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Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance: Breaching, Reaching, and Teaching

Katari Coleman

Abstract

The Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA) has operated for more than 25 years with the purpose of training and educating the Tennessee early childhood workforce. TECTA has removed barriers to postsecondary educational attainment for its students by specifically addressing issues of locality and affordability. This paper provides an explicit look at the factors and processes behind these promising practices for Tennessee's early childhood workforce.

Introduction

Since the late 20th century, numerous studies have demonstrated that teacher education and training is one of the strongest predictors of early childhood program quality, with a positive relationship reported between the teacher's preparation and children's experiences (Gable & Halliburton, 2003.) More than 25 years ago, Tennessee State University developed the Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA) in response to these and similar research findings to address barriers to postsecondary educational attainment through quality professional development opportunities for Tennessee's early childhood workforce. TECTA began as a community-based project and developed into a full-fledged statewide professional development program. Today TECTA provides opportunities for professional growth through training, college tuition support, postsecondary credential support and advisement, program accreditation technical assistance, and higher education instructional support. These opportunities allow TECTA to address tangible and criterion-based issues of accessibility for Tennessee's early childhood workforce.

TECTA is one of several child care workforce initiatives supported by the Tennessee Department of Human Services, the Child Care and Development Fund's (CCDF) lead agency in the State of Tennessee. To support low-income families that are working or participating in education and training, CCDF provides federal funding to pay for and improve the quality of child care for all children (Office of Child Care, 2016). Expectations from CCDF, guided by industry research, have led to a continual push to professionalize the early childhood workforce through suitable training and education.

Starting in the 1920s, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) established professional standards that support the existence of TECTA and numerous comparable initiatives across the nation. Professionals in the early childhood workforce are provided a body of knowledge to guide and inform them in their work. In addition, these standards establish expectations around early childhood environments, instructional approach and documentation, family engagement, and child assessment. NAEYC standards are the foundation of TECTA's training and education opportunities to meet the needs of the entire early childhood workforce.

The NAEYC standards and competencies are the focus of TECTA's orientation classes, and are combined with college coursework to support the acquisition of the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. TECTA offers five distinct orientation classes that include the following topics: Administrator, Center-Based, Family Child Care, Infant/Toddler, and School Age. The CDA, created and supported by the NAEYC and currently administered through the Council for Professional Recognition, is the most widely recognized credential in early childhood education and serves as a stepping stone on the path of career advancement in the field. This process is available to individuals in all 95 counties across Tennessee through TECTA's eight-site system. These sites are located in specific institutions of higher education and work to reach all early childhood programs and potential early childhood professionals across their service area. The orientation classes, which initiate TECTA's professional process toward the CDA or other postsecondary educational opportunities, occur across the service area. These classes are available to everyone, do not require prerequisite qualifications, and satisfy two years of

Tennessee child care training requirements. There is an intentional effort to run these 30-hour classes in accessible locales, sometimes making use of community-based spaces like churches and child care programs. Online orientation class options have recently been made available.

A major hurdle for the early childhood workforce is the affordability and availability of postsecondary education opportunities, particularly for those currently working in the field. This is due in part to the low wages associated with the profession. According to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2018), nationally child care workers are nearly in the bottom percentile when all occupations are ranked by annual earnings, with the average hourly pay rate between \$9 and \$13. This means child care workers earn less than two-thirds of the median wage for all occupations, which is a common threshold for classifying work as low wage. TECTA mitigates the cost barrier for this population by providing substantial tuition support for the CDA credential, technical certificates, and associate, bachelor, and advanced degrees. The only requirement is to complete the orientation class to demonstrate time commitment and knowledge of basic child care competencies.

TECTA also addresses criterion access, which refers to the ability to meet the necessary requisites to take college courses. For example, most postsecondary programs require the completion of entrance assessments like the ACT (American College Testing). For adult learners wishing to enroll in a Tennessee community college program, an assessment is required prior to enrollment that determines the academic level of the student and in what courses the student should enroll to begin their collegiate journey, with an emphasis on critical thinking, writing, and mathematics. TECTA's population usually comes with diverse educational backgrounds and usually satisfies the workforce's minimal requirements; however, they may not have previous postsecondary experience or test-taking skills.

