

Getting from Here to There: To an Ideal Early Preschool System

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Abstract

The development, care, and education of children from birth to age 5 has been the focus of rapidly increasing public interest, and numerous early childhood public policy initiatives have focused attention on a major problem of coordination and collaboration of services for young children. Four segments of services for young children—(1) child care, (2) Head Start, (3) services for children with disabilities, and (4) preschool programs—have all been major players in providing services for differing, and sometimes overlapping, populations of young children. Each group has a similar mission: to help children (most often with special needs or limited opportunities) master the skills and knowledge needed to adapt effectively to kindergarten at age 5. Each group has its own history and has developed more or less independently of the others. Because the groups developed independently, they have overlapping personnel preparation programs, evaluation efforts, and data systems. This paper explores some strategies for moving from independent and overlapping services toward a seamless system of early child care and nurturance provided by these four diverse players. Voluntary collaborations between these players seem unlikely because of self-interest and bureaucratic challenges. Barriers to reform exist in institutional, psychological, sociological, economic, political, and geographic domains. This paper proposes that four engines of change—legislation, court decisions, administrative rule making, and professional initiatives—be energized to move toward a seamless system. Such collaboration can begin by merging support systems such as personnel preparation, technical assistance, and evaluation. The paper concludes with specific recommendations for achieving an integrated early childhood system.

Introduction

The development, care, and education of children from birth to age 5 has been the focus of rapidly increasing public interest. Numerous early childhood public policy initiatives have focused attention on a major problem of coordination and collaboration of services for young children. This increased public interest in young children seems to stem from several factors:

- A sharp increase in mothers of young children in the workforce (Kamerman & Gatenio, 2003).
- A realization of the importance of early brain development and stimulation to later development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).
- Increasing evidence that a large number of young children enter the public schools unready to take advantage of what the schools offer (Zill & West, 2001; Kagan & Cohen, 1997; McMillen & Kaufman, 1996).
- Increasing pressure to improve school achievement for children at risk for academic and social failure (Neuman, 2003; Clifford, Early, & Hills, 1999).

Four federally funded segments of services for young children—(1) federally supported child care (i.e., Child Care and Development Block Grant [CCDBG] and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF]), (2) Head Start, (3) federally mandated services for children with disabilities (i.e., P.L. 94-142 [Education for All Handicapped Children Act] and P.L. 99-457 [Education for the Handicapped Amendments of 1986]), and (4) preschool education programs supported through Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-10) and through state initiatives—have all been major players in providing services for differing, and sometimes overlapping, populations of young children. Each group has a similar mission: to help children (most often with special needs or limited opportunities) master the skills and knowledge needed to adapt effectively to kindergarten at age 5. Because the groups developed independently, they have overlapping personnel preparation programs, evaluation efforts, and data systems (Clifford, 1995).

Each group urgently requests increases in its existing resources from its supporting agencies to achieve its mission. The price for such increased resources for these programs could be reduced if we moved from independent and overlapping services toward a seamless system of providing needed services for preschool children to eliminate some of the redundancy and if we collaborated in planning the use of scarce resources more efficiently and effectively than is currently being done. It is especially timely to consider such measures in an era of state and federal budget shortages.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest some ways of moving toward a seamless system of providing needed services for preschool children at risk for academic and social failure (this paper focuses

primarily on 3- and 4-year-olds because these children are the primary focus of policy makers at this time). The integration of programs for infants and toddlers with preschool programs is another complex issue deserving a more detailed discussion than can be given in this paper. We hope to address this issue in a future paper. The increasing number of working mothers of young children (Kamerman & Gatenio, 2003) has made the question as to whether the young child should be kept at home or in some child care setting a nonissue. The issue now is how to maximize the child care arrangements that many young children will experience, in cooperation with the family. We address two major questions: "What should an ideal comprehensive system of services look like?" and "How would we get from here (our current situation of overlapping missions, procedures, and purposes) to there (the desired result of one seamless system of services)?" We will introduce some proposed mechanisms, or engines of change, by which such a movement might take place.

