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Learning Together:

A Study of Six B.A. Completion Cohort
Programs in Early Care and Education:
Year 4 – Executive Summary

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Learning Together:

A Study of Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs in Early Care and Education: Year 4

Executive Summary

Kipnis, F., Whitebook, M., Almaraz, M., Sakai, L., & Austin, L. J. E.

The *Learning Together* longitudinal study focuses on four counties' efforts to expand bachelor's degree opportunities in early care and education (ECE) for adults currently working in the field. The "student cohort" model—in which small groups of ECE students with similar interests and characteristics pursue a bachelor's degree together, and receive targeted support services—emerged in Alameda, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, and San Francisco Counties, with programs at Antioch University, California State University-East Bay (CSU-East Bay), Mills College, San Francisco State University (SFSU), San Jose State University (SJSU), and the University of La Verne (ULV). With county, First 5, and private foundation support, these six cohort efforts were developed with similar goals:

- To increase and retain a pool of B.A. degree-level professionals in the ECE field with culturally, linguistically, and professionally diverse backgrounds;
- To invest in institutional change at colleges and universities in order to expand their capacity to provide appropriate and accessible B.A. programs for ECE practitioners; and
- To assure that degree recipients are able to demonstrate and articulate professional competencies that are appropriate to the degree obtained.

In 2007, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment began implementing a five-year longitudinal study of each student cohort, as well as periodic examinations of institutional change at selected colleges

and universities. In its first two years, the *Learning Together* study explored students' perspectives on the supports and services that facilitated their higher education access and success, and the impact of the educational experience on their professional practice. Program leaders and faculty also shared their perspectives on these issues. In the third year, the *Learning Together* study focused on graduation rates, and graduates' perspectives on two aspects of their B.A. cohort program: the practicum experience, and the extent to which their courses had assisted them in working with linguistically diverse children. In addition, graduates shared their perspectives about their workplaces as environments that supported their ability to apply the knowledge and skills gained from their studies, and changes in their employment and compensation post-graduation.

This report discusses the results of a fourth round of interviews, in which the study team asked graduates to assess how various structural features of their B.A. cohort programs had contributed to their educational success, the value of their general education courses, and the extent to which their programs had addressed leadership development and working with adults. Once again, graduates were asked about the impact of the B.A. degree on their professional and personal lives, and their perceptions of how their workplace environments affected teaching practices with children. To augment our understanding of their professional competence, graduates were presented with three vignettes describing a typical occurrence in a preschool classroom, and were asked to describe what they would do in each situation to promote children's learning.

Graduates in the Sample

Of the 85 graduates who participated in Year 4 of the study, 96 percent were women, and the majority (74 percent) were women of color. The average age of graduates was 45 years, with 55 percent between the ages of 30 and 49. Slightly less than one-third (31 percent) of graduates identified their primary language spoken at home as being other than English, most often Spanish. Over three-quarters (79 percent) of graduates reported working in a child care center, typically serving linguistically diverse children, children of low-income families, and children with challenging behaviors.

The Ongoing Value of a B.A. Education

During the last decade, researchers and policy makers have been debating the optimal level of formal education for ECE practitioners (Bogard, Traylor, & Takanishi, 2008; Calderon, 2005; Early et al., 2008; Fuller, Livas, & Bridges, 2006). Some stakeholders continue to support having few or no barriers to working with young children, while a growing number of advocates and educators assert that a B.A. degree and a credential in early education should be the standard for preschool teachers (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). The *Learning Together* Year 4 study focused on the experiences and views of practitioners, who are seldom included in these discussions. These findings provide a new perspective: a snapshot of B.A. completion cohorts by program participants two to three years after graduation.

Study Findings, Part I

Finding 1: Looking back on their experiences in B.A. cohort programs, graduates continued to identify the programs' structural supports, such as financial aid and flexible class schedules, as important to their educational success.

