

## BRIEF

# *Cross-site Evaluation of the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program*



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## Background

The Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program (ECEPD) is a federal discretionary program that provides grants to partnerships focused on providing professional development activities to early childhood educators working in low-income communities. The goals of the ECEPD grants are to improve the knowledge and skills of early childhood educators and ultimately to increase the school readiness of the young children they serve.

A cross-site evaluation of the ECEPD program examined 18 ECEPD projects that were funded in 2003, 2004, and 2005. The evaluation provided 1) A descriptive portrait of the 18 ECEPD projects including the partnerships involved and the infrastructure for delivering professional development activities, 2) An examination of the evaluations included in each ECEPD project, 3) The promising practices that emerged from an analysis of the professional development activities offered, and 4) Implications of the evaluation findings for strengthening the professional development of early educators, especially those working in low-income communities.

## A Portrait of the 18 ECEPD projects

- The ECEPD projects were made up of *partnerships*, often including colleges or universities, community colleges, nonprofit organizations, and state or local agencies teaming to administer the project as well as to provide professional development activities to educators.
- The *goals* of the ECEPD projects included increasing access to professional development and increasing the amount of professional development offered to early educators in low income communities. Additional goals were improving educators' knowledge and skills, improving the quality of early care and education, and improving children's school readiness.
- ECEPD projects created a variety of infrastructures for providing professional development services to early childhood educators. Professional development services were provided in several ways, but all projects included some combination of *knowledge-focused* and *practice-focused* approaches. Knowledge-focused approaches were aimed at improving early educator knowledge of early childhood development and pedagogical approaches, and involved course work toward a college degree or training that did not provide credit towards a degree. Practice-focused approaches were aimed at improving what early educators actually did when in the classroom or home-based setting, or the overall quality of the environment. Practice-focused professional development was individualized and was usually delivered on-site.



## The ECEPD Project Evaluations

- A review of the designs used in the evaluations of the ECEPD projects in the 2003, 2004 and 2005 cohorts revealed that **rigor increased over time**. For example, experimental designs were implemented in only one of the seven projects in the 2003 cohort, but in two out of five projects in the 2005 cohort.
- The percentage of projects meeting rigor criteria for both conduct and reporting of evaluation methodology and results increased over time (from 43 percent in 2003, to 67 percent in 2004, and to 80 percent in 2005).
- Of the ten ECEPD projects meeting the rigor criteria, eight showed evidence of significant effects on (1) measures of educator knowledge, educator practice, or observed early childhood setting quality; (2) on child outcomes, or (3) on both.
- Project documents and interviews with project directors for these eight projects were reviewed in depth to identify the features of the professional development provided for early childhood educators in these projects.

## What Practices Characterized the Eight Selected ECEPD Projects?

Two characteristics were salient across the eight selected projects:

- While all of the ECEPD projects in the 2003, 2004, and 2005 cohorts combined knowledge-focused and practice-focused components, a defining feature across the eight ECEPD projects with evidence of both rigor and effects was the **linking of the knowledge-focused and practice-focused components**. For example, the two components were often delivered by the same individual staff members and the content of the knowledge-focused activities was often followed and reinforced by on-site practice-focused activities with the same content.
- Projects that both met the rigor criteria and showed evidence of effects also consistently described procedures for **supporting and monitoring the fidelity of the implementation** of professional development activities.



Beyond these two key features, there was substantial variation across the eight projects in the way in which they conducted the knowledge-focused and practice-focused activities.

### Knowledge-focused activities:

- Were evenly balanced across the eight projects between course work and training, with half of the selected ECEPD projects used credit-bearing course work and half using non-credit bearing training.
- Focused heavily on understanding the development of language and literacy skills in young children, but also included a variety of further topics such as math, social or emotional development, cognition, child assessment and curriculum.
- Varied greatly in dosage.

### Practice-focused activities:

- Were most often delivered on-site (though in some cases were provided by phone or through the Internet) and were delivered by staff known as coaches, mentors, consultants, or technical assistance specialists (without clear definitional distinctions).
- Involved observation of the early educator and provision of feedback, modeling of approaches, and sharing of resources and information.
- Involved substantial variation in content from on-site sessions, in frequency and duration of sessions, and in overall dosage.
- Were characterized by an emphasis on the relationship between the professional development staff and early educators and individualization of activities.

### What Are the Implications of the ECEPD Cross-site Evaluation?

For administration of ECEPD and similar projects, this evaluation identifies the need to:

- Specify *rigor* requirements for evaluation and reporting.
- Require reporting of *effect sizes* for outcomes.
- Increase reporting of *demographic characteristics* of educators and the children served.



The contributions of this evaluation to existing literature include:

- Identification of *systematic linking* of the knowledge-and practice-focused components of professional development, and *procedures for monitoring fidelity of implementation* as promising practices.
- Identification of the frequently occurring challenges to professional development initiatives of *early educators who may have low literacy skills* and who may be *inexperienced with college course work*.

This evaluation suggests that it would be fruitful in future research to address a number of questions:

- What are the most effective strategies for combining knowledge-focused and practice-focused components of professional development?
- What dosage and intensity of professional development activities are optimal for improving outcomes?
- What are the best methods for measuring educators' knowledge?
- How can professional development approaches best take into account early educators' background and motivation, including literacy, familiarity with college course work, and knowledge about early childhood development, skills, and openness to changing their practice ("readiness to change")?
- What characteristics of those staff members who are providing the professional development facilitate delivery of effective practice-focused approaches?
- What supports in the work setting, such as involvement of the director or principal, are important to the effectiveness of practice-focused professional development?

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**Related resource:** *Professional Development for Early Childhoods Educators: A Review of the Literature* <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oepdp/ppss/reports.html>