Early care and education is a hot policy issue. From the U.S. Capitol to state houses and city halls across the nation, policy makers are debating issues with important implications for young children’s early development and learning. In 2005 alone federal policy makers are expected to reauthorize special education, welfare reform, and Head Start legislation. Meanwhile, state legislators in Florida and Massachusetts, for example, have recently passed laws to expand preschool programs and improve the quality of early childhood services. Overall, enrollment in state preschool programs continues to rise nationwide, but access varies from state to state (Barnett et al. 2003).

In addition to new federal, state, and local initiatives, research projects evaluating the impact of public policies on children’s early development and learning are burgeoning. We are learning more and more about the benefits of high-quality early care and education for children. A new evaluation of state-funded prekindergarten in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for instance, found that four-year-olds enrolled in the program improved their cognitive and language skills, and the results were most marked for minority and disadvantaged participants (Gormley et al. 2004). Now we have almost four decades of longitudinal data on early intervention participants. High/Scope researchers have recently released findings showing that adults at age 40 who had participated in the Perry Preschool program had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than those who did not participate (Schweinhart et al. In press). In sum, early care and education is high on both policy and research agendas in the United States.

Early care and education policy leaders

Stakeholders involved in the early care and education field range broadly and now include a diversity of groups: governments, universities, advocates, professional associations, nonprofit organizations, and unions, among others. In the past many early childhood professionals worked on policy issues as one
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piece of their professional work, whereas today the scope and complexity of the field make it possible to devote one’s career fully to early care and education policy leadership.

Among many young professionals there is a strong interest in taking on leadership roles in early care and education policy; however, no clearly defined path exists to pursuing a career in this broad and diverse field. Early childhood professionals can develop careers in private, nonprofit, academic, and government settings. A career can begin with formal training or experiential learning through internships, fellowships, volunteer positions, or jobs. Positions in early care and education policy range from policy makers and their staff advisers who help shape policy at national, state, and local government levels to researchers who analyze the impact of policies on young children and use their findings to inform policy making. Many others involved in early care and education policy have direct experience with children as early childhood practitioners and administrators, while other leaders have emerged from roles in advocacy, public policy, or law.

Diverse career options are welcome, but they also can cause confusion and frustration and raise many questions. How does one become a leader in the field of early care and education policy? What type of training should be pursued? What are the ideal skills and competencies necessary to provide meaningful contributions to the field? To address these and other questions, we convened a panel of six current leaders in early care and education policy at the 2003 NAEYC Annual Conference. Policy leaders discussed their experiences, thoughts about the future of the field, and provided guidance for emerging policy leaders.

In this article we focus on four key questions: (1) What can we learn about current policy leadership roles? (2) What career pathways lead to these roles? (3) What are the key skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to the field of early care and education policy? and (4) What guidance do policy leaders offer to emerging leaders in early care and education policy? The Annual Conference panel members—Gina Adams, Dick Clifford, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Kristie Kauerz, Joan Lombardi, and Giselle Lundy-Ponce—generously share their experiences of working in the field of early care and education policy, and they provide guidance and advice for future leaders in this field.

Current policy leadership roles

The six presenters on the Annual Conference panel hold a range of positions in a variety of settings, but all share a commitment to early care and education policy. Their policy leadership experiences include service as federal, state, and local officials; university-based researchers; independent consultants; and analysts in think tanks, nonprofit associations, and a teacher’s union. During the roundtable, the policy leaders described their current work. The following summaries profile each leader’s role.

Gina Adams. As a researcher at the Urban Institute, Adams conducts a range of research projects, including studies of child care providers in the subsidy system, subsidy implementation, and interconnections between child care and welfare systems. In this work her priorities are twofold. First, everything has to be relevant to the real policy questions that make a difference in the early care and education field. Her second priority is that the research be directly accessible to those whom she sees as “doing real work”—practitioners.
Dick Clifford. As a researcher at a university-based research center, the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, Clifford works on a range of studies related to early childhood policies and program quality. He sums up his role by stating, “Basically, I do research; I study and write about kids and families.” He identifies the advantage in this position: the Institute is primarily grant funded, so he has a place where he can change his job every couple of years without having to move. This continuous learning feeds back into his work.

