



ECE SOLUTIONS

Positive Relationships Key to Early Educator Success in Earning Bachelor's Degree

In "The Role of Relationships: An Exploratory Study of Early Childhood Educators Earning a Bachelor's Degree,"¹ Professor Anne Douglass shows how positive relationships with university faculty, staff, peers, and workplace colleagues and supervisors can support educators as they work toward earning their bachelor's degree. This qualitative study examined the higher education experiences of 18 early educators enrolled in a public urban university early childhood teacher education program. It included in-depth interviews with 11 of these educators' workplace supervisors. The results highlight the potential importance of the relational contexts in which educators pursue their degrees and make improvements in their teaching practices.

The Four Characteristics of Positive Relationships

Organizational science literature shows that relationships are a key predictor of many kinds of outcomes, and that organizations can enhance and improve relationships in systematic ways.² In educational settings, positive relationships appear to be an important factor in students' feelings of connectedness in college.³ Findings from this study show that four types of positive relational processes influenced educators' experience learning and working toward bachelor's degree completion.

Mutual respect and caring

Educators said that it was important that core program staff and faculty members knew educators as individuals and provided support, encouragement, and advocated for them. Educators explained that these caring and respectful relationships helped them to be more engaged in classes, to overcome barriers they confronted, and to persist in their efforts to complete their BA degree.

Believing in educators

Educators emphasized the importance of hearing that others believed in their success. This theme came up repeatedly in the educators' description of their relationship with their

university academic advisor, who was a full-time staff member responsible for advising the early education students. In that role, the advisor was the first and primary point of contact for educators at the university. She was described by almost all of those interviewed with terms such as "my counselor," a "savior," "my go-to-person," and "a big part of my success." Educators' also described ways that this advisor relationship helped buffer the negative impact of less positive relational experiences at the university. For example, several students described impersonal, inflexible, and negative interactions with university personnel outside of the early education department, which resulted in frustration and their questioning whether to stay in the program.

Flexibility and responsiveness

Educators confronted many challenges professionally and personally in their pursuit of a college degree, and they described how the respect and flexibility faculty offered them was important to their persistence in the program. For example, educators described struggling with finances and parenting, workplace instability, and battling major health crises. Completing

a bachelor's degree is a long process, especially for students attending part time over many years as most of these educators did. Many educators explained how faculty offered them flexibility by making accommodations to be responsive to their complex individual life circumstances.

Workplace supervisors also played an ongoing supportive role for many educators, for example, by offering flexible work hours so educators could get to classes, providing time to study during the workday, providing tuition support, and providing encouragement and helping with homework. Because so many directors found ways to provide flexible work schedules and support for homework, educators reported benefiting from the flexibility to take some classes during the day rather than at night when it interfered more with their family commitments. This helped them balance the many demands on their time and energy.

Mentoring and role modeling.

Educators spoke about faculty members as mentors who had deep knowledge of early care and education (ECE) due to their own current or previous experiences working in birth-to-five ECE settings. Educators saw these faculty members as mentors and role models. In the words of several educators, faculty are “peer leaders,” and “you can go to them for advice. If you're having issues at your job you can consult them and get advice to better the situation.” As one educator described, the faculty “make me proud to be in the field.” This sense of shared professional commitment and mentoring strengthened the alignment many educators experienced between the college classroom and their work settings. As described by several educators, this mentoring relationship increased their engagement in their classes and motivated them to keep working to complete their degree.

Implications for the Field

Improved professional development for the ECE workforce is a high priority for local, state, and national efforts to enhance ECE quality. Professional standards increasingly call for ECE teachers to hold a bachelor's degree as one measure of educator quality.⁴ But little is known about early educators' higher education experience and its impact on their professional practice.⁵ An emerging body of research across multiple disciplines provides strong evidence that positive relationships in work and educational settings are associated with better outcomes, such as learning and improvement, organizational performance, and worker well-being and retention.⁶ The results of this study revealed four characteristics of these relationships that influenced educators. Attention to these relational dynamics should be included in higher education program evaluation and in ECE research.

¹ Douglass, A. (2019). *The Role of Relationships: An Exploratory Study of Early Childhood Educators Earning a Bachelor's Degree*. SAGE Open.

² Gittel, J. H. (2016). *Transforming relationships for high performance: The power of relational coordination*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

³ Goldstein, L. S. (2002). *Commitment, community, and passion: Dimensions of a care-centered approach to teacher education*. *Teacher Education & Practice*, 15, 36-56.

⁴ Institute of Medicine & National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Reports/2015/Birth-To-Eight.aspx>

⁵ Zaslow, M., & Martinez-Beck, I. (Eds.). (2006). *Critical issues in early childhood professional development*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

⁶ Cameron, K. S., & Spreitzer, G. M. (2012). *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

ECE Solutions: Positive Relationships Key to Early Educator Success in Earning Bachelor's Degree is one in a series of policy briefs summarizing original research by the Leadership Institute that is generating new knowledge and accelerating creative and critical thinking about leadership and innovation in the field of early care and education.

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