The Players

Table 1 lists the four major players and provides information about how the programs in each area were initiated, how the programs are currently administered, the number of children served within each program area, and the amount of money now allocated to the area by the federal government. As Table 1 illustrates, each of the four program areas was initiated at different times, is administered by different agencies, involves large populations of children, and involves substantial sums of money. Although the figures below are for all children younger than 5, Barnett and Masse (2003) estimate that, overall, the federal government spent more than \$20 billion when funds in these programs serving children up to 14 are included. Each program area now has cadres of professionals committed to the purposes of its authorizing legislation together with a number of institutions established to carry out its purpose (e.g., research centers, technical assistance programs, data collection systems).

Child Care

Although established by federal legislation in the 1930s, federally supported child care became a focus of the Great Society programs in the 1960s to aid children and their families. The federal child care effort comprises two major funds: the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), which distributes money to the states, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), designed as part of the welfare reform program. Together these funds amount to \$5.3 billion in fiscal year 2001 to help support child care centers, family child care homes, and other nonrelative care homes for children 5 years and younger. In addition, both federal and state governments subsidize family expenditures for child care through tax credits, deductions, and other mechanisms (Barnett & Masse, 2003).

Table 1
Four Major Players in Early Childhood (FY 2001)

Player	Initiated	Administered	Children Served	Federal Contribution	State Contribution
Child Care	Social Security Amendments of 1935	Administration for Children and Families U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services	1.7 million	CCDBG (P.L. 104-103) \$3.1 billion TANF \$2.2 billion	NA*
Children with Disabilities	P.L. 94-142 (1975) P.L. 99-457 (Infants & Toddlers)	Office of Special Education Programs U.S. Dept. of Education	(ages 3-5) 599,000 (ages 0-3) 247,000	\$229 million \$427 million	\$2.4 billion \$1.4 billion
	Economic Opportunity Act	Head Start Bureau		\$6.2 billion Early Head Start	

Head Start	of 1964	U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services	912,345	(0-3)—\$432 million	NA
Title 1 and State Prekindergarten	Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965	U.S. Dept. of Education	740,000	\$704 million (est.)	\$2.0 billion

*NA = Reliable figures for state and local contributions are not available for many programs. However, Barnett and Masse (2003) estimate that the total state and local contributions to programs for children under age 5 were approaching a total of \$5 billion by 2001.

Head Start

Head Start was established as a summer program for disadvantaged youth (ages 3 and 4) and quickly became a permanent program (Zigler, Kagan, & Hall, 1996). Its aim was to help children born into poverty be ready for school by promoting good health, social skills, and cognitive growth. The program was designed to help families as well as the young child and spent \$6.2 billion dollars in 2002, serving over 900,000 children. To help children younger than 3, Early Head Start spent another \$432 million. Local match is required, but not well documented, and some states add state funds to Head Start programs. Recently, a bill (H.R. 2210) has been introduced in the House of Representatives to facilitate collaboration with other early childhood programs.

Children with Disabilities

Federally supported preschool services for children with disabilities started with a small demonstration program in 1968 (Gallagher, 2000) and developed further through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and a special law to include infants and toddlers, the Education for the Handicapped Amendments of 1986 (P.L. 99-457) (Gallagher, Trohanis, & Clifford, 1989). These two laws were mandates requiring services to eligible children, which resulted in impressive state action supporting the federal commitment, far exceeding the federal financial expenditure.

Preschool Education Programs

Preschool education programs were established through Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-10). The law was designed to target children in schools with a high incidence of poverty to forestall school failure. The estimated amount spent on preschool children was \$704 million (Barnett & Masse, 2003).

States have also begun to initiate their own preschool programs aimed at improving outcomes for young children when they attend elementary school. These programs, typically referred to as "prekindergarten" programs, have grown dramatically in recent years. By 2000, at least 34 states, plus the District of Columbia, had established prekindergarten programs, mostly for children at risk for academic and social failure. A few states are moving toward making these services available to all 4-year-old children, and other states and localities are following suit. Bryant and her colleagues estimate that states were serving more than 740,000 children and spending in excess of \$2 billion on these programs by the turn of the century (Bryant et al., in press).

Each major program area designed its own system of disbursement of resources, encouraged its own clientele, and developed rules to fit its perceived program goals. The professionals who oversaw these programs came from many different disciplines, but professionals from the disciplines of child development and education were the most heavily involved.

