

National Professional Development Center on Inclusion

Helping states achieve an integrated professional development system that supports high quality inclusion



Competencies for Early Childhood Educators in the Context of Inclusion Issues and Guidance for States

Four movements in the education and care of young children draw attention to the issue of competencies for early childhood educators¹ related to inclusion. One movement concerns the focus on the qualifications of early childhood educators and, in conjunction with this, attention to personnel standards and competencies. Currently, at least 80% of states have developed some form of early childhood educator competencies or core knowledge documents (National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, 2007).

The second movement concerns the legislative and moral imperative for the inclusion of young children with disabilities into general early childhood settings. Major national policy initiatives have provided the legal foundation for inclusion and, morally, society supports the right of children with disabilities to participate in all aspects of society, including educational opportunities. A joint position statement from two national early childhood organizations, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), defines the essential features of high quality inclusion (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

The third movement is the growing recognition that educators need to be better prepared to serve the growing number of non-White children who are under 5, especially those who are dual language learners (Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006; Ray, Bowman, & Robbins, 2006). Information from the 2010 census shows that the racial and ethnic background of the nation's children is changing significantly (Frey, 2011).

A fourth movement involves the broadened definition of the early education workforce, as exemplified in the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) program, and the emphasis on integrated, cross-sector early childhood systems. The trend toward more inclusive, collaborative approaches to educating young children has brought about shifts in roles and responsibilities. For example, early childhood educators must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work effectively with each and every child. Likewise, early childhood special educators and specialists must be competent to support early educators by collaboratively providing their specialized services in inclusive early care and education settings.

¹ For the purpose of this paper, the National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (NPDCI) is using the definition of early childhood educators put forth by the Race To The Top – Early Learning Challenge Program: “Early Childhood Educator means any professional working in Early Learning and Development Programs, including but not limited to center-based and family child care providers infant and toddler specialists, early intervention specialists and early childhood special educators, home visitors, related service providers, administrators, Head Start teachers, Early Head Start teachers, preschool and other teachers, teacher assistants, family service staff, and health consultants.” (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011, p. 17)

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this document is to identify issues and provide guidance to states as they develop, revise, and utilize early educator competencies in the context of inclusion. Key issues for consideration include:

- Ensuring that early educator competencies reflect knowledge, skills, dispositions, and emerging research on effective practices for working in inclusive settings with children with and without disabilities and children who are dual language learners (DLL);
- Ensuring that competencies that support inclusion are linked with quality professional development opportunities, accountability systems, and other components of a comprehensive early childhood system.

What Are Competencies?

Competencies are defined as what a person knows and can do (Bellm, 2005; Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2008; Winton, McCollum, & Catlett, 2007): the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to effectively function in a role. Identifying which practitioners (**who**); need specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions (**what**); and how they can best be supported in obtaining these capabilities is an essential step for those in charge of professional development for the early childhood workforce (Buysse, Winton, & Rous, 2009; National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2008). Competencies are used to inform the **what** and are therefore an important area of focus for professional development.

The terms *standards* and *competencies* are closely related and are often used interchangeably. However, standards and competencies generally represent different aspects of the same concept. Standards are a set of expectations or benchmarks conveyed as broad domains (e.g., child development and learning) within each of which associated key elements or competencies are organized into levels of expertise. Standards are frequently used as a guide for accreditation or licensing and tend to describe “the qualifications and credentials needed” to serve in a particular role (Harbin, Rous, & McLean, 2005). Competencies are more detailed descriptions of what one knows and can do—the knowledge, skills, and dispositions educators must master to be effective. In early education, competencies tend to be developed by states while personnel standards are defined nationally.

Key Challenges for States

States are faced with challenges as they address the process of developing or revising early educator competencies in the context of inclusion and ensuring that those competencies are linked to professional development and accountability systems.

