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Building Bridges to Overcome Widening Gaps: Challenges in Addressing the Need for Professional Preparation of Infant-Toddler Practitioners in Higher Education

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Cover Page Footnote

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Building Bridges to Overcome Widening Gaps: Challenges in Addressing the Need for Professional Preparation of Infant-Toddler Practitioners in Higher Education

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A skilled workforce is critical for the future of early care and education (ECE) and of settings that serve infants/toddlers and their families. Whatever their profession, infant-toddler practitioners must facilitate quality experiences that support child well-being and healthy families (Epstein, Halle, Moodie, Sosinsky, & Zaslow, 2016). Two- and four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs) play an important role in training those practitioners. As the result of recent efforts to improve the qualifications of the infant-toddler workforce through quality and capacity initiatives, such as Early Head Start Child Care partnerships and quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), the higher education requirements for these professionals have increased (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). As such, the demand for IHEs to train infant-toddler practitioners continues to grow.

Unfortunately, many IHEs situate curricula on infant-toddler development and care within preschool (ages 3–5) and early elementary (ages 5–8) training programs (Early & Winton, 2001). In this context, content specific to infancy and toddlerhood is often left behind (Chazan-Cohen, Harwood, Vallotton, & Buell, 2017; Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006). In this paper, we examine professional preparation of infant-toddler practitioners in IHEs, highlighting existing trends in qualification requirements and training as well as challenges facing ECE and IHEs. Then we discuss the Collaborative for Understanding the Pedagogy of Infant/toddler Development (CUPID), a partnership of IHEs and organizations working to improve pre-service preparation. We end with recommendations for cultivating skilled infant-toddler practitioners.

Trends in Infant-Toddler Caregiver Qualification Requirements

Infant-toddler practice is a specialty without a specific profession. Expertise and knowledge about infants-toddlers are needed in a wide variety of fields, ranging from pediatrics to education. In this paper we focus on one group that works very closely with infants/toddlers on a daily basis: those working in ECE. Terms for these professionals vary across settings and over time; *caregiver*, *provider*, and *teacher* are among those used in policy documents ranging from state child care licensing regulations to college catalogs. This variation in terminology reflects the very issues we describe below regarding how the infant-toddler workforce is viewed, funded, and trained. We use the term caregiver here. The federal and state landscapes of caregiver professional development, described next, are chaotic and therefore difficult for stakeholders to navigate.

1 The authors wish to acknowledge all members of the Collaborative for Understanding of the Pedagogy of Infant/toddler Development (CUPID) for their work and support.

Federal Systems

Federally, there is variation in how infant-toddler programming, and thus caregivers, are understood. The “birth to five” movement is becoming increasingly divided; programs for children between the ages of 3 and 5 are affiliated with the early elementary system, which does not often concern itself with infants/toddlers (Early & Winton, 2001), while programs serving children between the ages of zero to 3 are conceptualized as serving parents, rather than educating children, and thus are not part of the education system (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017).

The structure of federal systems contributes to the dual nature of ECE. According to Atchison and Diffey (2018), in almost every state, there is an “early childhood administrator” located in the education department who is charged with overseeing federally mandated education programs (e.g., pre-K and school readiness initiatives and Part B 619 programs for children with disabilities). Simultaneously, in every state, there is a “child care administrator” who oversees child care licensing as well as programs funded through the federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). These include resource and referral programs and the distribution of Child Care and Development Block Grant funds to assist low-income families in paying for child care. The programs that emerge from and are governed by the US Department of Education are focused on academics and school success within a K-12 system. While the regulations and goals within this education-focused context are clear, these programs rarely extend to children younger than 36 months. Conversely, the goals of the programs that run through DHHS are focused primarily on programs that support the provision of child care needed to allow parents or caregivers, particularly those from low-income households, to work outside the home. It is within the workforce support side of the governance equation that almost all the regulations and standards that impact infant-toddler caregivers reside. Thus, the education and training requirements currently shaping the infant-toddler profession are made in the service of providing workforce support. This means that the preparation of infant-toddler caregivers focuses largely on the health and safety of young children, rather than on a comprehensive set of competencies that support children’s optimal development and learning.

