

# DEFINING PRESCHOOL QUALITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGHLY-QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Caitlyn Sharrow  
Education Law and Policy

## I. Introduction

In recent years more research and attention has been paid to early childhood education and its importance. Specifically, studies have been done examining the potential economic impacts quality preschool programs can have in the United States.<sup>1</sup> A second body of research has developed regarding the meaning of quality in the context of preschool. This body of research has suggested a variety of factors that are common to quality preschool programs. Some of these suggested factors include small class size, parent involvement, and health screenings and services.<sup>2</sup> One factor that is common to most of this research is having highly-qualified teachers. The use of highly-qualified teachers in preschools is the most important factor because these teachers are best able to meet preschool program goals, enable programs to meet the other quality factors and are necessary for the proven economic benefits to be realized.

### I. What is a Highly-Qualified Teacher?

It is important to recognize the discussion and disagreement regarding the meaning of a highly-qualified teacher. Some research has suggested there is no relationship between teacher qualification and quality and therefore no need to require a bachelor's degree.<sup>3</sup> Other research

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Heckman, J.J., Moon, S.H., Pinto, R., Savelyev, P.A. & Yavitz A.Q., *Reanalysis of the Perry Preschool Program: Multiple-hypothesis and permutation tests applied to a quasi-randomized experiment*, QUANTITATIVE ECONOMICS 1-49 (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Press Release, National Institute for Early Education Research, Arkansas Better Chance Program Meets Nine Out of Ten Quality Standard Benchmarks (Nov. 7, 2006) (<http://nieer.org/news-events/news-releases/arkansas-better-chance-program-meets-nine-out-ten-quality-standard>); EDWARD ZIGLER, WALTER S. GILLIAM & W. STEVEN BARNETT, THE PRE-K DEBATES 142 (2011); National Association for the Education of Young Children, *Overview of the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards* (2008), available at <http://www.naeyc.org/files/academy/file/OverviewStandards.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> EDWARD ZIGLER, WALTER S. GILLIAM & W. STEVEN BARNETT, THE PRE-K DEBATES 51 (2011).

has found a relationship between preschool quality and qualifications.<sup>4</sup> However, the specifics of these qualifications vary. Some discuss the importance of a four-year degree.<sup>5</sup> Others have modified this definition and suggested that a bachelor's degree in education or early childhood should be achieved.<sup>6</sup> Another examination of qualified preschool teachers emphasizes the amount of training and in-service education that takes place while teaching.<sup>7</sup> The National Institute for Early Education Research has listed having a teacher with a bachelor's degree, specialized training in early childhood, and in-service training of at least fifteen hours per year as three of its ten quality benchmarks.<sup>8</sup>

Here, the argument for highly-qualified teachers being the most important factor for overall preschool quality uses state qualification as the measure of a teacher being highly-qualified. There is little variation in state requirements for public school teachers of children beginning at age five.<sup>9</sup> The requirements are usually a four-year college degree and some specialized education for the profession.<sup>10</sup> Further, while the quality of teacher education programs themselves vary, the programs require a higher level of knowledge than what is attained with a high school diploma or associate's degree. Moreover, completion of a bachelor's level program traditionally requires demonstrated performance through field placements and student teaching.<sup>11</sup> Preschool programs should require the same qualifications as other public school teachers because it is at this level that teachers are best able to meet program goals, achieve other quality factors, and produce the long term benefits that lead to economic gains.

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<sup>4</sup> Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 48-54.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> National Institute for Early Education Research, *supra* note 2.

<sup>9</sup> Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 49.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, OCCUPATIONAL OUTLOOK HANDBOOK, 2012-13 EDITION, KINDERGARTEN AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS (<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/Education-Training-and-Library/Kindergarten-and-elementary-school-teachers.htm>).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

## II. Preschool Program Goals

Before explaining why highly-qualified teachers are best able to meet program goals it is important to identify some of these goals. There is not a universal idea of what a preschool is or should teach. The purpose and goals of preschool vary by the type of program and the philosophy of teaching. However, there are some common themes to preschool objectives in the United States. First, preschools are often thought of a way to produce school readiness.<sup>12</sup> Often children move from private centers or even home based preschools to their public kindergarten and it is expected that preschool will prepare them for the rest of their education. Stemming from the idea of school readiness is the expectation that preschools will encourage and teach early literacy and math skills. The development of reading and math is frequently what is measured as an outcome of preschool programs. Student performance on literacy and math assessments are used as measures for the quality of preschool programs. Additionally, preschools encourage the development of cognitive and social-emotional skills.