UNIFYING NATIONAL PERSONNEL STANDARDS

Two national professional organizations, NAEYC and CEC/DEC, have each developed a set of early childhood personnel standards that reflect a commitment by both organizations to support developmentally appropriate and inclusive programs for young children. These standards are well established and typically are the basis for accreditation of 4-year early childhood (NAEYC) and early childhood special education (CEC/DEC) degree-granting teacher education programs by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). While the two sets of standards reflect a shared commitment to young children, they are not well integrated, each having its own organizational structure, level of detail, and terminology. This is a barrier for states and personnel preparation programs, especially those that are attempting to develop competencies relevant for blended licensure or blended personnel preparation programs to support inclusive, collaborative approaches to educating young children. For instance, blended teacher education programs seeking NCATE accreditation are required to document how they are meeting both sets of national standards. The work of integrating the standards is up to individual faculty or states.

CEC/DEC and NAEYC have recently embarked on efforts to examine the two sets of standards to identify commonalities in content focus. This is a starting point and could perhaps lead to a unified set of standards with an agreed upon structure, shared terminology, and a delineation of competencies and essential teaching practices as they relate to different roles and levels of responsibility. Having a unified set of national early childhood standards would support states' efforts at building high quality inclusive education and would provide a foundation for both preservice and inservice professional development.

LINKING STATE COMPETENCIES TO NATIONAL STANDARDS

In spite of the diligent efforts of NAEYC and CEC/DEC to promote national personnel standards, an inescapable fact is that these standards are voluntary. The link between national standards, state competencies and early educator certification or licensure is not guaranteed. As much as one would hope that national standards are the basis for state competencies, an analysis of state competency documents indicates this is not the case (Stayton et al., 2009). Stayton and colleagues conducted an item-by-item content analysis of state certification standards for early childhood special educators and found little or no correlation between these state standards and the national standards of NAEYC or CEC/DEC, in spite of state agency representatives reporting that national standards were the basis for their state standards. Clearly, there is a need to create incentives and give support to states in developing competencies that reflect national standards.

CONNECTING COMPETENCIES TO PRACTICES

Competencies alone do not affect what is happening in the classroom. A link between national standards, competencies, early learning guidelines, and practices is necessary to create a pathway through which competencies can influence teaching practices and child and family

outcomes (NCATE, 2010). Practices are the means through which competencies are enacted day-to-day in early education environments. States need assistance in developing a process for periodic review to ensure that competencies reflect emerging research on effective teaching and intervening practices and the changing demographics of the children and families in programs. Table 1 illustrates how national standards and associated competencies/indicators could be linked to research-based practices. In the left-hand column of the table, two standards related to interactional and instructional strategies are listed, one each from CEC/DEC (2008) and NAEYC (2011), along with accompanying “competencies” expressed as “key elements” by NAEYC and as “knowledge and skills” by CEC/DEC. Research-based practices linked to the standards are identified in the right-hand column.

Table 1.
Connecting Standards and Competencies to Research-Based Practices

CEC/DEC & NAEYC Standards & Related Competencies	Research-Based Practice
CEC/DEC Standard 4: Instructional Strategies 4.3. Use teacher-scaffolded and initiated instruction to complement child-initiated learning 4.4: Select, adapt, and use instructional strategies and materials according to characteristics of the individual with exceptional learning needs NAEYC Standard 4: Using Developmentally Effective Approaches to Connect with Children and Families 4.b. Know and understand effective strategies and tools for early education.	<i>Embedded interventions</i> (Snyder, P., Hemmeter, M. L., Sandall, S., & McLean, M., 2008) <i>Dialogic Reading</i> (What Works Clearing House, 2007)

It is important to recognize that most research-based practices have multiple components and this further complicates the specification of competencies. For example, for embedded instruction, competencies related to what to teach, when to teach, how to teach, and how to evaluate would need to be specified in order to guide professional development. This kind of explicit guidance linking competencies to practices with a strong research base would help faculty and professional development providers address the converging evidence that a strong practice focus is essential for effective professional development (NCATE, 2010).

RELIABLY ASSESSING TEACHER COMPETENCE

A related challenge concerns the absence of reliable and valid assessments of early educators' knowledge, skills, and abilities to implement research-based practices in their day-to-day work with children. The lack of valid teacher assessment approaches makes it difficult to determine what level of intensity, and type of professional development and monitoring, supports the attainment of necessary competencies. Teacher assessment is a complicated and controversial topic in K-12 education (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009), with conversations just beginning in early childhood field about how to address the issue. There is much work yet to be done, especially in terms of linking teacher competencies and demonstrated practices to child and family outcomes, and demonstrating that the development of those practices is directly linked to a specific professional development intervention. One emerging approach is the use of observational checklists for assessing the extent to which teachers are implementing essential components of specific practices that are the focus of professional development.

