

# Tennessee's statewide early childhood training system (TECTA)

Improving the quality of early childhood services through coordinated training

by Connie Mietlicki

A critical issue facing our nation today stems from the fact that many classroom teachers in Early Childhood Education lack adequate training. This deficit in the professional education of teachers impacts outcomes for children every day. In the state of Tennessee, approximately 65% of preschool-aged children receive some form of routine non-parental care. The Department of Human Services (DHS) licenses 5,042 child care agencies; 43,711 child care providers, assisted by more than 30,000 additional staff members, provide Early Childhood Education and school-age child care for over 349,691 of Tennessee's children. Short, on-the-job-only training typifies the average provider's professional preparation. Some do not even have high school diplomas or GEDs, which results in low average

income (around \$17,316) and high job turnover rates (around 40%).

In 1991, when federal Child Care Development Block Grant funds (\$1.2 million annually) became available to make quality improvements in the child care system, Tennessee allocated one-third of its funding to develop a training system (Wall & Lovell, 1996). The state steering committee determined that, in order to improve the quality of child care, they needed to develop a system that would provide quality training in Early Childhood Education for the current workforce. Survey results indicated fully 87% had NO training; those who had some training had only attended summer conferences or occasional workshops at best.

In the fall of that year, Janet Camp, former Director of Child Care Services for the State of Tennessee, and Dr. Barbara Nye, Executive Director of Tennessee State University's (TSU) Center of Excellence for Research and Policy on Basic Skills, sketched out details of a

delivery system that was later to be called Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance, or TECTA for short. The lattice concept of the plan called for an articulation of Early Childhood Education programs among the institutions of higher education in the state to lead from a professional credential, to an associate's degree, to a bachelor's degree, and ultimately, to graduate degrees (Pedersoli-Pinheiro, 1998).

## The career lattice

Unfortunately, teachers who want to pursue higher education face many barriers. The lattice concept of the TECTA system represented a new paradigm for the Early Childhood profession that communicates upward mobility with improved compensation at each step of professional development (Christensen, McDonnell, & Price, 1988). This system encourages many paths toward improved professional recognition. Early Childhood professionals can enter the lattice at levels appropriate to their edu-

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cational and experiential background, and the TECTA program offers financial support for their training throughout their upward climb.

For many Early Childhood teachers, TECTA Orientation offers an entry point onto the lattice by making available a free series of classes to individuals who currently work with young children in state-regulated facilities. A gateway to academic training especially geared for adult learners, TECTA Orientation provides 30 hours of non-credit bearing instruction about Early Childhood Education in five specializations: family child care, center-based, school-age, infant/toddler, and child care administration.

Upon completion of any of the TECTA Orientations, students may be eligible for scholarships to pursue Early Childhood credentials, such as the Child Development Associate (CDA), or to seek degrees from accredited institutions of higher education. The TECTA lattice facilitates students' ability to increase their knowledge by taking classes through a coordinated, articulated statewide system of 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education, and between post-secondary certificates and degree programs.

Early Childhood administrators who demonstrate the specific competencies for effective leadership and management can now earn a Tennessee Early Childhood Program Administrator Credential (TECPAC). This state credential provides yet another level of recognition as part of Tennessee's quality rating and improvement system.

One way to tell the story of the how the TECTA program has impacted Early Childhood education in Tennessee since its inception in 1992 is in numbers. As of fall 2008:

- 15,959 individual providers have successfully completed a TECTA Orientation;

- 1,689 have completed multiple Orientations.
- TECTA funds have paid for 75% up to 100% of the tuition costs for 23,143 seats in academic classes for over 7,025 students; 242 at 4-year institutions and 6,842 at 2-year institutions.

Numbers alone, however, do not give the full picture. Instead, interviews with individuals who have climbed the career lattice can best illustrate how professional development and academic study can make a difference in the lives of young children. Their stories not only provide inspiration to others about improving the quality of care in their state, but also offer ideas about how to support the development of their Early Childhood workforce.

#### **Melissa's story: "A moving-up process"**

Melissa was working as an assistant teacher in an after-school program while pursuing pre-med in college when she realized her true passion for children. She graduated with her baccalaureate degree in biology, but decided not to pursue a career in medicine. When she learned of Pleasant View Academy's new preschool program, she interviewed for and got the job as infant/toddler teacher despite the fact that she had no child development training, but five years' work experience.