One author has suggested a specific framework of preschool's essential goals. The goals fall into the categories of: social and interpersonal skills, self-help and intrapersonal skills, an approach to learning, academic content, character education, music and the arts, and wellness and healthy living.<sup>13</sup> Within this structure students would learn to develop social relationships, cooperation, and classroom rules.<sup>14</sup> They would manage their affairs and behavior and learn to be independent.<sup>15</sup> Further, the preschoolers would improve self-regulation, motivation, listening,

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<sup>12</sup> W. Steven Barnett, *Preschool Education and its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications*, NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH (2008).

<sup>13</sup> G. S. MORRISON, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TODAY 282-286 (2009).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

and critical thinking.<sup>16</sup> Students would also learn the letters of the alphabet, colors, shapes, and sizes.<sup>17</sup> They would learn through dramatic play and self-direction.<sup>18</sup>

Highly-qualified teachers are best able to meet all of these goals because of their unique education and experience with child development. First, ensuring that preschool teachers have the same education and certifications as kindergarten and other public school elementary teachers encourages school readiness. A highly-qualified preschool teacher would have knowledge of the skills, content, and structure of a basic kindergarten classroom. The uniformity in qualifications would prevent a large gap in preschool achievement and kindergarten classroom expectations.

Additionally, a highly-qualified preschool teacher would be better equipped to structure and teach the literacy and math skills that preschoolers are expected to develop. Non-preschool public teachers are required to pass licensing exams and demonstrate competency.<sup>19</sup> If one of the primary functions of preschool teachers is to prepare students for elementary education it makes sense to require the same level of competency.

Finally, the development of social and cognitive skills requires specific knowledge of early childhood development. Simply knowing the stages of development is not enough. Rather lessons and even entire classrooms should be set up in developmentally appropriate ways and rigorous requirements promote teachers with this knowledge. Overall, preschool teachers are helping children learn how to learn which requires knowledge of what kindergarten and the years beyond require of students.

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<sup>16</sup> Morrison, *supra* note 13, at 284-286.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> U.S DEP'T OF LABOR *supra* note 10.

### III. Other Preschool Quality Factors

The use of highly-qualified teachers is the catalyst for other high quality preschool factors. Schweinhart discusses highly effective early childhood programs as having (in addition to qualified teachers) a validated curriculum, outreach to parents, and regular assessment of program implementation and children's development.<sup>20</sup>

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) lists ten quality standards benchmarks.<sup>21</sup> They are: 1) comprehensive learning standards, 2) teachers with a bachelor's degree, 3) teachers with specialized training in early childhood, 4) assistant teachers with an Child Development Associate credential, 5) teacher in-service training of at least fifteen hours per year, 6) maximum class size of twenty, 7) staff to child ratios of at least 1 to 10, 8) vision, hearing, and health referral services, 9) provide at least one meal per day and 10) site visits.<sup>22</sup>

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) also provides ten early childhood program standards.<sup>23</sup> Some of these standards are similar to Schweinhart's factors and the NIEER benchmarks. First, NAEYC expects the implementation of a curriculum supported by research.<sup>24</sup> Second, programs are to employ teachers with educational qualifications, knowledge, and professional commitment.<sup>25</sup> Those teachers are also expected to use developmentally appropriate approaches and perform ongoing assessments of educational progress.<sup>26</sup> The NAEYC standards also include parent and community outreach.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 142.

<sup>21</sup> National Institute for Early Education Research, *supra* note 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children, *Overview of the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards* (2008), available at <http://www.naeyc.org/files/academy/file/OverviewStandards.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

Highly-qualified teachers facilitate achievement of these standards. First, teachers with education and demonstrated proficiency in early childhood development can impact the curriculum used in their classroom or center. With their knowledge developmentally appropriate curriculum is more likely to be chosen and used. Further, research has indicated cognitive-developmental programs produce better long-term educational and social adjustment outcomes than solely academic programs.<sup>28</sup> Teachers trained and certified with the same methods as other elementary teachers are more likely to know the important role cognitive skills play throughout all of the years of education. Heckman also points to the development of cognitive skills as a primary goal of early investment and a means by which to encourage later economic savings.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, teaching degrees usually require training in assessment. Teachers with a bachelor's degree are better able than those without a college education to assess not only their student's performance but also their implementation of the curriculum and its standards.