In most states, the baseline requirements to work in child care are to be 18 years of age, be able to pass a criminal background check, receive clearance from a physician to work with children, and have either a high school diploma or a GED (General Equivalency Diploma). These baseline requirements mean some individuals may not be ready for the compulsory classes needed to obtain the CDA due to their underdeveloped test-taking

skills. To address these gaps, TECTA developed a relationship with the Tennessee Board of Regents, which provides oversight to all state community colleges, 12 of which are currently working with TECTA to meet the needs of the workforce. Students supported by TECTA are not required to take the entry assessment for the four CDA prep courses if they complete a TECTA orientation class. This allows students to gain both the skills and confidence to take the CDA prep courses at a later date if they wish to pursue a certificate or degree in the future. Thus, students experience and appreciate the teaching and learning, and embrace the competencies and concepts they receive in the class. This relationship is continuously strengthened as TECTA hosts an annual higher education institute to provide vital professional development to early childhood education faculty members across the state, and maintains a network that supports TECTA students.

In the past five years alone, TECTA provided training and educational support to 7,404 child care professionals. This includes both traditional, face-to-face, and online (via the university's e-learn system) training opportunities. While these opportunities attract both inexperienced and seasoned child care professionals, the program database reveals that 65% of TECTA-supported students have 11 or more years of experience.

In the spring of 2017, 374 TECTA-supported students who completed orientation classes were surveyed. This was TECTA's first substantial data collection effort that spanned multiple training and educational events. Previous (pre-2016) data collection only focused on participant competencies, instructor skills, and instructional strategies, and occurred at the end of each event. Because this data collection only happens at the site level, each TECTA site has the responsibility for responding to red flags and reporting the issues to TECTA's management team. Red flags are concerns that suggest inadequate or inappropriate instructional delivery. The new survey provided past participants the ability to share information on multiple training and education events, and share their present professional status.

This mixed-method, cross-sectional descriptive design engaged a randomly selected population that came from the program's database extending back some 15 years, and was approved by Tennessee State University's Institutional Review Board. The researchers established reliability of the survey instrument by sourcing questions from

previously administered large-scale surveys like WestEd’s Evaluation of Professional Development for Child Care Providers in California (WestEd, 2014). After several iterations, to make certain the intended goals of the survey were reached, the researchers applied a test/re-test methodology with a small sample of participants. This yielded a .80 correlation coefficient average between scores on measures, which indicated positive test reliability. In addition, subject matter experts from TECTA evaluated the test items against the decided test specifications to establish content validity.

The responses were checked for completeness—as some questions did not have answers or were missing acceptable information—and edited for spelling and basic grammar. Beyond categorization of survey participants in groups, there was a text search query of the open-ended responses to identify themes. For example, to gain insight into the respondents’ views of the utility of the information provided in the orientation classes, TECTA posed the question, “How have you used the information you learned from the TECTA orientation?” The respondents’ answers generated the categories listed in Table 1.

Findings

All five of the TECTA orientations (Administrator, Center-Based, Family Child Care, Infant/Toddler, and School Age) serve as regularly-attended modes of training (Table 1). More than half of the survey respondents (53%) took more than one orientation, with some reporting that they took eight single orientations. The Center-Based orientation is the most frequently attended orientation, followed closely by the Administrator orientation. All but 3% of the respondents strongly agree/agree that the TECTA orientation is of high quality (Table 2).

TECTA’s commitment to high-quality instruction and goal of providing participants with the opportunity to continue their postsecondary education allows participants to embark on the next steps of their professional development. The survey exhibited that 79% of respondents utilized TECTA postsecondary services beyond the orientation, while 6% plan to utilize the services in the future. The specific nature in which survey respondents utilized or plan to utilize TECTA services after completing an orientation class is further defined in Table 3.