Both when they started their program and at the time of the Year 2 interviews, students overwhelmingly viewed its structural features, such as financial assistance, flexible class schedules, and convenient class locations, as very or extremely important. In Year 4, more than one-half of graduates identified financial assistance as key to their success (58 percent). We found that graduates of these cohort programs had incurred less student debt than graduates of other California public and private institutions of higher education (Project on Student Debt, n.d.).

Second to financial assistance, graduates identified flexible class schedules, designed to meet the needs of working students, as an essential feature of their programs. A substantial minority of students mentioned the following as essential: convenient location of classes, a supportive faculty, academic assistance, academic advising, and technology assistance.

Finding 2: Since graduation, cohort members continued to serve as professional, personal, and educational resources for each other.

A large majority (84 percent) of graduates viewed the cohort experience itself—taking classes with the same group of students, all of whom work in the ECE field—as extremely important to their success in attaining a B.A. degree. Further, virtually all the graduates (99 percent) reported that they had maintained contact with someone in the cohort. For the 88 percent of graduates who reported on the nature of their relationships with fellow cohort members, about three-quarters (76 percent) reported that these colleagues continued to be important professional resources. Graduates reported visiting each other's classrooms, working together to solve job-related problems, discussing ways to apply what had been learned in school to their current jobs, and keeping each other informed about new developments in the ECE field. A similar percentage of students (71 percent) reported that they had maintained personal relationships with cohort members, such as being friends and giving and receiving emotional support.

This finding suggests that peer learning and support are important quality improvement strategies that deserve greater attention; for example, how they compare to or enhance mentoring and coaching, strategies that have recently become prominent in professional development research and policymaking (Tout, Isner, & Zaslow, 2011).

Finding 3: More than two-thirds of graduates reported taking general education classes while participating in their B.A. cohort. Approximately two-thirds of these graduates reported that general education classes had enhanced their educational experience and/or had had a positive impact on their work with children and families.

More than two-thirds of the graduates (69 percent) reported taking general education (G.E.) classes while participating in the B.A. cohort program, with the majority identifying a positive impact. They mentioned,

for example, that the G.E. courses had allowed them to learn about topics beyond ECE; had resulted in a more well-rounded educational experience; had helped them succeed in their upper-division courses; and had improved their writing and oral presentation skills.

Approximately two-thirds of the graduates who took G.E. courses mentioned that their G.E. classes had positively influenced their work with children and families. More than one-third mentioned improvement in general work skills, such as using new math skills for determining eligibility and enrollment, better writing skills for writing a report or program newsletter, and overall better problem-solving strategies. Slightly less than one-third mentioned better relationships with parents due to improved communication skills, and a deeper grasp of research to share with parents. Slightly more than one-fourth talked about how incorporating topics learned in their G.E. classes, such as physical science, history, math, writing, music, literature, and art, had enriched their curriculum for children.

Finding 4: The majority of graduates reported that skills and knowledge related to two issues – ECE public policy and working with other adults - would be helpful to their current jobs and to their future careers. More than one-half reported that their B.A. completion cohort program had addressed these issues to some degree during the course of their studies.

We asked graduates how helpful it would be to understand the early care and education system and the complex sets of regulations, budgets, and public processes that shape the system in which they operate, and whether their B.A. program had provided information on these topics. Approximately three-quarters of the graduates responded that it would be very helpful for their current jobs to know about the impact of federal, state, and local budgets and legislation on the ECE system; about two-thirds thought that it would be very helpful to know how the ECE delivery system changes over time; and slightly more than one-half responded that understanding eligibility requirements, staff qualifications, and funding sources of ECE services in their community would be very helpful. When asked about the importance of these topics to their career goals, a large majority (82 percent) of graduates responded that it would be very helpful to know about the impact of federal, state, and local budgets and legislation on the ECE system; almost three-quarters thought it would be very helpful to

know how the ECE delivery system changes over time, and about two-thirds responded that understanding eligibility requirements, staff qualifications, and funding sources of ECE services would be very helpful. About two-thirds of the graduates (65 percent) reported that the B.A. cohort program had provided them with information related to the ECE system.

