

Building on Teachers' Experiences With the Desired Results Developmental Profile to Advance the California Infant Toddler Workforce

Introduction

California's ambitious \$2.7 billion investment in Transitional Kindergarten (TK) heralds a seismic shift in early childhood education. By 2025-2026, the state aims to offer high-quality, inclusive TK education for all 4-year-olds, with an impressive 1:12 student-teacher ratio (Early Edge California, n.d.-a). This bold move, however, spotlights a critical gap in the early education landscape and the need to finally squarely focus the public and policymakers on infants and toddlers.

Given TK expansion, a pressing need emerges to bolster support for and increase awareness of infant and toddler care. The transition will likely strain an already understaffed sector, grappling with the lingering effects of COVID-19. The subsequent need for Head Start and other early education programs to transition slots to Early Head Start face significant hurdles, including recruitment, salary and infrastructure costs, time constraints, and the need for specialized skills to serve infants, toddlers, and pregnant women (Kuhns et al., 2023).

The unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers demand a workforce of unparalleled expertise. Unlike their pre-K counterparts, infants and toddlers undergo rapid, individualized changes that blur the lines between typical development and developmental delays (National Research Council, 2012). Teachers must possess the relational skills to interpret and support these dynamic developmental efforts, a task that requires deep preparation and cultural competence.

About This Brief

This brief is based on a study of teachers' use of the Desired Results Developmental Profile for Infants and Toddlers (DRDP) followed by discussions on how to prepare California's infant toddler workforce. It provides a summary of study findings, including participants' demands for greater preparation, and implications for how study findings inform the need to support California's infant toddler workforce.

Quality assessment stands as a cornerstone in building a robust infant and toddler care system. Assessment facilitates understanding of how infants and toddlers develop and provides some indication of what supports they may need. Best practices in infant toddler assessment indicate that an authentic approach includes families, provides adequate professional development for teachers conducting assessments, and involves observation of infants and toddlers in real-world activities (National Research Council, 2012). Optimal selection and use of assessment tools begins with aligning tools to parents' developmental priorities. These priorities, along with those of teachers, guide preferences for what validated assessments should measure and how findings are used in everyday settings (Harkness et al., 2020).

California has an opportunity to maximize the value of its existing assessment tool, the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) for Infants and Toddlers. Strategic investments in teacher preparation and support could dramatically enhance the effectiveness of this mandatory assessment. By addressing the needs revealed in a recent study initiated by Tipping Point Community (Tipping Point), California can better equip its infant toddler workforce to implement the DRDP, ultimately improving outcomes for its youngest learners.

California's Infant Toddler Workforce

Experts in the early care and education workforce have conducted prolific research on the need for greater training and education among providers and teachers. California's infant toddler workforce grapples with a unique set of challenges that demand urgent attention. These dedicated professionals earn \$1.05 less on average than their preschool counterparts, while simultaneously receiving less preparation for their crucial roles (Austin, 2018). This disparity stems from limited focus on infants and toddlers in higher education, unsupportive work environments, and insufficient data to inform policy decisions. Despite these obstacles, the workforce boasts remarkable multilingual wealth, with nearly half of center-based staff and over half of family childcare providers being multilingual or monolingual in a non-English language. However, the high cost of providing infant care, combined with low compensation, has led to high turnover rates and facility closures, further straining the system. As California expands TK for 4-year-olds, a shift towards increased infant toddler care is anticipated, underscoring the critical need for a robust, high-quality infrastructure supported by a competent and well-supported workforce.

Infant Toddler Developmental Assessment Study

Tipping Point, a Bay Area foundation supportive of early childhood investments, initiated a study of infant toddler teachers' use of the DRDP assessment after hearing three grantees express challenges implementing the tool and using its findings in everyday practice. Grantees, all Early Head Start programs serving children and families in the Bay Area, specifically noted the following difficulties:

- Identifying explicit actions to support children at each age
- Mitigating the likelihood that teachers across classrooms and sites may subjectively complete the DRDP assessment
- Consistently applying DRDP findings to inform program-level quality improvement

The study was framed by a codesign approach in which the project team convened the grantees and Tipping Point in shared decision making and analysis. The project design and study sample are summarized in exhibits 1-3 of the appendix.