We are well beyond the experimental phase in providing services for children prior to entry into the formal school system in our country, yet there is no formal mechanism for governing these diverse services either across levels of government (federal, state, and local) or across the various agencies responsible for delivering these services.

Limited Collaboration

Professionals within and outside the four major groups noted here recognize the need for greater coordination and collaboration among service and support units in early childhood. Many attempts are already being made in local or regional settings to establish coordination efforts. The following are a few examples of many that could be cited:

- Federal and state policies often encourage or require community-level collaboration among early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs and related family services of health, employment, housing, and transportation (Ranck, 2003, p. 61).
- Schools in Kentucky have become full-service centers for the coordination of delivery of health, welfare, and social services, promoting one-stop support for families (Bowman, 2003, p. 134).
- A number of higher education institutions have established interdisciplinary collaboration among preservice programs (Mellin & Winton, 2003).
- Several states support joint teacher certification programs between early childhood education and special education (Danaher, Kraus, Armijo, & Hipps, 2003).

What is the problem in seeking a seamless system? It is simply that at present neither the legislative authority nor the institutions necessary exist to bring about comprehensive collaboration. In addition, there are anxieties about the unintended consequences of collaboration.

Why Oppose Collaboration?

Collaboration and coordination among preschool programs have been virtues well recognized, and often desired, by the professional communities, but they have not often been implemented successfully. The reason for this poor implementation rests in the potentially negative consequences of collaboration that are not often stated or understood. The four major players could, in theory, collaborate to create a seamless system of early childhood services. However, this effort would require that they give up some autonomy and modify well-established practices.

In addition, each player worries that such collaboration might result in a lessening of services or resources for its client population, and perhaps even a diminishing budget and loss of personnel. Despite the clear desire of many professionals to seek collaboration, the prospect of change, even favorable change, carries with it concerns about unknown consequences. When such concerns are matched against the potential benefits of collaboration, it is the "concerns" that often carry the day. To expect an eager reception for collaboration by the four players is to ask for a change in human nature and the dismissal of self-interest—expectations that are truly unreasonable. The debate regarding the U.S. House of Representatives' version of the reauthorization of Head Start illustrates these difficulties. The House version of the bill called for shifting control of Head Start to state governments in up to eight states as a test to see whether more collaboration would be possible. Many early childhood advocates, including the National Head Start Association, opposed the bill, calling this move the beginning of the end of Head Start as we know it.

Of course, it is an oversimplification to limit our concerns about early childhood to these four groups. Within each of these four program areas, many programs are operated by religious groups, by various nonprofit agencies, and, in some geographic areas, by both local providers and even national corporations. Some of these services are provided through informal relationships established by individual families with neighbors, or family members, for child care. They too will be influenced by public policy actions. Each of these subgroups further complicates the practicalities of collaboration. How can these four players be brought together to form a seamless early childhood service system? That is the challenge to today's decision makers. A final complexity facing all four of these groups is the increasing diversity of the U.S. population, which affects goals, curricula, and personnel preparation.

Ideal Service System

We will briefly note here the components of an ideal service system as the goal toward which we aspire. The purpose of an ideal early childhood system is to ensure that all young children have access to affordable, high-quality care and education that prepares them for academic and social success. The

ideal system also supports America’s diverse families in their efforts to provide appropriate care and education for their children. Table 2 provides a brief description of the components of an ideal system.

Information and Support

The information and support component of the system would link families to a network of community resources, provide public awareness for various aspects of the system, support families through transitions (e.g., moving from preschool to kindergarten), and proactively reach out to high-risk families (Clifford & Gallagher, 2001).

Table 2
Components of an Ideal Service System in Early Childhood

Components	Rationale
Information & Support	All families would have access to information and support about parenting, child development, and community services.
Universal Screening	The ideal early childhood system would offer systematic, ongoing health and developmental screenings for all young children.
Continuum of High-Quality Services	The ideal early childhood system would offer a continuum of high-quality care and education services to meet the diverse needs of families and children.
Competent Personnel	Well-prepared teachers and aides would be present in proper proportions to deliver the services to the preschool children.
Appropriate Curriculum	A well-accepted program of developmental activities would be applied to help enhance children's health and motor development, cognitive abilities, language development, and social and emotional development.
Constructive Learning Environment	Constructive learning environments, meeting professional standards, would provide sufficient space and equipment in attractive surroundings.
Adequate Financing	Direct services would have adequate funds to achieve goals for children, provide adequate compensation for staff, and purchase supplies and necessary equipment to aid program delivery.

