



Early Childhood Policy in Institutions of Higher Education

Elevating Early Childhood Policy as a Discipline of Inquiry and Practice:

Preparing the Next Generation of Early Childhood Policy Leaders

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A Summary Report of 21 Interviews

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Executive Summary

With the intent of informing the establishment and branding of early childhood policy as a new field of inquiry and developing a preparation program for policy leaders capable of designing, analyzing, and advocating for constructive policies, interviews were conducted with 21 individuals representing a wide range of policy experiences. *Elevating Early Childhood Policy as a Discipline of Inquiry and Practice: Preparing the Next Generation of Early Childhood Policy Leaders* outlines findings from these interviews in service to the deliberations of the Advisory Committee of the Heising-Simons-supported effort, *Advancing Early Childhood Policy in Institutions of Higher Education* (ECPIHE).

For the purposes of this project, the term *early childhood* is inclusive of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and early childhood development. The proposed discipline of inquiry hones in on ECEC and recognizes early childhood development, inclusive of policy arenas such as social protection, child welfare, and health, as a vital ancillary field of study. Distinct from preparing pedagogical leaders whose expertise typically reside in curriculum theory and ECEC and from administrative leaders who are prepared to lead and run centers and organizations, early childhood policy leaders are individuals who design and foster implementation of policies, regulations, and programs that improve the lives of large numbers of young children. Consequently, their preparation is anticipated to differ from that of pedagogical or administrative personnel. This report is intended to help inform the nature of these differences.

Interviewees responded to four questions explored during a quasi-structured, conversational phone interview. The 21 interviewees received the interview questions prior to their call so their thinking could be organized in advance.

1. What in your professional preparation best prepared you for the policy roles you have undertaken?
2. What was missing in your professional preparation? What knowledge and skills do you wish you had been better prepared with?
3. For the 2020s and beyond, what are the essential skills/essential knowledge that individuals coming into ECEC policy positions need? What can higher education do to best foster these?
4. As we plan the content for policy students or those new to policy roles, what advice would you have for them, and for us, as we plan options for their preparation?

Interviewees provided a wide range of responses to these four questions. Two overarching, fundamental content areas emerged: (1) multiple and varied approaches for personally experiencing the practice of policy and (2) communications in all of its policy hues. Remaining content topics were aggregated under four broadly construed topical categories that are identified below and sequenced in accordance with the frequency with which interviewees identified them.

Topical Categories of Interviewee Interest from Most to Least Frequently Identified

1. Policy-Specific Content
2. Early Childhood Knowledge
3. Auxiliary Policy Knowledge & Skills: technical policy skills; leadership & management; program implementation & scaling skills
4. Research Knowledge & Skills

Quantitatively, beyond their shared categorical membership, limited interviewee overlap exists within and across these four topical categories. This contrast with the two fundamentals just identified offers an opportunity to weigh their varied contributions to the proposed policy program. In light of the importance of context as a leadership variable, it is presumed that the variety of topics and their uneven selection can be explained, at least in part, by interviewees' policy positions, policy contexts, and career trajectories.

Given the project's aspirations, institutions of higher education are considered the delivery system most well-positioned and conducive to enhancing the study of early childhood policy and shaping it as a durable discipline of inquiry. In response to this premise, interviewees identified a range of substantive issues, such as race and cultural barriers to entry, outdated orientation toward innovation, and limited flexibility of thought, that they believed could hinder development of a model early childhood policy program.

The report concludes with recommendations and questions for further deliberation.

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ELEVATING EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY AS A DISCIPLINE OF INQUIRY AND PRACTICE: PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION OF POLICY LEADERS

With the intent of exploring the desirability and feasibility of establishing early childhood policy as a field of inquiry and developing a preparation program for early childhood policy leaders capable of designing, analyzing, and advocating for constructive policies, I was asked to conduct interviews with individuals who would bring a wide range of policy experiences to the conversation. This report outlines my findings, which are provided in service to the discussions of the Advisory Committee of the Heising-Simons-supported effort, Advancing Early Childhood Policy in Institutions of Higher Education (ECPIHE).