State Systems

Policies within each state complicate the preparation of the infant-toddler workforce further by creating a variety of distinct state-centric systems for training caregivers. Inconsistencies in the systems described below make it challenging for the infant-toddler workforce to establish a professional identity associated with clear education and training requirements.

Child care licensing. Child care licensing regulations for the qualifications of infant-toddler caregivers vary by state, ranging from very minimal—for example, requiring no high school diploma and only four hours of annual training (as in Idaho)—to more stringent, such as requiring a high school diploma and some pre-service early childhood college coursework or state certification (as in New Jersey). While requirements for infant-toddler caregivers are generally similar to the requirements for those who work in preschool, infant-toddler caregivers are almost invariably paid much less (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016; Whitebook, McLean, Austin, & Edwards, 2018).

Ongoing professional development is a common child care licensing standard. As such, states must grapple with various ways to offer both pre-service training that will qualify people for jobs within ECE as well as in-service training for those already employed so they remain compliant with licensing regulations (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). Often these needs are met through state-level Child Care Resource and Referral programs. There are also state-based strategies to recognize the competency-based Child Development Associate (CDA) credential (Council for Professional Recognition, 2017). As of 2018, 29 states have adopted an infant/early childhood mental health “family associate” endorsement that recognizes training and work experience pertaining to promoting socio-emotional development via healthy family relationships (Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health, n. d.). The need for training in ECE is justified, but chronically low wages for those in the infant-toddler workforce and licensing regulations with minimal to no college level educational requirements, often make investing in college-level coursework an unjustifiable financial burden from the perspective of the individual caregiver. To address this issue, the federally funded Head Start system (for both Head Start preschool and Early Head Start for infants/toddlers) has employed a national assessment-based strategy for credentialing caregivers with the CDA. The assessment is done through practice-based observation and evaluating a candidate’s portfolio. CDAs are offered for infant-toddler, preschool, family child care, and home visitor settings.

Another emerging strategy is online training. This removes some of the barriers that face practitioners who need content that is foundational for pre-service candidates seeking certification within a K-12 teacher licensure framework but typically acquired by those in the undertrained infant-toddler workforce to meet in-service training requirements. A leader in this realm is the Early EdU project, which has built a library of ECE content which can be accessed by IHEs at no cost (Early EdU Alliance, 2018). The free access is offered in return for allowing practitioners in the field to count their employed work toward field work or practicum hours.

Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS). Primarily designed to address the gap between the basic health and safety requirements found in child care licensing regulations and programmatic features and practices that support children’s development, QRIS differ from state to state, not only in state licensing standards but also in their attention to infant-toddler programming in terms of curriculum and environmental assessments (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2017). Policy makers see QRIS as a mechanism to address the quality of programming, including the structural aspect of training and educational requirements for infant-toddler caregivers (Mayoral, 2017). However, the unit of analysis in QRIS is the program, not the individual, and the requirements for infant-toddler caregiver training are minimal. Data from the National Survey of Early Education reveal that approximately 26 percent of infant-toddler caregivers have a CDA credential, and approximately 13 percent have only a state credential (Madill, Blasberg, Halle, Zaslow, & Epstein, 2016), which means that nearly 40 percent of caregivers meet only a basic level of specialized training. While the intention behind QRIS is positive, more could be done to ensure that individual caregivers are well prepared.

Core knowledge and competencies (CKC). The majority of states have defined their own core knowledge and competencies (CKC) that describe the knowledge, skills, and practices that early childhood practitioners are expected to have. As described in the seminal report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, there is some overlap among the CKCs listed in various states' documents (Institute of Medicine [IOM] and National Research Council [NRC], 2015). However, as noted in the report, these documents often present a set of competencies that are somewhat vague and difficult to differentiate; in addition, they are rarely described in terms of specific practices. Further, most state documents dealing with CKCs for early childhood practitioners cover the period from birth to age 5, and only six states have documents outlining CKCs specific to infant-toddler caregivers.

