

# **Using Research to Improve Outcomes for Young Children:**

## **A Call for Action**

### *Final Report of the Wingspread Conference*

**September 18-20, 2007**

#### **Context and Background**

In response to concerns about the limited influence research has had on early childhood (EC) programs and practices the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) conducted a small multidisciplinary conference at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The primary goal of the conference was to develop a set of action-oriented recommendations that would advance the field of early childhood and improve the outcomes for young children, especially children living in the most vulnerable of circumstances.

Wingspread marked the first time these two national organizations convened in a joint-effort to challenge the EC field. Their motivation stemmed from the awareness that in order to improve the outcomes for *all* children action must be taken to ensure research-based knowledge is put into usable formats for classroom teachers. The Johnson Foundation also recognized the extreme importance of this goal and, after a competitive evaluation process, supported the organizations' proposal. Approximately 40 experts (see Appendix A) in the field of EC, child development, and knowledge utilization<sup>1</sup> convened to participate in a dynamic exchange of ideas and information centered on strengthening the link between EC research and practice.

#### **Desired Conference Outcomes**

The Wingspread conference was intended to produce the following results:

- Specify the challenges and opportunities in the use of high quality research in the EC field
- Identify potentially effective approaches to translate research into effective classroom practices and policies in EC education
- Develop potentially effective strategies to increase the number and quality of faculty and graduate students in EC education
- Identify the essential elements for formulating a national research agenda on EC education practices
- Create an action plan with timeline and possible sources of support to put these desired outcomes into practice

## **The Wingspread Process**

The conference format consisted of both small and large group discussions. Catalyst panels proposed topics for fellow participants to consider prior to small group discussions. There were three panels, each consisting of several presentations by EC and knowledge utilization experts. Small groups were divided according to five areas: (1) building capacity to conduct and support practice-and-policy relevant research; (2) making research a part of practitioners' "toolkits;" (3) bringing research to bear more effectively on policy; (4) building the capacity of current and future faculty to understand and use research in their teachings; (5) creating partnerships in the service of knowledge utilization. Following small groups, a large group discussion took place in which all Wingspread participants convened, deliberated, and synthesized their small group recommendations.

### **Catalyst Panels**

The first catalyst panel (see Appendix B) was titled, "*Why Are We Here? Early Childhood Perspectives on the Importance and Challenges of Knowledge Utilization.*" Panelists raised important issues regarding the political versus empirical influence on the field of EC education (the former being stronger than the latter), the lack of research on the development of "good" teachers and their daily practices, and the importance of knowledge utilization. They discussed how differences across state education policies have fragmented current understanding of EC development and education. Researchers were advised to address the lack of knowledge about the decision-making processes of teachers "in the moment" and were challenged to make research more applicable to practitioners' realities. Moreover, issues regarding the paucity and lack of cultural and linguistic diversity among EC education teachers were raised, as was the problem of measures that identify general trends and ignore within group variability. Considering that cultural values play an important role in how both teachers and children develop, this last issue was particularly emphasized.

The second catalyst panel (see Appendix B) was titled "*Beyond the Early Childhood Field: Multiple Perspectives on Using Knowledge.*" The importance of evidence-based practice and the role of purveyors<sup>2</sup> in implementing research at multiple levels were stressed by this panel. It was cautioned, however, that evidence-based practice should not be equated with research-based practice due to the limited research available currently for specific practice questions. Instead, evidence-based practice was described as an integration and decision-making process that included combining the best available research evidence with family and professional wisdom and values<sup>3</sup>. The suggestion was offered that researchers should shift their study focus from "outcomes" to "process" in order to make implementation more feasible.

