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Report # 98

Teachers' Education and Preschool Quality

December 2007

**Teachers' Education
And
Quality Learning**

Raising Preschool Quality

Teachers' degrees don't guarantee better classrooms

Quality teaching is almost always the centerpiece of policy initiatives aimed at making sure preschool-aged children enter school ready to learn and improving the learning experiences they encounter in the early grades. And in most cases, the measure of quality is the level of a teacher's education.

In early education, the trend is to require that teachers have at least a bachelor's degree. But while better-educated teachers certainly offer benefits, research suggests that the focus on teachers' education alone does not guarantee improved preschool classrooms or better academic outcomes among students.

In the United States, 17 of the 38 states that support pre-kindergarten programs require lead teachers to at least have a bachelor's degree.¹ Twelve others require at least some of a program's teachers to have a bachelor's degree.

The emphasis on preschool teachers' education has foundations in research. Most childcare studies suggest that higher levels of teacher education is generally associated with higher quality in center-based care. However, there is no conclusive evidence that a teacher with a Bachelor's degree or any other specific level of education will always produce a high-quality classroom.

Degree Not Enough

A recent study in the journal *Child Development* that examined seven major studies of early care and education reported that a teacher's level education is an unreliable tool for predicting classroom quality and the academic outcomes of 4-year-olds.

On one hand, evidence that better-educated teachers had higher quality classrooms was found in two of the studies, including a national study that examined the effectiveness of Early Head Start programs.

That study found that classrooms taught by teachers with a graduate degree had higher Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) scores than classrooms taught by teachers with a Bachelor's degree. It also reported that students taught by teachers with a Bachelor's degree had higher scores than students taught by teachers with an Associate's degree.

However, four other early childhood studies reported little evidence to support an association between teachers' education and classroom quality.

Among the studies that included a pre-reading measure for students, for example, two reported that children's

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scores were modestly higher when teachers had a Bachelor's degree, but three others found no association between pre-reading scores and teachers' highest level of education. When math skills were examined, five of the seven studies reported no association between children's early math skills and whether the teacher had a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Caution Urged

Researchers cautioned that the findings should not be considered an indictment of teacher education. Instead, the results likely reflect the current realities in the field and suggest that teachers' education should be considered one part of a system of factors that contribute to teacher quality, classroom quality and children's academic gains.

One possible reason cited by the researchers for the weak associations between teacher education and classroom quality may be that the teacher prepara-

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tion system does not adequately prepare teachers to teach preschoolers. For example, the U.S. Department of Education only recently raised the standards for research on effective educational practices and it is likely that many veteran teachers were not exposed to studies using the new standards.

Also, a review of K-12 teachers suggests that the research base for coursework, methods and pedagogy in teacher preparation programs is lacking.² This may also be true in the early childhood field.

Researchers also suggest that forming trusting, respectful relationships with students may be underemphasized in the preparation of early childhood teachers.

Teachers also do not work in a vacuum. Even the most highly skilled need adequate materials, curricular support, skilled teaching assistants and a physical setting suited to the needs of young children to be effective. Also, lower wages typical of preschool programs may lead the best teachers with a Bachelor's degree to take better-paying elementary school jobs.

Raising Child Care Quality

In Pennsylvania, recent initiatives have shown some promise in improving the knowledge of child care providers, raising the quality of their programs and contributing to educational gains among young children.

A recent study, for example, suggests that the Keystone STARS program helped to reverse a near decade-long decline in the quality of child care in the state. The initiative of the Department of Public Welfare's Office of Child Development uses incentives, support and assistance to encourage providers to improve the quality of their early care and education programs.

Among Pennsylvania child care centers, the higher the STARS level providers achieved, the higher their quality scores were. Overall, Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) scores ranged from 4.11 for centers at the STARS entry level to 5.42 for those at the highest STARS level. The average ERS scores for child care centers not participating in STARS was 3.94.³

The study also reported that teachers with college degrees provided higher quality early education and care.

In western Pennsylvania, Keystone STARS was an essential part of the Strengthening Early Learning Supports (SELS) project that improved the quality

and quantity of early learning opportunities in four at-risk neighborhoods.

One successful SELS strategy was to assign coaches to work individually with providers to encourage their participation in Keystone STARS and provide them with support in raising the quality of their programs.

Before SELS, only eight of 123 neighborhood child care providers were participating in Keystone STARS. At the end of the 17-month SELS project, 84 providers were enrolled in the Keystone STARS quality system.⁴



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Children, Youth & Families background is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), a program of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

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