Backdrop for the Findings

Project directors Sharon Lynn Kagan and Kathy Thornburg developed a long list of early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy leaders. Unable to interview all, they narrowed the list to 21 individuals who varied in preparation for their diverse policy roles, positions, policy context, years of policy experience, and career trajectories. Listed in the Appendix, it needs to be noted that interviewees were assured my report would not include attributions.

For the purposes of this project, the term early childhood is inclusive of early childhood education and care and early childhood development. The proposed policy discipline of inquiry intends to hone in on ECEC and recognize early childhood development, inclusive of policy arenas such as social protection, child welfare, and health, as a vital ancillary field of study. Distinct from preparing pedagogical leaders whose expertise typically reside in curriculum theory or administrative leaders who are prepared to lead and run centers and organizations, early childhood policy leaders are individuals who design and foster the implementation of policies, regulations, and programs that improve the lives of large numbers of young children. It follows that their preparation would likely differ from that of pedagogical or administrative personnel. The findings from this report are intended to help inform the nature of these differences.

Interviewees responded to four questions (see textbox, next page) that were explored during quasi-structured, conversational phone interviews that typically extended to 40 minutes. The questions were premised on the operating principle that, given the project's aspirations, institutions of higher education are the delivery system most well-positioned and conducive to enhancing the study of early childhood policy and shaping it as a durable field of inquiry.

Interview Questions

1. What in your professional preparation best prepared you for the policy roles you have undertaken?
2. What was missing in your professional preparation? What knowledge and skills do you wish you had been better prepared with?
3. For the 2020s and beyond, what are the essential skills/essential knowledge that individuals coming into ECEC policy positions need? What can higher education do to best foster these?
4. As we plan the content for policy students or those new to policy roles, what advice would you have for them, and for us, as we plan options for their preparation?

Accentuating their differing career pathways, three of the 21 interviewees received formal preparation from institutions of higher education, preparation that either was at the masters or doctoral levels. One of these three degrees was specific to early childhood policy. Three other interviewees, each of whom lacked formal policy preparation, credited yearlong ECEC policy fellowships/internships, experienced at different points in their careers, as instrumental to their development. The remaining 15 interviewees attributed their preparation to related disciplines of study or on-the-job training; ten of these 15 indicated that they “wandered” into early childhood policy because their career experiences exposed them to ECEC policy issues of interest.

Consequently, multiple interviewees articulated a variation of “I had no idea I would end up doing early childhood policy.” An interviewee whose policy experiences began outside of the ECEC field commented, “I think I followed a very odd route.” In response to my noting how often I’d heard that said, she replied, “I think that says we presume there is a predictable, standard path, but there’s not.” Still another person, who struggled to answer the question of whether anything was missing in her preparation, said, “Different people take different pathways.”

Given that a majority of the interviewees have extended ECEC policy careers, likely originating prior to the broad availability of early childhood policy programs, it’s perhaps not surprising that the 15 individuals lacking formal preparation didn’t express regret in this regard. In light of their career trajectories, their varied on-the-ground experiences were prioritized as central to their effectiveness, especially when their development included engagement with a knowledgeable and engaged mentor. In response to my asking an interviewee whether she regretted the lack of formal preparation, she responded, “Not really.” Yet another interviewee indicated that, “In light of my interactions with those having formal course work preparation, it’s not very helpful in my experience.”

Findings: Early Childhood Policy Content, Context, and Practice

Given the sweeping experiences of interviewees, a wide range of responses was received. While possible to aggregate them within broadly construed topical categories, percentage-wise, only two topics received significant interviewee agreement. And beyond their shared categorical membership, limited quantitative overlap exists within and across the four additional topical categories. In light of the importance of

context as a leadership variable,¹ it is presumed that the variety of topics and their uneven selection can be explained, at least in part, by interviewees' policy positions, policy contexts, and career trajectories.

Because of this lack of unanimity, the opportunity exists to weigh these policy topics' varied contributions to the proposed policy program. As one interviewee stated when it comes to the program's curriculum, "There should be study of current policy issues in content areas, thinking about trends, policy process...pretty standard fare. A course is one thing, making it a discipline is something different because it's a series that should add up to some kind of sub-specialty."

The Fundamentals

The range of differing perspectives didn't thwart the emergence of what are labeled as two fundamentals deemed requisites to the development of well-prepared early childhood policy leaders regardless of policy setting and/or policy focus. Identification as a "fundamental" policy topic denotes that a strong majority of the 21 interviewees specified the topic in their interview—a consensus otherwise lacking. This is why the content of four topical categories that follow presentation of the two fundamentals are not similarly elevated.

