

Montana's Early Childhood Educators: Recruitment and Retainment of an Essential Workforce

Christine Lux, Ed.D.
Cassie Noble, M.S.
Nanci Red Bird, Ed.D.

Introduction

Perhaps now more than ever, families' access to quality early care and education is critical as parents navigate their return to work and prepare to bring their children back to early childhood programs as COVID-19 restrictions, including group gathering and social distancing policies, continue to evolve. However, access to early care and education was in high demand before the pandemic with national data suggesting that half of the families in the United States experience difficulty finding available care for children (Sochet, 2019). In the midst of COVID-19, a national survey of 5,000 early care and education programs reported more staggering statistics: nearly 50% of survey respondents had completely closed their programs and of those programs that remained open, 85% were operating at half capacity or less, thus further limiting the availability of care (NAEYC, 2020).

One solution to the crisis in available early care and education is to recruit and retain a highly qualified workforce and encourage more professionals to enter into and stay in the field of early childhood education, consistent with the recommendations presented in the 2015 IOM *Transforming the Workforce* report. These recommendations include, but are not limited to an improved knowledge base and set of competencies for early childhood educators, enhanced higher education programs, and strengthened systems that support every facet of the early childhood workforce, which includes financial support for workforce development (National Research Council, 2015). These

recommendations have inspired NAEYC's *Power to the Profession* movement. The *Power to the Profession* movement recommends finding and securing sustained incentives to attain higher education degrees, thus ensuring the preparation needed to successfully operate an early childhood program and provide high quality care for young children in working families (NAEYC, 2020). In summary, it takes a dedicated, responsible, and well-prepared person to successfully guide and teach young children, particularly when families are facing adversity and stress.

The purpose of this research is to share the results of a case study investigation of Montana's early childhood workforce to address policy change intended to advocate for the early childhood profession and therefore support young children and their families. Research efforts could build a comprehensive understanding of the influence of age, role, education, wage, and access to incentives on the motivation to enter into and stay in the early childhood workforce. Findings could provide insight into sustained recruitment and retention efforts, especially as we move forward with revised operational guidelines, policies, and procedures in response to COVID-19.

Methods

A case study methodology was selected for this study to gather in-depth information about Montana's early childhood workforce utilizing data collected by the Montana Early Childhood Project (ECP), the state's Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) outreach program, dedicated to improving the quality of programs and services for Montana's young children and their families. The ECP maintains the Early Childhood Practitioner Registry, created to develop a knowledgeable and skilled early childhood workforce, promote individual professional growth and development, and collect

information to inform policy makers and partners to help increase compensation and raise the status of early care and education as a valuable and essential career. Subsets of the workforce who participate in the Registry include early childhood educators, Professional Development Specialists, Child Care Resource & Referral staff, and other managerial personnel that impact early care and education program quality and child and family outcomes. Workforce data collected by the Registry includes education, certifications, employment, and a record of professional development and achievements. Registry members are not required to report wage and benefits, an essential piece of information, leaving a gap of knowledge about the workforce that could reveal indicators of motivation to persist in the early care and education profession. Therefore, survey and focus group interview questions were designed in this case study to fill that gap and provide both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis.

Sample. The Practitioner Registry is open to all members of Montana's early childhood workforce, and required as of July 2018 for those who are employed by a licensed early care and education facility, including family, group, and center-based programs. At the start of this research project, a total of 2,400 Registry participants represented an estimated 50% of the early childhood workforce in Montana. The total number of members affiliated with licensed childcare programs was expected to increase during the roll out of mandatory Registry participation through July 2019. The Registry represents the current workforce, as members must reapply and update their information yearly. Registry participation has steadily increased over the years, as shown in Figure 1.

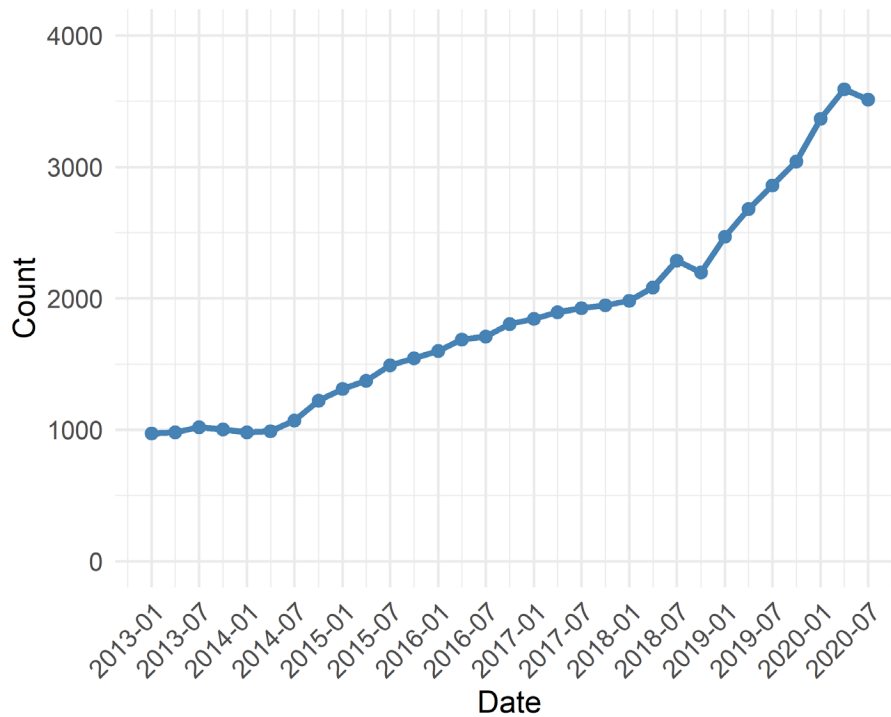


Figure 1. Count of current Practitioner Registry participants between January 2013 and July 2020.

Measures. The exploratory nature of this study led the research team to develop and administer an online survey and conduct focus groups via telephone to better understand trends in wages, education, incentives, and motivation to stay in the early childhood profession. Qualitative, anecdotal evidence about Montana’s early childhood professionals had not been obtained through rigorous research methods prior to this study.

Twenty-four survey questions were developed using other state models as well as input from a variety of stakeholders in Montana with vested interest to recruit, retain, and support a highly qualified, valued, and well-compensated early childhood workforce. Fixed-response demographic questions included age, role, years in the early childhood field, and years at current job. Questions about wages allowed participants to report

hourly, monthly, or annual salary data, and also to indicate their last wage increase. Respondents selected the types of benefits offered by their employer (e.g. health insurance, paid time off, etc.), and also were invited to provide additional information about benefits offered and/or received. Regarding education, survey participants recorded their highest degree received and current enrollment status in higher education. Participants were also asked about any forms of financial assistance they received for their education, in particular the Montana Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Leadership and Financial Assistance awards, designed to provide tuition assistance and educational materials support to professionals seeking a Preschool – Grade 3 teaching endorsement or early childhood education master’s degree. Incentives and motivation to stay in the early childhood field were measured using Likert scale questions such as *how likely are you to stay in the field of early care and education?* and *how important is (pay, benefits, job satisfaction, etc.) in deciding to stay in your current position?* One open-ended question at the end of the survey encouraged participants to share any other comments that might contribute toward a better understanding of Montana’s early childhood workforce, and also invited participants to indicate their interest in participating in a focus group to provide further insight. Focus group questions were aimed to better understand how each participant came into the early childhood profession, the incentives that were available to support attainment of higher education degrees, and their motivations to stay in the field. See the appendix for a complete list of survey and focus group questions.