In that teaching role, Melissa took the TECTA Infant/Toddler Orientation. She confesses being amazed by how much she didn't know even with five years' experience. "Just because you work in child care, you don't know what child development really is until you actually take the courses. Then I learned I could take courses toward my CDA, so I started on them, beginning with the 'Healthy Learning' course plus the mentoring requirement."

Soon Melissa was promoted to Infant/Toddler Coordinator at Pleasant View Academy. By increasing her knowledge

and confidence, she began the moving-up process. After completing her CDA, Melissa went on to obtain her Associate's degree in ECE and moved up into the Assistant Director position at Pleasant View Academy where she stayed for two years. From there she moved into a position as director of the Before- and After-School Program at Pleasant View United Methodist Church where she stayed another two years. At that point Melissa took the TECTA School-Age Orientation along with her staff, followed by the Administrator Orientation.

Melissa describes her story as 'moving-up' because she has now worked in all areas of ECE, taking more courses at each step in her journey. She has gone from "assistant teacher to lead teacher; infant/toddler teacher to infant/toddler coordinator; assistant director to director — building on successes as I learn more and more." TECTA provided financial support along the way that allowed her to take courses. She claims, "The more I know, the more I can teach."

Melissa starts her Master's degree program next semester at Tennessee State University. She says, "My ultimate goal is to be an advocate for children and their families, sharing my knowledge of child care, and improving the quality of care that the children of Tennessee are receiving." Her story inspires other practitioners to seek out opportunities for professional development and encourages them to "move up."

#### **Brenda's story: "The least likely to succeed"**

"I only had a high school diploma when I started working in child care. My director saw my potential and encouraged me; she told me about TECTA and wanted me to take classes. 'Health and Safety' was my first college course." Brenda continues, "I was new. I had no experience in teaching except for Sunday School. I wanted to apply

everything I learned when I saw what a difference it could make in the classroom. What I learned sparked my interest." Brenda's 'come-from-behind' story is one that offers encouragement for others:

"When I started taking classes, I was apprehensive. I just 'got by' in school and was not considered 'honors.' I was worried I wouldn't do well. But then I saw that what we were learning related to my job and would help me do well at work. I learned that persistence paid off, so I did well in the college courses and was successful, which was good for my self-esteem and basically changed everything for me."

Brenda's original goal was a CDA credential; she never expected to get a college degree; but "when I saw I could be successful, I just kept on going." As she tells it, "I went back to school for my degree when I was almost 32 with two children." She graduated with her Associate's degree, Magna Cum Laude, Phi Theta Kappa, and the Early Childhood Education Student-of-the-Year. She went on for her bachelor's degree and started working for TECTA as an Orientation Specialist. When the TECTA coordinator at the Chattanooga site moved on, she stepped into that position and then finished her Master's degree in Early Literacy.

Brenda has seen TECTA help many programs make improvement in the quality of care they provide for children. She says, "Yes, things are changing for the children in Tennessee."

Brenda's story encourages providers to seek out professional development resources. Today Brenda is convinced that "One course changed my life."

### **Claudia's story:**

#### **"The power of support"**

When a postcard arrived in the mail that said 'FREE hours,' Claudia, a director of a child care center, was introduced to

TECTA for the first time. "I needed the hours," she said, so Claudia and four teachers from her center took Center-Based Orientation together.

"From the very first class, we realized we had work to do in our center. After each module, we realized a weakness and were excited to incorporate our new learning into our setting. For example, the changes we made in the curriculum got kids more involved; our classrooms ran smoother. It was a real eye-opener. The kids enjoyed their experiences more, and they learned more; they interacted more, and they were more engaged in activities. We were able to provide more interesting areas. Even the parents could see the changes."

Through TECTA, Claudia received resources to improve her center; through collaboration with others, she realized her own strengths, but also saw areas that called for improvement. She exclaims, "All the information I needed to learn was right there in the TECTA materials!"

Claudia's story is one that illustrates the power of support. After two Orientations, she enrolled in Early Childhood courses and completed her CDA credential, and it "all came together" on a much deeper level. She feels that she gained a better understanding because her group went through the Early Childhood coursework together. "When we were tired, we motivated each other. We implemented at the center what we learned and then taught it to the other staff."

