



Wanted: Good Teachers

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Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications

by W. Steven Barnett

Once they begin kindergarten, America's children are taught by professionals with at least a four-year college degree. Prior to kindergarten their teachers are far less prepared. Fewer than half of preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree, and many never even attended college.

New research indicates that young children's learning and development depend on the educational qualifications of their teachers. The most effective preschool teachers have at least a four-year college degree and specialized training in early childhood. Despite a substantial body of evidence, public policy has yet to fully recognize the value of well-educated, professional, early education teachers.

What We Know

- Better-educated preschool teachers with specialized training are more effective.
- Preschool programs employing teachers with four-year college degrees have been shown to be highly effective and good economic investments for the taxpayer.
- Low educational qualifications and a lack of specific preparation in preschool limit the educational effectiveness of many preschool teachers.
- In 19 out of 38 states that finance pre-k educational requirements for prekindergarten teachers are lower than for kindergarten teachers.
- The federal government's Head Start program has lower educational requirements for teachers than most state pre-kindergarten programs.
- Leading educators and researchers have called for improved educational standards for preschool teachers.
- Better compensation is required to hire and retain more effective teachers.

Policy Recommendations

- Require publicly funded preschool teachers to have a four-year college degree and specialized training.
- Ensure that colleges and universities prepare new teachers and provide sustained professional development for those already teaching based on the best science regarding what and how to teach young children.
- Design programs enabling current early education teachers to get a four-year degree.
- Pay preschool teachers salaries and benefits comparable to those of similarly qualified teachers in K-12 education.
- Support the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)/National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards for new programs to prepare preschool teachers.
- Develop state policies to ensure that more capable teachers are maximizing their effectiveness in the classroom.

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Preschool Policy Matters

This brief defines preschools as center-based programs that provide educational experiences for children during the years preceding kindergarten. They can be located in a child care center, state prekindergarten, private nursery school, or Head Start center.

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Summary

High-quality preschool education produces substantial long-term educational, social, and economic benefits. But research finds large benefits occur only when teachers are professionally prepared and adequately compensated. Unfortunately, most of America's preschool programs are not required to hire teachers who meet even the most basic professional requirements, nor could they afford to without increased funding.

teachers and specialized training in early childhood education predict teaching quality and children's learning and development.¹ However, fewer than half of all early education teachers hold a four-year degree, and many have no college education.² In most states, a high school diploma is all a person needs to teach in a licensed child care center.³ As a result, many preschool teachers are not adequately prepared to be educationally effective.

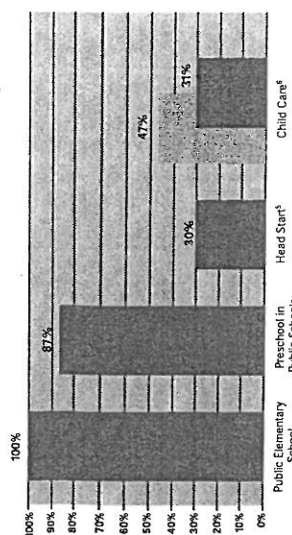
If a college degree is considered essential for teaching 5-year-olds in kindergarten, why isn't it required for teaching 3- and 4-year-olds? Apparently, many people are unaware of the evidence, and there is a reluctance to view preschool teachers as professionals and pay them accordingly.⁴ Yet, analyses of what we expect of preschool teachers

This brief looks at current educational requirements for preschool teachers, reviews the evidence on the importance of professional preparation, and provides key recommendations for policy makers.

Professional Preparation

Numerous studies have found that the education levels of preschool

Percentage of Teachers with BA Degrees



Estimates of the percentage of teachers with a BA degree in Child Care centers range from 31% to 47%.

and their actual performance suggest that the minimum qualification for a preschool teacher should be a four-year degree with specialized training teaching young children.

Adequate Compensation

Research regularly finds that preschool teacher quality and effective teaching are strongly linked to compensation. Poor pay and benefits make it difficult to recruit and hire professional early education teachers. In addition, poor compensation contributes to high turnover, which harms educational effectiveness and wastes the resources spent on teacher preparation and continuing education.¹ We stand to lose far more in educational benefits than we save by underpaying preschool teachers.

What qualifications do preschool teachers need now?