In addition to knowledge of the ECE system, we asked graduates how helpful skills related to working with colleagues and other adults in the workplace would be to their current jobs and to their future career goals. Graduates overwhelmingly reported that giving constructive feedback to colleagues at the workplace (89 percent), resolving conflict among adults in the workplace (86 percent), and running an effective meeting (74 percent) would be very helpful to their current jobs, with similar responses for the helpfulness of such skills to their career goals. More than four out of five graduates (82 percent) reported that their B.A. cohort program had provided them with information and/or skills related to working with adults as individuals, and 74 percent with information and skills related to working with adults in groups and organizations.



Finding 5: Approximately one to two years after graduation, nearly one-quarter of graduates reported changes in their job positions, with three-fourths attributing this change to having attained a B.A. degree. Three-fifths of graduates reported pay increases, with 80 percent attributing these exclusively, or in part, to their B.A. degree.

Except for a small percentage (five percent) who were not currently employed at the time of the interview, all graduates continued to work in the early care and education field. For those currently working in child care centers, almost one-quarter (23 percent) reported that their job position had changed since attaining a B.A. degree. Approximately three-quarters of these graduates (73 percent) reported that this change had been related exclusively, or in part, to having attained the degree.

More than one-half of graduates (61 percent) reported an increase in compensation since attaining the B.A. degree. Four-fifths (80 percent) reported that the raise was related exclusively, or in part, to the degree. Among graduates who reported a raise, the increase averaged \$3.46 per hour. For graduates working full-time and year-round, this translates to an increase of \$7,191 per year.

Finding 6: Almost all graduates were of the opinion that their B.A. degrees would have a positive impact on their future. Most reported a positive impact on their professional lives, more than one-half on their personal lives, and about one-third on their future educational pathways.

Virtually all graduates (97 percent) reported that having a B.A. degree would have a positive impact on their futures. More than four out of five of these graduates (82 percent) mentioned a positive professional impact, more than one-half (54 percent) mentioned a positive personal impact, and one-third (33 percent) mentioned a positive educational impact.

For those who cited an impact on their future professional lives, more than one-half (57 percent) mentioned more career opportunities. Approximately one-half (49 percent) mentioned feeling more competent at their jobs as a result of their education. For those who anticipated an impact on their future personal lives, more than one-half (55 percent) reported on increased self-esteem, approximately one-quarter (23 percent) mentioned other positive personal feelings, and approximately one-quarter (23 percent) also mentioned greater financial security. About one-half (48 percent) who reported an educational impact

mentioned the ability to pursue a Master's degree, and one-third (33 percent) mentioned feeling inspired them to keep learning and to keep up with new developments in the ECE field.

Finding 7: Graduates working in center-based programs agreed that prevalent characteristics of the ECE workplace, such as insufficient staffing, staff turnover, lack of sick or personal days, and lack of paid planning or preparation time, all have an impact on a teacher's ability to engage in effective classroom practice. Only about three-fifths of these graduates reported that their workplace offered paid planning time, and a much smaller percentage reported opportunities for paid sharing time with other colleagues.

The *context* of teacher practice matters. Teachers and other professionals develop their skills over time, and thus the work environment can either facilitate or impede practitioners' abilities to implement what they have learned at school and to continue to improve their instructional and caregiving practices (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Whitebook, Gombay, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). The graduates overwhelmingly agreed that various workplace characteristics can impact teachers' abilities to engage in good practice and to continue to develop their skills. The study findings reaffirm the importance of expanding the debate about the value of a B.A. degree for ECE teachers to an exploration of the relationship between higher education and the quality of the work environments in which teachers practice.