A tally of the number of interviewees identifying these two fundamentals, as well as the four other policy categories of interest, is indicated in parentheses within each topic area. Direct quotes are liberally sprinkled throughout this and the next section as a mechanism for sharing interviewees' voices as they relate to the findings.

Fundamental 1. Multiple and varied approaches for personally experiencing the practice of policy through diversified and generous use of field-based experiences, practicums, scenario planning, speakers, case studies, and interactions with policymakers and program leaders—all intentional in design and incorporating guided individual and collective analysis of what is being learned and its meaning for students' study and practice of policy—received the most frequent mention of any policy topic. Interviewees called for these experiences to be of sufficient depth and duration to develop meaningful knowledge and skills—in other words, not "drive-by" experiences. They suggested that these experiences range from one semester/summer to one year. One person framed her thinking as, "It has to be at least one month and need not be longer than one year." (*Explicitly noted by 17 of the 21 interviewees.*)

Reflecting the view of many who prioritized this fundamental, one interviewee stated, "To do higher education right as a preparation policy program, there has to be an experiential base, and it's essential that it offer the time and space in that space to really practice, and be part of a guided process." And as expressed by another, "The more variety of experiences one has in which ECE is embedded, the more competent they will be in policy and practice decision-making. And you can quote me on this." Two other interviewees lifted up the importance of working in a variety of systems and "getting your hands dirty in this field." A different perspective was expressed thusly, "These were hugely important experiences. They

¹ Goffin, S. G. (2013, December). *Building capacity through an early education leadership academy*. Washington, DC: Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes.

made me understand how different organizations tick and their different incentive structures, the differing constraints and perspectives, and organizational contexts.” And as disparagingly expressed by an interviewee, “Students who only know things learned in school have no understanding of where the disconnect lies between policy and the real world.”

Three interviewees recommended that these experiences not be delayed, as typically is the case, until after the program’s coursework is completed. Instead, they recommended that they be experienced earlier in the program’s design so students could toggle between theory and practice in real time. More than one interviewee called for attention, in this regard, to the need for increased understanding of children’s diverse early experiences, as broadly lived, and of different cultural contexts. As described by one interviewee, “[Students need] time and space in other communities...to know what it feels like to be a minority and uninformed.” It seems worth noting that the presence or absence of interviewees’ formal policy preparation did not seem a relevant variable in terms of this topic’s prioritization.

1a. Although not necessarily enmeshed within interviewee recommendations for multiple and varied approaches for personally experiencing the practice of policy, *mentors* were raised by multiple interviewees as an integral part of these experiences because of their role in fostering guided learning. (*Explicitly noted by seven interviewees.*) According to one interviewee, “Mentors teach you how to read the room, prepare for particular meetings, and recognize how a word choice could trigger something negative or positive depending on the state context.” As expressed by another, “You need someone to help you develop the muscle of political awareness.”

Mentors were seen as bolstering interviewees’ knowledge and skills and providing an essential on-the-ground context, as well as offering access to a network of individuals needed for effectively developing and/or executing policy. Noted one interviewee, “My mentors had work experience in government; they were willing to take me under their wings, and willing to reflect with me. Finally, they were supportive of me.”

1b. As just alluded to, *access to networks* was noted as an important by-product of faculty relationships, internships, and fellowships—contacts and interactions gained not so much from experience as by access. Being able to reach out for content expertise was given as an example more than once and linked to access initially gained through mentor relationships. Even though noted by a limited number of interviewees, those who lifted up the significance of access to networks wanted its importance to be recognized. (*Explicitly noted by five interviewees.*)

“Relationships are coin of the realm, and it’s important to have colleagues in policymaking, practice, translation, academics,” I was told. “...Having a network of close colleagues allowed me to gain different perspectives.” According to another interviewee, “If I learned anything, it was about the value of networking.”

