financial compensation. Eighty-five percent of survey respondents agreed that after participating in this program, they believed their salary would improve, and 84% believed that their family would be more financially secure. Similarly, key program informants discussed the impact of the program on the apprentices' compensation. These comments, however, were limited to apprentices in Head

Start and center-based settings, mostly because apprentices in such settings had seen a clear impact on their compensation thanks to the existence of a tiered pay schedule.

Program Successes

Apprentices identified the program being flexible enough to fit with their busy work and personal schedules as a critical element of the apprenticeship program. Apprentices also mentioned automatic course registration and the offering of weekend courses as key to the flexibility the apprenticeship program provided them. Additionally, apprentices identified the location of the classes as important given that their busy schedules did not facilitate the ability to travel to a community college campus. Related to the flexibility of the program, apprentices and key program informants also discussed the importance of the program's wrap-around services on their ability to succeed. Such services included on-site coaching, academic advice, technology access and training, and on-site childcare.

Key program informants also identified the relationships amongst everyone involved in operating the program as an important apprenticeship program element. Key program informants talked about a sense of trust, strong communication, and teamwork that existed amongst staff. Similarly, apprentices identified the support they received from their classmates, course instructors, and program staff as a key program element.

Furthermore, apprentices listed financial support for the courses as critical to the program. They identified financial support when speaking about what motivated them to participate in the program. Some of the apprentices shared experiences of having to stop taking courses in the past because of the high cost.

Program Challenges

Challenges for apprentices included finding time to complete assignments and juggling the coursework. For apprentices who had been out of school for some time or had previously taken only some (or no) college coursework, the content, expectations, and logistics of college coursework was sometimes daunting. Some apprentices also mentioned their limited English proficiency as a barrier to their success in the program.

Challenges for key program informants centered on working with the community colleges. Key program informants found community college staff inaccessible, that internal bureaucracy at the community colleges hindered their ability to run the program, and that they often had to wait long periods of time to hear about decisions. Furthermore, recruiting instructors was a key challenge, particularly instructors that were willing to teach outside of the community college campus, that were mindful of the special needs of the apprentice population, or that were willing to dedicate a lot of their time to working closely with apprentices.

Proposed Program Changes

Key program informants suggested a need to more clearly define staff roles. This included hiring new staff to absorb the responsibilities of staff members with dual roles, for example, those who mentored apprentices and handled the relationship with the community colleges; dividing program implementation from program development to have a focus on program fundraising efforts; and making program managers and coaches independent of the apprentices' employers to help ensure that actions taken are in the interest of the apprentices as program participants and not just as employees. Furthermore, they suggested solidifying the program's partnerships with the community colleges. The key program informants framed their suggestions as important for streamlining the course planning and scheduling process and clarifying expectations for the community colleges.

Discussion and Recommendations

The evaluation findings add to the growing evidence that apprenticeship programs present a promising approach to improving the knowledge, skills, and professional identity of early educators. Given the historical and systemic barriers that women of color have faced in accessing and successfully participating in higher education, it is significant that nearly all of the SEIU participants were women of color. The evaluation revealed the numerous ways in which the strategies employed by the apprenticeship programs --

namely access supports like paying for the cost of education and holding classes in community-based locations, academic supports, and peer supports -- removed barriers and supported success. Apprentices participating in this evaluation benefited from flexible course scheduling to coordinate with their work and family commitments, support from dedicated staff to ease the transition into college coursework and expectations, and a network of other early educators similarly committed to advancing their credentials and working together to improve their practice with children and families. Further, the apprentices reported gains in their knowledge and enhancements to their practices.

In the case of apprenticeship programs in the ECE field, while mechanisms for covering the educational expense may be fairly straightforward (e.g., covered by philanthropic and/or government grants) the element of increased and sustainable wages, a common feature of apprentice programs across occupations, is challenging to address. The costs associated with these increased wages may be difficult for employers (particularly self-employed family child care owners) or parents to absorb. Among programs participating in this evaluation, wage increases for center-based staff were minimal although publicly funded programs were able to provide larger wage increases as they were built into the wage structure and subject to collective bargaining agreements in place. For family child care providers, as small business owners, there is no wage paid to them per se. The stipends they received when reaching certain milestones in the apprenticeship program provided important financial relief, but as they are not ongoing payments, they thus are not a reliable source of income in the future. This challenge of providing reliable, significant wage increases that support long-term financial security and well-being is ubiquitous in the field and requires public investment strategies that are beyond the capacity of individual programs to solve, particularly those that rely primarily on parent fees.

A limitation of this evaluation is that the work environments of early educators were not assessed. The environments for educators play a central role in whether educators are supported or impeded in their ability to successfully implement their new knowledge. Future studies and evaluations of apprenticeship models would benefit from learning more about the conditions of the work place in which early educators practice their teaching skills. Future

iterations of these apprenticeship programs and other efforts that seek to advance the educational attainment and well-being of early educators would further benefit from the following actions.

Institute a common wage structure associated with levels of achievement in the program.

A clear wage structure associated with levels of achievement in the program is crucial for the long-term success of ECE apprenticeship programs as a compensation initiative. This should reflect a common, regionally-based structure so that increases are equitable for those completing the same levels and activities. Nearly half of apprentices in this evaluation were enrolled in some public support or assistance program(s). Reliable, significant wage increases are critical for their own financial security and well-being.

Strengthen existing program elements and expand course offerings and supports.

Apprentices and key program informants participating in the evaluation emphasized the importance of program elements such as the cohort model, coaching, mentoring, tutoring, and on-site child care. These elements should be the backbone of any future apprenticeship model.

Bolster the apprenticeship orientation to ensure apprentices are better prepared to begin the program.

Many of the apprentices participating in this evaluation were returning to school after some time, or were individuals for whom English was not their first language. As such, additional support with coursework in English and assistance with technology necessary to complete and submit assignments were noted as two areas that should be bolstered in future iterations of apprenticeship programs.

Expand staffing to ensure sustainability and scalability of the apprenticeship programs.

Key program informants mentioned the importance of one or two key staff members in the success of each of the programs. While the dedication and passion of individual staff can be crucial for launching new programming, long-term sustainability will require additional staffing and an institutional culture that values these programs and is dedicated to committing the resources necessary to ensure their success.

Formalize and broaden partnerships with local institutions of higher education.

Continuing to build relationships with departments of early childhood education at local community colleges and universities will be key for sustained and expanded programming. These ongoing partnerships should include an orientation or training for faculty and administrators in preparation for working with the population of early educators that often includes non-traditional students and those who may struggle with certain aspects of coursework related to language abilities.

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