The work environment characteristics that most graduates working in center-based programs perceived to have a very big impact on classroom practice included insufficient staffing, staff turnover, lack of paid personal or sick days, inadequate training of co-workers, inadequate director education and training, lack of paid planning and preparation time, and poor access to health care services.

Fifty-nine percent of graduates reported that their workplaces offered paid preparation time at their job, defined as a specific time set aside for preparation that does not occur when one has other responsibilities, including supervising children during play or nap time. Only 15 percent of graduates who were teachers reported having paid professional sharing time, defined as the opportunity to observe others at work and to reflect on one's own job with colleagues.

Study Findings, Part II: Vignettes

To augment graduates' self-reports about professional growth resulting from their participation in the B.A. cohort programs, graduates were read three scenarios that might occur in a typical preschool classroom, and were asked how, picturing themselves as the teacher, they would promote children's learning in each scenario. Analysis of graduates' responses suggests that using vignettes to assess practitioners' knowledge may provide an additional source of information beyond self-reports or director/instructor reports, particularly when individual observations of teachers are not feasible. Other factors requiring further investigation, regarding the research value of this vignette approach, include interviewer reliability, the setting and process for presenting vignettes, and any pre-existing differences in experience and skill among student populations.

The vignettes were adapted from situations described in the *California Preschool Curriculum Framework: Volume 1*, a resource for early childhood educators focused on promoting learning for preschool-age children (California Department of Education, 2010). We selected two vignettes that described situations offering teachers many opportunities to support the development of children's higher-order thinking skills, and one that focused on strategies for working with young children who do not speak English.

Graduates offered a range of strategies to promote learning, such as asking children to classify and experiment with objects, introducing complex math concepts, connecting an activity to children's home and/or classroom experiences, and art projects. Graduates also mentioned different communication strategies they would employ to assist English language learners. Some mentioned multiple strategies for each vignette, while others did not, and some proposed more complex approaches than others.

After each vignette, we asked graduates whether their responses would have been different if we had presented them with the vignette before they had participated in their B.A. programs. A large majority of graduates (87 percent) reported that their responses were influenced by their education, noting that their B.A. programs had provided them with a better understanding of children's capacities at different stages of development, which in turn influenced their choice of appropriate teaching strategies, and they noted that the B.A. programs had helped them to better communicate their views on best practices for teaching children. Many graduates believed that the B.A. program had helped them become aware of how important it is for English language learners to keep their home language.



Conclusion: Next Steps for Research

The cumulative findings of the *Learning Together* study demonstrate how investments in B.A. completion cohort programs that offer sufficient financial and academic supports can help working ECE practitioners access higher education and succeed in obtaining their degrees. Based on student self-reports, these programs offer personal, professional and educational benefits to the participants as well. From the graduates' point of view, these programs have helped them to become more effective teachers of young children.

These self-reports alone, however, tell us little about how the six cohort programs attended by graduates in this study varied in goals and content, and how such variations may have influenced graduates' competence as professionals. The degree of focus on teaching pedagogy for children younger than age five, for example, varies substantially among higher education programs that are considered to be "early childhood-related," including those in this study (Whitebook et al., 2011).

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment is developing two new measures to deepen our understanding of the contribution of higher education program characteristics and teachers' work environments to teacher effectiveness—issues that surfaced over the course of the *Learning Together* study. The Higher Education Inventory provides a mechanism for states to: a) establish baseline descriptions of higher education offerings for ECE practitioners; b) identify gaps and opportunities in available offerings; and c) assess changes in the capacity of the higher education system over time. In addition, researchers can use data gathered in this inventory to assess different approaches to ECE higher education programs.

A second measure under development is designed to be completed by classroom teaching staff, focusing on how ECE programs support teachers' professional growth, learning and well being. Our hope is that these measures will help states and communities explore strategies to improve and sustain program quality, distinguishing between higher education and workplace contexts when assessing the role of education in effective teacher preparation and practice.



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