Upon Montana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the survey was delivered electronically in December 2018 to 3,471 participants who met

any one of three criteria: 1) current or recent member of the Practitioner Registry (active within the prior eighteen months), 2) had a currently submitted application to the Practitioner Registry, or 3) had ever previously applied for or received the Leadership and Financial Assistance award through the Montana Preschool Development Grant (PDG). Survey participation was incentivized with raffle prizes of \$50 worth of children's books which was awarded to nine survey participants. The research team was particularly interested in receiving feedback and learning more from those who had received financial assistance, and so the 76 individuals in the survey who had received PDG Leadership and Financial Assistance awards were asked to indicate their interest in participating in a focus group. Of these, eight participants engaged in one of two focus groups held in February 2020.

Survey Results

Eight hundred sixty-nine respondents provided consent to participate in the research study and completed the survey, representing a 25% rate of return. Questions about age, role, and years of experience in the early childhood profession contributed to a descriptive understanding of the early childhood workforce. Data regarding wages provided evidence of low compensation, and information about benefits helped build an understanding of incentives to stay in the field. An examination of education attainment by age and role further described workforce trends and potential areas of needed support. An analysis of motivation to stay in the field as well as examination of open-ended comments yielded rich insight into recruiting and retaining a highly qualified early childhood workforce in Montana.

Age. Members of the early childhood workforce in Montana represented all age categories (Figure 2). However, nearly half of the workforce represented in the sample (48%) is between 31 and 50 years old ($n=405$) and just over half of the workforce (52%) is over 40 years old ($n=434$). In other words, the majority of the workforce (77%) that participated in this study is over 31 years old.

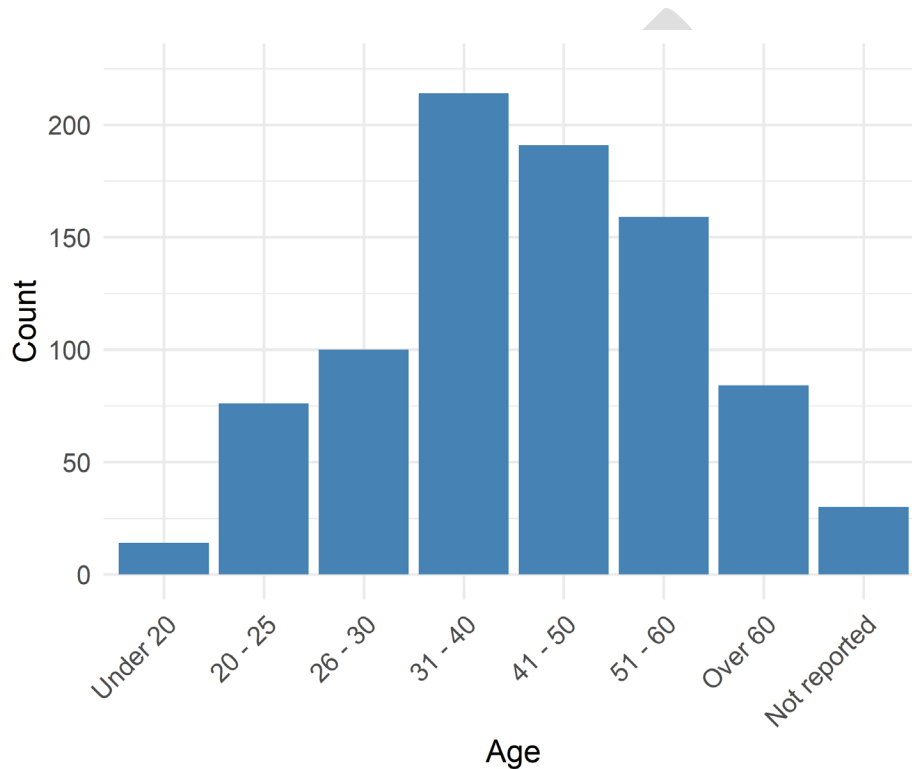


Figure 2. Montana's early childhood workforce by age range ($n=839$).

Role. Survey participants were asked to select among a variety of role categories (director/owner, program administrator, lead teacher, and assistant teacher) to best describe their current position. Role types on the survey were selected based on broad categories represented in Montana childcare licensing. Although the categories seemed distinct, an "other" category was also included and selected by almost 16% of respondents ($n=131$). The director/owner category was selected by 34% of the sample ($n=288$), followed by 29% of respondents that indicated lead teacher as their role

($n=246$) and 14% ($n=119$) that indicated assistant teacher. Only 7% of survey participants ($n=55$) identified themselves as program administrators. Distribution of role types are displayed in Figure 3.

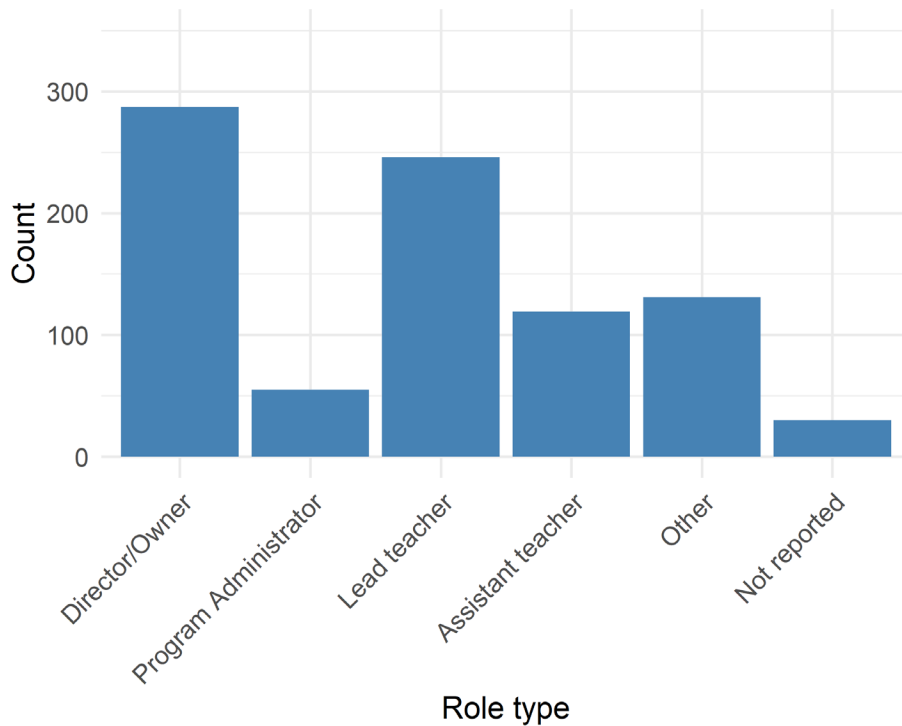


Figure 3. Montana's early childhood workforce by role type ($n=839$).

Role by age. A closer look at survey data revealed a better understanding of the kinds of positions held by Montana's early childhood workforce at different ages. Eight hundred thirty-eight participants reported both age and role type. Among survey participants less than 20 years old, 57% of respondents reported their role as an assistant teacher ($n=8$). Among respondents aged 20 – 25 years old, 3% ($n=8$) reported their role as director or owner, but 76% of respondents in that age span ($n=58$) reported holding a lead or assistant teacher position. Among survey participants aged 26 – 30 years old, 45% reported holding a lead teacher position ($n=45$), with just under 20% of professionals in that age group reporting director/owner or assistant teacher positions

($n=18$). Among respondents between 31 and 40 years old, 41% reported holding a director/owner position ($n=88$), followed by 28% in lead teacher roles ($n=60$). Among survey participants between the ages 41 and 50 years old, 44% indicated a director/owner role ($n=88$), and another 25% reported lead teacher roles ($n=48$).

Distribution of role types by age ranges is displayed in Figure 4.

Data collected also suggested that the early childhood profession often requires “wearing many hats” and taking on more than one role, particularly among family and group program professionals. For example, one respondent indicated “Family provider – I do it all.” Of the 131 “other” responses, 20% indicated that they held more than one role.