IDENTIFYING COMPETENCIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROVIDERS

Competencies for professional development providers are a related consideration. Faculty and professional development providers need content knowledge and expertise in the early childhood practices that are the focus of professional development in addition to having expertise in evidence-based professional development methods. The determination of the competencies needed for those who provide professional development has received little systematic attention in the literature on professional development, from national professional organizations or from states.

ADDRESSING INCLUSION

Considerations related to inclusion further compound the above challenges. Though federal regulations require the percentage of young children with disabilities served in inclusive settings be maintained or increased (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004), research has demonstrated that teachers often report they are inadequately prepared to work with children with disabilities (Buysse, Wesley, Keyes, & Bailey, 1996; Chang, Early, & Winton, 2005). In spite of recognition of demographic changes in the children and families being served in early childhood programs, content related to ethnic, linguistic and ability diversity has been found to be insufficiently represented in most early childhood professional development (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2008; Chang et al., 2005; Maxwell et al., 2006; Ray et al., 2006).

Typically, the professional development systems supporting regular early educators operate separately from those systems that support special education teachers and specialists. This is despite the fact that effective inclusion relies on early educators and early childhood special educators/specialists being able to provide education and support to children and families in a collaborative fashion.

State Approaches to the Development of Competencies that Support Inclusion

Despite the challenges, states are engaging in the difficult job of developing and revising early childhood competencies to include a focus on each and every child. To examine more closely what states are doing in this regard, state competency and core knowledge documents provided by the National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center (NCCIC) were reviewed to determine the approaches that states have used to address the inclusion of children with disabilities. An examination of competencies from the 28 states listed on the NCCIC website found that while all competency documents on the website included some content referring to children with disabilities, the comprehensiveness of the content varied widely.

Three main approaches for including content on children with disabilities were identified:

- Infusing content supporting children with disabilities within competency domains. In general, states taking this approach embed content specific to children with disabilities into some, but not all domains.
- Creating a separate domain that incorporates content specific to children with disabilities.
- Providing both a domain specific to children with disabilities and including content supporting children with disabilities within some additional domains.

In all three approaches, content supporting children with disabilities ranged from broad statements (e.g., adding a phrase similar to “all children including children with special needs” at the end of some statements) to detailed statements (e.g., describing the adaptation of materials and activities to meet the needs of children with disabilities).

There are pros and cons to each of these approaches. While infusing inclusion into existing content domains integrates support for children with disabilities across areas of competence, there are concerns that the information could be easily overlooked or that the focus on inclusion may be diluted. Creating a separate domain to address children with disabilities could potentially elevate or emphasize the importance of supporting children with disabilities. However, this could also give the impression that inclusion is a separate issue or a special domain that might be applicable to only some programs. The third approach provides a method for including both a clear focus on children with disabilities and integrating support for children with disabilities across additional areas of competence. There are some emerging efforts in a few states to develop a set of unified competencies that intentionally and systematically address core competencies needed by all educators as well as more specialized competencies for early educators who provide inclusion support. Currently, no empirical evidence supports one approach over the other.

The competencies from these 28 states were also examined to determine the approaches used to include content on supporting the needs of children who are DLLs. The approaches were similar to those used to include content addressing the needs of children with disabilities. The majority of the competency documents on the NCCIC website included some mention of children with diverse language needs, with comprehensiveness varying widely. Content ranged from statements on simply being responsive to the language spoken by the child to using strategies and activities to increase and maintain language and literacy skills in both home and English languages.

Relationship of Competencies to Professional Development

While the development of standards and competencies can be a complex task, even more challenging is ensuring that competencies, specifically those that support inclusion, play a central role in the preparation and support of the early childhood workforce. Professional development provides the mechanism for moving competencies off of the shelf and into action. However, few linkages between competencies and the professional development available for practitioners exist according to a report from the National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (Howes et al., 2008).