Findings

Findings are organized below according to the typical categories designers use in describing user experience (Chen et al., 2020). Data are derived from the study's leadership focus groups and teacher survey. The appendix contains a description of research design and data collection participants.

Comfort With Assessment

Teachers reported a high degree of overall comfort with conducting child assessments.

- A little over half of respondents ($n = 33$, 51 percent), indicated "high" comfort.
- No respondents selected "very low" or "low" comfort.

Practical Knowledge of Infant Toddler Development

Teachers reported being less comfortable assessing infants than toddlers.

- A greater number of respondents indicated that they were comfortable assessing toddlers than those reporting comfort assessing infants.

- Very few teachers reported being uncomfortable assessing toddlers in each domain, but several teachers reported that they were uncomfortable assessing infants.

Usability and Accessibility

Teachers appreciated the DRDP as a foundational tool for supporting quality infant toddler observation by providing a structured framework for aligning their observations with specific developmental measures; however, they also reported interpretation and implementation challenges.

- The DRDP examples helped teachers document what they observed and understand where those observations fit within the broader context of child development.
- Teachers reported challenges with the DRDP's ability to capture the full range of behaviors and developmental milestones for each child.
- Due to the variability in children's behavior and the developmental nuances of infant toddler development, it was difficult for teachers to observe and document every measure outlined in the DRDP.
- Teachers also found themselves having to infer or extrapolate ratings from limited observations due to low attendance, which can affect the accuracy and reliability of the assessment.
- Logistical challenges to achieving quality observation included the DRDP's strict timelines for data entry and reliance on parental input for children who are absent for extended periods.
- Teachers expressed a desire for flexibility in the administration of the DRDP, allowing for extensions or modifications to the assessment timeline.

Infant Toddler Teacher Preparation and Ongoing Training for Assessment

Focus group participants reported insufficient assessment training, education, and prior experience among applicants for infant toddler teacher roles.

- Participants identified the ability to observe infant toddler development in children's everyday activity as critical to infant toddler teacher competence.
- Finding teacher candidates with observational skills was rare due to an overall teacher shortage.
- The dearth of observation skills in candidates led to a reliance on on-the-job training and the hiring of many recent college graduates with little practical experience.
- Participants reported that new hires lacked technological proficiency, affecting their ability to enter observations into Learning Genie.¹

¹ Learning Genie is a digital assessment and portfolio management system designed for early childhood education. In the context of the DRDP, Learning Genie provides educators with tools to efficiently collect, organize, and analyze observational data on children's developmental progress. It streamlines the DRDP assessment process, allowing for real-time documentation, progress tracking, and report generation, thus supporting data-driven decision-making.

- One program provided an 8-hour introductory training focusing on the process of implementing the DRDP but provided nothing on its developmental content.
- Despite these efforts, challenges remained, such as the relevancy of observations to specific developmental measures and the need for more targeted training to address these gaps.
- Leaders recognized the need for establishing a “train the trainer” approach to build internal capacity for ongoing professional development and advocate for resources that support a deeper understanding of the DRDP’s application.

Implementation in Daily Routine

Focus group participants and teachers used data to individualize curriculum planning, identifying areas where children excel and where they may need additional support.

- Focus group participants reported that using a data-driven approach allowed them to target interventions and develop specific goals for each child.
- Focus group participants emphasized that sharing DRDP data with families was an essential part of the assessment process.
- Only 64 percent of teachers reported seeking parent/family input to include in their DRDP observations.
- Teachers who said that they did not share summaries of DRDP results back with parents/families indicated that it was because they were not required to do so ($n = 6$), not sure how best to do so ($n = 3$), or did not have time to review DRDP results ($n = 1$).

How Teachers Reported Using DRDP Results

Set goals for individual children ($n = 59, 98\%$)

Inform choices of classroom activities, materials, and interactions that support individual children’s development ($n = 58, 98\%$)

Set program-level goals ($n = 54, 92\%$)

Inform making referrals to early intervention ($n = 52, 87\%$)

Share summaries of results back with parents/families ($n = 51, 84\%$)

Effectiveness and Reliability

Teachers reported on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the DRDP for assessing the development of children in various subgroups.

- Around two-thirds of teachers indicated that the DRDP works very well or extremely well for most subgroups (e.g., children older than 18 months).
- Twenty-seven percent of teachers indicated that they feel the DRDP does not work well or at all for children who have experienced trauma.