Fundamental 2. Communication skills, as writers, speakers, and messengers, are policy-specific and technical in their orientation. They reference the customized, succinct writing required for policy briefs, for example, and skills for translating research in ways tailored to one’s audience. While not

accompanied by the same fervency associated with the first fundamental, these communication skills were identified as an essential too often overlooked. The skills highlighted included not only policy-specific technical writing skills such as “writing like a policy analyst,” but also public speaking, messaging, grant writing, use of technology, ability to speak across sectors, conducting interviews, preparing and delivering testimony, and polling. One interviewee informed me, “Competencies, such as grant writing, public speaking, writing a speech, and preparing fact sheets, need to be added. I’m not sure ‘skills and knowledge’ are sufficient.” *(Explicitly noted by 14 of the 21 interviewees.)*

As intensely expressed by an interviewee, “Honestly, knowing how to speak about ECE as an “integration point” vs. as a separate entity—within ECE and across sectors and disciplines so it can get a governor’s attention. Knowing how to help policymakers who don’t get this to understand the overlaps...to [help them] see the bigger picture.” Contended another interviewee while speaking to the importance of communications and who was concerned that a formal preparation program might bypass the realities of policy as a practice, “Don’t ignore politics! In some sense, good policy is the easy part, but navigating politics to make it happen is challenging. You have to be able to explain policy within the reality of government administration and understand messaging. Understanding the political context is essential.” And for many, this latter point was strongly linked to the importance of multiple and varied approaches for personally experiencing the practice of policy. Interviewees’ presence or absence of formal policy preparation, once again, did not seem a distinguishing variable in terms of who prioritized this fundamental.

Policy-Related Topics of Interest

Now we move on to four topical categories of study and practice deemed important by subsets of interviewees but lacking sufficient unanimity to be considered as a fundamental in terms of their significance to an early childhood policy preparation program. These four categories, which are listed in the chart below, as well as in the narrative that follows, are itemized from most to least frequently identified by subsets of interviewees. I chose not to further topically merge interviewees’ answers in service to providing as much access as possible to their recommendations.

When considering the range of perspectives and specifics within each of these topical categories, it’s worth recalling my supposition that interviewees’ differing policy roles, organizational settings and contexts, and career trajectories influenced their responses.

Topical Categories of Interviewee Interest from Most to Least Frequently Identified

1. Policy-Specific Content
2. Early Childhood Knowledge
3. Auxiliary Policy Knowledge & Skills: technical policy skills; leadership & management; program implementation & scaling skills
4. Research Knowledge & Skills

Policy-Specific Content

An abundance of topics falls under this first header; they address “policy basics,” reflect personal interests, and endorse program graduates having a broad knowledge base. The most often noted policy basic revolved around knowing how government works. (*Seven interviewees explicitly noted what follows*). This included a government 101 course, inclusive of government processes; understanding how advocacy in service to policy change works; deciphering the legislative process; and demystifying legislators. “It’s important to understand bureaucracy,” an interviewee stressed, “from influencing legislation, developing awareness of how the public policy arena works, understanding the levers of power, and learning how to move them.”

And then there is the multitude of additional topical possibilities under this header that interviewees proposed, providing an especially good example of the limited overlap and prioritization among interviewees’ responses. (*What follows was explicitly noted by one or more interviewee, but never by more than nine of the 21 interviewees, which falls below the threshold of a fundamental*): attention to specific populations of children; understanding program compliance and knowing how to write rules; administrative decisions applicable to the executive branch of government—including relevant executive branch decisions at the state and federal levels and education law; learning how to read policy “below the lines”; social and political science; measurement science; business; understanding how equity is built via policy; understanding families and how to effectively engage them; neuroscience; behavioral economics; impact of global forces on domestic policy; the world of technology; and understanding race and class issues and their politics.

Early Childhood Knowledge

Interviewees expressed strong views on the topic of early childhood knowledge, which encompasses three content topics: knowledge of child development, cross-sector knowledge, and knowledge of ECEC as a field of practice, with cross-sector knowledge referring both to *within* ECEC interactions and across early childhood sectors such as home visiting, health care, and social services. Friction revolved around the extent to which early childhood development cross-sector content and policy knowledge should be at the forefront of an early childhood policy discipline and preparation program versus a vital ancillary to ECEC policy and its implementation (see operational definitions of ECEC and early childhood development on page 1).