Universal Screening

The primary purpose of these screenings would be to identify problems and offer treatment or early intervention as quickly as possible to maximize each child’s long-term development. These screenings would occur periodically across the early childhood age range and be offered in locations convenient and accessible to all families (Cryer, 2003).

Continuum of High-Quality Early Care, Education, and Intervention

Children would be engaged in meaningful and enjoyable activities that support their optimal growth and development while preparing them for academic and social success. The continuum of care and education would include part-time, as well as full-time, care and education that occur in various settings—the child’s own home, family child care homes, center-based programs, and schools.

Competent Personnel

Plans would be available to continuously upgrade existing personnel and recruit additional qualified personnel. The programs and staff would reflect the children and families served and would facilitate children’s entry into the diverse culture of the United States.

Appropriate Curriculum

A variety of curricula based on knowledge of young children’s growth and development would be available to the staff of early childhood programs. All of these program options would encourage the development of needed knowledge and learning skills (National Education Goals Panel, 1997).

Constructive Learning Environment

Learning environments would meet standards set forth in instruments such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised Edition (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) or by professional groups such as the American Public Health Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics (2002) in *Caring for Our Children*, or the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Adequate Financing

Funds would be available through federal, state, and local sources, parent fees, and private contributors. Financial support would at least be the same as the per-pupil cost of public schools. It is widely recognized that few early childhood programs meet these financial standards at present (Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Helburn & Bergmann, 2002). In addition, efficient systems for distributing government funding would be coordinated across the many different programs or through some consolidation of programs.

As described above, extensive financial resources are already in place for serving young children—our estimates are that federal and state government spending at the current time approaches nearly \$25 billion. It is not known how much local government financing is involved. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that parents are currently paying the majority of the costs of early care and education. Mitchell and her colleagues estimate that parents pay some 60% of the total costs (Mitchell, Stoney, & Dichter, 2001). Although very substantial additional resources will be needed to ensure high-quality programs for all children and families needing those services, a substantial base exists from which to build the system. Barnett and Masse (2003) estimate that the total cost for operating a comprehensive early care and education system is at least \$40 billion. Some economy of scale and efficiency will help to offset a portion of these large expenses as the seamless system is built.

Currently, major efforts are underway on the part of policy makers to move toward creating a seamless system of services, at least for 3- and 4-year-olds. We know how to build programs that are good for children in these age groups, have a modest supply of trained personnel, and, with the infusion of additional funding, have the capability in the higher education system to provide a substantial number of additional teachers. All of these factors point to relatively rapid development of a system of services for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Support Systems for an Ideal Program

Just as large corporations and military establishments need an extensive support system to back up those employees or personnel on the "firing line," so does an ideal high-quality program for young children need extended professional support. In many areas, some of these support system components are in place, but few areas have them all. Such support system elements would be generally found at the state or regional level or at a district level in a large urban area. Table 2 provides a list of these support system components and their functions.

This support system requires active participation of many different institutions at local, state, and federal levels if it is to run smoothly. The need for such a support system is becoming widely recognized. Kagan and Cohen (1997) have estimated that 10% of government funding for child care should be invested in elements of support infrastructure.

Infrastructure is critical to the success of an ideal early childhood service system. The range and quality of services offered in an ideal system do not come about easily. They rely on competent personnel, appropriate funding mechanisms, adequate data systems, and other supports. The next section of the paper discusses infrastructure needs in more detail. In addition to the issues of uncertainty and turf wars referred to above, other significant barriers to having a comprehensive early childhood system in the United States exist. The major barriers are discussed below.

Barriers to Reform

Professionals in the early childhood field generally agree on the need for greater coordination and collaboration among various units, professions, and organizations. Given this consensus, the lack of progress in these areas suggests the need for an investigation into the barriers to reform. Gallagher and Clifford (2000) have presented a series of potential barriers that could hinder, delay, or postpone desired policy actions. Certainly, the self-interest of professional groups and the established patterns of service delivery of the four major players alert us to potential barriers to change (see Figure 1).