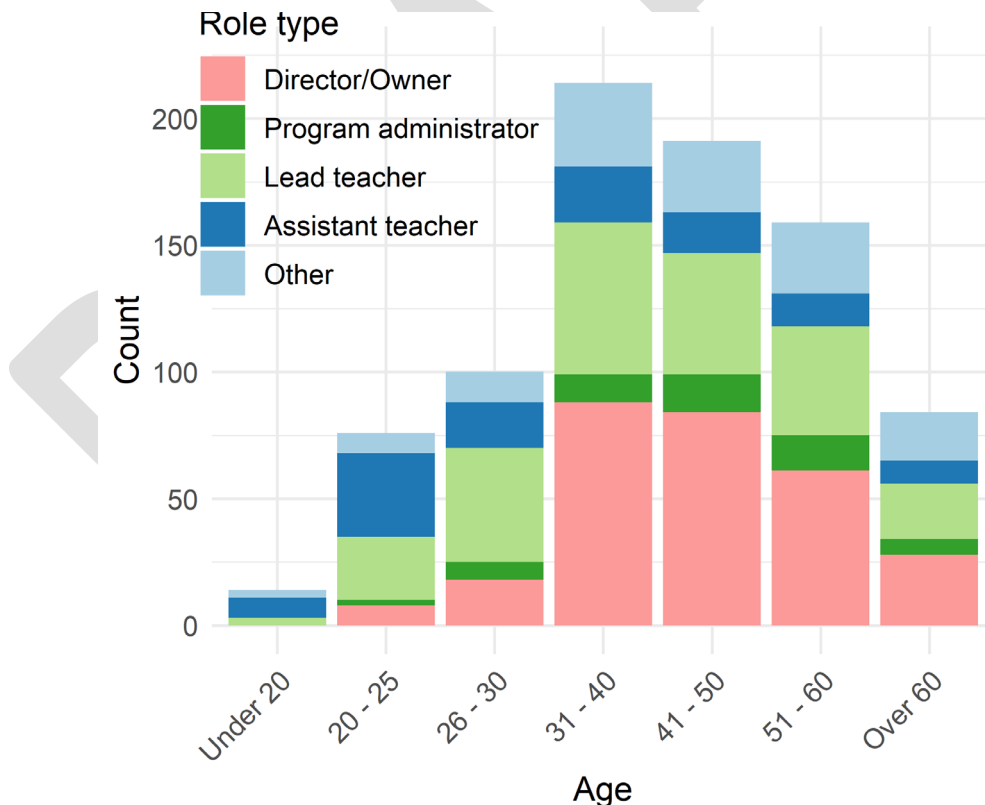


Figure 4. Role types by age range ($n=838$).

Years of experience in the early childhood profession. Survey questions regarding years of experience included one question about longevity in the field and one question about employment length in their current position. Eight hundred thirty-nine survey participants reported their years of experience. Of those, 45% ($n=374$) reported employment in the early childhood profession for less than 10 years, while 27% ($n=229$) reported between 11 and 20 years of experience, and 28% ($n=236$) reported more than 20 years of experience. Seventeen percent of respondents ($n=145$) reported more than 25 years of employment in the early childhood profession. Distribution of data regarding longevity in the field of early childhood is displayed in Figure 5.

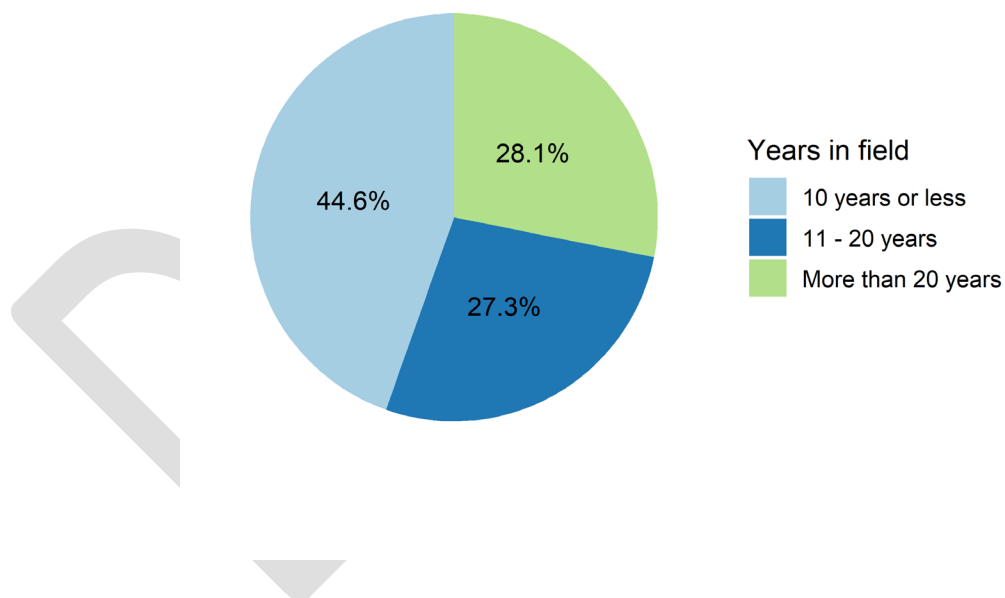


Figure 5. Years employed in the Early Care and Education field ($n=839$).

Data regarding years of employment suggests that the majority of survey respondents are new to their current position. Thirty-five percent of the sample ($n=293$) has held their current position for less than three years. Another 22% of respondents ($n=185$) reported 3 – 5 years of employment in their current positions while 16% of the

sample ($n=134$) reported 6 – 10 years of employment in their current positions. Only 9% of respondents ($n=74$) reported 11 – 15 years of employment in their current positions and just 6% of respondents ($n=51$) of respondents reported 16 – 20 years of employment in their current positions. The greatest amount of longevity in their current position – more than 20 years – was reported by 12% of the sample ($n=102$). Data are displayed in Figure 6.

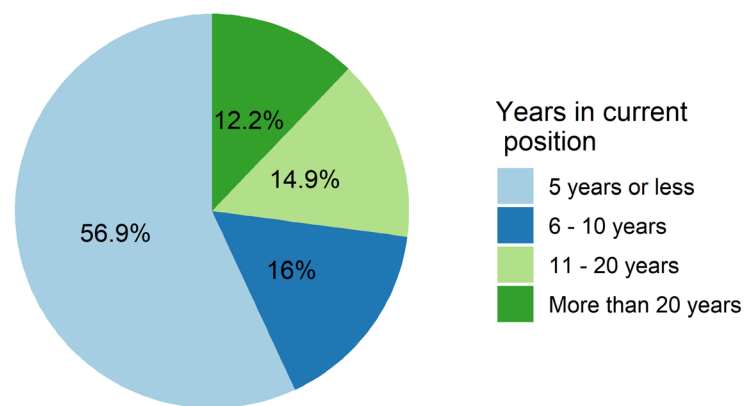


Figure 6. Years employed in current position ($n=839$).

Wages. Survey participants were able to report hourly, monthly, or annual wages and salaries. Monthly salaries were converted to and are included with annual salaries. Program administrators reported the highest earnings, while assistant teachers earned the least. Wage results by role type are displayed in Table 1.

Role type	Average hourly wage	Average annual salary	n	Percent of role types
Assistant teacher	\$11.03	\$22,140	124	15%
Lead teacher	\$12.99	\$35,883	249	29%
Other	\$15.23	\$35,206	135	16%
Director/Owner	\$16.22	\$34,457	289	34%
Program administrator	\$18.76	\$37,180	55	6%

Table 1. Average hourly and annual wages by role ($n=852$).

Although we did not control for county of residence or employment, we asked what type of program participants were employed by, and data revealed higher salaries for both Preschool Development Grant (PDG) and STARS Preschool programs, two grant funded programs received by the State of Montana in 2014 and 2017, respectively. Both grants supported wage increases for early childhood educators. Wage results by program type are displayed in Table 2.

