

I was recently made aware of NAEYC's recommendation in Power to the Profession's Decision Cycles 3-5 for preschool teachers to be required to have an AA and not a BA. I presume this decision was made based on where the field currently is, not because NAEYC's Task Force believes all students should not have adequately educated and compensated teachers.

Unfortunately, the Task Force has set the bar so low with an AA degree that it leads me to conclude that our leadership is failing to professionalize an already marginalized field of low-paid, predominantly female workers. While I agree that we must have a diverse workforce, the most important thing is that we have a diverse, highly qualified, and empowered workforce to help tilt the scales of social justice both for the workforce and for closing the achievement gap. I truly understand the relationship between diversity and higher education. Boston Public Schools' most recent teaching survey shows that 62% of our teachers are white, compared to 14% of our students. Despite this challenge, I still believe that higher qualifications, professional development and support, and systems that promote diversity through access are better ways to bring about a more diverse workforce than lowering the bar to best meet the current field.

I have divided my comments into two sections: impact on teaching and learning and impact on the workforce.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

The work we do as educators requires more advanced capabilities among the workforce, not less. For example, in recently reviewing the 2009 Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement, 3rd Edition (DAP), I was asked to offer my reflections on where changes might be needed. I suggested that we need more specificity in understanding and supporting teachers in developmental progression for students with disabilities, strategies for untangling biological vs. environmental factors and related solutions, and more specificity in understanding dual language learners. I further asked for guidance on curricular choices and professional development/coaching structures to help teachers navigate the complexities of the work they do.

In addition, the 2009 DAP book already places high expectations on what preschool teachers should be able to do:

“Teachers use wide-ranging vocabulary in their talk to and with preschoolers, including many words that are unfamiliar to children. When teachers use words that are unfamiliar to the child, they give sufficient information for the child to grasp the meaning...”

This highlights the critical relationship between adult education and expressed vocabulary interaction with young children. Not surprisingly, they are related, as illustrated in Figure 4 from Brybareret et al. 2016-7 research.

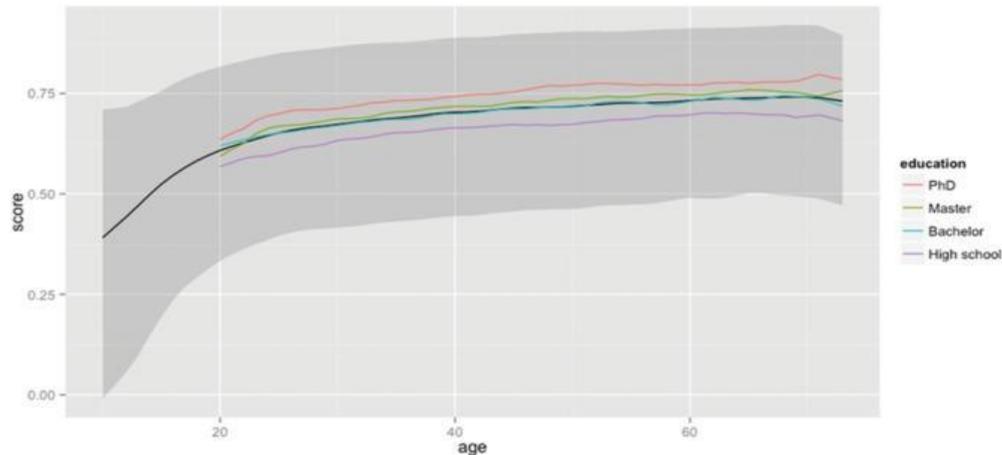


FIGURE 4: Percentage of base words (word families) known as a function of age and educational level. The solid black line shows the median percentage known as a function of age. It shows a steady increase up to the age of 70 (for the people who took part in the study). The gray zone indicates the range of percentages between percentile 5 and percentile 95. The impact of education level is shown in the lines representing the medians of the various groups.

We see that vocabulary—the fuel of early childhood education—is related to degrees. Therefore, an AA degree falls progressively off the mark for what our youngest students need.

Teaching students who are low income and at risk for school failure need more expertise, not less, and, as we already know, the families who need the teachers with higher education and training often receive the least educated and compensated teachers. I believe that this holds for teachers of infants and toddlers as well as those teaching preschoolers.

Implications for Workforce

I fear that only requiring teachers to have an AA will unintentionally create a two-tier system: one most likely affiliated with public schools and another more aligned with programs that are kept artificially low for families who have to pay or who are subsidized by state and federal government. This divide is usually most acute—and disproportionately affects children from low-income families—because many of our federal programs have work requirements that require an 8-hour work day for parents, something that school systems cannot provide.

If we further create a divide between school systems and community-based programs, we miss the very important opportunity to align curriculum, create more ready schools, and ease the transition for families into school, especially for low-income children and students with disabilities. This would be the greatest loss, as research is making it clear that students can lose the preschool gains they make if Kindergarten just focuses on the same thing.

I am also concerned that NAEYC will send yet another message to higher education institutions that a BA in early childhood is not necessary for the profession. Early childhood degree

programs barely exist in our state's major universities, yet the success of our program depends on highly qualified teachers.

Final Points

I appreciate that NAEYC has created a robust process for discussing adequate educational requirements for student success. And I can see that NAEYC is trying to balance all the membership of the big tent that makes up the early childhood workforce. However, early childhood professionals cannot lower our expectations of what students need from teachers because of the present realities of professional development opportunities and systems. Doing so would be the same as saying that the majority of teaching quality is low in the U.S., which it is, and then saying we should set the bar low so we can set realistic expectations—even when we know that these low scores are not going to move student outcomes. We must do better. We must think about what children need from their teachers, set higher standards, and work toward a solution that retains diversity while moving the workforce forward and upward.

I strongly recommend that the Task Force revise the recommendations made in Decision Cycles 3-5 to reflect the need for higher competencies and qualifications in the early childhood workforce.

Sincerely,

Jason Sachs