Institutional Barriers

Each of the players has established institutional support systems, personnel preparation programs, and technical assistance programs. Varieties of professional organizations also play a role in the support of particular programs. These organizations include NAEYC, the Council for Exceptional Children, the National Head Start Association, and the American Federation of Teachers. All organizations will resist change when they perceive it as harming their own interests in early childhood.

Barriers to Reform

There are few policies that do not find some barriers that stand in the way of implementation. Success in policy implementation often depends on knowing the nature of these barriers, how they interact, and how they can be portrayed, so that an effective strategy can be devised to overcome them.

Institutional

These barriers arise when the proposed policy conflicts with the current operation of established social and political institutions. A call for interagency coordination might create difficulties in blending the existing policies and operations across health, social services, and educational agencies. If a lead agency is identified to carry out the policy, is that agency given sufficient authority and resources?

Psychological

A proposed policy can come into conflict with deeply held personal beliefs of clients, professionals, or leaders who must implement the policy. Perhaps some persons resent the fact that they were not consulted before the policy was established. Any time someone loses authority or status, there can be personal resistance.

Sociological

Sometimes the new policy runs afoul of established mores or cultural values of subgroups within the society. For example, it may be traditional in some cultural subgroups for family members to show deference to those in authority (e.g., physicians or agency heads). The notion of family empowerment might be a difficult one for them to entertain.

Economic

Often, the promise of resources to carry out a program is not fulfilled, not because of deviousness, but because of the multitude of issues to be met and the limited financial resources at the state or federal level.

Political

Some programs become identified with one or the other political party, and such programs become hostage when the opposing political party comes into power. There is a periodic overturn of political leaders through retirement or elections—changes that can cause disjunction in the support or understanding of the program on the part of political leaders.

Geographic

The delivery of services to rural and inner-city areas has long plagued those who have tried to provide comprehensive health and social services. Personnel resources tend to remain in large- or middle-sized urban areas, causing substantial difficulties in covering outlying areas.

Figure 1. Barriers to policy implementation. Source: Gallagher & Clifford (2000).

Psychological and Sociological Barriers

Additional barriers may come from individuals (psychological) or subgroups (sociological) of individuals who perceive their own status to be threatened by proposed changes. Some professionals have worked faithfully for years for their agencies or organizations and would be justifiably irritated at major proposals for change. Similarly, some subgroups suspect that changes will downgrade their already shaky status in society. Numerous proposals have been made to fold Head Start into public education, and the Head Start families and personnel have reacted negatively and strongly opposed such proposals.

Economic Barriers

Economic barriers, although far from the only barriers, are probably the most serious to be overcome. It is not clear yet whether the American public is willing to accept financial responsibility for preschool children. A recent report from the National Academy of Sciences estimates that we spend one-quarter the amount per capita on children birth to 5 as we spend on children ages 6-17 (Ladd, Chalk, & Hansen, 1999). As long as many members of the public see early care and education as a service to parents rather than developmental enhancement for the child, they will be unlikely to pick up the cost of comprehensive programs.

Political Barriers

All of these programs rely on political support to provide the authority and resources to get their jobs done. But politicians come and go, and a program may lose its protector through elections or retirement. Time constraints marked by elections and legislative calendars affect the politics that influence programs. The legislative committees that have been formed to oversee such programs also can be counted upon to question what major changes might mean for them.

Geographic Barriers

Geographic barriers—distance and isolation in rural areas, and danger and decay in urban areas—limit the resources available for early childhood programs. A comprehensive system could help meet the needs of the young children served by these programs.

Pedagogical and Philosophical Barriers

Additional barriers include the pedagogical and philosophical differences among the four major players. Head Start emphasizes health issues and parental influence on the program. The Title 1 programs emphasize preparing the child for academic activities. Programs for children with disabilities emphasize individualization of programs. Attempting to meld all of these elements would be difficult indeed.

Status Quo

The status quo as a force is one of the more significant barriers in policy initiation or change. In any people-serving operation (e.g., health, education, and social work), professionals become accustomed to carrying out their jobs in certain ways, and they need a powerful reason to change in order to overcome that resistance. Psychological inertia can be as powerful as physical inertia (Fullan, 1993).