The third and final catalyst panel (see Appendix B) was titled "*Taking Action and Building the Capacity Needed to Generate and Use Knowledge: Promising Practices*" and focused on practical and innovative ways to strengthen the bridge between EC research and practice. Researchers were persuaded to apply the scholarship on knowledge

transfer and utilization to the EC field. It was explained that the various processes (i.e., social, technical, economical, political) detailed in the knowledge utilization framework were important to consider when translating both basic and applied EC research into practice. Additionally, practitioners were asked to develop a culture of inquiry within the teaching profession. It was believed that self-inquiry skills should be included in both pre-and in-service training in order to improve “in-the-moment” teaching and to highlight the point that practitioners and researchers are not mutually exclusive professions. Lastly, both researchers and practitioners were recommended to use technology as a means to increase their interaction. A presentation on the *Harvard Family Research Project* exemplified this point. This project successfully implemented an on-line opportunity for EC researchers and practitioners to communicate on research findings related to topics of general interest.

The final commentary (see Appendix B) of the conference emphasized the importance of policy and how it is arguably the most effective vehicle in making a connection between research and practice. The EC field was encouraged to think of itself as policy making in the sense that it provides a conduit for bringing research to practice.

### **Recommendation Themes**

The 25 action-recommendations (see Appendix C) produced at Wingspread were divided according to five overarching themes:

- A. **Develop Infrastructures that Require Partnering.** Strong arguments were made for the creation of new structures. Federal grants or other resources, for example, could be used as incentives to ensure partnerships between researchers and practitioners. Also, legislative initiatives with a funded research component should be identified.

Wingspread Recommendations:

- Formulate a plan and proposal to federal agencies (e.g., IES, NIH) that encourages funding of research on the practice and implementation of ECE. Identify legislative initiatives where funding a research component should be a priority.
  - Create early learning coalitions (partnerships between researchers and practitioners) to bring evidence, people, and resources together in a way that fosters reciprocity and mutual benefit. Financial resources should be made available through partnerships.
  - Build resources, community networks, and state and local policy mechanisms and infrastructures, to facilitate knowledge transfer for practitioners and policymakers. *Research Connections* and *The California Institute of Mental Health* serve as excellent examples.
- B. **Increase Knowledge Base and Implementation.** The need was highlighted for researchers to develop a stronger base on effective teaching strategies in the

classroom, especially as it applies to “in the moment” teaching decisions and high-risk children. Once that base is established, the EC field could benefit from knowledge utilization advances from other disciplines to effectively transfer knowledge from research to practice and families.

Wingspread Recommendations:

- Increase outlets for translational/implementation research in ECE.
  - Incentivize higher education institutions to generate knowledge regarding what makes good teachers and how we produce them.
  - Increase focus and research on infrastructure (e.g., what quality is needed, wages needed, what do we need to keep and get *good* teachers). Invite professionals who understand logic models and business plans to participate in meetings with policymakers and researchers to illuminate strategies that will reach positive child outcomes. Consolidate, think through, and create a planning process.
- C. **Focus on Professional Development.** The practitioner’s role in research was considered critical. It was suggested that involvement in research should begin *early* among student teachers in order to raise their level of *self-inquiry* in the classroom and sustain it over time. In addition, issues were addressed relating to the lack in number, quality, and diversity of faculty committed to generating and using knowledge about the development and learning of the most vulnerable children. Recruitment of ethnic minority graduate students who are more likely to ensure that culturally sensitive research questions are asked was emphasized.

Wingspread Recommendations:

- Emphasize *inquiry* as the foundation for both pre-and in-service education. Inquiry-based professional preparation should include collaborative learning communities, early involvement in action research, and innovative use of technological resources.
  - Develop young scholar award programs that fund student training and research.
  - Create and evaluate a sustainable system of faculty professional development that incorporates adult learning principals and evidence-based practices for improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children.
  - Convene teacher preparation associations (e.g., AACTE) to brainstorm strategies that will increase the total number of future teacher educators, faculty, and researchers, especially from ethnically diverse backgrounds.
- D. **Encourage Collaboration among Existing Institutions.** Existing EC organizations with complementary emphases (e.g., NAEYC and SRCD) should combine their strengths to communicate the link between practice and research. In addition, state and local delivery systems are encouraged to further expand data collection capacity, allowing researchers and administrators to perform longitudinal analyses.

