
Women Who Make a Difference in the Lives of Children

By Connie Mietlicki

Critical issues facing women and all parents in our nation and others stem from two facts: 1) Many, if not most, parents must depend on other people to care for their children while they work, and 2) Many childcare providers lack adequate training. The professional education of childcare workers or lack of it impacts learning outcomes for children every day. In 2001, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2003), 66% of all 4-year-olds were enrolled in a center or school-based preschool program, a statistic that represents a dramatic 23% increase from thirty years earlier (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970). Today, preschool enrollment varies widely from state to state, with Oklahoma the highest at 71% (Barnett, et al., 2010). Short, on-the-job-only training typifies the average provider's early childhood educational preparation. Some do not even have high school diplomas or Graduate Equivalent Degrees (GEDs), which justifies the low wages paid by employers. Little education and low incomes for staff, high rates of teacher turnover, and high child-to-adult ratios characterize poor quality childcare in the United States (De Vita, Twombly & Montilla, 2002).

Research evidence indicates that academic outcomes and cognitive development for young children can be improved by good quality care in center-based programs (Barnet, 1995; Meyers et al., 2003; Smolensky & Gootman, 2003). Early in life, responsive and cognitively stimulating care fosters the language and cognitive skills that facilitate learning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children from economically disadvantaged families are less likely to attend quality preschool programs and more

likely to enter school with fewer academic skills than their more advantaged peers, contributing to substantial gaps in cognitive and academic competencies that persist in later school years (Stipek & Ryan, 1997).

Results from a large body of studies confirm that teacher qualifications play a pivotal role in equipping children with skills necessary to enter school ready to learn (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce, & Snipper, 1982; Oden, Schweinhart, & Weikart, 2000; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1999; Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, & Howes, 2001). Additionally, higher qualifications for caregivers contribute to more positive short- and long-term outcomes for the children in their charge (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997, 2001; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989), and level of teacher education are related to the quality of child care and instruction they provide (Berk, 1985; Dunn, 1993; Helburn, 1995; Honig & Hirallal, 1998; Marshall et al., 2001; Ruopp, Travers, Glantz, & Coelen, 1979; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1990). These studies strongly indicate that a bachelor's degree and specialized early childhood education training at the college level are required to support high-quality child care (Blau, 2000; Howes, 1997; Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000; Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997; Whitebook, 2001).

To promote higher quality teacher preparation and care for preschool children, the Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA) developed a career lattice which allows early childhood providers to obtain on-the-job training and access to higher education. At its inception in 1992, the TECTA system represented a new paradigm for the early childhood profession that promoted upward mobility with increased

compensation for each step of professional development, and it included alternative pathways with various entry points. TECTA's Orientation was designed to be a gateway to academic training, and classes introduce providers to best practices in 1) Center-Based Education, 2) Family Care Settings, 3) Programs for School-Age Children, 4) Infant/Toddler Programs, and 5) Childcare Administration. Upon completion of Orientation courses, students may be eligible for financial aid to pursue early childhood credentials, such as the Child Development Associate (CDA), or seek degrees from accredited institutions of higher education.

The TECTA lattice allows childcare providers to take classes in a coordinated statewide system of two-year and four-year institutions and earn post-secondary certificates and enter degree programs when they meet admission requirements. Personal accounts from four women who climbed the lattice illustrate how professional development and academic study changed their lives and the lives of children and families with whom they have worked. First, meet Melissa and then Brenda, Claudia, and Kelly to learn about their paths through this career lattice.

Melissa's Story—“It was a step-by-step, moving-up process.”

Working as an assistant teacher in an after-school program to earn money while taking college courses toward a pre-medical degree, Melissa realized that her true passion was teaching children. She graduated with a baccalaureate degree in biology but did not pursue a career in medicine. When she learned that a local academy had added a pre-school program, she interviewed and got a job working with infants and toddlers. Melissa related, “I had no child development training except for my five years' work experience” in the after-school program.



After being hired, Melissa took the Infant/Toddler Orientation. She confessed that she was “amazed by how much I didn’t know even with five years’ experience. Just because you work in childcare, it doesn’t mean that you know what child development really is until you actually take the courses.” She then learned she could take courses for a CDA credential. “I started the Healthy Learning course including the mentoring requirement.” As she completed childcare courses, Melissa was promoted from teacher to coordinator for the Infant/Toddler program. “By increasing my knowledge and confidence, I began the moving-up process.”