The following comments from TECTA participants highlight the individuals’ gratitude for

Table 1. Orientations by Type

Type	Number	%
Administrator	128	50
Center-based	153	59
Family child care	33	13
Infant/toddler	106	41
School age	55	21
<i>Total number of orientations = 475</i>		

Table 2. Agreement on Orientations of High Quality

Level of Agreement	Number	%
Strongly agree	120	32
Agree	243	65
Disagree	6	2
Strongly disagree	4	1
<i>Total number of orientations = 373</i>		

the TECTA program, and the specific knowledge and/or application of knowledge due to their TECTA experience:

As a teacher with no formal training, I learned that I was one important first step in a child’s early development and that I was engaged in best practices and age-appropriate activities. I did not know about theory and child development prior and TECTA helped me be a professional in the field. (I had the opportunity of being in one of the first classes.) Later, as a director, I used the information to improve my staff’s development and my program. It definitely was a stepping stone in having one of the best programs in my county at the time.

I have used TECTA information while working with children in and out of the center. By having the knowledge and techniques I learned in TECTA, I better understand the needs of children and what is developmentally appropriate for each individual child. I know how to set up the best learning environment and provide the best quality care for children. I have also learned how to provide support and resources for my parents of typical and non-typical children. As an administrator

I learned the financial aspects of running a center while providing a safe, healthy environment for my community and its families.

Interestingly, these two respondents discussed their professional growth, as both progressed from teaching and directly working with children to working as administrators. Their professional TECTA journey, as with numerous others, began with the TECTA orientation. In conclusion, as the importance of early childhood draws more attention, TECTA believes similarly to the National Academy of Sciences that the early childhood workforce needs to be “unified by the foundation of the science of child development and early learning of children birth to age eight” (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015). When individuals in the workforce, no matter the status of their professional career, receive specialized training like the TECTA orientation, and more importantly, credentials like the CDA, academic certificates, and degrees to reflect the bodies of knowledge needed to educate young children, this can be accomplished. TECTA’s approach has resulted in more than 25 years of services that have shown to be effective, promising practices that elevate the knowledge, skills, abilities, and

competencies of those that work with our nation’s most valuable resource, our children.

Lessons Learned

Based on the results of the TECTA surveys, we recommend that other early childhood professional development programs survey their participants’ utility of program services, along with their attitude/opinion of their experience(s). Surveys should query participants about all components of the process from enrollment/registration to completion of the training event, or related service. TECTA invested in a database that documents participants’ use of program services, which has proven valuable (Table 4). Similar databases should track activities from each participant’s initial contact with the program to the most recent service obtained. Survey questions should reflect the program’s goals and objectives, and capture participation trends that have been observed over time. These questions should be a mixture of closed questions (e.g. Likert scale) to measure attitudes and opinions, and open-ended questions to compel participants to share details about their experiences. Lastly, though TECTA’s research efforts detailed in this manuscript were subsequent to 25 years of service to the Tennessee child care workforce, assessment of effectiveness is best when

Postsecondary Services (Opportunities)	%
Completed academic Child Development Associate (CDA) prep course	22
CDA advisement	14
Completion of CDA	32
Completion of Technical Certificate (TC)	26
Completion of Associate’s Degree	20
Completion of Bachelor’s Degree	7
Completion of Advanced (Graduate) Degree	2
Took academic course but did not yet complete CDA, TC, or degree	15
Accreditation financial support (prior to 2013)	8
Accreditation technical assistance	4
Program Administrator credential	2

Table 3. Participant Utilization of TECTA Services Beyond Orientation

Utilization Categories	%
Use information daily (non-specific)	28
Use developmentally appropriate practices	34
Assist with lesson plan development: activities, curriculum	12
Assist in work with families	7
Professionalism: postsecondary achievement, networking	16

Table 4. TECTA Orientation Information Utilization

implemented early and often. TECTA plans to implement similar large-scale surveys every 3–5 years to remain responsive to the needs of both program participants and the field at-large.

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About the Author

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