Wingspread Recommendations:

- NAEYC/SRCD will commission and convene a small group of senior investigators who will conduct research in EC. The work of this group will include the implementation and basic science to design, fund, and plan the rollout/implementation of an infrastructure that builds research capacity in EC.
  - Identify, describe, document, and analyze the most promising examples of where researchers and practitioners have informed each other's work.
  - Convene an ongoing work group made up of researchers and representatives from major practitioner-focused organizations to develop strategies that facilitate collaboration.
  - Establish data collection capacity across state and local delivery systems, and improve the quality and accessibility of national data bases in terms of information on young children, to provide data (that allows longitudinal analyses) for researchers and administrators.
  - Encourage professional associations and researchers to use their resources and influence to emphasize a new model of action-oriented research, constructed by communities and researchers, to develop strategies that improve achievement and expectations for children placed at-risk.
  - Promote forums to talk about children who need additional or unique resources to make it onto a trajectory for success.
  - Use existing structures to motivate research-to-practice dialogue (e.g., *Research Connections*, *SRCD Community of Common Interest*).
  - Tap into leverage points; develop a "Work Force Development Plan" to promote effective practice. Strategies may include, for example, engaging philanthropic communities, interfacing with ethnically diverse organizations, and incorporating coaches and mentors.
- E. **Strengthen Communication.** The use of the media as a *bridge* between researchers and practitioners was stressed. Social marketing campaigns should be enacted to communicate the field's collective knowledge and wisdom about child development to practitioners and families. The use of diverse media outlets was proposed as a vehicle for framing culturally appropriate information for home-based providers and parents.

Wingspread Recommendations:

- Collaborate and find funding to implement a social marketing campaign that communicates the field's collective knowledge and wisdom about child development to practitioners and families.
- Facilitate dialogue among state and local administrators about effective and promising practices for serving young children.
- Frame research findings in ways that can be used by policymakers. Answer the "so what" question.
- Use diverse media outlets to frame culturally appropriate information for home based providers and parents.

- Use media in forthcoming Presidential political campaigns to focus on quality.

## **Conclusion**

At Wingspread, NAEYC and SRCD convened both international and national experts in early childhood research, practice, and policy to work collaboratively and develop a set of 25 action-oriented recommendations for the field of EC. A major contributor to the success of Wingspread stemmed from the information presented by invited knowledge utilization and mobilization experts, who reminded early childhood experts throughout the conference to consider the practical translation and implications of their research.

Several initiatives based on the proposed recommendations have been enacted since Wingspread. For example, the recommendations have inspired all of the themes and formats of NAEYC's Office of Applied Research's national symposiums, as well as the Plenary and Key Note address at NAEYC's National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development. Recommendations on knowledge utilization, in particular, influenced the framing of revisions for NAEYC's Conceptual Framework on Professional Development and Teacher Preparation Standards.

## **Next Steps**

Wingspread participants were propelled by the urgency of improving practices to support development and learning of young children, especially children placed most at risk for poor outcomes. The conference concluded that (1) considerable infrastructure and knowledge delivery changes would be required to connect research and practice, and (2) NAEYC and SRCD would need to work together and involve others to fulfill the recommendations.

Immediate next steps to further this process include:

- Disseminate the final Wingspread report to a variety of audiences
- Develop an Action Plan, timeline, and possible sources of support to achieve the recommendations
- Provide Wingspread report, recommendations, and updates on NAEYC's website: [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)