When the CDA was earned, Melissa then obtained a two-year Associate’s degree in early childhood education. “That achievement moved me into the assistant director position. After I achieved that goal, I stayed two years and became director of a before- and after-school program where I stayed for almost two years, another step in the moving-up process.” Melissa took School-Age Orientation with her staff. Then she took Administrator Orientation “because it was important in the development of the center. Regardless of degree, I realized I needed more specific information about areas pertaining to my job so I became a life-long learner.”

Melissa worked in all areas of early childhood education, taking more courses at each phase of her “moving up process” from assistant to lead teacher and then to coordinator, assistant director, and director. She described her progress as “building on successes as I learned more and more.” She explained, “The more I know, the more I can teach.” Melissa concluded, “My ultimate goal is to be an advocate for children and their families, sharing my knowledge of childcare, and improving the quality of care that the children are receiving each step of the way.”

Brenda’s Story—“One course changed my life.”

“I was mediocre in high school but got my diploma and started working in childcare. My director saw my potential and encouraged me to take classes. She took the classes with me, which was helpful. Health and Safety was my first college course.” Brenda continued, “I took Center-Based Orientation later on. I was new; I had no experience in teaching except for Sunday school. I wanted to apply everything I learned when I saw what a difference it could make in the classroom. What I learned sparked my interest, especially the diversity module.” After attending this session, Brenda “wanted to make sure the classroom was a place where all the children felt they belonged” so she brought appropriate materials to school “that reflected all cultures” represented by the children.



Brenda’s “come-from-behind” story is one that offers encouragement for others: “When I started taking classes, I was apprehensive. I just got by in school. I was worried I wouldn’t do well, but then I saw that what we were learning related to my job and would help me at work. I learned that persistence paid off and was successful in the college courses, which was good for my self-esteem and basically changed everything for me.” Brenda originally planned only to get her CDA credential and never expected to get a college degree. “When I saw I could be successful, I just kept on going and went back for my Associate’s degree when I was almost 32 and had two children.” She graduated Magna Cum Laude and was recognized as a member of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and Early Childhood Education Student of the Year. She went on for her Baccalaureate degree and has now finished her Master’s degree in early literacy. Today Brenda is convinced that “One course changed my life.”

Brenda’s career growth spilled over to her home life. Academic work for degrees in early childhood education “made me a better mother, and the confidence I gained has impacted my family. My children now know that college is an option for them. My daughter is pursuing a degree in biology. She and my son saw me up late at night

studying so I could become the first person in my family to earn a college degree. With each degree, I got a salary increase, which made financial changes that helped my family. Now, I am a positive role model.”

Today Brenda is a community leader with positions on key boards in the Chattanooga area. “Providers see me as a real person. I tell them, ‘If I can do it, you can.’” Brenda has seen many programs improve the quality of care for children. “We go through rating scales with providers to help them make improvements such as arranging rooms and centers and going through toys to discard those that are inappropriate. Our work helps create accredited providers who are changing things for the better in Tennessee childcare.”

Claudia’s story—“I had the power of support from others.”

When a post card arrived in the mail advertising “FREE hours” of credit for childcare providers, Claudia, the director of a center for young children, decided to take advantage of the offer. “I needed the hours to meet a licensing requirement,” so Claudia and four teachers from her center took Center-Based Orientation together. “From the very first class, we realized we had work to do in our center. After each module, we realized weaknesses in the program and were excited to incorporate our new learning into our setting. The changes we made in the curriculum got kids more involved, and our classrooms ran smoother. It was a real eye-opener. The kids enjoyed their experiences and were more engaged in activities. They learned and interacted more because we were able to provide more interesting areas. Even the parents could see the changes.”



After that, Claudia attended courses for the Administrator Orientation. Her administrative skills contributed to staff development and systematic plans to improve the center. Through that process, she became aware of her own strengths personally and professionally. Claudia's story is one that illustrates the power of support. After the Orientations, she and the group of caregivers from her center began to take early childhood classes. "When we were tired, we motivated each other. We implemented at the center what we learned and then taught it to the other staff." Claudia attributed her success to colleagues, "I had the power of support from others."