Sharon Lynn Kagan. As a professor of early childhood and family policy at Teachers College, Columbia University, and associate dean for policy, Kagan teaches classes, guides students’ dissertation work, codirects a policy research center, and charts a policy agenda for the college. In addition, she maintains regular contact with policy makers and colleagues in the early care and education field—talking with providers, consulting with state government officials, and working on issues with governors, chief state school officers, and early childhood educators. These field-based experiences fuel her efforts and inform her ability to take cutting-edge positions and to engage in diverse policy work nationally and internationally.

Kristie Kauerz. As director for early learning at the Education Commission of the States, Kauerz works with governors, state legislators, chief state school officers, and commissioners of higher education to inform early learning policy making across the 50 states. Her primary role is synthesizing and translating the substance of research and its policy implication for policy makers. Her aim is providing usable, clear data for people who are very busy and have many priorities.

Joan Lombardi. As director of the Children’s Project, Lombardi facilitates partnerships and innovative initiatives that she has forged with different organizations and foundations. The goal is to advocate for improvements in and expansion of early childhood development services, in the United States and around the globe. With her broad experience in and out of government, she plays a unique role in blending policy and practice, working across settings and age groups and reaching out to add new voices in support of early care and education policy change.

Giselle Lundy-Ponce. As a senior associate at the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Lundy-Ponce, works as a liaison between the AFT’s membership, its lobbyists, and the organization’s leadership. Her work includes the preparation of testimony and policy proposals for the organization’s lobbyists and leaders. She enjoys behind-the-scenes work, such as combing through legislation and educational research to identify the information needed by union lobbyists and leaders, Congress and state legislatures, and the AFT membership at large.

Pathways to leadership in early care and education policy

The six panelists with careers in early care and education policy followed different routes to the positions they hold today. Each person discussed the roles of serendipity, luck, and timing in the success of his or her career path. Adams discussed her switch to the child care division of Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) where she worked in 1989, just when Congress passed the Child

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Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). CDF was the main organization working on state implementation, and as Adams related, “I got to have a part in helping states across the country set up their subsidy programs, thinking about what is a good subsidy program. It was an incredibly lucky choice. I got to work with advocates and researchers and R&Rs [resource and referral organizations], and child care providers. Going all over the country, I got a very broad perspective. I worked on issues concerning licensing, child care, Head Start, and prekindergarten. Really, it was phenomenal training.”

Family or personal motivations were other influencing factors in the leaders’ careers. Kagan explained that her pathway began early as a child of parents who were social activists even before the civil rights movement. She said, “There was no hope but for me to become a teacher in the nation’s first Head Start Program.” Lombardi reflected on her father’s immigrant journey to the United States and the strong sense of family and work shared by her mother and father. As she put it, “This experience gives you a different perspective and a different sense of your responsibility to give back.”

A common pathway for these policy leaders was direct service work or teaching young children. Adams reported that she started out as a child care teacher and home visitor, which she said gave her “a clear passion about kids and an anger about injustice done to kids who did not get what they needed . . . [as well as a realization that direct service] was not the right path for me.” Kagan spent time as a Head Start teacher, a Head Start director, and an elementary school principal prior to focusing on policy work. She found these experiences essential, and said, “To be passionate about anything you have to have firsthand experience. You need to know what it is like to wake up on a snowy morning, call on eight different people to substitute in a Head Start classroom, and not be able to get them.”

Lombardi told of teaching Spanish a few doors down the hall from a kindergarten classroom. She said, “I was fascinated by what was going on in that room and realized that I wanted to work with young children, eventually becoming a Head Start teacher and later working in child care. I love little kids . . . and that has driven my passion to advocate for change.” Similarly, Clifford was a principal in an elementary school and became interested in organizational change and learning environments.

Beginning her career in human service programs, Lundy-Ponce worked with migrant farm workers on educational initiatives. She saw what she described as “unreal conditions for this country, similar to conditions I saw in my home country in Latin America.” After that work, she served as a vice principal in an alternative education program in a school that, she said, “took the kids that the regular schools didn’t want.” And then she became the director of an AmeriCorps program to help volunteers go into schools and set up programs. This work made her realize that she wanted “to do the same work, but on a systemic policy level.”