## APPENDIX A

### *Wingspread Participants and Affiliations*

Name	Position/Affiliation
Ronald G. Barr	Professor; Department of Pediatrics; Child and Family Research Institute; University of British Columbia
Karen Blase	Research Professor; National Implementation Research Network; University of South Florida
Virginia Buysse	Senior Scientist; FPG Child Development Institute; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Virginia Casper	Graduate Faculty; Graduate School of Education; Bank Street College of Education
Richard M. Clifford	Senior Scientist; FPG Child Development Institute; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Moncrieff Cochran	Professor and Director; Early Childhood Program; Cornell University
Lori Connors-Tadros	Literacy and Early Learning Coordinator; National Child Care Information Center
Carol E. Cople	Director; Publications and Initiatives in Educational Practices; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Josué Cruz, Jr.	Chief Executive Officer and President; Council for Professional Recognition
Jerlean Daniel	Deputy Executive Director; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Carol Brunson Day	President; National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI)
Chip Donohue	Director; Center for Early Childhood Professional Development and Leadership; School of Continuing Education; University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Walter Gilliam	Assistant Professor of Child Psychiatry and Psychology; Director; The Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy Child Study Center; School of Medicine; Yale University
Mark R. Ginsberg	Executive Director; National Association for the Education of Young Children

Linda C. Halgunseth	(NAEYC) Research Coordinator; Office of Applied Research; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Aletha C. Huston	Professor of Child Development; Department of Human Ecology; Division of Human Development and Family Services; University of Texas at Austin
Marilou Hyson	Affiliate Faculty; Applied Developmental Psychology; George Mason University; Senior Consultant; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Sharon Lynn Kagan	Professor Adjunct; Yale University's Child Study Center; Co-Director; National Center for Children and Families; Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy and Associate Dean
Eric Karolak	Executive Director; Early Care and Education Consortium
Naomi Karp	Consultant, Early Education
Jane Knitzer	Executive Director; National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP)
Derry Koralek	Journal Editor; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Joan Lessen-Firestone	Director; Early Childhood Programs; Oakland Regional Educational Service Agency
Peter Levesque	Principal; Knowledge Mobilization Works!
M. Elena Lopez	Senior Program Officer; The Picower Foundation
Jeanne C. Marsh	George Herbert Jones Professor and Dean; School of Social Service Administration; University of Chicago
Mary Ann McCabe	Director; Office for Policy and Communications; Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD)
Robert B. McCall	Professor and Co-Director; Office of Child Development; School of Education; University of Pittsburgh
Anne Mitchell	President; Early Childhood Policy Research
Victoria Molfese	Professor and Ashland/Nystrand Chair in Early Childhood Education; Department of Teaching and Learning; Early Childhood

Robert Pianta	Research Center; University of Louisville Dean; Curry School of Education; University of Virginia
Susan D. Russell Frances O'Connell Rust	President; Child Care Services Association Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs; Dean of Faculty; Erikson Institute
Jason Sachs	Director; Early Childhood Programs; Boston Public Schools
Arnold J. Sameroff	Professor of Psychology; Center for Human Growth and Development; University of Michigan
Elaine Surbeck	Professor and Associate Dean; Mary Lou Fulton College of Education; Arizona State University
Maurice Sykes	Early Childhood Leadership Institute; University of the District of Columbia
Adam Winsler	Professor; Applied Developmental Psychology; Department of Psychology; George Mason University
Martha Zaslow	Vice President for Research; Senior Program Area Director; Child Trends

## APPENDIX B

### *Catalyst Panels*

Catalyst Panel	Title of Panel	Moderator	Panelists
1	<i>Why Are We Here? Early Childhood Perspectives on the Importance and Challenges of Knowledge Utilization</i>	Anne Mitchell	Josué Cruz, Dick Clifford, Bob Pianta, and Lynn Kagan
2	<i>Beyond the Early Childhood Field: Multiple Perspectives on Using Knowledge</i>	Ronald Barr	Karen Blase, Virginia Buysse, Jeanne Marsh, and Peter Levesque
3	<i>Taking Action and Building the Capacity Needed to Generate and Use Knowledge: Promising Practices</i>	Marilou Hyson	Chip Donohue, M. Elena Lopez, Mary Ann McCabe, Victoria Molfese, and Frances O'Connell Rust