- One focus group participant noted that while the DRDP is intended to drive outcomes and inform educational strategies, the tool's variability in its application and low level of consistency among raters limits its utility for program-level assessment.
- The challenges of assessing developmental progress with the DRDP have led some programs to supplement it with other assessments, such as the Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDI) for language and literacy (for older children), highlighting the need for a multifaceted approach to program evaluation.

Discussion

Teachers reported the current design of the DRDP tool presents logistical and technical hurdles that hamper its potential benefits as an assessment. Many infant toddler teachers enter the field lacking essential observational skills, knowledge of infant toddler development, and technological proficiency. Optimal use of the DRDP to achieve quality learning outcomes requires investments from multiple sources, including advocacy bodies, California state departments, WestEd, and teacher credentialing bodies. Infant toddler teachers expressed serious concerns about the DRDP's ability to capture the full process of development and its strict timelines for data entry. Specifically, teachers wanted more time to get to know infants and toddlers before rating them. This study found that infant toddler teachers reported significant relief from these challenges with the introduction of a codesigned tool supplementing DRDP observations and ratings in one domain. Participants further reported the need to build similar supplemental tools for the remaining DRDP domains.

The data and user experiences captured in this study highlight the need to bolster support and guidance for California's multilingual and economically and racially marginalized infant toddler workforce. This longstanding need will only increase as expansion of infant toddler services is expected to rise with the ongoing implementation of statewide TK. The insights gleaned from this study mirror broader concerns voiced by national advocates who identified a need for increased availability of public child health indicators. These data, they assert, are critical to policies that support infant toddler development (Ryberg et al., 2022).

Infant toddler teachers are invested in developing their capacity to use the DRDP to identify specific areas of need. The multilingual and racially diverse participants in this study codesigned quantitative and qualitative protocols to investigate their use of the DRDP. They analyzed study findings to codesign and test a supplemental tool supportive of DRDP observations and ratings. This engagement suggests a workforce receptive to capacity-building opportunities and the need to include their voice in designing them.

Engaging families in the DRDP assessment process is valuable, but current practices are inconsistent. Positive uses of DRDP data include individualizing curriculum planning and engaging families in the developmental support process. Potential areas for improvement include the limited involvement of families in the DRDP process, and challenges with effectively integrating DRDP results into program planning. Participants identified language differences, family availability, and comfort with family engagement practices as barriers to consistent engagement. These findings suggest the need to develop a multilingual workforce and include family engagement skills as an aspect of DRDP assessment training.

Call to Action

The expansion of TK to all four-year-olds in the state, backed by substantial legislative support, signals a pivotal shift in California's landscape of early childhood education. It also reveals the need for comprehensive workforce development specific to infant toddler teachers to meet the burgeoning needs of California's youngest residents.

Strategies to meet this need include:

- **Increase funding to provide enhanced training focused on infant toddler quality of care.** Organizations like WestEd need enhanced funding and support to develop and deliver quality training that prepares providers to help meet the developmental needs of infants and toddlers effectively. This includes not only foundational provider education but also specialized training in areas like dual language development and inclusion practices.
- **Prioritize infant toddler workforce improvements by implementing equitable wages and promoting multilingualism.** To attract and retain a skilled and diverse infant toddler workforce, it is imperative to implement policies that promote equitable wages and recognize the multilingual capabilities of the workforce. Such policies will not only support the workforce but also enhance the linguistic and cultural relevance of the care provided and redress the historical marginalization of the predominantly Black and Brown persons working in the early care field.
- **Include infant toddler teachers in designing workforce development improvements to increase the quality of child outcomes.** It is crucial that infant toddler teachers are actively involved in crafting the strategies and solutions that will shape their profession. Their firsthand experience is invaluable in developing effective training programs they will actively use and that improve the quality of care.
- **Strengthen family engagement in DRDP assessments through improved teacher training.** Provide educators with concrete strategies and resources to effectively involve families in the DRDP process. Incorporate family engagement skills into DRDP assessment training, focusing on culturally responsive practices and overcoming common barriers to participation. This

approach will foster stronger partnerships between educators and families, leading to better-coordinated support for children's development, and ultimately, better outcomes.