**Teaching experience or not?**

During the leaders’ discussion session at NAEYC’s Annual Conference, a question was posed: “How far can you get in the field without direct experience teaching young children?” Lombardi answered, “You can do a lot without teaching experience. However, my concern is that I see some people in Washington who don’t know early childhood, who have no experience working with children or in communities. When I see people who come directly out of policy programs, I tell them to take some time off and spend it with children and families. You can do great things without that experience, but you can be better
You have to be in touch with providers all the time. Those are the people who are going to give you a reality test and help you make your research and policy work relevant.

Academic training

Some of the six leaders emphasized their academic training as an important element of their career pathways. Adams and Lundy-Ponce both identified internships in early childhood policy that they held during their master’s programs in public policy as leading them to the early care and education policy path. Clifford discussed his diverse academic background, with a BS in physics and a PhD combining educational leadership and research with political science. He felt that these degrees had provided insight into his current work. The physics degree gave him strong training in the scientific method, while his doctoral program focused on what he called “the intersection between programs for children and research’s impact on what was happening in the world.”

Kagan highlighted the current debate among academics who are training people to work at the intersection of public policy and almost any other field. She reported, “One theory says you should be fully grounded in your own discipline and treat policy as an overlay. The other theory says it is really important to engage in meticulous study of social policy. My predilection is the former—knowing your field cold. There is nothing like having the confidence that experience and depth of perspective can really offer.”

Formative experiences

It is not surprising that each of the six policy leaders identified formative experiences of working in policy settings. Clifford described the value of taking a yearlong leave of absence to work in North Carolina’s state government. He said that he took this opportunity “to bring myself back to reality as well as to help establish a new division of child development and contribute to the design and implementation of Smart Start.” Kagan told a similar story of teaching at Yale and realizing that, as she described it, “I didn’t have any firsthand experience of what it was like to work with policy makers. So I made sure that I got a U.S. Senate Fellowship to get a firsthand experience and to bring it back.” At other points in her career, she also worked for the Connecticut State Department of Education and as director of the mayor’s office of early childhood education in New York City.

Kauerz entered the early childhood field as a staffer to then Governor Roy Romer of Colorado. Lundy-Ponce spent college summers interning in Washington, D.C., learning the legislative policy process. Lombardi reported on the
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formative experience of receiving a Health, Education, and Welfare (later renamed Health and Human Services) fellowship and working in the commissioner’s office for the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families during the late 1970s. She called this formative experience excellent preparation for other positions she eventually held in the agency some 15 years later when she joined the Clinton administration and became the first director of the Child Care Bureau.

What is interesting across the career pathways of these six leaders is not only the diversity of routes that led to their leadership in this field but the range of experiences each encountered along his or her own path. Kagan highlighted the value of this diversity: “I share these different roles to point out that I feel I have looked at this field from very different vantage points, both in terms of levels—local, state, national—and from different spheres—Head Start, child care, school-based programs. One of the things that has enabled me to bring slightly different perspectives is being well grounded in a variety of diverse experiences.”

Key skills and knowledge needed for leadership

On the panel “Making a Difference in Early Care and Education Policy,” leaders with more years of experience reached a consensus that the field has changed. Lombardi said, “It is not the field I came into. It is much more complicated. But the skills people need are a combination of practice, research, policy understanding, and ability to communicate.” Across all six leaders’ statements, there was agreement on the need to understand both the field of early care and education and public policy making. Adams remarked, “Number one is to have a knowledge of the realities of the field. . . . You must have some sense of whom you are trying to affect. You also have to have some understanding of the complexity of policy. Because if you don’t understand that, you will probably do some damage.”

Kauerz emphasized that you need to know the big picture: “Although it is essential to have specialists who know all there is to know about standards or who focus especially on universal pre-K or Head Start, it is also necessary to have people who see the big picture. To know Head Start, you need to know how it fits in with pre-K, K–12 education, and child care.” Lundy-Ponce echoed the need to understand both the early care and education field and world of politics and government. She said, “Immerse yourself in the field and in the academic research. Know how Congress works, how your state government works, who the lobbyists are, and other key players.”

Learn from outside fields and the world

The six leaders called for emerging early childhood leaders to learn more about policy issues affecting the field and to look at what’s happening in other fields and other nations to develop ideas, to grow, and to keep vibrant.

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interested in and with whom you can link up with and learn from.” He also
cautions, “Don’t emulate people you associate with, just learn from them and
then fit it into your own framework on how you are going to work in the world.”
This interdisciplinary approach includes seeking lessons from the challenges
and successes of policies and practices developed in other nations.