Early learning guidelines (ELGs). ELGs are standards for the care and educational experiences that young children should have to support their well-being and acquisition of knowledge and skills across developmental domains. Currently, 22 states and three US territories have implemented ELGs that are specific to infants/toddlers, and 15 states and the District of Columbia have ELGs that continue to group together children from birth to age 5 (National Infant and Toddler Child Care Initiative, 2011). Moreover, since only 37 states have implemented ELGs, many infant-toddler caregivers are left without any guidance on how to best support the children and families they work with on a daily basis.

P-12 teacher licensure. Lastly, states differ in how their public school professional standards boards group ages and grades for the purpose of granting teacher licenses. Twenty-nine states offer public school teacher licensure with an age range that begins at birth (IOM/NRC, 2015). Florida offers a public school teaching license with the narrowest age range, from birth to age 4, while New York and Wisconsin offer licenses with a wide age range, from birth to grade 6. These inconsistencies in public school licensure create even greater challenges when states offer licenses for overlapping age ranges. For instance, Delaware has a birth to second-grade public school license as well as a kindergarten to fifth-grade license.

In sum, the landscape of training expectations and opportunities for the infant-toddler workforce is influenced by each state's own ways of approaching both child care licensing and quality standards for ECE. But the approaches to those two areas are not systematically coordinated with each other and are rarely used to create comprehensive curricula to ensure a well-prepared workforce. Further, although a minimum number of annual training hours are required for infant-toddler caregivers, they are not designed to systematically build toward advanced certificates or licensure, and there are few, if any, forms of compensation linked to obtaining training or higher competencies.

“Working as an infant-toddler teacher was my favorite career choice that I have made. I was able to create and maintain relationships with my children and each family. However, I recently had to make the hard decision to switch careers and move away from the ECE field due to the low wages that come along with the field.”

Figure 1. Reflection from a recent graduate at [IHE institution name removed for blind review].

Challenges in Infant-Toddler Practice and Training in Higher Education

The dual nature of the ECE field is also reflected in the academic programming within IHEs. In states where at least one public school teaching certification begins at birth, there is usually an IHE certification track within teacher education programs that covers content related to infants/toddlers. These programs are often located in departments or colleges of education, even though course content on infants/toddlers is rarely covered by education faculty. Other infant-toddler programs are often found in human development or family science departments or in other IHE programs that focus on early childhood. Some infant-toddler content is also found in courses in psychology, social work, public health, or related fields. However, the infant-toddler content available in any one discipline or degree program is typically minimal. Infancy has relevance across disciplines but is usually addressed in disparate ways in four-year IHEs. There is no single, well-compensated infant-toddler workforce that attends IHEs and demands relevant training, and future infant-toddler practitioners who attend IHE programs typically receive minimal preparation. Thus, given multiple macro-level issues that plague ECE, cultivating high-quality infant-toddler practitioners in higher education is challenging.

Macro-level Issues in Early Care and Education

Low wages in the field are a major barrier to creating a highly qualified infant-toddler workforce. Despite the high cost of child care for families and the multiple funding streams that exist in the field (e.g., the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which provides subsidies, and the national Early Head Start center-based child care programs and child care partnerships), infant-toddler programs generally lack sufficient funds to pay staff adequately. In the United States, families spend an average of 10 percent of their household income on child care (The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2018), but low pay for caregivers is the norm. Across the United States, child care is classified as “low-wage” work, with a median wage less than two-thirds of the median across all occupations (Whitebook et al., 2018). In center-based settings, only 14 percent of infant-toddler caregivers (and 33 percent of preschool teachers) earn \$15 or more per hour (Whitebook et al., 2018). Financial insecurity results in reliance on federally funded income supports among these caregivers and their families. The state-level rate of participation in public support programs among infant-toddler practitioners ranges from 30 percent in Minnesota to 59 percent in New York (NASEM, 2018).

