



## **Challenges and Opportunities for Including Coursework on Infants and Toddlers in Higher Education Degree Programs**

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## Introduction

The first three years of life represent the most sensitive period of brain development. Children's encounters during this period with caregiving adults play a powerful role in establishing either a sturdy or fragile foundation for lifelong development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). As such, the role of early care and education to children's lifelong learning and to our nation's economic and social well-being is recognized up to the highest levels of government, and by society at-large. This understanding represents a dramatic shift from earlier decades, and carries with it heightened expectations for what teachers of our youngest children should know and be able to do (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014).

### **The Size of the U.S. Adult Workforce Serving Infants and Toddlers**

As of 2012, according to the National Survey of Early Care and Education (2013), the center-based early education workforce serving children from birth to three years included approximately 318,000 members. The home-based child care workforce receiving payment to work with children from birth through five years included 118,000 providers listed in state or national databases, and about 919,000 paid providers who were unlisted. Data are not available on the number of paid assistants working in home-based settings.

In 2015, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council of the National Academies of Sciences issued several recommendations to strengthen professional preparation standards for early childhood practitioners and the institutions responsible for their preparation and ongoing learning. *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (IOM & NRC, 2015), includes among its recommendations: 1) transitioning to a minimum requirement of a bachelor's degree, with specialized knowledge and competencies, for all lead teachers working with children from birth to age eight; and 2) the development and enhancement of interdisciplinary higher

education programs for early care and education professionals, including practice-based and supervised learning opportunities.

However, disparate and persistently low qualifications for teachers working with children from birth to age eight fail to reflect current scientific understanding of the complexity of early learning and development, and undermine the value accorded to those who teach our youngest children, especially infants and toddlers. They also contribute to inadequate teacher preparation, and in turn, to uneven and inequitable early learning opportunities for children (Institute of Medicine [IOM] & National Research Council [NRC], 2015). This variability in age-group focus is both inconsistent with the science of early development and learning, and unlikely to produce consistently effective preparation of teachers and administrators for early learning programs (IOM & NRC, 2015).

This paper explores the inclusion of infant and toddler focus in early childhood higher education programs based on findings from the Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory (see Box 1). It explores gaps in early childhood teacher preparation and faculty expertise that have implications for the infant-toddler workforce, and offers strategies to strengthen infant-toddler preparation in higher education.

The Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory is a research tool developed by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. The Inventory is used to describe the landscape of a state's early childhood degree program offerings at the associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels and examines variations among programs at different degree levels with respect to the age-group focus of course content and field-based learning experiences. To-date the Inventory has been implemented in seven states--California, Indiana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island. See the Inventory reports for methodology and sample information: <http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/cscce/2013/early-childhood-higher-education-inventory/>.

## Infant-Toddler Focus in Higher Education Degree Programs

Depending on the ages of children they serve and the setting in which they work, teachers of young children are often perceived as requiring different levels of skill and knowledge, and are expected to meet significantly more or less rigorous qualifications. Specific education and training required for the infant-toddler workforce is often minimal, as reflected among states that have established an infant-toddler credential or certificate (National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives (PDW Center), 2014).<sup>1</sup> Among these 28 states, only one-half require more than one or two infant-toddler courses to meet the educational qualifications necessary for certification. In California, for example, at the Master Teacher level of the Child Development Permit, one can earn an infant-toddler specialization with six semester units (typically two courses) in infant-toddler care (State of California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (2013)). Only six states include the Infant/Toddler Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential™ and/or Program for Infant Toddler Caregivers as an option to meet the early childhood education/training requirement for a state infant-toddler credential or certificate, and only three additional states include a field-based course requirement specific to infants and toddlers (PDW Center, 2014).