The distinctions made among knowledge of child development, cross-sector knowledge, and knowledge of ECEC as a field of practice are outlined below. While interviewees who focused on the priority of deep understanding of the science of child development and its implications for policy development typically expressed their thoughts as “How could it be otherwise?,” another interviewee articulated the tension in the relationship between ECEC and early childhood development thusly: “We no longer can afford for ECEC and health and mental health policy to be completely separate. I hope higher education can bridge the divide. ECE professionals need to understand how to leverage Medicaid for young children and families, for example. And given forecasts re the economy over the next couple of years, mental health issues are

likely to escalate. This means professionals need to know much more about how to identify, manage, and advocate for health as an essential part of early childhood.”

- **Knowledge of Child Development.** This topic included brain development, in-depth knowledge of the science of child development, and diversity/cultural training. *(Explicitly noted by eight interviewees.)*
- **Cross-Sector Knowledge.** Referencing cross-sector knowledge as both a within-ECEC issue as well as one for early childhood development (exterior-to-ECEC) writ large, this topic encompassed the ability to speak across systems and the presence of a comprehensive/big picture/systems frame of reference. While not necessarily excluding the policy issue of integrated services, such terminology was never uttered. Rather, interviewees highlighted early childhood development as including policy disciplines and systems that need to be well-known and understood. *(Explicitly noted by seven interviewees who were referencing a broad early child development framework.)* As expressed by one interviewee, “There needs to be an awareness that problems are solved differently across policy domains.” Even though the intended relationship between ECEC and early childhood development was described more than once, an interviewee asserted, “As a discipline, graduates need to have analytic skills, and more than one content area should be involved. The program should be cross-sectorial, and I feel strongly about that. It should not be limited to ECE.”
- **Knowledge of ECEC as a Field of Practice.** ECEC’s history and its specialized pedagogy, for example focusing on the whole child and child-centered learning, dominated this topic area. *(Explicitly noted by four interviewees.)* More than one interviewee underscored this by contending, “It can’t be just about education because that misses what children and families need.”

Auxiliary Policy Knowledge & Skills

Technical Policy Skills. In conjunction with the communication skills fundamental identified earlier, this policy topic extends into the “mechanics”/ toolbox of early childhood policy development and implementation, including political and negotiation skills, and the politics of effective policymaking. *(Explicitly noted in some way by nine interviewees.)*

It also includes a subset of skills associated with data collection and analysis. *(Explicitly noted by six interviewees.)* Although seemingly synonymous with formal skills associated with research and evaluation (see below), it was voiced by individuals who self-identify as policy agenda-setters and advocates, not as researchers or research connoisseurs. They were ardent about the importance of systematically collecting pragmatic data, believing that “the devil is in the details.”

This skill set, as described by the six interviewees, is distinct from designing and implementing formal research and evaluation studies and not necessarily reliant on formal research methodologies. Its intent is to inform policy agendas and policymakers when pursuing new rules, regulations, and/or legislation. Their expressed goal was not a formal study of program impact, for example—for that they relied upon formal

research studies—but rather avoiding unintended consequences that resulted from insufficiently informed rules, regulations, and/or policies. These interviewees routinely expressed the frustrating consequences incurred as a result of decontextualized legislation, regulations, and policy stances that resulted from this on-the-ground understanding, both broadly and specifically, being absent.

Drawing from their lived experiences, these six interviewees came across as investigative advocates, stressing the importance of deeply knowing and understanding a policy intervention's real world context when advocating for new legislation, regulations, and/or program design. As expressed by one interviewee justifying her viewpoint in this regard, "Getting down to the community level vs. staying at the macro level leads to getting to causes and making different decisions."

Leadership & Management. In terms of leadership development, this content topic included subject matter such as the importance of self-knowledge; decision-making skills; understanding of power dynamics; knowledge and skills for engaging with race and class issues; strategy in all its guises; collaboration skills, which while sometimes inclusive of political skills, was intended to encompass a larger knowledge base; and critical thinking. (*Explicitly noted in some way by nine interviewees.*) As shared by an interviewee whose work is close-to-the-ground, "Policy is primarily about [the technical skill of] crafting the policy. Personally, I'm more attracted to what leadership is in the field vs. policy. For example, what's involved in translating and assessing a policy's efficacy; for example, standards offer so much wiggle room re implementation and accountability."