Financial insecurity contributes to the stress of what is already emotionally demanding work, which is in turn associated with high rates of teacher turnover as well as with lower-quality child-caregiver interactions (IOM/NRC, 2015). Caregivers—especially those who provide care to children from lower-income families—often struggle with mental health issues like depressive symptoms (IOM/NRC, 2015; Whitebook & Sakai, 2004).

While turnover rates vary by program type, in 2012 an estimated 50 percent of child care centers experienced turnover in a 12-month period among staff working directly with children, with an overall average annual turnover rate of 13 percent (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). Turnover undermines children’s—and particularly infants/toddlers’—need for continuity of care. More needs to be done to ensure that infant-toddler caregivers are provided wages and supports that enable them to provide

continuous, high-quality care. Low wages and high turnover are directly linked to low program quality, a chronic issue for infant-toddler programs (Whitebook et al., 2018). These factors contribute to a climate in which infant-toddler caregivers are unlikely to view themselves as professionals (Madill et al., 2016); they also leave IHEs struggling to find high-quality internship placements for pre-service students (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017).

The wage penalty for infant-toddler caregivers exists regardless of the education level of the practitioner: those with a BA or graduate degree earn a mean hourly wage of \$13.83 when they work with infants and toddlers, compared to \$17.86 when they teach 3- to 5-year-olds (Whitebook et al., 2018). This trend, coupled with the general lack of degree requirements for infant-toddler work and little professional recognition, likely contributes to potential pre-service teachers' decision to pursue alternate careers. IHEs thus risk graduating students who have already educated themselves out of the infant-toddler field because they are unwilling to pursue a career that does not adequately compensate their educational achievements.

Issues Within Higher Education

Program structure. Across universities, as noted above, the program content relevant to infant-toddler development and care may be found in several different colleges or departments, including human development, family services, education, consumer sciences, human ecology, and early childhood education, among others. Relatedly, the majors containing coursework relevant to infant-toddler care and education that move students toward certification or licensing in their given field have many different names, including child development, infant-toddler care and education, human services, family studies, family life education, early childhood education, early childhood special education, and preschool teaching. While there is much overlap among these majors, there are also substantial differences in their curriculum, pedagogy, and field experiences (Early & Winton, 2001).

For programs with no major dedicated to infant-toddler care and education, the entirety of the content on infant-toddler development as well as on building skills in basic care and on relevant educational pedagogy, is typically taught in one course. It is rare to have even two infant-toddler-focused courses as part of an early childhood degree. In addition, in many programs, infant-toddler content is blended into courses that span the years from birth to age 5 (or even from the prenatal period to age 8), with the primary focus on ages 3 to 5. Buettner, Hur, Jeon, and Andrews (2016) demonstrated that many training programs fall short on topics that are especially central to supporting the needs of infants/toddlers, such as understanding influences on behavior and motivations for learning, supporting emotional understanding, responding to social-emotional needs, and identifying community support resources.

Pedagogical approaches. IHEs vary in pedagogical approaches to infant-toddler training, but as the formal education requirements for the infant-toddler workforce continue to increase (for example, Early Head Start educators must hold four-year degrees), IHEs will face greater demands for programs to prepare infant-toddler professionals distinct from those for training preschool and elementary educators. Traditionally, most preschool and elementary teacher training programs have focused solely on curriculum and teaching methods. However, a recent survey found that over half of early childhood

education teacher preparation programs in IHEs in the United States have incorporated coursework that includes child development, family development/parenting, and observation and assessment (Buettner et al., 2016). Most programs averaged one course focused on one or more of these topics and provided minor coverage of these areas in other courses.