Program type	Average hourly wage	Average annual salary
Licensed or registered program	\$12.99	\$33,276
STARS to Quality (QRIS)	\$12.78	\$34,311
STARS Preschool	\$13.49	\$38,513
Preschool Development Grant (PDG)	\$17.92	\$53,987

Table 2. Wages by program type.

Benefits. Figure 7 shows reported benefits offered, such as health insurance, paid time off, and retirement. Approximately 60% ($n=472$) of respondents reported that some benefits were offered by their employer. Of the list of possible benefits, paid time off was the most common with 25% of all respondents reporting this benefit ($n=426$). Financial support for professional development and education, health insurance, and retirement options were also very popular (15-20%). Free or reduced childcare and paid

membership in a professional organization were less common with about 7-8% of survey respondents reporting these benefits.

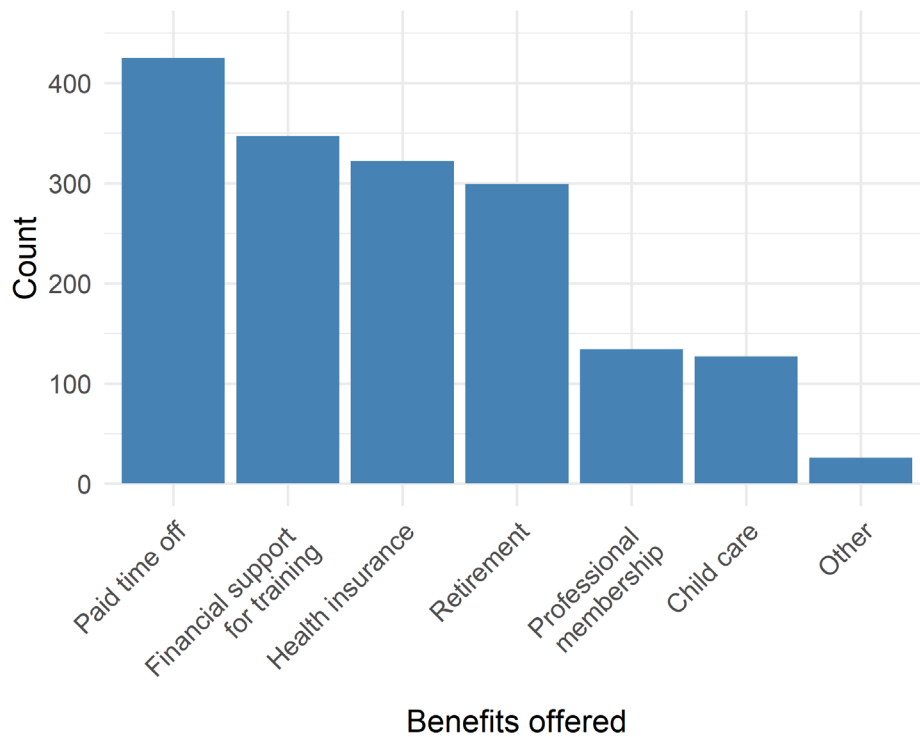


Figure 7. Benefits offered to Montana's early childhood workforce ($n=472$).

Education. Survey questions regarding degree and education attainment included selecting the highest level of education attained, and indication of current enrollment status in higher education and anticipated date of graduation. Figure 8 shows the distribution of the 791 participants who reported their highest degree received. One third of the workforce reported a bachelor's degree as their highest degree earned ($n=267$), followed by 29% with a high school diploma or equivalent ($n=229$), 18% with an associate degree ($n=139$), and 10% with a master's degree ($n=83$). Eight percent of participants ($n=67$) reported a CDA as their highest level of education. Less than one percent of survey participants have received a doctorate

degree ($n=3$) or did not complete high school ($n=3$). Fifteen percent of respondents ($n=122$) indicated they were currently enrolled in college.

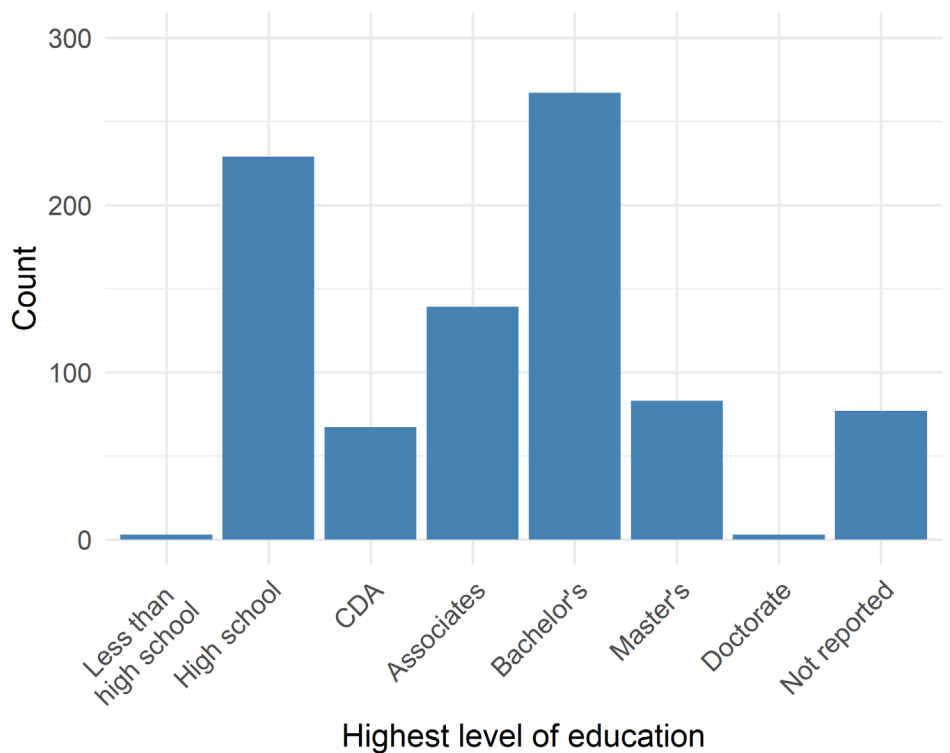


Figure 8. Highest degree earned by Montana's early childhood workforce ($n=791$).

Preschool Development Grant (PDG) financial assistance. A series of survey questions were targeted toward individuals who had applied for and received financial assistance through the Montana Preschool Development Grant to pursue their Preschool – Grade 3 (P3) teaching endorsement or early childhood master's degree. There were 202 individuals who received over 1.3 million dollars in financial assistance between Fall 2015 and Fall 2018, the time the survey was conducted. Recipients received an average of about \$2,000 per semester. Figure 9 shows the amount of financial assistance awarded and the number of recipients each semester over this time period. Of these recipients, 38% ($n=76$) participated in the survey. Those who indicated they received this assistance were asked about the length of time they received it, if

they completed their degree or endorsement, and if they did complete, if their wage changed. An additional 13% ($n=12$) of individuals who applied for but never received the financial assistance also participated in the survey.

