

2012 PROJECT BRIEF

Exploring the Potential for State-Level Consolidated Governance for Bringing Coherence to Early Childhood Education Systems

Rebecca E. Gomez, M.Ed. (Scholar) and Sharon Lynn Kagan, Ed.D (Mentor)

Teachers College, Columbia University

Child Care Research Scholar (90YE0142), 2012-2013

Project Description

In an attempt to move from a fragmented landscape of programs and services for young children, U.S. states have begun to create infrastructure for these programs. This infrastructure takes the form of early childhood education (ECE) systems, which have seven critical elements. Governance is one of these seven elements, and is argued by some to be the most critical system element, because it provides a foundation from which each of the other system elements can be developed. A few states have taken an innovative approach by focusing on governance and consolidating their early childhood services and programs into one entity, designed to provide infrastructure for and management of the ECE system in that state. Of the states that have consolidated governance for ECE, this study focuses on three in particular: Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Delaware. The purpose of this study is to explore the decisions states make about the form and function of governance, the influence of governance on the ECE system, and opportunities and limits of governance for bringing coherence to a complex and otherwise fragmented system. The dual theoretical frameworks of institutional theory and complexity theory guide my data collection and analysis procedures, providing a rich theoretical lens through which to conduct this study. The three states I have chosen to study have made different choices about governance over the past decade; I hypothesize that these choices have resulted in a particular approach to governance by each state. Embedded in this approach are expectations that governance will improve the ECE system. Given these realities, I am asking the following research questions about the three states on which I will focus:

Research Questions.

1. Why have the states in this study chosen a particular form and set of functions for ECE governance?

- What contextual factors (i.e., economic, political, historical) contributed to a state's choice?
 - What is the state's approach to governance (i.e., how do form and function interact)?
2. How, if at all, has consolidated governance affected:
 - The development of data tracking systems and the way data is used to inform system development
 - Workforce supports
 - Public will for ECE
 - Administrative efficiencies (e.g., financing, human resources)
 - The influx of resources into ECE systems and the ability of ECE policymakers to buffer financial or political changes that may deplete/reduce these resources
 3. What are the opportunities and limits of governance for:
 - promoting coherent ECE system development?
 - legitimizing ECE as a field, and
 - creating normative understandings about ECE governance among those working in the field?

Sample. The sample for this project consists of three states, Pennsylvania (PA), Massachusetts (MA), and Delaware (DE). Each state was selected based on two criteria: (1) The state has adopted a consolidated governance approach for ECE, or, is in the process of creating a consolidated approach to governance; and, (2) Each state's governance structure takes a different form (i.e., PA has adopted a structure which crosses two departments, MA has created a stand-alone structure to govern ECE, and DE is in the

process of creating a structure to house ECE within the Department of Education).

Method. This study employs a three-phase qualitative methodology. The methods used will be employed in a nested design (in which the findings from each phase inform the data collection procedures and measures for the subsequent phases). I am taking an emergent approach to data collection and analysis, in which the collection and analysis go hand in hand to build a coherent interpretation. I am using Nvivo, the qualitative analysis software to help me classify and code the data, rendering a deep and thorough analysis.

The first phase of the study focuses on textual analysis of documents related to the development and operationalization of governance in each of the focal states. While some of the publicly-available documents related to consolidated governance were included in the literature review, there are other documents that are important to analyze, like fiscal documents, which can only be identified and obtained with consent from the states I have selected. Data collected in the first phase will be analyzed for findings that help answer the research questions and also inform the protocol for the second phase. The second phase consists of a series of semi-structured interviews with 3-5 individuals from each state. Interviewees will be selected from a pool of individuals who were involved in creating the governance approach in each of the focal states. As with the first phase, the findings will be used to inform the protocol of the third phase of research. The third phase consists of a series of online surveys using the Delphi method of surveying; I will invite members of the Early Childhood Advisory Councils in each state to participate in this three-part survey.

Using the findings from each phase, I will illustrate the degree to which governance has, if at all, affected the ECE system in these three states.

Progress Update

At present, I have gained access to all documents related to consolidation from each state. These documents range from records of congressional testimony, to organizational charts, to data on child progress and workforce qualifications. I have

developed a construct template to use in coding these data, and am currently conducting reliability checks with two peers.

Implications for Policy/Practice

The recent investments in ECE governance by these states have garnered much attention and excitement among policymakers and scholars who are interested in improving the efficacy and coherence of ECE systems. It is, however, unlikely that policymakers and constituents will support investments in what amounts to a costly and time-consuming endeavor, without a clear understanding of how consolidated governance impacts the ECE system. This study also has the potential to provide guidance to states that are contemplating governance or are in the process of creating different administrative structures through which ECE can be governed. In light of the recent grants to states via the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Fund, which requires states to develop ECE systems, including governance, this study could help states approach governance with intentionality and greater efficiency.

Implications for Research

This study is the first of its kind, in there have been no efforts to date to explore empirically the impact of governance on ECE systems. As such, it could contribute to the body of literature (a literature largely confined to theoretical and conceptual work about governance rather than empirical work) on governance and systems. This study also expands the relevance of institutional theory for analyzing educational issues. Institutional theory provides a unique lens to examine the degree to which individuals working in ECE have a shared understanding of what governance is and the relative importance placed on governance as a system element.

For more information:

www.policyforchildren.org/systems.html

Contact

Rebecca E. Gomez, M.Ed.
National Center for Children and Families
Teachers College, Columbia University
Reg2137@columbia.edu / 603.370.1284