Although the integration of these subjects into established courses can be seen as a positive step, one course on such key competency areas is unlikely to promote mastery. Moreover, infant-toddler education practices are fundamentally different from teaching methods appropriate for preschool education. For example, in work with infants/toddlers there is a greater emphasis on child-teacher relationships and high-quality responsive interactions as the basis for development and learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009); on the environment and spontaneous interactions as the primary teaching tools; and on the use of continual observation for individualized curricular planning (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017).

“I was most unfamiliar with infant-toddler development compared with the development of older children... however, the juxtaposition between these practices for infants and toddlers, the 4-year-olds I completed practicum with, and the third graders I am placed with for elementary education have contributed the most to my learning, as it has helped to highlight the needs of children at different developmental levels.”

Figure 2. Reflection from a current undergraduate student at [IHE institution name removed for blind review].

Consistency in content. There is a lack of consistency across IHEs to ensure that pre-service early childhood students receive similar training prior to graduating. To meet the expectations outlined in infant-toddler-relevant CKCs and ELGs, course topics may include, among others, infant-toddler development, understanding and working with diverse families, family systems and services, early intervention, and curriculum development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Division for Early Childhood, 2014). In particular, professionals working with low-income families, infants/toddlers with disabilities, and other marginalized groups must understand how young children develop within contexts of increased vulnerability to poverty, trauma, chronic stress, and maltreatment, leading to negative impacts on overall development (Sameroff, 1993). Without a coherent national strategy, however, it is challenging for professors and instructors to know which areas to prioritize or how to provide the depth, breadth, and practical experience needed to produce sufficient mastery.

Quality field experiences. An enduring challenge for preparing pre-service infant-toddler professionals is that of providing high-quality community placements in which students can learn to apply course content (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). Strikingly, four-year IHEs are less likely to include practicum experiences to accompany coursework than are two-year associate programs (Hall, Peden, & Maurer, 2017), and we suggest that this is particularly true for practicum placements in infant-toddler ECE settings. Quality is a major issue; the vast majority of infant-toddler child care/educational programs are of low-to-moderate quality (Atkins-Burnett et al., 2015; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). The lack of high-quality field placement settings sheds light on a larger need: providing high-quality

education to create a pipeline of infant-toddler educators who can then serve as role models to future generations of the infant-toddler workforce.

Reflective practices. Most IHE programs do not address pre-professional students' attitudes and beliefs about infants/toddlers as those perspectives relate to pre-service training (Berlin, 2012). The traits of students who are attracted to working in this field and who make successful practitioners need to be better understood (Vallotton et al., 2016). Professional work with infants/toddlers is largely based in the centrality of relationships, both in terms of infant-toddler development and of working with families (e.g., Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). To foster quality relationships, pre-professional students need opportunities to reflect on and analyze their own relational experiences throughout their training and to understand how these influence their view of young children and approaches to care and education.

"The most significant things I learned about infants and toddlers would be how competent they are and how important the first three years of life are for a child's development. Before taking this course, I was primarily interested in early childhood education because I loved working with children and thought infants and toddlers were adorable. While infants and toddlers are still adorable, I now have an entirely different reason for wanting to work in early childhood education."

Figure 3. Reflection from a current undergraduate student at [IHE institution name removed for blind review].

It is clear that the infant-toddler ECE workforce faces several systemic challenges and barriers to progress. Among the many stakeholders that have an opportunity to move the needle in this area, particularly in pre-professional training, are IHEs. We now describe a collaborative effort aimed at understanding and improving the professional competencies of infant-toddler caregivers.

Collaborations to Support Training Infant-Toddler Practitioners

In 2012, a group of researchers came together to address preparation of the infant-toddler workforce and the large gaps in research on the professionals who support children in the first three years of life. Identified as the Collaborative for Understanding the Pedagogy of Infant-toddler Development (CUPID), the group has expanded to include approximately 57 scholars within 45 IHEs and organizations. For a history of how CUPID was formed, see Vallotton, Cook et al. (in press).