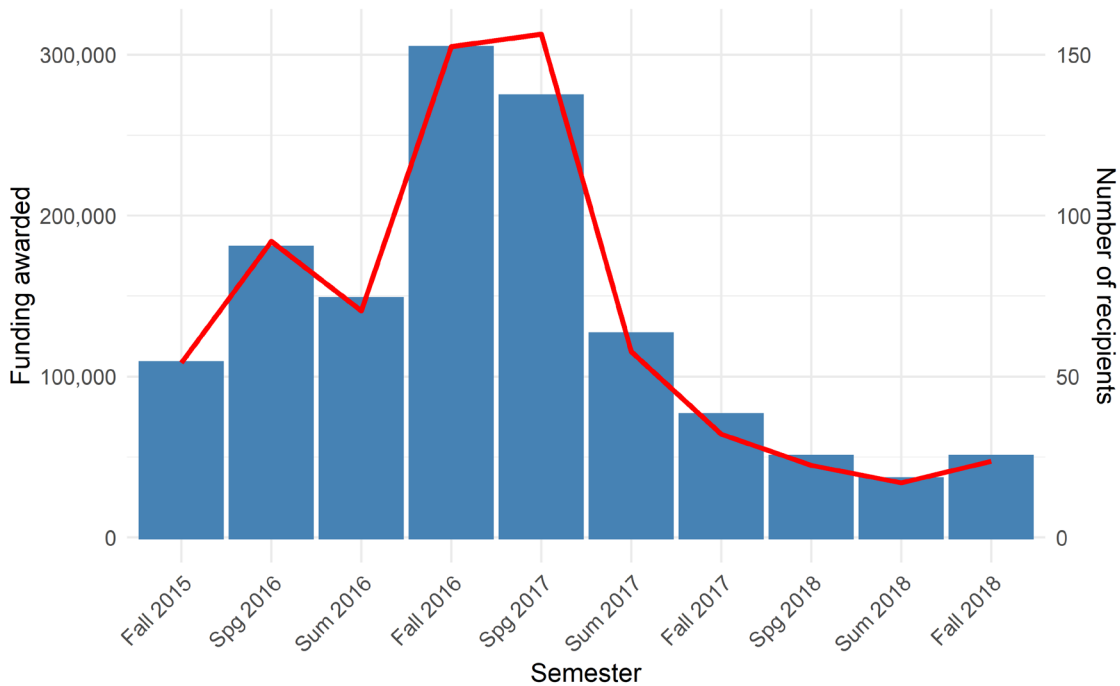


Figure 9. Count of PDG Leadership and Financial Assistance award recipients (red line) and amount awarded (blue bar) from Fall 2015 to Fall 2018 ($n=202$).

Motivation to Stay in the EC Field. Participants were asked about their likelihood to stay in their current position (Figure 10) and also their likelihood to stay in the early childhood profession over the next three years (Figure 11). Of the 798 who reported their intentions of remaining in the field, 82% ($n=651$) reported that they were extremely or somewhat likely. Three-quarters of the 797 respondents who reported their intentions of remaining in their current position ($n=596$) reported extremely or somewhat likely.

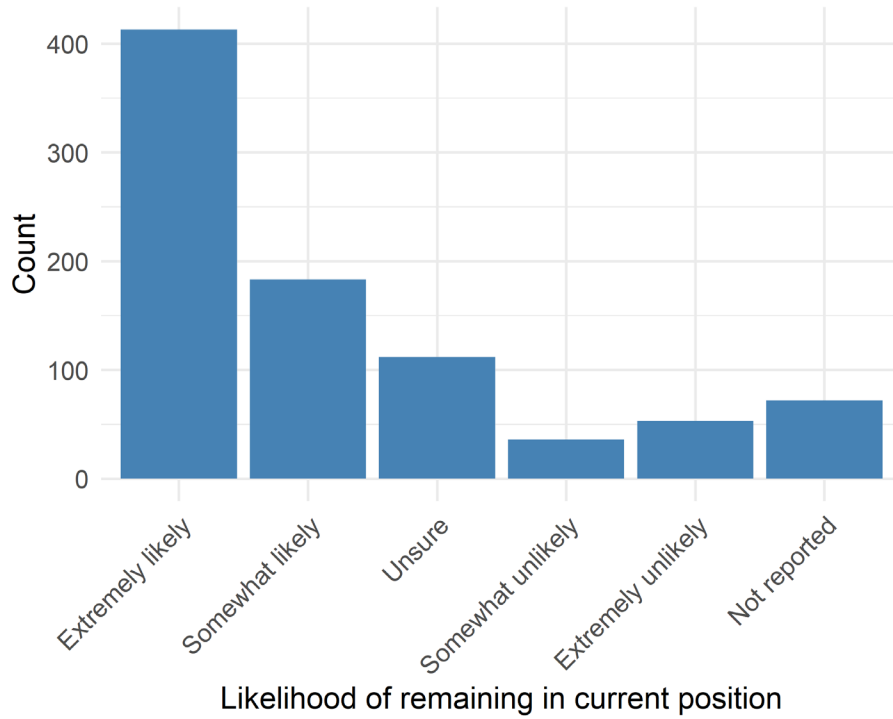


Figure 10. Reported likelihood of remaining in current position for next three years ($n=798$).

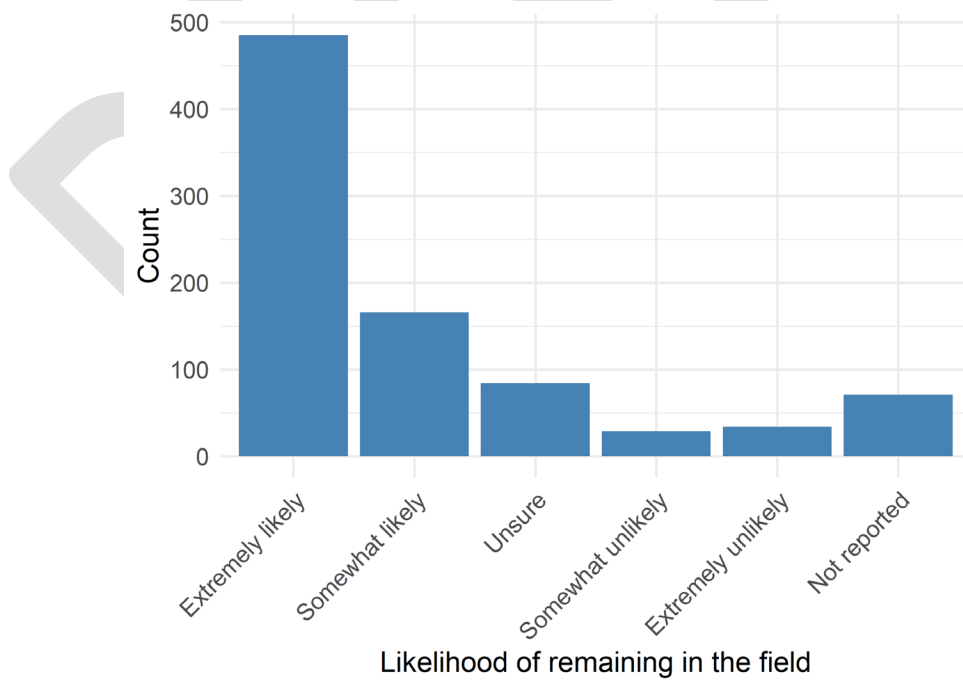


Figure 11. Reported likelihood of remaining in the field for next three years ($n=797$).

Open ended feedback. Participants provided extensive comments about their experience in Montana’s early childhood workforce in the open-ended question at the end of the survey. Responses were analyzed and coded by theme by each member of the research team to ensure reliability of data, and several common themes emerged, including education, scholarships, pay, joy, the Practitioner Registry, and benefits.

Figure 12 shows these themes.