The nation has yet to fully appreciate the importance of high standards for preschool teacher knowledge and expertise, as it does for K-12 teachers. This is evident in the minimal requirements for early childhood teachers in Head Start and many state preschool and child care programs. Early childhood teacher qualifications are low relative to other professions and have not been improving over time.²

Other industrialized countries have more rigorous qualifications for their preschool teachers than we do in the United States. For example, most 3- and 4-year-olds in France attend public schools in which teachers are required to have the equivalent of a master's degree.³

America's preschools vary widely in teacher education requirements, to some extent because standards vary across the different government agencies that sponsor and regulate Head Start, public school, and other

preschool and child care programs. The consequence is that preschool education is less effective than it should be, and educational effectiveness varies depending on the government agency responsible.⁴

Preschool programs operated by public schools employ the best-educated teachers. Nearly 90% of preschool teachers in public school programs have at least a four-year college degree.⁵ Typically they have degrees that require specialized preparation in early childhood education. Most early childhood teachers in public schools have a teaching credential or license that has requirements beyond completing a bachelor's degree, such as taking additional courses in teaching methods, having had supervised teaching experiences, and passing a test of teaching knowledge and skills.

State-funded prekindergarten programs are not always provided through the public schools, however, and vary in whether they require a four-year degree or a teaching credential. Of the 44 state pre-school programs operating in 2002-2003, only 23 required all lead teachers to have a BA. Eight additional programs required teachers to have a BA when teaching in the public schools, but did not extend this requirement to teachers outside public school settings.⁶

Until recently, the federal government's Head Start program did not require teachers to have any higher education. Fewer than one-third of Head Start's teachers have at least a four-year college degree.⁷ Others have some college and many have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, which may not require college coursework.

- Current qualifications for early education teachers**
- *Forty-two states require no more formal education than a high school diploma for teachers in child care centers.*
 - *France requires the equivalent of a master's degree.*

Congress has increased the accountability of Head Start for enhancing children's school readiness. However, it was reluctant to substantially increase standards for Head Start teachers, requiring only that half of all teachers have a two-year college degree by 2003. Until Head Start teacher qualifications and compensation are raised, it is unlikely to fully produce the large educational gains for disadvantaged children that was the impetus for the creation of Head Start, based on studies of high-quality preschool programs.⁸

Government regulation and funding for child care provide little support for teacher quality, with the lowest teacher education standards of any early childhood program. As a result, compensation is poor and teacher qualifications are highly variable. Less than half the teachers in child care centers have four-year college degrees, and many teachers have just a high school education. More teachers in child care centers have just a high school education than in Head Start or other public programs.⁹

Forty-two states require no formal education beyond a high school diploma for teachers in child care centers. Many of the states require some kind of early childhood-specific preparation, but this can be as little as a few hours of training. Only two states (California and New Hampshire) have a minimum requirement that includes training obtained through college courses.

What does research tell us about the link between teacher qualifications and child development?

Preschool teachers with a college education tend to be more effective. Studies have found teacher education to be related to the quality of preschool

education and the development of children in preschool classrooms. Both general education and specific preparation in early childhood education have been found to predict teaching quality. Better-educated teachers have more positive, sensitive and responsive interactions with children, provide richer language and cognitive experiences, and are less authoritarian, punitive and detached. The result is better social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development for the child.¹⁰

*Several studies of state-supported preschool programs have found that quality is higher in programs where more teachers have at least a four-year college degree.*¹¹ The higher quality of preschool programs in the public schools is plausibly related to better pay and benefits that enables them to hire teachers with at least a BA. Teachers with four-year degrees also have been found to be better teachers in Head Start.¹²

Multi-state studies of child care lead to similar conclusions. In a study of 621 preschool classrooms, Phillipsen and colleagues found that the percentage of teachers with a four-year college degree was related to preschool classroom quality as measured by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and to teacher warmth, attentiveness, and engagement.¹³

Using data from two massive studies, Howes examined the effects of four levels of teacher education on teaching quality and child development. She found that higher education was associated with better teaching and better language acquisition. Also, children whose teachers had four-year degrees engaged in more creative activities.

Overall, "teachers with the most advanced education and training appear to be the most effective."¹⁴



Another study compared the teaching of teachers who had four different levels of education and training (including one with four semesters of specific college coursework in early education).

