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

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Research Notes

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

There is general agreement that the effectiveness of early childhood teachers impacts the learning and developmental outcomes of young children. What determines teaching effectiveness, however, is the subject of much heated debate. Do early educators need a degree to be effective? Is there a difference in efficacy between teachers with an associate or baccalaureate degree? Does a major in early childhood education or child development make a difference?

A recent policy brief jointly published by the National Institute for Early Education Research and the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment argues that the attention given to whether an associate or baccalaureate degree is the appropriate baseline education for a qualified early educator masks equally important questions about the content and quality of the education received, the on-going support for teaching and learning, and the effects of the work environment.¹ The policy brief explores these contextual issues and makes recommendations for policy, resources, or further research.

Research Informing the Policy Debate

Many advocates and policymakers have adopted the BA degree as a proxy measure for high quality teaching. They believe that higher qualifications for early childhood teachers will lead to better developmental outcomes for children. This position is largely drawn from the seminal body of research (Perry Preschool, Abecedarian Project, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers) demonstrating both short- and long-term benefits for disadvantaged children attending preschool programs. In each of these carefully controlled, randomized studies, the teachers had baccalaureate degrees or higher.

The opposing perspective, that the BA degree should not be a prerequisite for teachers in early education programs, is drawn from recent research that finds that the effects of a BA degree over an AA degree are minimal and unpredictable. These studies of publicly-funded preschool programs found contradictory evidence of the association between classroom quality, teachers' education level and major, and child educational outcomes. Even when teacher credentials were associated with student gains in mathematics, there were no gains in other areas of student learning or development. This line of research begs the question of whether the costs exceed the benefits associated with policy promoting a BA degree for early childhood teachers.

Limitations of the Research

The variation in the interpretation of the research findings related to teacher qualifications can be largely attributed to three limitations of the available research.

Variation in design and research purposes

The studies examined as evidence in the debate about teacher qualifications were not specifically designed to address the question of what is the baseline level of teacher education needed to ensure a level of program quality that promotes children's learning and development. Some researchers explored which programs lead to the best long-term outcomes for children with a focus on intensive, multi-service and multi-year programs staffed by BA-level teachers. Other researchers asked whether there was an association between teacher preparation and child outcomes in state-funded prekindergarten programs. Without research that specifically looks at the question of teacher education while controlling for other program variables, it isn't possible to answer the question of the optimal level of education to assure positive child outcomes.

Content and quality of teacher education

Early childhood teacher education occurs within 2-year and 4-year institutions. It is most often provided in schools of education but also in other schools or departments which cover a wider age span, such as child development, psychology, or family and consumer sciences. The existing research exploring academic content has identified certain content areas in need of strengthening: language acquisition and dual language learning, infant and toddler studies, children with special needs, and working with culturally diverse children, families, and colleagues.

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We know little, however, about how the scope and sequence of a teacher's education (whether specialization in early childhood occurs at the 2-year or 4-year level and whether the education is taken as piecemeal courses or as part of a comprehensive program) influences teacher effectiveness. Further, unlike teachers in K-12 settings, teachers in early childhood settings are not often required to complete student teaching as a prerequisite for completing their degrees.

Quality of the work environment

The research base on teacher qualifications has largely ignored any consideration of the adult work environment and the degree to which it supports or undermines the ability of teachers to apply their knowledge and skills. For example, there is little research examining the effect of different staffing patterns or the impact of the qualifications and skill level of co-teachers or the program administrator. Other important contextual information often overlooked in research examining the benefits of teacher education is the degree of support in the workplace for ongoing teacher development through policies related to mentoring or coaching, professional development opportunities, paid planning and meeting time, and the level of compensation and benefits. Many of the studies examining teacher education did not control for the wage effect, which has been repeatedly linked to program stability and quality, teacher behavior, and child outcomes.

What We Know

- There is a significant mismatch between the expectations we have for early childhood teachers, the quality of available teacher preparation, the ongoing supports provided to teachers for teaching and learning, and the compensation and benefits provided.
 - Scant research exists on the content and quality of teacher preparation programs.
 - There is a deficit of teacher educators with experience related to children birth to age five and who reflect the ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity of our nations' young children.
 - The adult work environment has a significant impact on teacher effectiveness.
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Recommendations for Policy, Resources, and Research

To move the debate beyond the baseline qualifications of teachers to how to improve the quality of teacher preparation programs...

- revise the content and structure of higher education to include more practice-based opportunities and focus on brain research, language acquisition, cultural and linguistic diversity, and working with diverse families and colleagues.
 - increase support and professional development for teacher educators.
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To focus attention on workplace policies that support teachers to be able to consistently perform well and to continue to learn and improve...

- promote better work environments as a key ingredient in providing high-quality care and education.
 - identify and test strategies to increase compensation of professionals working with young children.
 - expand professional development and workplace practices that support ongoing learning such as paid planning and meeting time, opportunities to visit other classrooms and programs, and access to a mentor or coach.
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To ensure that policy initiatives achieve their target goals...

- help states develop, maintain, and expand longitudinal data systems, such as registries, that track workforce demographics and educational characteristics to benchmark progress and identify challenges.
 - expand federally funded workforce research focused on the effectiveness of higher education programs, professional development approaches, and work environments to support teachers' ongoing learning.
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It is time to move beyond the either-or debate about baseline qualifications; there is no one single ingredient to ensure effective teaching practice. All teachers need relevant teacher preparation, focused supervision to enhance teaching and learning, and a positive work environment to support high-quality instructional practices. In addition, new policies need to be developed, and resources allocated, that provide the early childhood workforce with compensation commensurate with their education.

References

1. Whitebook, M., & Ryan, S. (2011). Degrees in context: Asking the right questions about preparing skilled and effective teachers of young children. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER.
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For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.
