

**The Child Development Associate (CDA) as a Viable Stepping Stone  
in the Early Childhood Education Classroom**

Markell Mettler, Amy Wolfe, Marci Shepard, Debra Dunning,

Julie Francis, Maryjo Flamm-Miller

*Ohio University*

Kim Suwannasing

*Ross County Board of Developmental Disabilities*

**Context of the Problem**

Currently, childcare in the United States is provided through a combination of funds with much of the cost falling on families (DesRosiers & Bornfreund, 2016). As programs attempt to limit the costs to families, early childhood centers often employ individuals with limited education/experience working with young children (Power to the Profession, 2020). Evidence that education and experience for early childhood education providers is a significant indicator for quality care (Egert et al., 2018). The Ohio Administrative Code 5101:2-12-10 (2017) sets minimum standards to meet licensing requirements for staff working with young children in a center setting, however these minimum standards are not aligned with key stakeholder recommendations in Ohio (Power to the Profession, 2020). Advocating legislators for a change in licensing rules is recommended. The recommendation would require a Child Development Associate (CDA) as a minimum requirement in all licensed center programs when the primary role of the staff member is working with young children after six months of employment. This case clinic discussion is to gain insight into ways to influence legislation to consider updating licensing rules to incorporate the CDA as a requirement. The challenge posed for the case clinic discussion was, “How can your experiences inform how to influence and advocate for a change in rules and regulations for licensure in childcare.”

### **Developing Understanding**

An early childhood education advisory group grappled with the question “How can your experiences inform how to influence and advocate for a change in rules and regulations for licensure in early childhood education.” The presenter clarified that while the question focuses on a particular policy, this discussion could inform a desire to change any rules and regulations, not strictly in early childhood education.

### **Sharing Related Experiences**

One participant mentioned they have joined committees that advocate because there is power in a shared voice. These groups work together to have a collective statement. The primary representative presents the collective statement on the committee’s behalf. There is great power in a collective voice. It is necessary to build ongoing relationships with legislators, not just when we are asking for something. We need year-round relationships. Additionally, they have had situations where legislators have stepped out of session and called them to ask, “How would this carry out in real life?” Building relationships is powerful. The collaborative voice is powerful. We need to join and advocate because “it matters.”

Another participant stated that network opportunities where many professionals come together from a variety of organizations to produce possible solutions through creativity builds relationships, allowing for a collective voice to be heard. A third participant shared their experiences have been in both profit and not-for-profit sectors, concurring that a center director needs to give details to owners of an organization. Many times, the owners are not abreast of what is happening in the day-to-day work environment. The directors have the expertise and need to communicate the reason influencing and advocating for change is crucial. Influencing a board of directors on the “why” of an initiative advances advocacy efforts. Internal work is necessary to impact change. Getting to the ground level and working up is essential.

A participant continued to share the importance of storytelling. Real stories have influence. There are many opportunities for people to have input at various stages of the policy process. An additional participant shared their experiences from previous work in public

schools and the idea of storytelling. It is important that voices are heard through stories. From their experience, shared stories at school board meetings were impactful. Moreover, backing the stories up with data creates even more of an impact. The data can share a perspective that can go beyond a personal story as well. Collecting data to view impact is powerful (positive or negative). Balancing the narrative with the data can tell a story of its own.

A participant shared that in different communities, family structures may look different. There is an inflated demographic that may not be recognized in other places across the state. This could mean that teacher preparation is of high importance when preparing teachers as family structures look different. A participant added when looking at previous advocacy, at one point there was no PreK degree, it was family studies. Advocacy was necessary then. Education legislation on teacher licensure grade bands went from grades K-8, and then back to grades PreK-3. Professionals in early childhood were excited to have PreK recognized and early childhood included in teacher licensure. We must keep advocating because now we are at grades PreK-8 in teacher licensure once again. Educators of young children need to advocate for early childhood education because American society does not focus on children's education from birth to four years of age.

### **Advice from Participants**

Cultivating relationships is a primary way of making changes in rules and regulations. It's more than one organization talking to another; it is two individuals having a conversation. Stakeholders need to advocate by building bridges and building relationships. A collective voice for change is imperative to the change process. Listening to voices and stories of all the lives that are impacted in early childhood is essential. Building understanding in the connection between the data in the community along with voices that need to be heard is essential. Lastly, making a connection to the economy will get legislators to listen and can impact change in rules and regulations.