Pushing for practices tied to innovation, an interviewee urged, "Whether coursework, competencies, or a practicum, make it obligatory to think in terms of disruption and innovation. There are parts of society that live and breathe this; it can be learned and applied. It's impacting changes in lots of fields."

On the management side (which should not be viewed as synonymous with leadership²), operational and executive management skills were highlighted, including accounting. Highlighting that an administrative role can't always be separated from a policy agenda, an interviewee used the term "policy executive" to capture this hybrid realm. Another interviewee remarked, "I have had to learn management. I never thought I would manage 27 people. I'm getting so much work done because I squeeze and manage the passion. I believe in co-construction—a process of management from behind. You can't do this by yourself."

What I'm labeling as dispositions to policy effectiveness also were mentioned (*explicitly noted in some way by nine interviewees*): openness to new ideas; learning how to nurture relationships; persistence; tenacity; continuous learning; and recognizing what you don't know. In follow-up to the importance of assuming a bipartisan stance, which two interviewees raised, one shared, "When it comes to DC-based advocacy groups, Republicans tell me, 'Advocates don't come to see us because they assume we're

² Kotter, J. P. (May-June 1990). What leaders really do. *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 103-111; Zaleznik, A. (March-April, 1992). Managers and leaders: Are they different? In *Leadership insights: 15 unique perspectives on effective leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business Review.

stupid.’ You can’t make assumptions about those relationships. You have to learn to separate support for an issue from your disagreement with everything else someone else may think in order to find common ground and accomplish your objectives.”

Implementation and Scaling Skills. This auxiliary content topic, which received the lowest number of explicit mentions, included the importance of knowing how to take things to scale, how to roll out a curriculum across school districts, and in general how to well implement whatever was being implemented. *(Explicitly noted by two interviewees.)* One of the two interviewees specifically noted implementation science. The other interviewee succinctly stated, “Policy is only good if it’s implemented well.”

Research Knowledge and Skills

As previously noted, interviewees made a distinction between formal research knowledge and skills and the policy skill labeled as data collection and analysis. The former’s specifics concentrated on formal policy research and evaluation. *(Explicitly noted by seven interviewees.)* It included methodological specifics such as quantitative and qualitative research skills; analytical skills; and knowing how to read research through a political lens, while at the same time having—and articulating—appropriate expectations of an intervention’s impact; knowing what is known and what isn’t known based on available research; and knowing how to avoid going beyond what the data say. Remarkd one interviewee, “I wish I had better grounding in basic methodological skills related to the policy [vs. political] world not in order to do it but in order to better challenge it.”

Findings: Higher Education as the Conduit for Program Delivery

Three interviewees specifically noted the presence of a policy leadership gap, one of whom acknowledged, “There’s a big mix out there. In my experience, you can really quickly tell the difference between those who have book knowledge and experience from those who only have book knowledge or work experience.” Another interviewee lamented, “I see jobs everywhere that can’t be filled, and people are not prepared for what they will have to take on.” Along similar lines, the third interviewee angrily observed, “We have a bunch of folks in ECE policy roles who don’t know anything at all about ECE; they’re learning on the fly, and learning in context. Really smart people are getting these jobs without backgrounds, and yet they’re making important decisions without any history, context, or knowledge of the workforce.”

One interviewee, though, questioned the need for a standalone early childhood policy program and recommended that a market study be conducted, arguing that policy jobs were going to individuals with traditional policy backgrounds or specialized skill sets, though later adding, “Why wouldn’t it simply be organized under an existing public policy program as a specialization?”

And at length, another interviewee cautioned against, “building a whole new field of inquiry based on conventional thinking. A new field of inquiry can’t be dominated by the conventional policy approaches and methodology that presently exist. Conventional analytic skills dominating policy analysis are ignorant

about child development. The methodology is atheoretical (sic) when it comes to child development and is missing the boat in terms of asking important questions and doing important analysis. The current paradigm has a stranglehold on the field, and it's stifling a bright future. Researchers are insistent on "taking a no prisoners approach" re randomized trials independent of a theory of change or a frame for understanding what their findings mean. The new program has to demand deep conceptual understanding of the process of child development because the black box is being opened."

