

# Apples and Oranges: Family Child Care Homes Shift the Thorny Knot's Paradigm

BLOG POST



By **Bela Moté**

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*To facilitate interaction among ideas presented in [Moving Beyond False Choices for Early Childhood Educators](#), Series Editor Stacie G. Goffin offers opening comments. For readers new to the Series, her [introduction](#) explains the series' intent.*

*The series' last three blogs, authored by [Valora Washington](#), [Nilsa Ramirez](#), and [Lauren Hogan](#), challenged us to become more introspective about our behaviors, intentions, and choices. Bela Moté shifts the series back to an "external lens" by urging us to view center-based and family child care settings as "apples and oranges" whose differences necessitate a different approach to ECE's thorny knot. Reminding us of arguments made earlier by family child care provider [Josephine Queen](#) and All Our Kin CEO [Jessica Sager](#), Moté contends that*

*addressing the two settings as synonymous is like "trying to force a center-based peg into the family child care hole."*

Many conversations around the professionalization of early childhood education (ECE) as a field of practice revolve around the triad of workforce directives to credential, better compensate, and diversify. However, I find these conversations tend to ignore the unique circumstances that family child care providers confront in this regard. If ECE continues to approach these expectations solely through the lens of center-based care, though, or by trying to force a center-based peg into the family child care hole, family child care providers will continue to be slighted, along with the children and families they serve.

As CEO of the Carole Robertson Center for Learning on Chicago's West Side, I have gained an appreciation for how the underlying logic of **ECE's thorny knot** shifts in the context of family child care. As a field, we need to realize that a host of assumptions are embedded in the knot analogy that derive from the status of the center-based model. For example, when discussing compensation, we typically are referring to salaries and benefits. When talking about bachelor's degrees, we usually are referring to ECE degrees. And when advocating for a diverse workforce, we mostly are thinking of individuals who wear the familiar hat of "educator." While largely the case for center-based sites, these assumptions overlook the fact that family child care homes are businesses.

The ECE field needs to expand beyond its center-based stance if it wants to ensure solutions to its thorny knot increase access to high-quality ECE for children in family child care settings as well as in center-based programs. As **Sager** writes, family child care homes are an essential resource, in particular for economically vulnerable families that, for cultural or geographical reasons, prefer the intimate environment of home care for their child.

Several previous series' authors, however, have conflated this sensitivity with an assumption that the field's thorny knot exists in similar, if not more acute, form in family child care settings. **Sager**, for instance, contends that **family child care providers are unlikely to reap compensation commensurate to their degree**, while **Doucet** argues that a degree requirement will hurt diversity amongst family child care providers, especially for women of color.

I disagree with these assessments, though, because they rely on a narrow understanding of home providers. I have learned from leading an organization that has operated a family child care home network for over two decades that, in fact, this delivery model has more flexibility than center-based programs to accommodate the field's growing decree for credentials and degrees, increased compensation, and sustainable diversity. But for this potential to be realized, home providers have to be understood as more than educators; their settings have to be acknowledged as small, independent businesses, and they have to be recognized as small business owners.

Recognition of the additional responsibility, however, requires a fuller accounting of what compensation means for home providers. Obviously, more than salaries and benefits are involved because the home setting involves revenues and expenses. This is where the network concept increasingly in vogue becomes key: a network model, also commonly known as a **shared services model**, can leverage economies of scale, providing budget relief for items that would be analogous to capital expenses in a center-based setting. This model can also reduce or eliminate costs for marketing and recruitment, back-office equipment and support, supplies, trainings, and professional development, line item expenses easily forgotten if we ignore that family child care homes are businesses. A network model can not only increase the revenue available to providers, it can also allow their businesses to expand and boast new offerings. It also allows the network's "home office" to solicit funding opportunities oriented towards economic and workforce development.

The implications of this broadened perspective applies to the **thorny knot's** credentialing and diversity threads, too. Many home providers, with **Tracy Elbert** being just one example, tout the importance of ECE degrees. Others enter the field already having bachelor's degrees in other fields, such as business or psychology, adding to the field's diversity. While the subject-matter content of an ECE degree is important, I believe home providers offer proof that a requirement for bachelor's degrees in ECE may represent another example of one-size-fits-all thinking that warrants revisiting. I would advocate instead for ECE bachelor's degree programs with a business administration component for family child providers and, as **Josephine Queen** suggests, course credit for experiential learning. This would allow providers to find their voice and identities as small business owners as well as educators.

When it comes to **the field's thorny knot**, I think ECE has two choices. It can recognize the distinctive context and potential of family child care providers or it can continue to ignore the sector's distinctions from its center-based colleagues. If we grab the first horn, we can expand opportunities to provide families who prefer home providers with quality options. And if the ECE field truly wishes to serve families no matter their program choice, inclusion of family child care voices as both educators and business owners will move this conversation forward.

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