### Course Content

There appears to be an implicit assumption that early childhood practitioners are gaining exposure to the development and learning of infants and toddlers in other early childhood coursework, such as child growth and development, social and emotional foundations, and literacy development, and that infant-toddler specializations are built upon those foundations. However, findings drawn from seven state Inventories reveal that across all degree levels, early childhood degree programs did not consistently focus coursework on all

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<sup>1</sup> This review focused on credit-bearing coursework identified in the “early childhood training/education” requirement area of the PDW Center Infant/Toddler Credential Overview document.

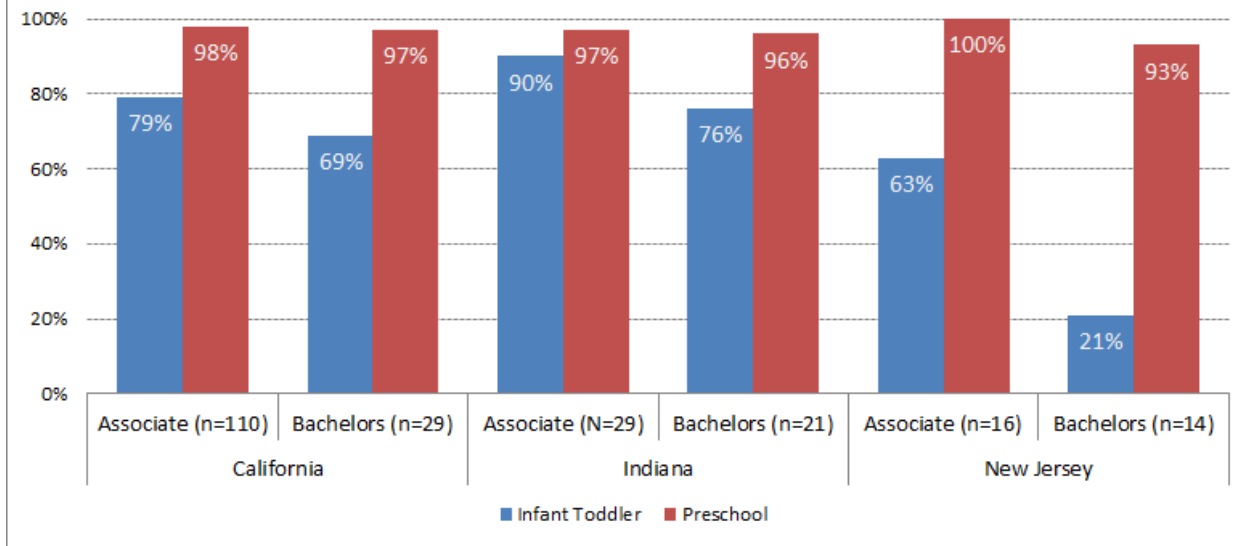
ages of children from birth to age 8. In contrast to the preschool years, there is uneven and more limited inclusion of infants and toddlers in the course content, as well as in field-based learning experiences.

Early childhood degree program leaders (e.g., deans, chairs, coordinators) were asked to identify a series of course content topics required for students to complete the degree program in the areas of child development and learning and teaching skills. Across the states, the degree programs reported that most of the topics were required as part of the degree program. However, when asked to indicate the age-group focus included in the content, with the exception of New Hampshire,<sup>2</sup> across all degree levels, programs did not include an equal focus on children across the full age span. Fewer early childhood degree programs required the inclusion of the youngest children in the course content and field-based experiences compared to preschool age-children. For example, nearly all degree programs required the topic “teaching literacy skills to children”, and among those programs, nearly all required a focus on preschool-age children, whereas the focus on infants and toddlers varied by degree level (see Figure 1). As displayed in Figure 1, associate degree programs were more likely to include a focus on infant-toddlers than were bachelor’s degree programs.

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<sup>2</sup> The New Hampshire Infant Toddler Credential Endorsement represents a distinct, six-level lattice with infant toddler coursework requirements at each level, and coursework must meet state specific requirements for the inclusion of particular content and age-group of children. Source: <http://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dcyf/cdb/documents/earlychildhood.pdf>.