One reason that is often given for change is that newer approaches are more effective and efficient. The "carrot side" of the argument is that new methods may improve performance and increase professionalism (Zigler, Kagan, & Hall, 1996). The "stick side" of the argument is that the status quo may not be allowed to continue. Professionals unwilling to change may be replaced or lose funds. Some combination of the "carrot and stick" approach may be necessary to convince people who are being asked to change to accede to these requests.

Engines of Change

The vast numbers of potential barriers to change call for special attention. Sheer persuasion, or logical arguments, applied to these barriers may not be sufficient. Gallagher (2002) has described four major engines of change that can affect early childhood programs—legislation, court action, administrative rule making, and professional initiatives.

Legislation

Legislation moves away from persuasion as a means of changing the behavior of parents and child care workers to mandates for specific behavior. Once enacted, a law requires compliance. For example, teacher-to-child ratios become more standardized when legislation is specific about such requirements. Goals 2000 (National Education Goals Panel, 1997) stated clearly that in this country all children should be ready to learn when they enter school. This goal was stated as an expectation rather than a mandate. By contrast, the No Child Left Behind Act (P.L. 107-110) is a law that requires certain standards to be met in an effort to ensure that all children come to school ready to succeed and continue to succeed.

Consider legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L. 105-15), which guarantees a free and appropriate education to all children with disabilities. This law focuses on the performance of schools rather than individuals and provides for sanctions for those schools where the students are not meeting a predetermined rate of progress. IDEA has opened the door to opportunity for many young children with disabilities who would not have received needed services before the act existed.

State legislation and other state actions have played an important role in making early care and education services available to young children. A recent example can be seen in Florida, where a constitutional amendment requires free and universal access to prekindergarten to all Florida parents who wish to have these services for their 4-year-old children. The New York state legislature set similar goals for universal access to prekindergarten several years ago. In the cases of both Florida and New York, the degree to which high-quality services will be available to families is yet to be determined. Even though it may take time to fully implement legislative intent, the existence of legislation is a powerful engine for change in our society.

Court Action

Court action represents another engine of change. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court mandated desegregation of our public schools. The half-century that followed was affected in many ways by that decision and by the many rulings that followed from it. The courts have also been active in many dimensions of early childhood services.

Court actions such as the Leandro case in North Carolina (*Leandro v. North Carolina*, 1999) and the Abbott case in New Jersey (*Abbott v. Burke*, 1998) have addressed the inequity of public education for young children from economically disadvantaged homes and neighborhoods and called for redistribution of resources within the states to create more equal conditions for learning. In both of these cases, high-quality early education for children prior to kindergarten was identified as a key strategy for a more equitable education. In both cases, the response to the court rulings has created an expectation for change, which cuts across the traditional divisions in the early childhood field.

Administrative Rule Making

Administrative rules strengthen the standards for early childhood programs and have changed the landscape for young children. Gallagher, Rooney, and Campbell (1999) analyzed state regulations for child care in four states and concluded that existing state regulations paid more attention to the physical health and safety of young children than to the stimulation of cognitive, social, and emotional development. Such state regulations sent a message to child care operators that developmental stimulation was *not* a top priority and that providing a "safe haven" for children was the main goal.

A recent strong movement to develop child-based outcome standards suggests that child development is the key goal for children. Survey data in 2000 revealed that 27 states had child-based outcome

standards covering at least one developmental domain or academic content area for preschool-age children. Another 12 states were in the process of developing such standards (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). In developing standards, states typically seek to tie prekindergarten learning standards to those of their K-12 systems.

Administrative rule making tries to answer many of the questions regarding implementation of major ideas, laws, or legal decisions that must take place. Rule making on the implementation of such central ideas as placing a child with disabilities in the "least restrictive environment" has had much to do with shaping the inclusive early childhood settings of the past two decades. Thus, we see that administrative rules are another major engine for change that can help provide a seamless system of services for young children and their families.

Professional Initiatives

Professional initiatives refer to actions taken by individual professionals or organizations of professionals. For example, NAEYC's *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) has had a huge impact on many early education programs. NAEYC consolidated this impact through the development of a system for accrediting early childhood programs that set new standards for practice in the field. The standards for personnel preparation established by the Council for Exceptional Children have similarly influenced the staffing of many programs for children with special needs. The American Academy of Pediatrics' publication *Caring for Our Children* (American Public Health Association & American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002) also set new standards for child care in America.