Offering another provocative stance, an interviewee contended that more impact would be gained by placing early childhood policy-specific content in preparation programs such as law schools, because lawyers have greater stature than individuals in the ECEC field and would be better able to effect change when in an executive level meeting with the governor's staff, for example. She wished for "more licensed attorneys in the ECE space." She recognized the importance of having someone with classroom experience at the table and as a part of a team, but noted, "When I vet a proposal with attorneys, they nix it because it's not easy to accomplish...because it requires figuring out how to make it happen." She went on to say, "In other fields, one's background is sufficient and conventional, e.g., having had experience supporting senior elected officials, sitting at policy tables, and presenting executive's views, plus legal training/degree. If given the choice to develop a PhD program in early childhood policy versus looking to where our PhDs are in other fields, like economics, where we could layer in early childhood policy, I would go for the latter."

Interviewees had much to say about what would be needed to ensure a higher education setting would be conducive to an early childhood policy preparation program. Most concerning to interviewees regarding the higher education context, though, was its perceived inflexibility; distance from the kinds of on-the-ground experiences seen as a fundamental to early childhood policymakers; insufficient faculty with direct early childhood policy experience; limited cross-fertilization among students with different interests; resistance to seizing collaborative and technology opportunities that would enlarge the institution's infrastructure capacity and expand students' knowledge base and horizons; disregard for adequately preparing students for specific ECEC policy roles; risk aversion to developing a truly 21st-century early childhood policy preparation program reflecting the most current early childhood knowledge base; and a history of failing to make supports available so the program's application process can be equitable and inclusive and its student body diverse.

Recommendations and Questions

The range of topics to be considered during the design of a policy preparation program and the relative lack of consensus is not unexpected by any of us who have been assigned this task or struggled with pruning one's teaching priorities for a three-credit course. Yet as my first recommendation, I'd advocate for two unmentioned topics that I think deserve serious consideration: **the specialized leadership required by adaptive work³, and understanding of systems' complexities, principles of systems thinking, and the kind of thinking necessary when contemplating how to**

³ Heifetz, R. & Linsky, M. (2017). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press; Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Boston: Harvard Business Press; also see Kansas Leadership Center (<http://www.klc.org>)

change a system's architecture.⁴ Policy work involves few issues whose answers can be known in advance and resolved through typical problem-solving approaches. It involves, almost always, systems intervention, and effecting systems change is an endeavor few really understand.

The concerns articulated about higher education are not surprising either for those of us who have lived in the higher education realm or are following the ECEC field's resistance to requiring degreed early childhood educators. These are not solely early childhood policy concerns, though, and others, both within and outside the walls of higher education, are attempting to tackle them. This augurs well for the availability of informal case studies and network(s) of individuals who are directly engaging with these challenges to inform development of a policy preparation program striving to be sensitive to higher education's access barriers and to rising doubts about its relevancy and effectiveness.

Honing in on the program's signature content and pedagogy,⁵ though, requires refining the program's intent since mission clarity and focus is a mainstay of effective organizations/ programs, especially since interviewees' varied perspectives suggest that more than one program design and desired student outcome(s) are conceivable. As a second recommendation, therefore, I'd advise that **questions swirling around the program's mission and signature content and pedagogy be examined.**

These questions can be at least partially informed by divining answers to issues interviewees raised: the curricular relationship between ECEC and early childhood development; the presence or absence of early childhood policy specializations; the quantity and type of linkages between formal content and experiential learning; and finally, how leading edge the program seeks to be in terms of its "brand." Towards this end, here are some questions that intrigue me:

- I've assumed that forming a discipline of early childhood policy as a new field of inquiry is tightly coupled with formulating a leading-edge early childhood policy preparation program and that the two are intertwining, mutually informing ambitions. Is this assumption a shared one? Why or why not?
- A meaningful majority of interviewees lacked formal preparation for their policy roles. How would you articulate the contribution(s) provided by a formal preparation program when compared to learning on the job in conjunction with a knowledgeable mentor? How would your answer(s) inform the design and marketing of a new early childhood policy preparation program?
- Several interviewees alluded to early childhood policy specialties, and as I've noted, I intuited a connection between interviewees' interview answers and their policy roles, organizational and policy contexts, and career trajectories. Upon further teasing apart this presumption, I identified four possible early childhood policy specialties:

⁴ Senge, P., Hamilton, H., & Kania, J. (Winter 2005). The dawn of system leadership. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. pp. 27-33. Also https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership

⁵ Schulman, L. S. (2005). Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedalus*, 134 (3), 52-59.