**Figure 1. Teaching Literacy Skills to Children, Coursework Required, by Age Group, and Degree Programs in Selected States**



## Field-based Learning Opportunities

There is widespread agreement that field-based learning experiences for teachers working with children of all ages are critically important to developing new teaching skills or improving upon existing ones (IOM & NRC, 2015; Whitebook et al., 2012; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010b). In the K-12 community, this recognition has led to efforts to increase the length of student teaching, introduce it earlier into a program of study, and strengthen student supervision during field experience (Whitebook et al., 2012). In early childhood, however, there is no widely implemented standard of field experience, such as student teaching (Whitebook, 2014; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Findings from the Inventory suggest that practica are the most common, and likely to be the only, type of field-based learning experience required in most early childhood degree programs. Across states and across degree programs--again, with the exception of New Hampshire—when an age group focus for practicum experiences was required, it was more likely to be focused on preschoolers than on infants and toddlers. In Indiana, for example most bachelor’s (85 percent) and about one-third of associate degree programs required that practicum experiences included a focus on preschool age children, compared to about one-half of bachelor’s and 10 percent of associate degree programs that required the inclusion of infants and toddlers (Kipnis, Sakai, Whitebook, Austin, Amanta, & Montoya, 2015). In New Jersey, fewer than ten percent of programs across degree levels required a focus on infants and toddlers in practicum (Kipnis, Whitebook, Austin, & Sakai, 2013).

### Definitions

*Student teaching.* defined as full-time immersion in a classroom, with increasing responsibility for curriculum planning and teaching, and supervision by cooperating teacher.

*Practicum.* defined as an experience that is short in duration, associated with a course, often focused on a particular skill or population of children, and supervised by a faculty member and/or mentor.



## **Influence of State Context on Higher Education**

The inclusion, or exclusion, of infants and toddlers in course content and field-based experiences, may in part be a reflection of the certification and policy context of a state. In New Jersey, for example, a preschool to grade 3 credential is a requirement for all New Jersey public preschool teachers. When the credential was implemented as a requirement, initially for the state's Abbott preschools, four-year institutions of higher education developed courses of study that provide specialized training that focuses on children beginning at the preschool-age (Rice, & McLaughlin, 2007). Whereas nearly all early childhood bachelor's degree programs in New Jersey now include preschool and elementary age children in the course content, often only one-third or fewer of programs include a focus on infants and toddlers (Kipnis et al., 2013). In contrast, in New Hampshire where there is greater inclusion of the infant-toddler workforce in state workforce policies, degree programs include infants and toddlers in the required course content across topics, and in field-based learning experiences at rates similar, though still not on a par, with that for preschool-age children.