Teacher preparation in early childhood education was effective in improving teacher behavior, but teachers with four-year degrees in early education were found to be distinct from all three other groups. They expressed greater warmth for the children and greater enthusiasm for the activities they engaged in, they communicated more clearly with children, and they encouraged children to share and cooperate with their peers. They were less punitive with the children. . . [and] exhibited less apathetic and uninterested behavior.²¹

Disadvantaged children have less access to high-quality teachers through whom they may benefit the most from teacher quality.

All studies have limitations, and not every study finds that teacher education and training influence educational quality and child development. While the failure to find a relationship between professional preparation and teaching quality or child outcomes may result from study flaws in some cases, it should be recognized that teacher qualifications alone cannot guarantee effective teaching. Poor pay, poor work conditions, classes that are too large, inadequate leadership, and a lack of instructional focus are all problems that can block good teachers and good teaching, whatever the formal qualifications required. However, many studies with a variety of strengths and weaknesses lead to the conclusion that professionally prepared teachers are generally necessary (but not sufficient) for highly effective preschool education.²²

One recent report from the NICHD child care study found that teacher's educational attainment predicted

teacher behaviors that in turn predicted children's achievement and social development controlling for the direct and indirect effects of mother's education, parenting behavior, and family economic circumstances.

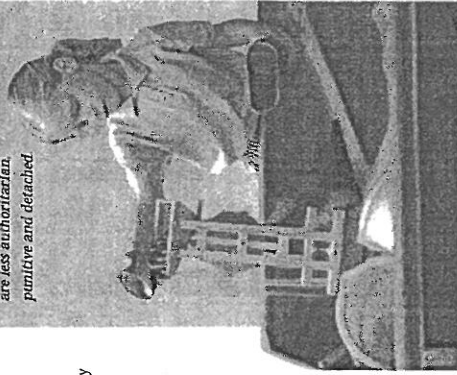
The United States will provide its children with the quality of preschool education they deserve only when it raises the qualifications needed to teach at this level and offers compensation consistent with our expectations for these teachers and the importance of their work.

Another recent NICHD report found that teacher education influences children's achievement at age 4 controlling for a prior achievement, type of child care, and a wide range of child and family characteristics.²³

Confidence in this conclusion also derives from the simple logic that explains this pattern of findings. Better-educated teachers have more knowledge and skills. This makes them more effective teachers for many reasons. For example, they:

- have larger vocabularies to which young children are exposed
- are better at constructing and individualizing lesson plans
- are better problem solvers when they encounter challenges in the classroom such as a child with a learning difficulty or a child upset by a death in the family.

And, teachers who have been taught what young children need to learn and how to teach them are likely to spend more time conducting rich learning activities that address each child's needs and less time in unproductive and inappropriate activities.



Better-educated teachers have more positive, sensitive and responsive interactions with children, provide richer language and cognitive experiences, and are less authoritarian, punitive and detached.

NAEYC Standards (2001) Early Childhood Professionals Must Know How To

- Promote child development and learning by creating learning environments based on a deep understanding of children's needs and development.
- Build relationships with family and community that support and involve them in children's education.
- Systematically employ observation, documentation and assessment to positively influence children's development and learning.
- Promote learning and development by integrating knowledge of relationships with children and families; a wide array of effective educational approaches; content, knowledge in each area of young children's learning; and how to build a meaningful curriculum.

Support for the conclusion that preschool teacher education is important for educational effectiveness is also provided by other closely related research literatures.

Research on families has established strong links between parental education, parenting practices, and the preschool child's learning and development.²⁴

Research on programs specifically developed to study the effects of high-quality preschool education on disadvantaged children demonstrates that such programs produce larger gains in children's knowledge and abilities than the lower-quality programs that are too often provided to even our most disadvantaged young children.²⁵

Low quality is linked to poor compensation. Poor pay and benefits make it difficult to recruit and hire good early education teachers. And poor compensation contributes to high turnover, which harms educational quality and wastes the resources spent on teacher preparation and continuing education.²⁶

Benefit-cost analyses demonstrate that preschool programs employing well-paid, well-prepared teachers can be sound public investments.²⁷ Two rigorous long-term studies with "gold standard" experimental designs and another with a strong quasi-experimental design found that preschool programs for children from economically disadvantaged families produced economic benefits that far exceed costs. Two programs were operated by the public schools and served children at ages three and four. They employed only certified teachers with at least a BA degree.