- ***Policy as a subject of study***: deep examination and analysis of the policy literature and its practice derived from theory and research and often connected with wide-ranging roles in higher education, think tanks, and legislative/government offices
- ***Policy as a field of practice***: execution of policy knowledge contextualized by understanding of child development and ECEC systems in roles typically associated with advocacy; development of rules and regulations; and policy and program implementation
- ***Policy as an intervention tool***: strategic development and implementation of policy informed by understanding of early childhood and ECEC systems targeted at issues amenable to early childhood policy mediation, typically associated with local, state, and federal government and legislative office roles
- ***Policy as a realm for research and evaluation***: deep study of policy and research methodology and their intersections with the early childhood policy field

Their labels are meant to be self-evident in terms of their policy emphasis, but they have yet to be vetted or deeply conceptualized; so their descriptions are imprecise.

With this as prelude, do you think early childhood policy can and/or should be conceptualized and/or organized by policy specialties? If so, might these possibilities offer a conversation starter?

- Is the proposed preparation program best conceived as a specialization within an existing policy program, as a freestanding preparation program, or as combined approach? Which approach could best address the aspiration to create early childhood policy as a new discipline of study? Which would offer the best setting for providing a wide range of student-policymaker interactions? Which would best support the development of specializations if that approach were of interest?
- Given the assortment of possible policy topics and their relative lack of overlap, are criteria needed for prioritizing topics for program inclusion?
- What levers of influence will be necessary to ensure that faculty and institutions of higher education can move beyond a traditional policy program and be capable of supporting an innovative, leading-edge program of study that addresses the concerns interviewees have raised?

A concluding comment from an interviewee is given the final word. “ECE,” she said, “is as rough and tumble as it comes. It’s a field not well funded, scrapping around for resources, and trying to figure out who it is. I think what’s being proposed is a good idea. But I think figuring out how to engage in this kind of work must be accompanied by the realization that this is a fractured field.”

Appendix — Early Childhood Project Interviewees

[Alphabetized by last names]

1. **Barbara Bowman**, Irving B. Harris Professor of Child Development
2. **Kristin Bernhard**, Deputy Commissioner for System Reform, Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning
3. **Laura Bornfreund**, Director Early and Elementary Education Policy, New America
4. **Miriam Calderon**, Early Learning Systems Director, WA. State Department of Education
5. **Stephanie Fanjul**, Past President, N. C. Partnership for Children
6. **Tiffany Ferrette**, Program Assistant, Education Division, National Governor’s Association
7. **Lauren Hogan**, Senior Policy and Advocacy Director, NAEYC
8. **Jacqueline Jones**, President and CEO, Foundation for Child Development
9. **Michael Levine**, Senior Vice President and Senior Knowledge Officer at Sesame Workshop
10. **Joan Lombardi**, Senior Advisor Bernard Van Leer Foundation; Director, Early Learning Opportunities. LLC
11. **Lisa Klein**, Executive Director, Birth to Five Policy Alliance
12. **M.-A. Lucas**, Military-State Child Care Systems Pilot ... Beyond the Gates, L.E.A.D. Early Childhood Collaborative; Past Executive Director Early and Education Consortium
13. **Amy O’Leary**, Early Education for All Campaign Director
14. **Deborah Phillips**, Vice Dean of Faculty, Georgetown College; Professor, Department of Psychology; Affiliated Faculty, McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University
15. **Karen Ponder**, Distinguished Fellow at the Build Initiative
16. **Jason Sachs**, Executive Director, Early Childhood Education, Boston Public Schools
17. **Aaliyah Samuel**, Director of the Education Division of the National Governors Association
18. **Jack Shonkoff**, Julius B. Richmond FAMRI Professor of Child Health and Development, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health & Harvard Graduate School of Education; Professor of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School and Boston Children’s Hospital
19. **Linda Smith**, Director of Early Childhood Development, Bipartisan Policy Center
20. **Maurice Sykes**, author, *Doing the Right Thing for Children: Eight Qualities of Leadership*, and Senior Associate, Early Childhood Leadership Institute
21. **Valora Washington**, CEO, Council for Professional Recognition