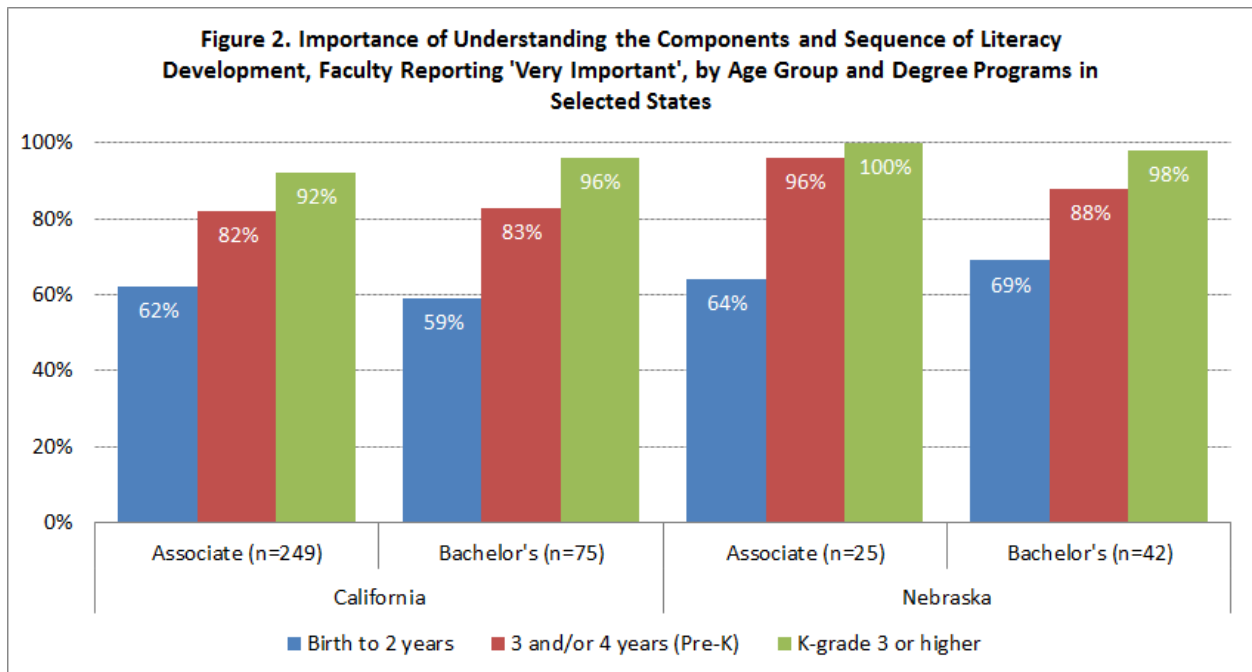
## **Perceptions about the Importance of Including Infants and Toddlers in Program Content**

Faculty member attitudes about the importance of teaching infant-toddler content and their own sense of efficacy to teach this content may contribute, along with state policy, to the extent to which infant/toddler content is included in early childhood higher education programs.

### **Importance of Infant-Toddler Content**

Inventories conducted in California, Indiana, Nebraska, and New York explored faculty member attitudes and beliefs about the importance of inclusion of five domains of early learning and development for different age groups in higher education teacher preparation

programs. Faculty members considered content related to infants and toddlers to be less important in several domains for teachers being prepared to work with infants and toddlers than for those with preschool or school-age children (Austin, Kipnis, Whitebook, Sakai, 2015; Kipnis et al., 2015; Sakai, Austin, Whitebook, Bloechliger, Amanta, 2015; Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2015). For example, at least 80 percent of associate and bachelor’s degree faculty respondents, across states, considered it “very important” to include literacy development in preparation for preschool and school-age teachers; fewer considered the topic “very important” in the preparation of infant-toddler teachers. (See Figure 2.)



## Faculty Expertise

Emphasis on particular content in early childhood teacher preparation programs, as is true in other disciplines, is likely to be influenced by faculty member experiences, areas in which they have had opportunities to develop expertise, and their comfort level with the subject matter (Chang, Lin, & Song, 2011). Additionally, as teacher educators are themselves increasingly called upon to be effective practitioners, preferably having had classroom

experience with children within the last decade (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010a & 2010b), among faculty members who participated in the state inventories, those who reported classroom experience with children in the previous decade were much more likely to have worked in preschool or elementary classrooms than with infants and toddlers.

Findings from the state inventories suggest that many early childhood faculty members considered themselves less prepared to teach infant-toddler content. The topic area of early mathematical development serves to illustrate the challenges faculty members experience in delivering early childhood content related to the youngest of children. While the area of early math received less attention across all age-groups compared to other topics, content focused on infant-toddlers was even more limited. The Inventory asked early childhood faculty members in four states to assess their capacity to prepare practitioners to promote children's mathematical understanding and teach math skills, across a total of 13 topics. While generally one-half or more of associate and bachelor's degree faculty members, across states, reported being capable of preparing teachers working with preschool-age children for each of the topics, fewer faculty members reported being capable of teaching the topics to practitioners working with infants and toddlers.

## Strategies for Change

Erasing the divisions in professional expectations and preparation across and within age groups in the birth to age eight spectrum is a necessary requirement to bring today's dated system in alignment with 21st century knowledge and expectations for teaching young children, particularly our youngest children at the most sensitive period of development. Such realignment requires a multifaceted approach.