CUPID's ultimate goal is to ensure that through the application of research-informed advances in higher education pedagogy, pre-service students who enter the infant-toddler workforce develop the competencies they need to provide high-quality care and education (Vallotton et al., 2016). To this end, CUPID's activities have included identifying and describing those competencies and determining multiple dimensions of the challenges to the preparation of infant-toddler professionals: the historical context; challenges within IHEs; and differences in requirements and regulations at national and state levels. CUPID is also investigating student- and course-centered barriers and facilitators to developing student competencies within IHEs (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017; Vallotton, Brophy-Herb, Chazan-Cohen, & Roggman, in press).

To address these goals, some of CUPID's earliest efforts have focused on identifying the competencies of an effective infant-toddler workforce (Vallotton, Brophy-Herb et al., in press), as well as those for home visitors who work with infants, toddlers, and their families (Roggman et al., 2016). To better understand what contributes to enhanced student learning regarding these competencies, CUPID members collect survey data within their IHEs across the United States on students' knowledge, disposition, and skills around infant-toddler development and care as well as on their backgrounds. (For more information about the data collection process, see Vallotton, Cook et al., in press.) As of 2018, CUPID had collected data for over four years from approximately 4,000 students across 17 IHEs. These data have begun to provide the field with a better understanding of the factors that influence pre-service students who will enter the infant-toddler workforce, including how pre-service professionals' own approaches to relationships—e.g., attachment styles (see Vallotton et al., 2016) and dispositional mindfulness (see Brophy-Herb et al., 2018)—and prior caregiving experiences (see Lippard, Fusaro, Decker, & Vallotton, in press) have influenced their knowledge and beliefs about and skills for working with infants, toddlers, and their families. These data also provide a better understanding of the characteristics of the incoming infant-toddler workforce being educated within four-year IHEs, as well as the sources of stress and adversity those caregivers may face. The data may also help identify which caregiver competencies are particularly difficult to acquire and why (e.g., because of beliefs about caregiving that are resistant to change). That knowledge can inform the development of new instructional approaches. Importantly, the collaborative, responsive nature of CUPID means that its members are able to immediately use what they have learned from the data to adapt established courses and create new ones to develop a more successful infant-toddler workforce.



Photo 1: Based on findings from CUPID data regarding how mindfulness can positively influence students' knowledge, beliefs, and skills (Brophy-Herb et al., 2018), one CUPID member has incorporated mindfulness practices into her courses. Pictured here are students at [IHE institution name removed for blind review] engaging in a gratitude activity.

Challenges to CUPID's work. CUPID faces issues regarding funding; most of the group's work has been done on a volunteer basis by its members (Vallo-ton, Cook et al., in press). Recent funding from the Foundation for Child Development made possible the intense preparation of a longitudinal, multisite dataset; however, given the challenges associated with preparing such a dataset, CUPID faces ongoing struggles regarding timely reporting of results back to its members. This is problematic because these results are intended to guide pedagogy and responsive approaches to the courses and content taught within members' IHEs. The systems of rewards and promotions in higher education pose additional challenges to collaborations like CUPID. While progress has been made in recent decades in recognizing the value of the scholarship of teaching, in some IHEs it continues to lack the prestige of other forms of research (Chalmers, 2011). Likewise, as a collaborative, CUPID shares credit and authorship. This poses an issue in the reward system of higher education where single authorship and individual recognition drives the promotion and tenure process (Woods, Youn, & Johanson, 2010).

Looking Forward

As highlighted above, there are many systemic challenges to developing a skilled infant-toddler workforce. Below we provide a set of recommendations to address some of these barriers.

Unify Infant-Toddler Content

IHEs need to offer coherent infant-toddler content at their universities. A first step would be to identify where infant-toddler content is addressed in various coursework and applied field experiences in academic programs. With this information in mind, faculty can make intentional decisions about how to address gaps in content and how to ensure that content is aligned with emerging core competencies in the infant-toddler field. Universities can also create stand-alone infant-toddler majors or a specific infant-toddler strand within an existing academic program that would enable the development of an in-depth, whole-child approach to understanding infant-toddler development, care, and education (Weissman & Hendrick, 2014).

