

Preschool: Its Benefits, and Who Should Teach

by

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As researchers from FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, The Center for Improving Child Care Quality at the University of California at Los Angeles, and Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) at the University of Virginia we conducted a decade of studies on preschool education as the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL), funded by the US Department of Education, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and The Foundation for Child Development. In this period we completed the most comprehensive and detailed studies of state-funded pre-K programs to date. Our work included over 2,000 children and more than 700 teachers and classrooms in eleven states. Our work speaks to two issues currently being debated in the national press: Does preschool benefit all children? and Should a Bachelor's degree be required for all pre-kindergarten teachers?

Does Preschool Benefit All Children?

We found that children's pre-academic skills increased while participating in state-funded Pre-K programs. Furthermore, children from a variety of different family structures, economic, racial, and ethnic groups showed significant academic gains during pre-K participation. These peer-reviewed findings replicate previous analyses of the effectiveness of early childhood care and education using a wider range of locations with a conservative analytic approach.

Our findings are similar to the larger NICHD Study of Early Child Care. They found that relations between the *quality* of early childhood care and education and academic and cognitive development were maintained through 3rd grade. Children who experienced better quality of early care and education in their first 4 ½ years of life continued to manifest somewhat greater academic achievement across the primary grades than children who experienced lower quality programs. That these relations were sustained through 3rd grade is notable because reading and math competencies at the end of 3rd grade are highly predictive of future academic performances.

Should A Bachelor's Degree Be Required for all Pre-Kindergarten Teachers?

Several recent policy-oriented reports have called for every pre-kindergarten teacher to have a Bachelor's degree. This recommendation is based largely, though not entirely, on previous research suggesting that the Bachelor's degree is a marker of a well-prepared teacher and that such requirements will increase classroom quality and children's academic gains. Our peer-reviewed findings on the first six states studied partially support these conclusions. In this analysis teachers with more than a Bachelor's degree received higher scores on observed teaching and interaction, but not on other measures of classroom or instructional quality. When teachers had more education, children gained more in math skills. However, teachers' education level was not linked to children's gains in language or literacy.

While our study does not provide comprehensive evidence supporting a Bachelor's degree as a teacher requirement, it and previous studies suggest children benefit from effective teachers. We found that children made academic gains in classrooms where the teacher engaged them in interactions that encouraged

communication and reasoning, was sensitive and responsive in her/his interactions with children, and constructed an atmosphere of respect, encouragement, and enthusiasm for learning.

We call on researchers, advocates and policymakers to examine the data on preschool programs objectively and carefully. Preschool is not a cure-all for widespread systemic shortcomings in our educational system, but as our research and that of others shows, it appears to provide substantial benefits for a broad range of children, both poor and not poor. But these benefits are realized only if careful attention is given to establishing a sound set of standards for programs and ensuring that the programs are in fact implemented with teaching practices that have been shown to result in improvements in child wellbeing.

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