Claudia took another three academic classes and "gained insight into how children develop language, math, and science skills, which helped me to teach with confidence." Claudia completed her Associate's degree with honors, an accomplishment that "seemed like it took forever, but it was a big milestone in my life." Claudia stated, "I proved a point. It doesn't matter how old you are, or how long it takes, or even if English is your second language, as long as you are motivated and put in the time and effort, you can complete your goal if you have your mind set. 'The most difficult step of any journey is the first.' This is the quote I live by." Claudia has the words in her quote engraved on a plaque, and she takes them to the Orientation classes she now teaches to inspire her

students. Having completed her Bachelor's degree, Claudia has started on her Master's. Through each phase of her professional development, Claudia has learned that “the more educated you become, the stronger a leader you are.”

Kelly's Story—“I was hungry for knowledge.”

Like Claudia, Kelly was a center director when the advertisement for free training caught her attention. The hours required for continued licensing had increased so “I drove one way, one hour, for five Saturdays” to take the Center-Based Orientation. She reported, “I was able to implement the knowledge in the classrooms at the center right away. The Orientation had such an impact that I required every employee of my center to take it.” At that time, she had nine employees. Hungry for more knowledge, Kelly then took the Administrator Orientation, “which gave helpful hints for the management portion of my job.”



As the co-director of a licensed childcare facility, Kelly needed training credit each year. She chose the free training because it would “not only serve as training hours, but also count toward a degree that would last forever.” Her first step was to complete her CDA

credential. “The coursework explained the whys for how you do things. I was hungry for knowledge. I could not get enough information quickly enough, so gradually I increased my hourly load each semester and before I knew it, I had completed all my course work for my Associate’s degree.” She recalled, “I really enjoyed the college courses and soaked in all of the knowledge being offered. I decided I was going to be the first generation college graduate in my family with a four-year degree. The on-line courses entwined with campus courses were perfect for me. In two short years, I obtained my four-year degree.” Not stopping there, Kelly went on to finish her Master’s degree in Family and Consumer Science and currently is an instructor for early childhood and Orientation courses and a CDA advisor.

Kelly’s story highlights the effect of her thirst for knowledge on children and others. As a director, she saw a real difference in her staff’s interactions with children after they had experienced Orientation training. She noted improvements in “appropriate setting up of the classroom and talking to parents.” Kelly added, “The teachers loved going to classes. There was a positive influence from them on the children even after the first session.” Kelly has first-hand knowledge that there was higher quality care for children because of the training they all received. “I have seen teachers move through courses and then seen their impact in the classrooms. Ultimately, children benefit because the teacher puts it together for better flow.”

Kelly concluded, “I was traveling down a path looking to provide quality child care for the children in my community. Now I am able to share my success story with many other women who are interested in growing professionally.” Still hungry for

knowledge, Kelly is now enrolled in a doctoral program and seeking the highest credential in her field!

A Common Thread from All Four Stories—Care is the key.

Real stories of authentic experiences are inspiring sources of information, especially for people in similar circumstances. Professional development for these women has indeed had a profound impact on the quality of care in early childhood all across the state. Through such training, they have been able to move up in the workplace, often with pay increases and career advancements. They found the instruction immediately applicable and relevant to their every day work experiences. They gained self-respect and confidence, which, in turn, motivated them to continue taking courses, moving up, and learning more. As they grew professionally, they improved their centers or daycare sites. In many cases, they sought accreditation and/or improved scores on the state quality rating system for childcare programs. Ultimately, their children received better care, and the parents and communities responded with praise and approval. They have joined advisory boards and committees and become members of professional organizations, affecting policy changes at local, state, and national levels. Because of the increasing need for highly qualified professionals in early childhood settings, they could pursue educational goals with confidence that there would be a place for them to work when they obtained that next degree or credential. All along the way, they made life-long friendships with colleagues and fellow childcare providers, who helped and encouraged them. Their real stories are living proof that women who seek to grow professionally can make a difference, both in their own lives and in lives of the people for whom they care.

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