Socio-ecological approaches to understanding infant-toddler development within the context of individual families and cultures are also vital because professionals must ensure that unique child and family characteristics are considered and integrated into daily curricula and interventions (Bruder, 2010). A collaborative approach involving experts in early childhood special education would also help ensure that a program effectively prepares caregivers to work with infant-toddlers identified with or at risk for disabilities, as well as with their families. Partnerships such as these and collaborations with professionals with other relevant areas of expertise may lead to the revision or creation of conferences, workshops, professional development opportunities, field placements, shared assignments, and research opportunities.

Create a Student-Alumni Board

IHEs need to expand internship opportunities so pre-service students can gain practical experience working with infants/toddlers and their families (Norris, 2010). A student-alumni board would create

the connection between pre-service students, alumni currently working in the field, and instructors within each program. A joint board would seek to address multiple challenges, including finding high-quality field placement settings and supporting early career professionals to prevent burnout; it could also be an effective way to build a workforce pipeline of students from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, programs could update curriculum based on feedback from alumni on recent developments or trends in the field. Pre-service students need sufficient hands-on training in curriculum development, developmentally appropriate practices, partnering with families, and other areas; working alumni can assist in bridging the gap between knowledge of course content and mastery of practical skills.

In addition, a student-alumni board could improve retention of infant-toddler caregivers who report symptoms of burnout and lack of support in their work placements (e.g., Jennings 2015; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018) by connecting them with colleagues at other infant-toddler care centers. A joint board could also be expanded to include part-time instructors, community partners, and local infant-toddler leaders. There are often funding opportunities for student-led groups, such as those that could lead a student-alumni board, which can be an important resource for student-leaders as they transition into the working world and become leaders in the infant-toddler workforce. Most importantly, a student-alumni board supports communication among a pipeline of infant-toddler educators by connecting them with others in the field and focuses on the challenge of training and retaining infant-toddler professionals.

Prioritize Training in Reflective Practice

IHEs must recognize the unique relational aspects of working with infants, toddlers, and their families and integrate content on reflective practices into infant-toddler training programs. As one of our students commented, learning about reflective practices—the foundation for high-quality programming—opened new insights into “understanding self and other,” including new beliefs about infants and toddlers as individuals “that need to be seen, heard and felt.” Such integration needs to involve not only teaching students how to engage in reflective practices in their work, but also the use of reflective practices by IHE faculty in their own teaching. Examples of more reflective teaching in higher education include the use of designated time for students to reflect on their reactions to course content and/or applied experiences, either orally or in journal writing, and the use of mindfulness exercises in the college classroom (Bush, 2011).

Reflective practices also include faculty’s intentional efforts to act in empathic and compassionate ways in order to create trusting environments in which students are better able to confront their biases about infants, toddlers, and caregiving (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). Another strategy for enhancing pre-service students’ preparation for reflective, relational work with infants/toddlers is to align IHE infant-toddler programming with professional endorsements emerging in the field, such as the infant mental health endorsement (IMH-E®) and the new early childhood mental health endorsement (ECMH-E®), both of which reflect workforce initiatives available to practitioners across the country through the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health (Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health, n. d.).

Final Thoughts for Expanding Avenues for Advocacy

Nationally, there is growing interest in how to better professionalize the field of infant-toddler education, and we have described some of the ways that CUPID is working to move professionalization forward. IHEs have a key role to play in preparing pre-service caregivers to become advocates for the field. Hence, IHE programs must also prioritize training related to professionalism; IHE programs typically provide little coverage of topics like including self-identifying as part of the field of ECE and engaging in self-reflection about one's teaching practices (Buettner et al., 2016). Faculty engagement in conferences, national boards, national workforce initiatives, and cross-university collaboratives such as CUPID provide avenues for caregiver trainers to emphasize the need for and help create national strategies and shared visions in pedagogy, knowledge, and skills that will infuse infant-toddler caregiver training programs with shared high-quality content.

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