Next, highly-qualified teachers would have the knowledge necessary to help identify, support and refer families to needed services. There is a large amount of evidence supporting the short and long term benefits of early intervention.<sup>30</sup> Interventions implemented and evaluated during the first five years of life substantially reduce declines in development that occur in the absence of early intervention.<sup>31</sup> Preschool teachers are uniquely placed to have contact with children before they reach the age of five. The importance of these early years necessitates highly-qualified teachers. Overall, staffing a program with highly-qualified teachers encourages the use of comprehensive learning standards, developmentally appropriate curriculum, early

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<sup>28</sup> Bette Chambers, Alan Cheung, Robert E. Slavin, Dewi Smith & Mary Laurenzano, *Effective Early Childhood Education Programmes: A Best-Evidence Synthesis*, BEST EVIDENCE ENCYCLOPEDIA, Sept. 2010, at 8.

<sup>29</sup> James Heckman, *Presenting the Heckman Equation*, <http://www.heckmanequation.org/content/resource/presenting-heckman-equation>.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Michael J. Guralnick, *Effectiveness of Early Intervention for Vulnerable Children: A Developmental Perspective*, 102 AMERICAN JOURNAL ON MENTAL RETARDATION 319-345 (1998).

<sup>31</sup> Id. at 321.

intervention, and regular program assessments. Educated teachers can be advocates for best practices within preschools.

## II. Program Examples

Comparing programs such as the HighScope Perry preschool program and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers program to Head Start illustrates some of the impacts of having a highly-qualified preschool teacher. The Perry Preschool project and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers program are both highly effective and lead to lifetime returns.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey study found modest short-term effects of the Head Start program's preschool education.<sup>33</sup> Both the Perry and Chicago projects used state-certified teachers; the Perry teachers were state certified in elementary and special education and the Chicago project teachers were certified in early childhood.<sup>34</sup> The Head Start Program, in contrast, required only a Child Development Associate Credential prior to 2011.<sup>35</sup> More recently the requirements have been raised to the minimum level of an associate's degree and to 50 percent of the teachers with a bachelor's degree by 2013.<sup>36</sup> The presence of a highly-qualified teacher in the Perry and Chicago projects was not the only factor leading to long term benefits. As mentioned above these programs used validated curriculum, engaged in outreach to parents,

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<sup>32</sup> Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 141.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Zill et al., *Head Start FACES 2000: A Whole-Child Perspective on Program Performance*, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, May 2003; Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 141.

<sup>34</sup> Milagros Nores, Clive R. Belfield, W. Steven Barnett & Lawrence Schweinheart, *Updating the Economic Impacts of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program*, 27 EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION AND POLICY ANALYSIS 4, 245-261 (2005); Arthur J. Reynolds, Judy A. Temple, Dylan L. Robertson & Emily A. Mann, *Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers*, 24 EDUCATION EVALUATION AND POLICY ANALYSIS 7, 267-303 (2004); Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 142.

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum from the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services to Head Start and Early Head Start Grantees and Delegate Agencies (Aug. 19, 2008) ([http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/IMs/2008/resour\\_ime\\_012\\_0081908.html](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/IMs/2008/resour_ime_012_0081908.html))

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

and regularly assessed program implementation and children's development;<sup>37</sup> factors which as argued above can stem from the use of highly-qualified teachers.

A unique program in which teacher qualifications can be examined is the New Jersey Abbott preschools. These programs were formulated in response to the New Jersey Supreme Court rulings in *Abbott v. Burke*.<sup>38</sup> The court required the creation of high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4- year old children.<sup>39</sup> Further, the court specified that teachers were to have a bachelor's degree with early childhood certification.<sup>40</sup> At the time of the ruling most children were being served by private child care centers with significantly lower qualification requirements.<sup>41</sup> The state provided methods for these existing teachers to become degreed and certified.<sup>42</sup> Prior to implementation of this program the overall quality in these private programs was low.<sup>43</sup> However, after teachers had time to acquire degrees and certification the quality improved.<sup>44</sup> The programs made gains in their Classroom Quality Scores in areas such as language and reasoning, activities, and program structure.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, data indicates first and second grade students that attended the high-quality Abbott preschools continue to outperform their peers.<sup>46</sup> Reports indicate one year of Abbott preschool moves a child's language, literacy, and mathematics skills up seven percent of the population and two years of preschool moved

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<sup>37</sup> Ziegler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3 at 142.