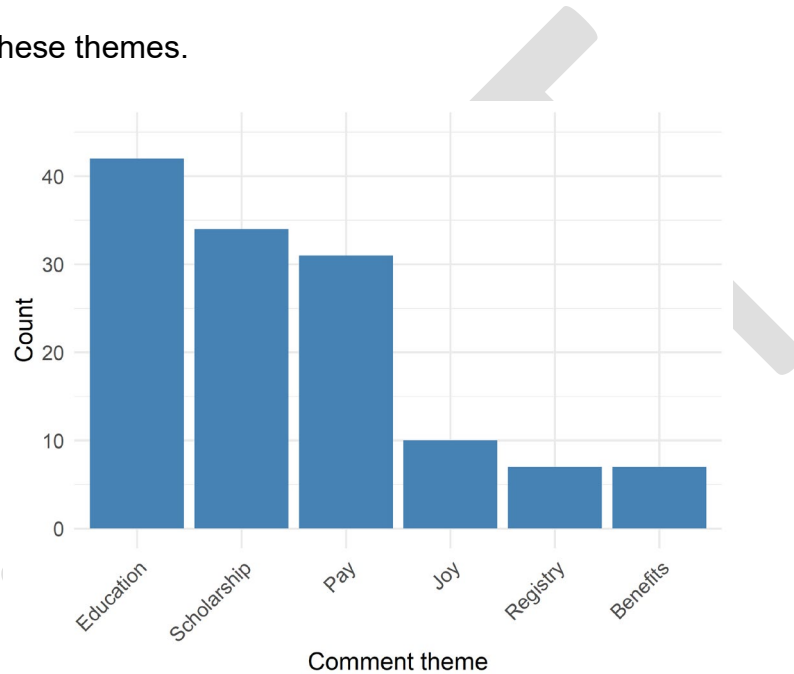


Figure 12. Open-ended comment themes ($n=158$).

Focus Group Results

Eight survey participants who had received financial assistance through the Montana Preschool Development Grant provided insight about their experience in Montana’s early childhood workforce by engaging in one of two focus groups held in February 2020. Because education was the most prominent theme of the open-ended feedback gathered in the survey, specific questions about attainment of higher education degrees were included in the focus groups. Additionally, participant insight about entry into the field, impact of incentives, and ongoing professional goals provided

a deeper understanding of this specific sector of the workforce and gave insight into motivation to stay in the field. Although focus group participant identities are kept anonymous in this report, demographic data was obtained by matching identities to Practitioner Registry data.

The eight focus group participants came from eight different counties in Montana, with half residing in larger cities, and half from smaller towns. There was also representation from five of Montana's seven Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) regions. All participants were Caucasian and non-Hispanic. An attempt was made to include a more racially and ethnically diverse group, however any eligible and willing participants were unable to participate. Ages of the focus group participants ranged from 29 to 53, with an average age of 39. Age ranges are displayed in Figure 13. The average number of years participants had been working in the field was 12, with a range from 6 to 25 years.

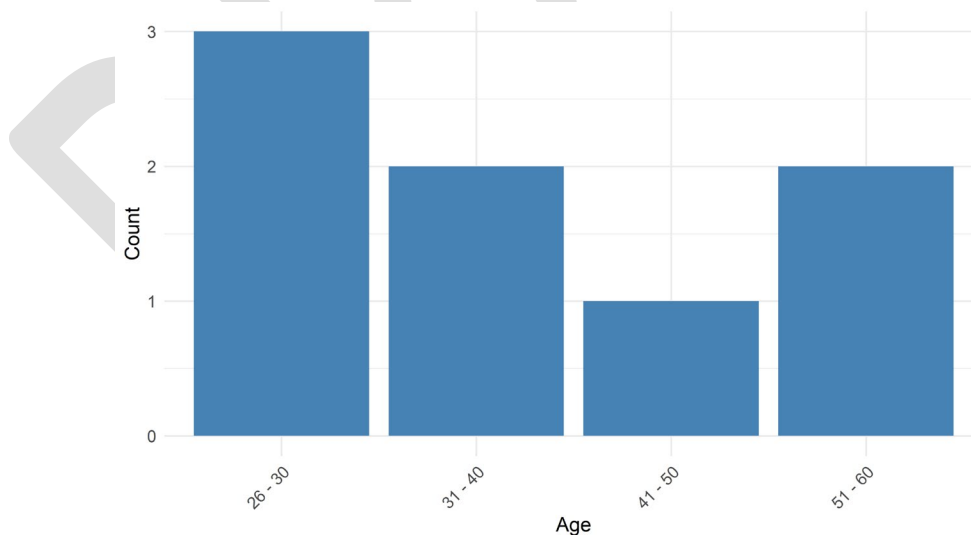


Figure 13. Focus group participants by age range ($n=8$).

Entry into the field of early childhood education. Each participant told a unique story about their path to the profession, representing a wide variety of

experience. Of the eight focus group participants, six talked about becoming a parent as a catalyst for entering the early childhood workforce. The struggle to find quality care led four participants to start their own early care and education programs.

Impact of incentives to attain higher education degrees. Participants cited the importance of higher education and the opportunity for financial support as motivation to obtain a P3 or master's degree. Prior to receiving a financial assistance award, two participants had not completed a higher education degree, one had an associate degree in early childhood, and five had bachelor's degrees. Among the bachelor's degrees, two were in related fields (e.g. Elementary Education), and three were in unrelated fields (e.g. Art).

Previous bachelor's degrees in both related or unrelated fields, such as elementary education or art, did not prevent three participants from pursuing and completing a second bachelor's or even graduate level degrees in early childhood, however one participant explained "I wouldn't have attempted it [without the assistance]." Another comment was "financial assistance helped formalize my commitment to the field." Another participant expressed gratitude for the financial support, but also explained that she "can be there for parents, for children. That's why I go to school." This same participant is thinking of pursuing a specialized degree to provide targeted support for struggling learners.

Over the course of the PDG Leadership and Financial Assistance program, the eight focus group participants received an average of \$8,300 in funding, with a range of \$5,000-\$13,000, and completed an average of 48 college credits, with a range of 36 to 70. In addition to the PDG Leadership and Financial Assistance program, which

provided full tuition and fees, participants also talked about the many other incentives they have received to complete or continue their education. Five of the participants had previously received the Professional Development Incentive Award for Higher Education (PDIA-HE), which provides a set amount of assistance per semester based on the number of early childhood credits earned. Two participants also completed the Montana Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program (MECAP), an incentive program that provides on-the-job training with the support of a mentor as well as college-level classroom instruction. One participant started her educational career with an associate degree as the end goal, but went on to complete her bachelor's degree and then became an apprenticeship sponsor.

In addition to these opportunities, half of the participants completed the Montana Preschool Certification, and three-quarters completed the Montana Infant/Toddler Certification, both 60-hour courses offered through the state's CCR&R network, that can be taken for college credit and come with a \$500 incentive. Focus group participants shared their interest in more financial support towards achieving a higher education such as a service payback or additional scholarship opportunities to help them complete their degrees.

Ongoing professional goals. There was clear voice about the passion for early childhood education and the commitment to young children and their families throughout the focus groups. One participant spoke about her role in a small Montana community, explaining about children that she got to “start them off” and “see them grow up.” This joy has kept her in the field. Another participant also spoke about her commitment to the community, explaining that she holds high standards in her program

because she wants to provide for the community. Her next professional goal is to “advocate for quality care and turn this into a profession.” Similarly, another participant sees herself leaving teaching for a leadership position to advocate for publicly funded pre-K, explaining “this is a really important time to solve community problems.” The theme of leadership and advocacy was summed up by one participant who wants to “venture into bigger things” by taking a more active role in state boards and becoming a conference presenter.

Discussion and Recommendations

In this study, new insight was gained about Montana’s early childhood workforce, including information about age, role, education, wages, motivation to stay in the early childhood field, and impact of financial incentives. Several interesting conclusions and suggestions for further research are highlighted in the sections below.

Age. Although the age ranges reported by survey and focus group participants suggested a wide range of results, a comparison to data from all Early Childhood Project Practitioner Registry participants is necessary to fully understand trends in age in the early childhood workforce. Establishing consistent age ranges among other agencies that collect information about the workforce would also strengthen the data. For example, the United States Department of Labor reports labor force statistics using specific age ranges that differ from those used in the survey reported here. It is recommended to use the Department of Labor ranges in the next early childhood workforce survey.