Network and build relationships

The panel of leaders emphasized the importance of networking and building
relationships, whether with mentors, teachers, or coworkers. Kauerz said, “It is
incredibly important in this field to make friends with those with whom you
need to work. Find common ground even though you may have lots of reasons
not to.” She talked too about the need to be a team player: “In the public policy
world, nothing gets accomplished single-handedly. Sometimes you are the one
who gets to make copies, other times you get to be the visionary leader. You
have to be comfortable with all those roles throughout each week and a
lifetime.”

Strong communication skills are crucial to being an effective early care and
education policy leader. Most of the panelists emphasized the importance of
written communication, being able to express thoughts clearly and succinctly.
Kauerz described this as “being able to say what’s important and what you
care about in a screen’s worth of text.” Lombardi described it as “controlling
the computer—knowing how to write if you want to make a difference.”

Many panel leaders discussed the need to take risks. Kagan said to “stick
your neck out,” while others talked of “stepping outside your comfort zone.”
No one offered assurance that leadership in the early care and education field,
or in any field, would be easy.

Guidance for emerging policy leaders

Adams characterized the current climate for early childhood education
policy this way: “The great thing is that there is so much more going on now.
When I started in the field, there wasn’t child care policy. . . . There are many
opportunities now. So many people are doing work to teach you and inform
you. But, the downside is—it’s very complicated. There are many places to go
and people to talk to. It is a very devolved and complex system, which looks
different in every community of the country.”

We asked all of the panel leaders what guidance they could offer in this
complex climate to those just stepping into this pathway but seeking to serve
as leaders in the early childhood policy field. “Don’t think that policy only
happens in Washington,” Lombardi responded. “It happens wherever you are.
Just take what you know and tell others.” She also recommended taking
advantage of fellowship opportunities, such as the Presidential Management
Fellows Program (www.pmi.opm.gov) or the National Head Start Fellowship
Program (www.headstartinfo.org). Clifford advised, “I think it [the first step] is
looking for opportunities that are out there. You don’t have to set out to do one
thing. I just looked to find things that fit with what I really cared about, and
that leads to where you want to be.” Adams added, “Each of you probably has
one or two things that really make your heart sing. Go there first, then figure
out what to read, who to talk to. Find out more; follow your passion because
that will guide you.”

Working on someone’s election campaign is Kauerz’s recommendation. “You
get to see policy makers, realize they are real people, and also learn the
process of how issues get put on platforms and are raised in policy makers’ minds.” Lundy-Ponce mentioned that “there are any number of advocacy, direct service, and policy organizations in Washington, D.C. Find an internship for a summer or a year. Oftentimes you can’t afford to work for free. But, if this [field] is something you are going to be in for the next 30 years, you have to do it. Moonlight for pay at night or work weekends. But, get that experience working with people doing the work you want to do.” Kagan recommended that emerging young leaders “study with the very best people you can, never settle [for less]; spend time with young children; recognize that this is a 30-year enterprise. You are embarking on something that will not be finished tomorrow.” She also pointed out that the reason all of them, panel members and conference participants, were at the Annual Conference was because of NAECY, and she emphasized that “a very important developmental pathway is getting involved in this organization.”

Conclusion

With the growing public and political attention to early care and education, there are expanding leadership opportunities for individuals eager to shape policies for young children and their families. Today, a range of venues, including private, nonprofit, academic, and governmental settings, offers chances to conduct policy work. This NAECY Annual Conference panel of leaders, each of whom followed a different route to their current policy positions, nonetheless highlighted a number of common themes.

In their sharing of collective experiences, we learned that no one pathway leads to making a difference in the early care and education policy field. Personal motivation, direct service with children, academic training, and policy work in national, state, or local government were among the experiences that guided these six educators to their current leadership positions.

These policy leaders held several diverse professional and academic roles along the way. Some choices were serendipitous, while others were intentional efforts to seek out additional experiences and to broaden their knowledge of the field through a range of perspectives. In addition to viewing the early care and education field from diverse vantage points, our panel of leaders recommended exploring other fields and looking to other nations for innovative ideas and insights.

The panel discussion highlighted the importance for emerging leaders to cultivate mentors and to collaborate with leaders in the field. Above all, we learned that policy leaders need to be skilled at bridging the worlds of early care and education and public policy as they embark on a long-term journey toward improving the lives of young children and their families.

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