### **Summary**

Key concepts that arose from the case clinic discussion included a strong indicator that forming relationships are necessary to impact change. Stakeholders need to continue to advocate for change and help others understand the why. This happens through telling real life

stories and understanding communities and families. When stakeholders connect data to stories, this impacts not only our own communities but other communities as well. By building relationships and connecting stories and data to the why, informed and diverse teams of stakeholders can advance and change federal and state policy. Examining “the why,” builds understanding in the early childhood education domain. Internal work at the ground level is necessary for collective voices to be heard. By doing this, a broader scope of advocacy and change exists, which elevates the early childhood profession. Our.Voices.Matter.

A recommendation emerged in the discussion when participants arrived at a new understanding of the connections among happy workers, early childhood education quality, and the economy. A happy worker for this article's purpose is defined as caretakers having affordable, quality, available, and reliable early childhood programs for young children. This creates a more productive workforce and minimizes absenteeism. Caretakers are more likely to experience mental health concerns when they patchwork options for their children's care which leaves little time for self-care (Herron, 2023). A happy worker, along with coexisting stories and data, can influence legislative decisions. Early childhood educators need to be prepared to support children in on-going identified behavioral needs, engaging with families and sharing how their stories promote understanding. When individuals have passion for something, they want others to understand why. This can be done in small, community level impactful ways. On the ground level, we can connect different professions into the conversation to impact change. Bringing in other disciplines and looking at a child from a holistic perspective will get the medical community interested. Many people are in business and want holistic wellness for children. Caregivers are concerned about childcare, and they have businesses they work in that would be invested in their staff being happy and healthy. A happy worker can be supported by excellent early childhood education centers with educated teachers.

Finally, in rural schools, there is an over identification of special education services so that preschoolers have a place to go because there seems to be a lack of quality early education centers for all preschoolers. New teachers need to be prepared to support children with behavioral needs since addiction, traumatization, and unstable environments are impacting

children's learning environments. In this context, looking at how curricula are structured for teacher preparation is needed.

### **Next Steps**

Steps moving forward to advocate for change in rules and regulations are needed and voices need to be heard. Having on-going relationships with legislators and having these conversations will create more advocacy. It is important for people to realize that small movement is still movement! Many people can advocate for rules and regulation changes as early childhood education impacts both business communities and employees. The happy worker was strongly identified with the connection to the economy, so maximizing high-quality child-care options are necessary for healthy businesses. Thus, reaching out to business communities to advocate for high quality early childhood education is imperative as a first action step. High quality experiences in early childhood helps children become healthy and productive adults. Likewise, low quality experiences are detrimental and harmful to children as it influences their adulthood as well. Collectively working on a grant as passionate early childhood educators is a call to action.

If the argument alone for change in rules and regulations is to make the economy better this is certainly an argument worth investing in. Influencing legislation from an economic perspective is ideal, however we must come back to the value this has for a child. Early childhood education programs must have staff with a CDA as a minimum standard to adequately provide quality experience for children and to advance a happy workforce.

### **Case Clinic Conversation Structure to Collective Action**

After proposing the initial question, the facilitator allowed for fluid discussion. The less structured conversational approach provided rich context and feedback in this group dynamic made up of passionate early childhood educators. The facilitator posed the question, and this spurred enthusiastic conversation. This allowed the case clinic participants freedom in where the discussion transitioned allowing for flexibility as thoughts and ideas continued to emerge. This structure continued to enhance the strong discussion which provided a good fit due to the group dynamic as the participants were action-oriented and inspired through the case clinic conversation (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2018). The group expressed a desire to have continued conversation and find ways to take collective action in service of early childhood education. This case clinic discussion was a springboard for a sustained community of practice.

### **References**

- DesRosiers, R., and Bornfreund, L. (2016). *A Labor of Love (Not Money): How the Child Care Non-System Hurts its Own Workers*. <https://www.newamerica.org>
- Egert, F. Fukink, R. G., Eckhardt. A.G. (2018). Impact of in-service professional development programs for early childhood teachers on quality ratings and child outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Review of Education Research*, 88(3), 401-433.  
<https://dio.org/10.3102/0034654317751919>
- Herron, A. (2023). *How Child Care Benefits for Employees Can Enhance Well-Being (and Benefit Employers, Too)*. [www.webmdhealthservices.com](http://www.webmdhealthservices.com)
- Ohio Administrative Code. (2017, October 29). 5101: 2-12-08. Ohio administrative code.  
Retrieved May 20, 2023, from <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-administrative-code/chapter-5101:2-12>.

Power to the Profession. (2020, March). Unifying framework for the early child education profession. Power to the profession. <http://powertotheprofession.org/>

Wenger-Trayner., E & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2018). Communities of practice handbook: Three frameworks for managing an initiative, cultivating a community, and assessing the value.