Finally, the professions can influence practice both through the training of preservice professionals and through ongoing research. A series of studies to test whether early intervention could make a positive difference in the development of young children has demonstrated clearly that high-quality interventions can have a positive, long-term impact on young children. The intervention studies have proven that meaningful, if modest, gains can be made for children "at high risk" through implementation of a systematic program focusing on language development, social and emotional development, and good work habits (see Guralnick, 1997; Bryant & Maxwell, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Behrman, 1995; Wolery & Bailey, 2002).

Changing the Early Childhood Service Systems: A Common Support System

Although we may agree that we need a seamless early childhood service system, we still face a complex set of tasks to make sure that such a shift occurs. How can these four engines of change be used to bring about a more collaborative and coordinated early childhood system? There should be recognition that coordination, collaboration, and the creation of an infrastructure are not naturally occurring events. Institutions have to be put into place to ensure that necessary actions happen, and that these institutions continue to function and be supported in the future.

In seeking a seamless early childhood program, it would be too much to expect that the current four major delivery systems—federally supported child care, Head Start, federally mandated services for children with disabilities, and federally and state-supported preschool programs—would agree to merge their service programs. However, a possible first step toward a universal system of early childhood services could be the blending of the groups' support systems so that a single support system could back up all four of the service programs and settings. Figure 2 reflects such a proposed integrated support system serving four separate service providers, and it shows the various support elements that each of the four major players includes in its operation. The supporting agencies are also included. One of the supporting agencies' efforts at collaboration will almost certainly require a blending of the support and the various support system elements for these agencies. Professional groups will have to be involved for the blending of standards and communication systems. Suggestions for blending support elements follow:

- *Personnel Preparation.* One personnel preparation program would focus on early childhood development with special additions for those working with children with disabilities or children in poverty.
- *Technical Assistance.* One technical assistance (TA) program would be established instead of four.

- *Evaluation.* The strong call for accountability has caused all of the entities to consider the appropriate approach to evaluation to meet these accountability requirements. A single approach to evaluation for these programs would be developed so that four separate evaluation systems are no longer necessary.
- *Data Systems.* A single data system, instead of four, would provide a central data repository at the state and federal levels, providing resources to answer questions posed by decision makers, instead of having fragmentary information of limited value.
- *Communication.* Each of the four major programs has a series of mechanisms designed to communicate with its clientele, public decision makers, and professional colleagues.
- *Planning.* A comprehensive planning unit would be established at the state level with elements at the local level as well, to integrate the future efforts and needs of the various groups or players.
- *Standards.* Standards for the four groups would be integrated into a master plan that would cut across the various service delivery sectors, providing consistency for parents, professionals, and administrators.

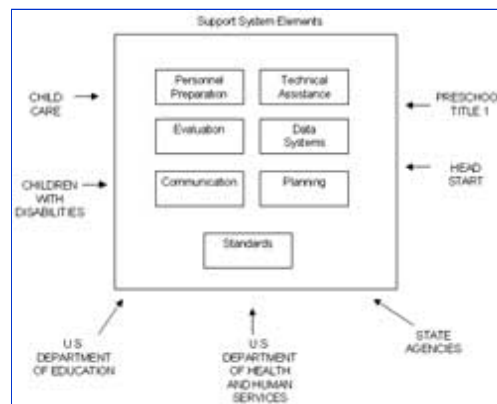


Figure 2. Multiple support systems in early childhood.

One should not underestimate the storm and fury that such a proposed integration is likely to generate in each of the four camps or in other groups that might be affected, but considerable professional and public support can also be expected. Blending these support elements could require great ingenuity and diplomacy on the part of the various task forces and commissions charged with developing such a program. However, substantial savings in money, and in scarce personnel, could make such a combined support system attractive to decision makers already concerned about the serious budget implications of the growing early childhood field.

Recommendations

We believe that a series of actions can move us closer to the ideal seamless early childhood system. To accomplish this goal, we would utilize all of the engines of change noted in this article.