Role. As previously reported, almost 16% of survey respondents ($n=131$) selected “other” as their role type. Within the 31 - 40 years old age range, 15% of

respondents ($n=33$) indicated different role types and professional responsibilities, ranging from caregiver to mental health consultant to elementary school teacher. This suggests that many early childhood professionals contribute to the workforce and provide services to children and families in unique ways, beyond the categorizations provided in the survey. Among focus group participants, a variety of typical programs and roles were represented, such as center director, group childcare owner, and head start teacher, but also ranged from undergraduate student completing her student teaching to a community college faculty member, indicating that access to higher education and degree attainment provides different opportunities for career advancement throughout different stages of professional growth.

A variety of “other” role types reported on the survey suggests inconsistencies among agencies and organizations across the state that employ early childhood professionals. For example, the Montana Early Childhood Project Practitioner Registry uses the role types “early childhood teacher,” “assistant teacher,” and “director/owner.” Similarly, Montana Child Care Licensing uses the role types early childhood lead teacher, assistant teacher, and director, reflecting recent changes to licensing rule. However, some data tracking systems in Montana continue to use the word “caregiver” to refer to early childhood professionals employed by early care and education programs. It is recommended that all early childhood systems use consistent language and titles, such as early childhood educator, that are aligned to NAEYC’s *Power to the Profession* to advocate for and professionalize the field of early childhood education.

Beyond direct care roles, and to acknowledge the many different roles within early childhood systems across Montana, a recommendation is to change the wording

of Practitioner Registry to Early Childhood Workforce Registry. This would capture the many roles of the early childhood workforce and broaden the categories of employment to include all individuals working with young children and their families. Suggested role categories are detailed in Table 3.

Role category	Position types
Leadership and Management	Director / Assistant
	Owner
	Program Administrator / Assistant
	Education Manager
	Education Coordinator
Early Childhood Educator	Teacher / Educator
	Lead Teacher
	Assistant Teacher
	Aide / Student Aide
	Substitute
Family Support	Home Visitor
	Parent Educator
	Family Advocate
Professional Development	PDS
Resource and Referral	STARS Consultant
	Pyramid Model Coach
Special Education and Exceptional Learners	Related Service Providers
	SLP / OT / PT
	Paraeducator
	Instructional Assistant
	Support Staff
Health Services	Health Specialist
	Health and Nutrition Coordinator
	Health Manager

Table 3. Suggested role categories and position types.

Role by age. Among survey participants under age 20, 21% (n=3) reported that they are student aides helping lead teachers. This suggests that a portion of the workforce might be enrolled in higher education and is employed by an early care and

education program, perhaps on a college campus. As the workforce gets older, age somewhat predicts moving into roles with greater management responsibility, such as taking on a director or administrative role. This also has implication for wage and salary, as management positions earn more money than teaching roles. Focus group data further supports this claim, as participants with the most years of experience held higher level positions.

Education. An analysis of education attainment among survey participants at various ages and within different role types revealed trends and characteristics about Montana’s early childhood workforce. Survey data, shown in Figure 14 and Figure 15, suggests that high school and bachelor’s degree attainment were fairly evenly split in each age range. Master’s degrees became less prevalent as age increased, and bachelor’s degrees were most commonly associated with director/owners and lead teachers.

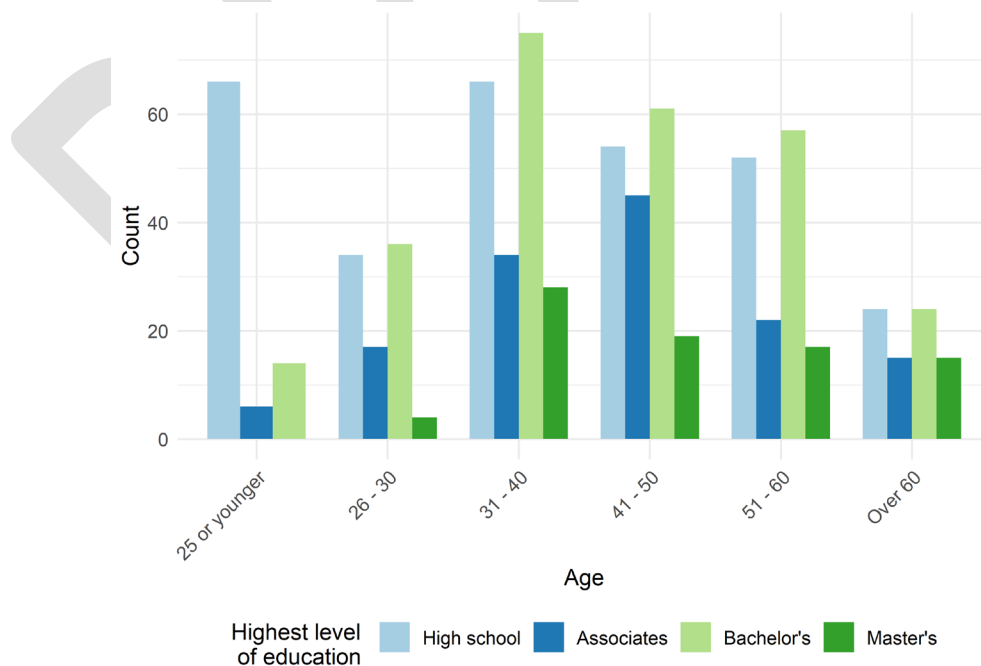


Figure 14. Education levels by age (n=785).

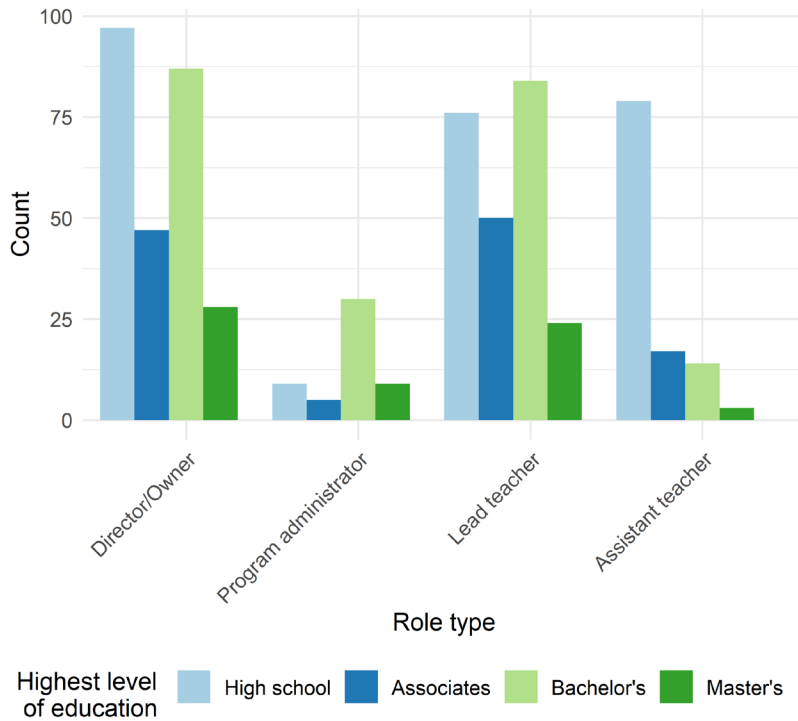


Figure 15. Education levels by role type ($n=659$).

Interestingly, focus group participants provided some negative sentiment about the impact of their education and cited some of the challenges to completing a degree. One respondent explained that “the coursework wasn’t groundbreaking” and another shared that she hasn’t “received a lot of benefit from my education.” Follow up questions were not asked to better understand the kinds of benefits that were anticipated, but one participant explained that “professionally, I am still in the same position,” suggesting that perhaps she expected to achieve a higher-ranking position in her place of employment. One participant spoke about the “hoops to jump through” to obtain her teaching credential, explaining that, in particular, student teaching was very difficult to complete while also trying to earn an income. She suggested, and the researchers agreed, that financial incentives are crucial to a teacher candidates’ ability to ensure financial stability while finishing a teaching endorsement.