To address this gap, some states are creating formal connections between competencies and professional development through accountability systems. To examine how states are attempting to strengthen the relationship between competencies and professional development, three types of accountability systems with professional development components were considered: (a) certification and licensure of early educators, (b) career ladders, and (c) child care program licensure and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).

CERTIFICATION AND LICENSURE FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

Traditionally, teacher certification and licensure has been based on coursework and degrees with a focus on teachers in kindergarten through grade twelve. For the most part, early care and education programs have operated outside of the teacher licensure system. However, as states move to professionalize the early childhood field, and more states are investing in publicly funded pre-K programs, licensure and certification of early educators are being used as strategies for addressing the quality of the workforce. While state pre-K programs have raised the educational requirements for teachers in state-funded pre-K programs (Bueno, Darling-Hammond, & Gonzales, 2010), requirements for other early educators vary widely and are generally lower than those for teachers in state-funded pre-K programs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). To address this discrepancy, some states are looking at alternative forms of certification for child care teachers, including early childhood certification based on continuing education credits (CEU) or required number of clock hours of professional development. Ensuring that the professional development approved for CEUs or professional development requirements reflects early educator competencies is one avenue for providing the early childhood workforce with professional development in key content areas, including content related to children with disabilities and DLLs.

CAREER LADDERS

Additionally, states may link certification, coursework, and professional development with a career ladder. A career ladder provides a framework for recognizing and tracking progress as early educators move through career levels ranging from initial to more advanced certification, degrees, and licensing to qualify them to assume certain roles. Competencies, if they are utilized as the basis for professional development linked to movement up a career ladder, can help ensure a systematic approach to development of the knowledge and skills of the early childhood workforce. It is important to note that career ladders may target a single sector (e.g., child care) rather than the broader early childhood field, thus limiting their influence.

CHILD CARE PROGRAM LICENSURE AND QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS (QRIS)

Child care licensure and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are related components of a voluntary state system for assessing, monitoring, and improving the quality of early childhood programs and offer the potential for forging a connection between professional development and competencies. Child care licensure may contain baseline requirements for professional development and is often the first rung in multiple steps in a QRIS. A QRIS generally includes a standard related to professional development and staff qualifications. This provides the opportunity for states to incorporate requirements for professional development based on early educator competencies. Currently, fewer than half of the states have a fully functioning statewide QRIS (NCCIC, 2010), and there are few formal connections between QRIS and competencies (Howes et al., 2008). However, child care program licensure and QRIS provide promising avenues for systematically linking competencies to state-wide professional development initiatives. This could be accomplished by instituting a requirement that professional development accepted for program licensure or QRIS is based on competencies that address inclusion. For example, in New Mexico, approved training for their QRIS must be based on their inclusive core competencies.

Creating connections between competencies and accountability systems is a complex task that requires systematic planning and collaboration. Examples of selected states that have made these connections are provided in the Appendix. Even states that

have accomplished a certain level of connection between professional development, accountability systems and competencies still face challenges. States have multiple accountability systems (Rohrbough, Krajec, & Winton, 2011), multiple early childhood teacher licensing systems, (Bornfreund, 2011), and sometimes multiples sets of early childhood competencies.

Summary and Recommendations

The development and utilization of early educator competencies that support inclusion is complicated. Guidance provided to states is limited, and evidence on effective approaches is absent. It is encouraging to learn that states are addressing support for children with disabilities in their early educator competencies. It is also encouraging that efforts to professionalize the early childhood field include putting into place accountability and professional development systems. However, it is discouraging that these elements may not be linked (Howes et al., 2008). It is time to connect the dots. Linking these elements will not be easy and will require multiple agencies and organizations to work together. The current emphasis on the quality of the early childhood workforce compels us to provide some guidance to states as they move forward in this effort. The following recommendations are for states developing, refining and utilizing early educator competencies to build the quality of the early childhood workforce:

- Require cross-sector collaboration among key early childhood sectors², including families and practitioners, in the development of **all components** of the early childhood system, including the competencies;
- Unify national personnel standards and require that they be used as the framework for state competencies;
- Update competencies periodically to reflect existing and emerging research-based practices that support inclusion and the changing demographics of the children and families served;
- Ensure that professional development requirements related to early educator certification and teacher licensure are based on competencies that incorporate content on children with disabilities, and DLLs;
- Require competency-based professional development, including content on children with disabilities and DLLs, for the initial rung of child care and licensure and all levels of ratings in a QRIS;
- Develop competencies for professional development providers that include content supporting inclusion, along with expertise in effectively delivering the content to the learners who need it.