Legislation

- Legislation at the state level could be enacted to establish institutions that would be committed to a coordinated early childhood program, such as creating a Department of Early Childhood in state government. All four interest groups, plus parents and higher education, would have membership in the Department of Early Childhood at the state level, and the budgets of all groups would flow through this department. Long-range planning for early childhood programs would be centered here. Legislation may also be necessary to establish and fund support system features such as common statewide data systems, technical assistance centers, and evaluation protocols.
- Someone within the federal and state legislatures can attempt to combine existing legislative committees into one Early Childhood Committee that would oversee early childhood programs. In this way, rivalries between legislative committees, each competing over pieces of the early childhood program, might be avoided.

Court Cases

- Court cases such as those related to "fairness of resource allocation" represented in the New Jersey and North Carolina litigation might be brought to the Supreme Court so that a federal decision on equality of opportunity for all children could be made. The inequity in expenditures within states has been manifest for some time, but it will take something like a court mandate to shift this allocation of scarce resources.

Administrative Rule Making

- The establishment of proper teacher standards and viable class size and teacher-to-child ratios can be made administratively to ensure proper working conditions in early childhood programs. Special conditions such as the presence of children with serious disabilities could adjust the teacher-to-child ratio downward appropriately.
- Other rules can be established for the environmental conditions, health examinations, and nutritional concerns to complement the early childhood programs. Such rules could be made to cut across the current diverse set of service providers, bringing more consistency to the system. Such rules could be a function of the overarching Department of Early Childhood structure (discussed above).

Professional Initiatives

- Interested professionals and their organizations are needed to build effective multidisciplinary personnel preparation programs and to convince reluctant higher-education organizations that it is important to cut across discipline lines in early childhood. Also, professionals could be involved in developing more curricula for young children so that the service provider might have a menu of choices for a valid program. Finally, the development of rules and new measurements for accountability for programs could be initiated and supported by professional groups and teams.
- One of the most important professional initiatives involves the various institutions of higher education. Consider the number of departments in the university that have a stake in early childhood: pediatrics, sociology, psychology, early childhood education, special education, communications and speech, and human development, just to mention the most obvious examples. These departmental interests in early childhood are rarely shared with one another, and some efforts at blending joint personnel preparation programs into a multidisciplinary program would seem to be necessary to build a seamless system.
- Of particular importance in the early childhood field is the current split between most four-year institutions and the community colleges and technical colleges. The lack of consistent agreements among institutions about transfer of credits (commonly known as articulation agreements) presents a substantial barrier to raising the training requirements for early childhood professionals. Federal agencies could help this process by providing funds to subsidize multidisciplinary personnel preparation programs and development of comprehensive personnel preparation plans for states.
- The support of a multidisciplinary research center, and the availability of research funds for studies on early childhood, which would bring together the various disciplines, can be an important higher education institutional step toward coordination and cooperation.

Conclusion

A final recommendation would be the establishment of a National Commission on Early Childhood whose task it would be to make recommendations designed to bring together disparate parts of the early childhood service and support systems. One or more of the major foundations, which have played a similar role in the past, could be convinced that now is the time for such a venture.

Surely what is needed is leadership of a neutral interested party independent of the partisan political entities and without alignment with any of the four players. Highly respected professional scholars; public policy makers; service providers at federal, state, and local levels; and a strong representation

from families would make up the composition of such a body whose first job might be to generate task forces on personnel preparation, technical assistance, data systems, and finances to bring a sense of reality to the discussions.

Imposing questions need to be answered. How would the seamless early childhood program be governed? Would the collaboration be mainly at the local level? Would it also include efforts at state and federal levels? How can higher education be brought onboard? Who would pay for the services? Who would deliver the services? What standards would be set for individual service providers? How do we make the transition from the current disjointed enterprise to a real system?

The time required to effect the changes that will be necessary for a seamless system can be measured in years, if not decades. However, we now have a solid rationale for these programs (i.e., the data on early brain development, the school histories of children from at-risk environments) and the beginning of interest at the state and federal levels to examine the options for developing a comprehensive system of services.

We have tried to present briefly the complex nature of change necessary to reach a seamless collaborative ideal service system for early childhood. One future option for early childhood services is simply not acceptable—the status quo. Services are too fragmented, too chaotic, and too expensive in their redundancies to expect generous public support. The price for public support would be a coordinated system that the public sees as efficient and effective. Only then will we gain the necessary financial and political support needed to fulfill the goals of parents and professionals committed to an appropriate early childhood system for all children.

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