<sup>38</sup> *Abbott v. Burke* (Abbott II), 119 N.J. 287 (1990); *Burke v. Abbott* (Abbott III) 136 N.J. 444 (1994), *Abbott v. Burke* (Abbott IV), 149 N.J. 145 (1997); *Abbott v. Burke* (Abbott V), 153 N.J. 480 (1998); Ziegler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 52.

<sup>39</sup> *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480 (1998).

<sup>40</sup> Ziegler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 52.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> Ziegler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 52; Carrie Lobman, Ryan Sharon & Jill McLaughlin, *Reconstructing Teacher Education to Prepare Qualified Preschool Teachers: Lessons from New Jersey*, 7 EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH & PRACTICE (2005) (<http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v7n2/lobman.html>).

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> Ellen Frede, Kwanghee Jung, W. Steven Barnett & Alexandra Figueras, *The APPLES Blossom: Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study*, NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH, June 2009, at 3-4.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*



those skills up seventeen percent.<sup>47</sup> The Abbot preschools demonstrate the increased educational gains that can be made when teachers are highly-qualified.

### **III.A Problem with Required State Certification**

A major force in the recent development of interest in high quality preschool programs has been the potential economic returns. Economists such as James Heckman have argued that investment in educational and developmental resources for disadvantaged families, encouragement of cognitive and social skills in children from birth to age five, and sustainment of effective education can result in great economic returns and gains for generations.<sup>48</sup> Even though preschools may be situated within the larger school context they are uniquely placed to reach children and families during this critical period and thus the investments made in preschools are uniquely timed to give the greatest return on this investment. It is highly-qualified teachers that shape effective programs and it is effective programs that produce cognitive and social skills and provide the best educational and development resources. In short, the use of highly-qualified teachers produces the greatest economic returns.

This paper has argued for an increase in preschool teacher certification requirements because higher qualifications lead to higher quality and more effective programs. However, there are increased costs associated with higher degrees and more qualifications. If preschool teachers are required to have comparable certifications to that of public elementary school teachers their pay should also be comparable. Head Start and most private child care centers have low qualifications and pay when compared to public school kindergarten teachers.<sup>49</sup> On average Head Start teachers earn \$24,000.<sup>50</sup> Salaries for public school kindergarten teachers average

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<sup>47</sup> Frede, Kwanghee, Barnett and Figueras, *supra* note 45, at 3-4.

<sup>48</sup> HECKMAN: THE ECONOMICS OF HUMAN POTENTIAL, <http://www.heckmanequation.org/> (last visited May 12, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 49.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

more than \$50,000.<sup>51</sup> While it is certain this difference in salary would raise program costs it is equally certain preschool teachers who have consistently produced strong gains for young children have been teachers with bachelor's degrees who were paid public school salaries.<sup>52</sup> This is relevant to the costs argument because programs that produced strong educational gains produced much larger economic benefits resulting in benefits greater than the difference in costs.<sup>53</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

If a social goal in the United States is to provide effective, high quality preschool education then programs should be required to use highly-qualified teachers. While preschool quality is defined in a variety of ways teacher qualifications are most often referenced. Additionally, highly-qualified teachers are catalysts for increasing preschool quality since higher education generally translates into more knowledge and skills - which are needed to recognize and use developmentally appropriate methods. While not all teacher certification programs lead to effective teachers, increased degree requirements are more likely to produce positive educational gains. For example, a comparison of the teacher requirements for the Perry Preschool Project, Chicago Child-Parent Centers, Head Start, and New Jersey Abbott preschools demonstrate the gains in quality achieved by highly-qualified teachers. If a purpose of preschool is school readiness then preschool teachers should have the same qualification as other elementary teachers. Lastly, if a goal is to most efficiently invest our resources then highly-qualified teachers should be used because they produce the greatest economic gains. Teacher qualification is the most important program quality consideration because highly-qualified

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<sup>51</sup> Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 49; U.S DEP'T LABOR *supra* note 10.

<sup>52</sup> Zigler, Gilliam and Barnett, *supra* note 3, at 53.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

teachers are the best equipped to meet preschool program goals, enable programs to meet the other quality factors, and produce the long term benefits that lead to economic gains.