

Research Notes

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Staff Qualifications of Lead Teachers in Early Childhood Classrooms: Making the Case for a Differentiated Staffing Pattern

Policymakers interested in designing a system to implement universal preschool or to expand state-funded Pre-K programs for children at-risk of academic failure will find the results of a recent study conducted by the Center for Early Childhood Leadership useful. In this study researchers evaluated the staff qualifications of 365 lead teachers in 67 center-based, full-day, early childhood programs in Illinois. This research was part of a larger study to determine the reliability and validity of the *Program Administration Scale (PAS)*.¹

The findings suggest that reaching the goal of having a highly qualified early childhood teacher for every group or classroom of preschool children is closer than many policymakers currently believe. The PAS study found that by reframing the way members of the teaching team in a classroom are identified, Illinois does not have quite so long a road to travel to achieve its goal of having a BA certified teacher for every classroom of preschool children.

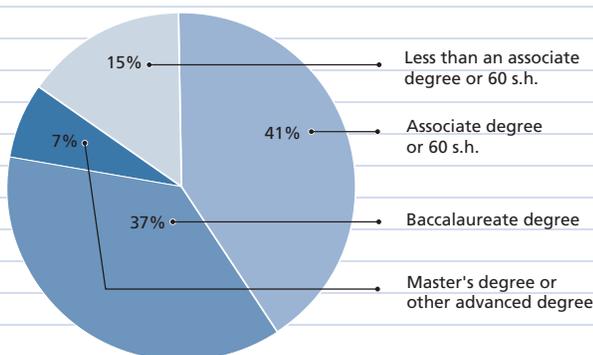
In order to promote school readiness and positive child outcomes, policy reports issued during recent years have consistently recommended that every group of preschool children should be taught by a highly qualified teacher—a teacher with a minimum of a baccalaureate degree and specialized training in early childhood education.² Unfortunately, current data collection procedures for the early childhood workforce undermine the ability of policymakers to assess progress toward accomplishing this goal. Data reporting staff qualifications usually group all teaching staff together giving a skewed picture of the workforce. In contrast, the PAS study looked at teacher qualifications through the lens of a differentiated staffing pattern. The individual with the highest educational qualifications was designated as the lead teacher in each classroom.

Sample and Data Collection Procedures

A sample for this study was drawn from all licensed child care centers in Cook (Chicago), Cook (Suburban), Jackson, Madison, McLean, and Winnebago counties. These counties were targeted because they included urban, suburban, and rural geographic regions of the state. A random stratified sample of 176 centers was selected, representing variation in center capacity, legal auspice, and accreditation status. From this pool, 124 centers were contacted. A total of 67 centers agreed to participate in the study, which included an on-site interview with the program administrator and a review of documents, including staff transcripts.

The following identifies some of the key findings, as well as recommendations for policy and practice.

Highest level of education achieved

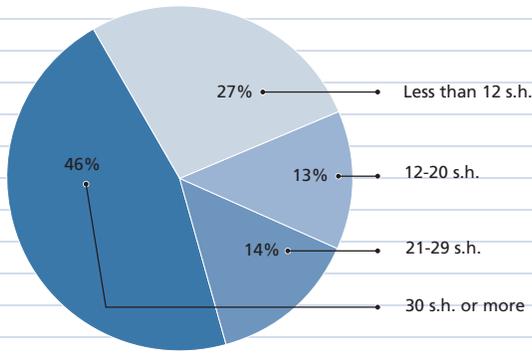


Finding 1: In 44% of classrooms the lead teacher had a minimum of a bachelor's degree.

The Illinois Department of Human Services staffing and salary study released in 2002 reported that only 26% of teachers in licensed child care facilities had a minimum of a baccalaureate degree.³ The IDHS study used the minimum qualifications provided in the DCFS licensing standards to define the position of an early childhood teacher—qualifications ranging from completion of a CDA or CCP credential to completion of 60 semester hours of college credit with 6 semester hours in courses directly related to early childhood education. The PAS findings are based solely on the qualifications of the lead teacher, the individual with the highest educational qualifications who is regularly assigned to teach a group of children.

Continued on back page

Semester hours of early childhood coursework



Finding 2: Approximately 60% of the classrooms had a lead teacher with a minimum of 21 semester hours of specialized training in early childhood education.

As part of the development of an early childhood career lattice in Illinois, faculty of two- and four-year colleges have begun crafting early childhood core competencies consisting of 21 semester hours of credit that can be taught at the freshman and sophomore levels and transferred into any associate or baccalaureate early childhood degree program. This PAS finding suggests that the majority of children in center-based programs in Illinois have at least one teacher “within reach” of fulfilling the core competencies.

Finding 3: Lead teachers in accredited programs were more qualified than lead teachers in non-accredited programs.

One way analysis of variance procedures (ANOVA) confirmed that there were statistically significant differences in both the level of general education ($F = 16.81, p < .0001$) and the number of semester hours of coursework in early childhood education ($F = 26.82, p < .0001$) between lead teachers who worked in NAEYC-accredited programs compared to those who worked in non-accredited programs. Only 17% of lead teachers in non-accredited programs had a baccalaureate degree compared to 27% in accredited programs. Likewise, 18% of lead teachers in non-accredited programs had 30 or more semester hours of coursework in early childhood education compared to 28% in accredited programs.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Young children in center-based early childhood programs are usually taught by a teaching team comprised of several teaching staff. The PAS study found that in full-day early childhood programs regardless of the role titles given to the teaching staff, a differentiated staffing pattern exists. Two or more members of the teaching team may be called *teacher* but are likely to have different educational qualifications. By focusing attention on the lead teacher—the member of the teaching team working with a group of children who has the highest educational qualifications—the PAS findings suggest that Illinois is closer than previously reported to the goal of having a highly qualified teacher for every group of preschool children in center-based early childhood programs. The following recommendations result from these findings:

- Developing uniform nomenclature based on educational qualifications for teaching roles across all early childhood programs—Head Start, Pre-K, and child care—should be a priority of policymakers.
- Systematic data collection procedures should be implemented at the state level that differentiate between teaching staff with varying levels of general education and specialized training in early childhood education regardless of their role title.
- Financial support should be given to programs to achieve and maintain NAEYC accreditation as an effective means for promoting higher staff qualifications.

1. Talan, T. N., & Bloom, P. J. (2004). *The Program Administration Scale: Measuring early childhood leadership and management*. Wheeling, IL: The Center for Early Childhood Leadership.
2. Bowman, B., Donovan, M. S., & Burns, M. S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
3. Whitebook, M. (2003). *Early education quality: Higher teacher qualifications for better learning environments*. Berkeley, CA: Institute of Industrial Relations.
3. Illinois Department of Human Services. (2002). *2001 salary and staffing survey*. Springfield, IL: Author.

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