



Degrees in Context: Asking the Right Questions about Preparing Skilled and Effective Teachers of Young Children

by Marcy Whitebook, Ph.D. and Sharon Ryan, Ed.D.

Preschool teachers play a critical role in children's development yet there is little agreement about how to codify teacher knowledge and skill. Although much attention has been given to debating the baseline of qualifications required of preschool teachers (e.g., AA vs. BA), the field has largely failed to take into account the precise nature of the education that teachers have received en route to their degrees, support for ongoing learning, and the effects of the workplace environment on their teaching practice. This fact sheet summarizes these issues and the recommendations presented in NIEER's policy brief.



National Institute for
Early Education Research

73 Easton Avenue
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Tel 848 932-4350
Fax 732 932-4360
www.nieer.org

A joint publication with
the Center for the Study of
Child Care Employment

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF

Child Care Employment

2521 Channing Way, #5555
Berkeley, CA 94720-5555
Tel 510 643-8293
Fax 510 642-6432
cscceinfo@berkeley.edu

What We Know:

- There is a serious mismatch between the expectations we place on early childhood teachers, and the quality and relevance of available preparation, supports for learning on the job, and compensation and benefits.
- Relatively little research has examined the content and quality of teacher preparation programs, making it difficult to identify aspects of formal education that enhance effectiveness.
- Teaching efficacy is shaped by the adult work environment, which is seldom considered in research about teacher quality. How well teachers interact with children requires attention to adult learning and well-being in the workplace.
- States vary considerably in the extent to which they have developed early educator competencies and whether their institutions of higher learning have incorporated them into their curricula and certification programs for teachers.

Policy Recommendations:

- Support policies that connect what we expect in terms of teacher competencies with credentials and the quality of environments in which teachers learn and work.
- Revamp the content and structure of teacher higher education and professional development to include more practice-based opportunities and integrate a focus on areas related to brain research, language acquisition, and diversity.
- Strengthen the requirements for teacher educators to ensure their attainment of the necessary knowledge, experience, and skills to prepare teachers of young children.
- Help states develop longitudinal data systems that track workforce demographics and educational characteristics to identify challenges, track progress, and develop policies to address chronic problems like low wages, high turnover, and inadequate access to training and education.
- Expand workforce research focused on the effectiveness of higher education programs, professional development approaches, and work environments to support teachers' ongoing learning.

The Debate over Pre-K Teacher Qualifications

Despite the widespread consensus that preschool teachers play a critical role in the lives of young children, no such agreement exists about how to codify teacher knowledge and skill. The available evidence has yet to resolve the issue definitively, offering insufficient guidance to those making hard choices about investments in early learning programs.

Based on numerous studies, many reviewers have concluded that, in general, young children have better experiences that contribute more to their learning and development when their teachers have higher levels of education. Yet several recent studies have led others to re-examine the emphasis on college degrees for ECE teachers. The discrepancies in findings and interpretations can be attributed to three limitations of the available research: the wide variability of study designs and purposes; the quality and content of teacher education; and the environments in which teaching practice occurs.

Variation in design and research purposes. The studies examined as evidence in the debate about teacher qualifications were not designed to explicitly answer the question of what is the baseline level of teacher education needed to ensure program quality and effectiveness. As teacher education and qualifications are only one of several variables being studied, it is not possible to determine from the data presented whether it is the degree itself or the cluster of variables within a program that contribute to program quality. In short, without research that is specifically designed to disentangle the effects of teacher education from the effects of other program features, it is not possible to definitively recommend an optimal level of education based on its benefits.

Quality and content of teacher education. Research examining the relationship between teacher education, program quality, and child outcomes has tended to focus narrowly on the quantity of teachers' formal education. Relatively little work has examined the content and quality of this teacher preparation.

Early childhood teacher education often takes place in university schools of education—typically geared more toward teaching children covering a wider age span in the early elementary grades than preschool—but also in other schools or departments, such as child development, human development, psychology, or family and consumer sciences. The few studies exploring the academic content of these difference approaches identify insufficient attention to issues related to language acquisition and dual language learning; understanding and working with infants and toddlers, children with special needs, and those from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds; as well as working with co-workers, families, and colleagues across disciplines and from varied cultures and communities.

There is almost no mention of student teaching experiences in studies examining the relationships among early childhood teacher characteristics, practice, and child outcomes, yet a growing body of evidence suggests that longer student teaching experiences, coupled with concurrent theoretical coursework, are associated with teachers' increased ability to apply learning to practice for older children.

Current research indicates that the number and expertise of faculty mediates the content and delivery of programs of preparation. Nearly one-third of faculty members in ECE teacher preparation programs have no experience working with children prior to kindergarten, and many do

not have specific academic preparation in early childhood education. Early childhood programs within institutions of higher education also employ fewer full-time faculty and have lower faculty-to-student ratios.

Quality of the work environment and effective teacher practices.

Recent studies suggest that ECE professional development that involves coaching leads to more changes in teacher behavior than programs implemented without coaching. Yet mentoring and induction opportunities are much less available for ECE teachers. Additionally, many work environments do not offer the supports that encourage and allow for more effective teacher practices, such as paid planning time and professional development opportunities.

Wages and benefits for early childhood professionals remain among the lowest of any occupation, contributing to problems that impact quality, such as high turnover and declining educational levels among teachers. Strikingly, many of the studies examining teacher education did not take into account the effect of wages and benefits, which have been linked to program stability and quality, teacher behavior, and child outcomes.

Conclusion. Insufficient consideration of the complexities of education and the work environment calls for new directions in research and policy directed toward teacher performance. It is necessary to expand the debate beyond the baseline of necessary qualifications to how to improve the quality of teacher education programs. It is also critical that closer attention is paid to developing workplace policies that support teachers to be able to consistently perform well and to continue to learn and improve.