Recent guidelines to states applying for the RTT–ELC grants, jointly administered by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are encouraging in this respect. The guidelines state that competencies “must, at a minimum, be evidence-based; incorporate knowledge and application of the State’s Early Learning and Development Standards, the State’s Comprehensive Assessment System, child development, and strategies for working with families; and incorporate feedback from experts at the State’s postsecondary institutions and other early learning and development experts” (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011, p. 21). RTT–ELC guidelines also state that workforce competencies should align with credentials and degrees and with professional development opportunities. Adding that competencies include strategies for working with children with disabilities and DLL and link to national standards would strengthen the guidelines to an even greater extent. The continuing national push for a competent and confident early childhood workforce and high quality inclusive programs and services provide the opportunity and motivation to make competencies a linchpin in state professional development systems in ways that support each and every child and his or her family.

² Early Childhood Advisory Council legislation identifies key sectors as child care, public school (Title 1, pre-K, 619), Head Start, health or mental health, Part C, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), and other entities and agencies determined to be relevant by the governor of their state (Satkowski, 2009). Other considerations include ensuring that voices of families and practitioners are represented.

State	Competencies/Core Knowledge and Approach Taken to Address Inclusion*	Connection to a Career Ladder	Connection to Personnel Certification and Licensing	Connection to Program Licensure and/or QRIS
Illinois	<p>ECE Credential Content Areas from the Gateways to Opportunity Professional Development Advisory Council.</p> <p>http://www.ilgateways.com/en/ece-credential-content-areas</p> <p>Illinois's Competencies contain 7 content areas organized into 6 levels. Content to support children with disabilities is embedded within 6 of the 7 content areas and is addressed within levels 2-6.</p>	<p>Illinois' career lattice is organized into 6 levels ranging from noncredit community-based training through completion of a graduate degree. Education and training at all levels is aligned with the Content Areas.</p>	<p>Illinois' voluntary ECE credential is based on the Gateway's to Opportunity content areas.</p> <p>http://www.ilgateways.com/ececredentials.aspx</p>	<p>Illinois Quality Counts: Quality Rating System (QRS) is linked to the Level 1 ECE credential</p> <p>http://www.inccrra.org/quality-rating-system</p> <p>Illinois's child care program licensure requires 15 clock hours of PD per staff member, the PD is not linked with the content areas</p> <p>http://www.state.il.us/dcf/docs/407.pdf</p>
New Mexico	<p><i>Common Core Content and Areas of Specialization for Personnel Preparation in Early Care, Education and Family Support in New Mexico: Entry Through Master's Level</i> prepared by the Higher Education Early Childhood Task Force for the New Mexico Child Development Board,</p> <p>http://www.newmexicokids.org/Resource/Library/LaRistraPDF/cc%20indicator.pdf</p> <p>New Mexico's Core Content contains 9 competency areas. Content to support children with disabilities is embedded within 8 of the 9 core content areas</p>	<p>The competency levels from the Common Core Content are matched to the four levels of New Mexico's career lattice:</p> <p>http://www.newmexicokids.org/content/caregivers_and_educators/training_education_certification/certification_options/</p>	<p>All levels of New Mexico's voluntary early childhood certification and licensure require completion of coursework. All of NM's institutions of higher education include the common core content in their coursework.</p>	<p>Approved training, based on NM's common core content, is required for star ratings. Completion of an approved, six-hour course on inclusion is required for a rating of 3 stars. The course must be completed by all administrative and classroom staff, and family care providers.</p> <p>Look for the Stars:</p> <p>http://www.newmexicokids.org/#.pages.stars.index.cfm</p>

* For the purpose of this table, competencies were considered as addressing inclusion when children with disabilities/ special needs were specifically mentioned and/or when skills and knowledge related to IEPs and IFSPs were addressed.

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