The third was the Abecedarian program, which served children from birth to age five in a university-based child development center. Some Abecedarian teachers had MA and BA degrees, others had demonstrated skill and competencies as teachers of young children in lieu of formal qualifications.

In all three studies, preschool teacher compensation was comparable to that of K-12 teachers in the public schools. Yet, all three generated strongly positive economic returns for society.

On the other hand, lower-quality preschool programs with less qualified, more poorly paid teachers have much smaller effects on learning and development and may not pay-off. Thus, the question taxpayers should be asking is whether America can afford *not* to pay for highly qualified preschool teachers.

Good teaching depends on the teacher's knowledge and skills and not necessarily on formal education. Formal education and training are one way to acquire these knowledge and skills, but similar abilities might be acquired through informal education including on-the-job learning experiences. However, there is ample evidence that experience *per se* is not an effective method of teacher preparation.

Although the Abecedarian program employed some teachers without formal higher education, the program provided constant, intensive training and supervision by curriculum experts and others. Employing teachers without formal educational qualifications is not a means to cut costs because attracting and retaining good teachers still requires adequate compensation, and it may increase supervision costs.

From a policy perspective, it makes sense to rely on a combination of formal educational requirements and demonstrations of knowledge and skills to assure a minimum of quality in new teachers. However, policies also are required to ensure that those capabilities are used effectively and continue to develop after teachers are hired.

Disadvantaged children have less access to high-quality teachers, even though they may benefit the most from teacher quality. Studies from around the nation show that preschool education quality is lower for children from the most disadvantaged families. While there is evidence that quality makes a difference for all children, a number of studies suggest that quality may have larger impacts on the learning and development of children from disadvantaged families.³

What should good preschool teachers know?

The knowledge and skills required of an effective preschool teacher have increased as science has revealed more about the capabilities of young children, how they learn best, and the importance of early learning for later school success.

In addition, the public expects preschool education to enable disadvantaged children to close the achievement gap with their more advantaged peers despite the challenges posed by poverty or limited knowledge of English.⁴

The National Research Council (NRC) report, *Eager to Learn*,⁵ recommends that the minimum standard for teachers of 3- and 4-year-olds should be a four-year college degree, with specialized training in early childhood education. The report says preschool teachers need to know:

- How young children learn and what they need to learn based on an understanding of child development and knowledge in specific subject areas
- How to individualize teaching

based on the temperament, responsiveness, learning style, ability, home language and culture, and other characteristics of each child.

- How to establish effective relationships with young children and their families.
- How to best work with groups of young children.

In 2001, NCAE and NAEYC approved standards to prepare early childhood professionals. They require a four-year college degree and practical experience in which teacher candidates learn and demonstrate the abilities of effective teachers.

The NAEYC standards and a U.S. Department of Education (2000) report, "The Future of Early Childhood Professional Education," emphasize the importance of preparing teachers to educate—in regular early childhood programs—a highly diverse population that includes increasing numbers of children with disabilities and children who speak a language other than English at home.⁶

The knowledge and skill required of an effective preschool teacher have increased as science has revealed more about the capabilities of young children, how they learn best, and the importance of early learning for later school success.

Recommendations for Policy Makers and Educators

Qualifications for New Teachers

Require a four-year college degree and specialized training for teachers in Head Start, state prekindergarten programs, and licensed child-care centers serving as the primary providers of education for 3- and 4-year-olds outside the home. Courses to prepare new teachers and professional development for experienced teachers both need to incorporate the best new science on what and how to teach preschool-age children.

Professional Development Support for Current Teachers
Design and subsidize professional development programs that will enable current teachers and assistant teachers to obtain four-year degrees within a reasonable time.

Certification and Regulation
Encourage policy makers and schools of education to use NAEYC/NCAE standards in designing new programs to prepare preschool teachers.

Salary and Benefits

Pay preschool teachers salary and benefits comparable to those of similarly qualified teachers in K-12 education, whether they work in public schools, Head Start, or child care centers. The cost will be offset by savings from reduced teacher turnover and the economic returns to taxpayers from more educationally effective public programs.

Education and Training Institutions
Support institutions of higher education in developing the faculty and programs required to provide the professional development early childhood teachers need. These programs must meet high standards for preparing teachers with knowledge of child development, best teaching practices, and the knowledge and skills required to teach a highly diverse population.