### *Commentaries*

Aletha Huston

Final Commentary

## APPENDIX C

### *Original 25 Recommendations to Field of Early Childhood*

*Developed September 18-20, 2007*

1. Formulate a plan and proposal to federal agencies (e.g., IES, NIH) that encourages funding of research on the practice and implementation of ECE. Identify legislative initiatives where funding a research component should be a priority.
2. NAEYC/SRCD will commission and convene a small group of senior investigators who will conduct research in EC. The work of this group will include the implementation and basic science to design, fund, and plan the rollout/implementation of an infrastructure that builds research capacity in EC.
3. Increase outlets for translational/implementation research in ECE.
4. Identify, describe, document, and analyze the most promising examples of where researchers and practitioners have informed each other's work.
5. Convene an ongoing work group made up of researchers and representatives from major practitioner-focused organizations to develop strategies that facilitate collaboration.
6. Collaborate and find funding to implement a social marketing campaign that communicates the field's collective knowledge and wisdom about child development to practitioners and families.
7. Create early learning coalitions (partnerships between researchers and practitioners) to bring evidence, people, and resources together in a way that fosters reciprocity and mutual benefit. Financial resources should be made available through partnerships.
8. Develop 10 year strategic plan; strong emphasis on technology
9. Incentivize higher education institutions to generate knowledge regarding what makes good teachers and how we produce them.
10. Establish data collection capacity across state and local delivery systems, and improve the quality and accessibility of national data bases in terms of information on young children, to provide data (that allows longitudinal analyses) for researchers and administrators.
11. Facilitate dialogue among state and local administrators about effective and promising practices for serving young children.

12. Build resources, community networks, and state and local policy mechanisms and infrastructures, to facilitate knowledge transfer for practitioners and policymakers. *Research Connections* and *The California Institute of Mental Health* serve as excellent examples
13. Encourage professional associations and researchers to use their resources and influence to emphasize a new model of action-oriented research, constructed by communities and researchers, to develop strategies that improve achievement and expectations for children placed at-risk.
14. Promote forums to talk about children who need additional or unique resources to make it onto a trajectory for success.
15. Emphasize *inquiry* as the foundation for both pre-and in-service education. Inquiry-based professional preparation should include collaborative learning communities, early involvement in action research, and innovative use of technological resources.
16. Develop young scholar award programs that fund student training and research.
17. Create and evaluate a sustainable system of faculty professional development that incorporates adult learning principals and evidence-based practices for improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children.
18. Convene teacher development associations (e.g., AACTE) to brainstorm strategies that will increase the total number of future teacher educators, faculty, and researchers, especially from ethnically diverse populations.
19. Increase focus and research on infrastructure (e.g., what quality is needed, wages needed, what do we need to keep and get *good* teachers)
20. Frame research findings in ways that can be used by policymakers. Answer the “so what” question.
21. Invite professionals who understand logic models and business plans to participate in meetings with policymakers and researchers to illuminate strategies that will reach positive child outcomes. Consolidate, think through, and create a planning process.
22. Use existing structures to motivate research-to-practice dialogue (e.g., *Research Connections*, *SRCD Community of Interest*).
23. Tap into leverage points; develop a “Work Force Development Plan” to promote effective practice. Strategies may include, for example, engaging philanthropic communities, interfacing with ethnically diverse organizations, and incorporating coaches and mentors.

24. Use diverse media outlets to frame culturally appropriate information for home based providers and parents.

25. Use media in forthcoming Presidential political campaigns to focus on quality.

## Notes

1. In this context, knowledge utilization refers to implementing solid EC research findings into practice in order to improve outcomes for children. For more information on knowledge utilization or mobilization, see: Landry, R., Amara, N & Lamari, M. (2001). Climbing the ladder of research utilization. *Science Communication*, 22, 396-422; or, Graham, P.J., & Dickinson, H.D. (2007). Knowledge-system theory in society: Charting the growth of knowledge-system models over a decade, 1994-2003. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*, 58(14), 2372-2381.
2. Purveyor, in this context, refers to a source or supplier of EC knowledge or research.
3. For the definition of evidence-based practices used in this conference and for more information on evidence-based practices, refer to: Buysse, V. & Wesley, P. W. (2006). *Evidence-based practice in the early childhood field*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE Press