By implementing these strategies, California can ensure that the implementation of TK is complemented by a robust infrastructure capable of supporting the state's youngest children. This approach will require the collaboration of policymakers, childcare providers, developmental experts, and community advocates to create a sustainable and effective early childhood education system.

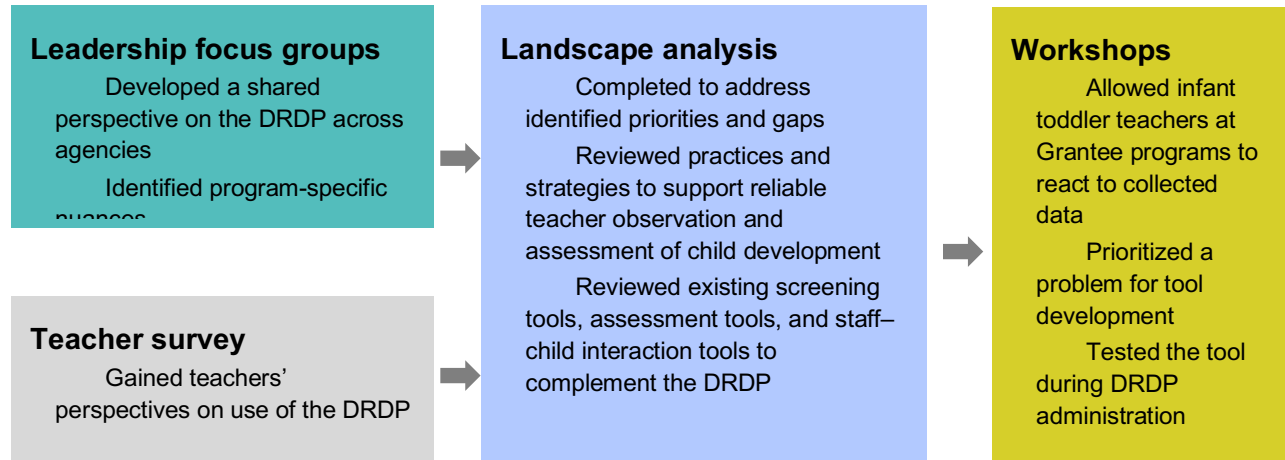
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Appendix

Exhibit 1 describes the process used to codesign this study.

Exhibit 1. Data Collection Activities



Exhibits 2 and 3 describe the participants in the leadership focus groups and survey.

Exhibit 2. Leadership Focus Group Participants *N* = 19

Site	Role	Leadership focus group 1 <i>n</i> = 8	Leadership focus group 2a <i>n</i> = 6	Leadership focus group 2b <i>n</i> = 5
Grantee 1	Administrators	3	3	
Grantee 2	Administrators	2		3
Grantee 3	Teachers	1		2
	Administrators	2	3	

Exhibit 3. Current Title/Position of Survey Respondents *N* = 65

Current position or title	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Associate teacher	9	23
Lead teacher	8	21
Teacher	8	21
Assistant teacher/teacher's assistant/assistant	5	13
Teacher I	2	5
Teacher II	2	5
Toddler teacher	2	5
Master teacher	1	3
BA	1	3
CDA	1	3

Note: Not all respondents wrote in their current position or title, so percentages are calculated out of the total number of respondents who provided a title (*n* = 39). This means that the current position/title is unknown for 40 percent of the total survey respondents.

When asked if the DRDP is effective with key subgroups survey respondents responded as summarized in exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4. Effectiveness of DRDP in Assessing Subgroups of Children

How well do you think the DRDP works for assessing development of children who:	Not well at all	Slightly well	Moderately well	Very well	Extremely well
Are dual language learners	1 (2%)	4 (7%)	16 (26%)	25 (41%)	15 (25%)
Have IFSPs	2 (3%)	7 (12%)	14 (23%)	26 (43%)	11 (18%)
Are younger than 18 months old (infants)	5 (9%)	2 (4%)	11 (19%)	31 (54%)	8 (14%)
Are older than 18 months old (toddlers)	0 (0%)	4 (7%)	13 (22%)	29 (48%)	14 (23%)
Have experienced trauma	14 (27%)	4 (8%)	12 (24%)	17 (33%)	4 (8%)

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Disclaimer

The opinions expressed here are those of the individual researchers and do not necessarily represent the views of Tipping Point or the grantees who participated in this project.