Other Elements of Quality

Well-prepared teachers are one element in a quality program. They make possible, but do not guarantee, highly effective teaching. Other policies are important for quality: decent pay and working conditions, strong leadership and supervision, and a good curriculum.⁷





MA - Associates Degree, BA - Bachelor's Degree, CDA - Child Development Associates Credential, CDA-P - State-recognized, CCP - Certified Childhood Professional, N/A - Not Applicable, * - Please see or contact instructor for pre-req. None - no post-secondary degree requirements.

- The percentage of teachers with a BA degree in Head Start centers is 26% in the Head Start Performance Information Report, 2001. Two surveys of sampling of Head Start programs provide higher estimates: 37% in FACES 2000, Rentfro, C., & Zili, N. (2002). *Relationships of teacher beliefs and qualifications to classroom quality in Head Start*. Paper presented at the 3rd National Conference on Head Start, Washington, DC, and 40% from Sallaia (2002). The survey conducted by Sallaia et al. plausibly adds to overestimation. It is unclear why the FACES estimate would overestimate the percentage to this extent.
19. Sampling on the basis of teachers with a BA degree in child center ranges between 31% in the National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitbeck, 2002), 38% in the Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study (Heburn, 1995), 45% in Sallaia, et al. (2002) and 47% in *A Profile of Child Care Costs, Quality and Outcomes Study Team* (1995). Howes & Brown (2000). Improving child care quality: A guide for Proposition 10 commissions. In N. E. Child Care, E. Shulman, M. Shannon, & M. Hochstein. (Eds.), *Building communities: Improving child care quality*. UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families, and Communities. Phillips, D. A. H. (1993). *Four years in the life of center-based child care: A study of staff and teaching quality revisited*. Washington, DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce. Young, M., & Howes, C. (2001). *Then and now: Changes in child care staffing, 1994-2000* [Technical Report]. Washington, DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce. Edwards, C. (2002). *America's Child Care Problem*. New York, NY: Palgrave. Kisker, E. E., Hofferth, S. L., Phillips, D.S., & Habbert, B. (2002). *A profile of child care settings: Early education and care in 1990*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research. Sallaia, J. (2002). Kisker, E. S. (1998). Long term effects on cognitive development and school success. In W.S. Barnett, W.S. Barnett, & S. Broccolo (Eds.), *Early care and education for children in poverty: Promises, programs, and long-term results*. (pp. 11-44). Albany, NY: SUNY Press. Barnett, E. S. (1989). Barnett, W.S., Tarr, J., Lamy, C., & Frede, E. (2001). *Frailty lines, shattered dreams: A report on implementation of preschool education in New Jersey's Abbott districts*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Rutgers University.
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- " Howes (1997). The sample included 655 classrooms from the Cox, Quality and Outcomes study and 410 classrooms from the Florida Quality Improvement study. The teacher education levels tested were high school only, some early childhood education, an AA degree or CDA (depending on the study), and a BA in early childhood education.
- " Barnett (1998).
- " Limitations in research on the effects of preschool teacher qualifications on education quality and children's learning and development include: to varying degrees, less than ideal sample size; samples that are not randomly selected or nationally representative; imperfect measures of teacher characteristics, quality, learning and child development; inadequate controls for child and family characteristics; and, incorrectly specified statistical models. Some limitations could lead to overestimates of the importance of teacher qualifications, others to underestimates. Examining the strongest studies and comparing their results to those of randomized trials of high-quality preschool education, this reviewer concludes that underestimation is the most common result. At least one researcher, Blau (2001) appears to disagree. He concludes that teacher education does not contribute to teacher effectiveness. However, this view is based on an analysis that considers only variation within a child care center. His analysis also implies that wages do not affect quality, which seems implausible. An alternative view is that Blau's favored analysis mistakenly focuses on variation where the link between teacher education and teacher quality is broken because centers seek to hire teachers of uniform quality regardless of their qualifications on paper (due to financial constraints, market niche, and other factors).
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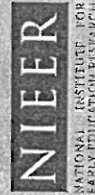
Dr. Barnett's research has focused on the long-term effects of preschool programs on children's learning and development, the educational opportunities and experiences of young children in low-income urban areas, and benefit-cost analyses of preschool programs and their long-term effects. He received his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Michigan. He is a Professor of Education Economics and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

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