Career Path. In Montana, education attainment is verified by the Early Childhood Project on the Practitioner Registry, and recognized on the Career Path, included in the appendix. The Career Path begins at Level 1, indicating a high school diploma with fewer than 60 hours of early childhood training. The highest level of the Career Path is Level 10, achieved by completion of a doctoral degree. Alignment of degree completion to the Career Path enables Registry participants to better understand and clearly see the ways their progress toward degree attainment could provide recognition and advancement in their professional career. The eight focus group participants experienced changes in their steps on the Career Path as outlined in Figure 16 which documents their progression from the date they first applied for financial assistance to the date of publication. To date, they are all current on the registry.

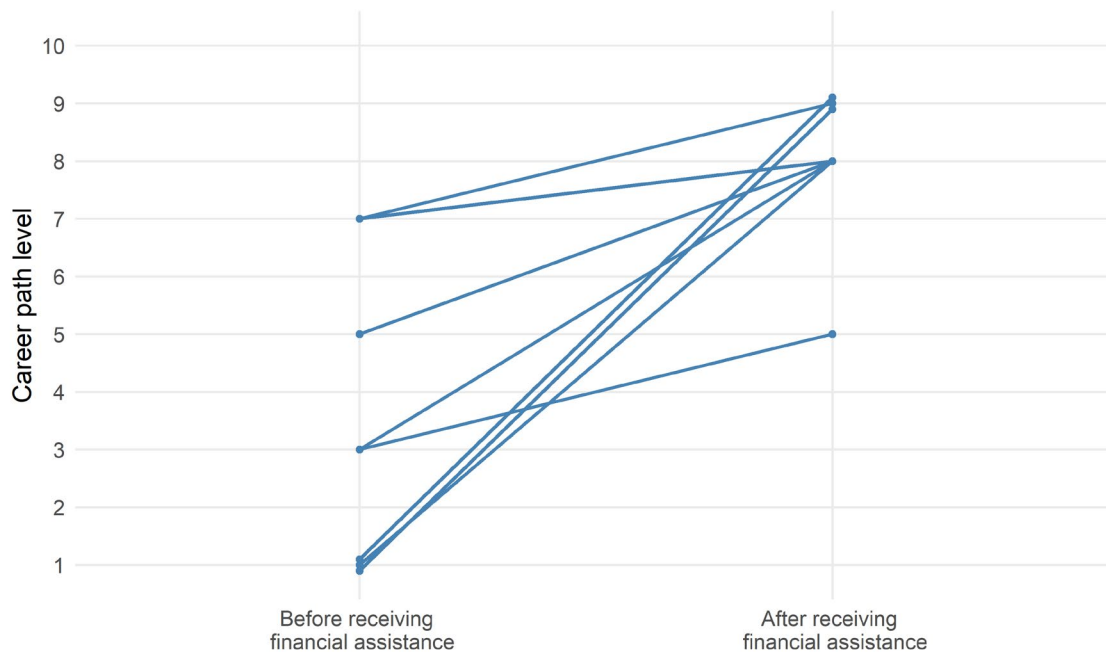


Figure 16. Career path level of focus group participants prior to receiving financial assistance awards vs. after receiving financial assistance awards ($n=8$).

Wages. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment reported that “teaching in early care and education (ECE) programs is one of the lowest-paid occupations in the United States” (Whitebook, 2018, p. 1). In other fields, salary and wages can be indicative of the value of work completed, but chronic low wages persist despite the value placed on early childhood education. One focus group participant revealed that “families view me as more professional but I’m not paid more.” Open ended comments on the survey also revealed strong themes about pay, following comments about education and scholarship. One participant noted, “I love the field of Early Childhood and want to stay in this field, but I am having a hard time finding a job that can pay me a living wage and includes benefits.”

In this study, wages were reported either hourly, monthly, or annually. Curiously, nearly 14% of survey respondents ($n=120$) did not provide wage or salary information on the survey. Some program owners explained in the open-ended comments that they do not earn reportable wages, which suggests a need for more professional development about business practices, including tax credits, income reporting, and recognizing financial gain for household expenses that are covered by revenue generated by tuition.

A limitation to the study results was discovered regarding calculation of average earnings. The researches did not parse out full time or part time employment when participants reported their salary instead of hourly wages, therefore, calculations about average earnings may not be accurate. A recommendation for further research is to determine number of hours worked to get a clearer picture of wages. This limitation is consistent with a recent Montana Department of Labor and Industry (DLI) report

(Watson, 2019) about earnings for the early care and education workforce. In the DLI report, wage reporting was focused to childcare licensing role types, which are one subset of roles reported in the current study. In the current study and the DLI report, compensation seems to be tied to professional role (i.e. managers are paid more than assistant teachers), but a clearer alignment of pay to the Montana Career Path might help establish pay scales and guidance for employers seeking to improve compensation. However, the career path may need to be amended based on the suggestions of different role type categories for the Early Childhood Workforce Registry.

Motivation to stay in the field. Survey participants were asked about their likelihood to stay in the early childhood profession and the importance of wage, benefits, personal fulfillment, and opportunities for growth in their career planning. A closer analysis of these motivators is needed to further understand perceptions of Montana's early childhood workforce. Continued analysis and reporting of the qualitative data obtained through the open-ended question on the survey could continue to add to the understanding of Montana's early childhood workforce. Among focus group participants, there was clear sentiment regarding passion for young children and families. The motivation to stay in the field seemed most focused on making a difference in the community.

Conclusion

Early childhood education is a valuable profession, but it is fraught with compensation disparity and barriers to the pursuit and attainment of higher education degrees. Wages must reflect the education, knowledge, and commitment of professionals who support young children and their families. Degree attainment,

coupled with ongoing professional development and mentoring, can ensure the delivery of high-quality early care and education.

Investment in the early childhood workforce, in Montana and beyond, requires a keen understanding of how individuals come into the profession and why they stay. In this study, this understanding was gained regarding Montana's early childhood workforce. Recommendations to further support recruitment and retention efforts resulted from survey and focus group data analysis that revealed some gaps in data collection. Because the Practitioner Registry does not require wage reporting, but does require and verify education, one idea is to utilize Department of Labor income data to get an accurate account of earnings based on reported job category. There is also a need to change the name of the Practitioner Registry to the Early Childhood Workforce Registry to best represent the range of professionals who support young children and their families in a variety of ways. Revised professional role categories must find their place on the Career Path to enable individuals to clearly understand their advancement in the early childhood profession. The Career Path could also indicate financial incentives for access to and attainment of degrees as well as longevity awards. Start-up grants and mentorship opportunities might continue to recognize early childhood professionals as an essential component to the health and strength of our communities. Through the study of the early childhood workforce and early childhood teacher preparation, stakeholders such as institutes of higher education, as well as public and private schools, can respond with opportunities that encourage early childhood teachers to grow and stay in the profession, creating quality and continuity for our youngest children.

References

- NAEYC. (2020, May 20). *A state-by-state look at the ongoing effects of the pandemic on child care*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/topics/ongoing_effect_of_pandemic.naeyc_state_by_state.pdf
- NAEYC. (2020, March). *Unifying framework for the early childhood education profession*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. <http://powertotheprofession.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Power-to-Profession-Framework-03312020-web.pdf>
- National Research Council. (2015.) *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>.
- Sochet. L. (2019, March). *The child care crisis is keeping women out of the workforce*. Center for American Progress. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/03/19103744/ECPP-ChildCare-Crisis-report-2.pdf>
- Whitebook, M., McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., & Edwards, B. (2018). *Early Childhood Workforce Index – 2018*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from <http://cscce.berkeley.edu/topic/early-childhood-workforce-index/2018/>.