Claudia completed her Associate's degree with honors, and TECTA supported her all along the way with tuition dollars, as well as books. Now she shares with others that she "proved a point: it doesn't matter how old you are, or how long it takes, or even if English is your second language, as

long as you are motivated and put in the time and effort, you can complete your goal if you have your mind set. 'The most difficult step of any journey is the first' is the quote I live by."

Having completed her Bachelor's degree, Claudia will begin work on her Master's degree this fall, and TECTA will help with financial assistance for each class.

For many practitioners, the notion of going back to school conjures up fearful thoughts, but Claudia's story offers a beacon of hope: all along her journey she was joined and supported by others who shared her vision of wanting to learn as much as they could in order to obtain the best results for the children in their care. Working together, they not only advanced their personal careers, they also improved the quality of care in their state.

### **TECTA's message**

Numbers and statistics are inadequate to describe the impact that the TECTA alliance has made on Early Childhood Education in the state of Tennessee. Real stories of people's authentic experiences are inspiring sources of information, especially for people in similar circumstances. These are just a few of the TECTA program's many "homegrown" stars who illustrate that professional development for teachers ultimately benefits children and families. Because of TECTA, students such as those featured here have been able to:

- move up in their workplace, often with pay increases and career advancements;
- find the training immediately applicable and relevant to their everyday work experiences;
- gain self-respect and confidence, which, in turn, have motivated them to continue taking courses, moving up, and learning more;

- improve the quality of their centers and family child care homes;
- (often) acquire accreditation, or improve their STAR rating;
- provide better care to children enrolled in their programs;
- receive the praise and approval of parents, their community, and their own families;
- join advisory boards and committees;
- become members of professional organizations, effecting policy changes at the local, state, and national levels;
- acquire credentials and degrees without going into debt or placing additional financial burdens on their families.

Today we face a very real need for professional development for Early Childhood teachers. As early as 1991, NAEYC began a series of publications about the concept of the career lattice, and the TECTA system's development of such a lattice demonstrates a proven model that can be useful for children and their families looking for ways to improve the quality of child care in their state. The articulated alliance of the TECTA program, consisting of 2- and 4-year higher educational institutions working together to provide the highest quality professional development credential/recognition system, illustrates a model for a successful statewide system utilizing Child Care Development Block Grant funds (or other grant sources) that other states could adopt.

In the current economic situation, new stimulus money is being made available almost on a daily basis, and many new opportunities are being created for funding. See [www.hhs.gov/recovery/](http://www.hhs.gov/recovery/) for updates. For other specific recommendations that Early Childhood practitioners might find beneficial, see Table 1 and the suggested resources listed at the end of this article.

The increased demand for highly-qualified teachers should inspire others to seek out opportunities for professional development and continuing education, confident that there will be a place for them to work when they obtain that next degree or credential. They should be encouraged by a vision not only of personal career advancement, but of becoming practitioners who are making a difference in children's lives every day. In seeking out professional development, they will make life-long friends who encourage and assist them along the way. These real stories are living proof that the TECTA system works: it makes a difference in each person's life in unique ways. How far these women have come is amazing. As they grew stronger professionally, so has the TECTA Alliance itself — for what is a lattice, but one that is grounded by its roots and reaching up with its "STARS."

## References

Christensen, J. C., McDonnell, J.H., & Price, J.R. (1988). *Personalizing staff development: The career lattice model. PDK Fastback*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

Pedersoli-Pinheiro, M. (1998). *Tennessee caregivers benefit from TECTA. Council News & Views*. Washington, DC: Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition.

Wall, B. W., & J. C. Lovell. (1996). *Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance — Seeking Quality Solutions. TECTA on the Move*. Nashville, TN: Center for Research & Policy on Basic Skills.

## Suggested resources

*Planning for Professional Development in Child Care: A Guide to Best Practices and Resources*. North Carolina Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, 2001.

*Role, Relevance, Reinvention: Higher Education in the Field of Early Care and Education*. Valora Washington and Aspire Institute, 2008.

*The State of Preschool 2008: The State of Preschool Yearbook*. The National Institute for Early Education Research, 2008.