It is incumbent upon states to establish both better defined and more rigorous expectations for infant and toddler teachers working in licensed programs. Findings from the Inventory studies suggest that when states intentionally include and emphasize robust expectations

for infant toddler preparation in their career ladders and certification system for early childhood educators, the higher education system responds accordingly. In the absence of intentional, well-designed certification standards that apply to early childhood teachers and administrators serving infants and toddlers, the default has been to place greater emphasis in higher education on older children. Higher education faculty and other stakeholders should be actively engaged in developing program content standards and faculty professional development focused on infant and toddler development and pedagogy across multiple domains, and establishing field-based learning opportunities focused on children beginning at infancy.

To facilitate change in the states, federal policies and programs can support and incentivize these efforts. For example, the Early Head Start/Child Care Partnerships, a recent competitive grant opportunity from the Office of Head Start and Department of Health and Human Services, requires that successful grantees demonstrate that the teachers participating in child care programs have or will earn a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) and training with an infant/toddler focus or comparable credential from their state within 18 months of initial funding as is required of EHS teachers (Administration for Children and Families, 2014). Similar opportunities to increase the levels of specialization should be explored for inclusion in other federally funded programs such as the Child Care and Development Fund.

Higher and better defined expectations must also be accompanied by greater respect and reward for those who work with infants and toddlers. The value currently accorded infant-toddler expertise is exceedingly low. The current infant and toddler teaching workforce experiences the lowest wages of teachers of any age child, earning a fraction of what their equally educated counterparts teaching preschool and elementary school earn, with a median wage of only \$11.40 per hour for those who hold a bachelor's degree or higher (Whitebook et al., 2014).

Higher education programs are a cornerstone of the U.S. system of early childhood services. As long as these programs, and the policies which they reflect, ascribe lower expectations for teacher preparation and assign fewer resources to those who care for and educate our nation's babies and toddlers, an integrated, high quality system of early learning for all young children will remain on the horizon. The long-standing challenges raised in this paper are fixable and require attention if, as a nation, we are to build a skilled and stable early childhood workforce, necessary to meet the needs of the country's diverse young child population, inclusive of infants and toddlers.

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## About the Authors

Lea J.E. Austin joined the staff of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment in 2010. She has extensive experience in the areas of workforce development, early childhood leadership competencies and curricula, and public policy and administration. In previous roles with Mills College in Oakland, California and First 5 Alameda County (California), Lea developed leadership programs in higher education and community settings, and implemented a professional development initiative focused on attainment of college education. She is a co-author of *Leadership in Early Childhood: A Curriculum for Emerging and Established Agents of Change*. Lea earned a master's degree in Public Administration from California State University, Hayward, and a master's degree and Ed.D in Educational Leadership from Mills College.

Marcy Whitebook, Ph.D., established the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment in 1999, as a researcher focusing on issues of employment in settings for young children, the relationship between good jobs and the quality of services available to children and families, and appropriate and accessible professional preparation for teachers. Prior to joining UC Berkeley, she was the founding Executive Director of the Washington-based Center for the Child Care Workforce (CCW), an organization she began in 1977 as the Child Care Employee Project. Marcy has led several large-scale early childhood research projects, including the landmark *National Child Care Staffing Study*, which first brought public attention to the low wages and high turnover of child care teachers. She co-developed the Early Childhood Mentor Program in California, now operating in 96 colleges throughout the state, and CARES, a California program to encourage professional development and retention of early care and education practitioners. She worked as an infant toddler and preschool teacher for many years, and received a Ph.D. in Developmental Studies from the UCLA Graduate School of Education.

Felippa Amanta is a Program Associate with Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. She has completed internships with the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Indonesian National Commission for UNESCO in Jakarta, Indonesia. She earned a bachelor's degree in Sociology from UC Berkeley.