

## THE NEED FOR HIGHLY QUALIFIED PREKINDERGARTEN TEACHERS

Preparing Highly Qualified Prekindergarten Teachers Symposium  
April 15-16, 2002

Dick Clifford and Kelly Maxwell  
National Prekindergarten Center  
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

There are approximately 19 million young children birth to 5 in the U.S.; about 3.8 million in each age cohort. Approximately 69% (2.6 million) of four-year-olds in the U.S. receive care and education in a center-based program (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Almost 1 million four-year-olds are in prekindergarten programs—including both state and local programs (Clifford, Early, & Hills, 1999).

The term *prekindergarten* is used in this paper to refer to the set of educational programs serving three- and four-year-olds that are part of a formal state initiative. The programs themselves may be housed in public schools, Head Start programs, or community-based child care centers.

Attention to the *quality* of these programs for young children has grown. Experts cite an increasing belief in society that young children would benefit from—and should receive—early education experiences in a caring environment (National Research Council, 2001). Research has shown that children who attend higher quality center-based programs have better academic and social outcomes than do children who attend lower quality programs (Burchinal, Roberts, Riggins, Zeisel, Neebe, & Bryant, 2000; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Quality is especially important for children at risk for school failure. This same research suggests that most center-based child care in the U.S. is of poor-to-mediocre quality—not high enough to positively impact children’s outcomes.

Teacher education is a critical component of quality. Research suggests that early childhood teachers with more education are more likely to implement developmentally

appropriate practices than their peers with less education (Cassidy, Buell, Pugh-Hoese, & Russell, 1995; Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Phillips & Howes, 1987; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989). Teachers with bachelors degrees and who hold certification in working with young children appear to have the highest quality classrooms and to be most capable of having a significant impact on the developmental progress of children considered at risk of later school failure (Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Henderson, Basile, & Henry, 1999; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989).

### **State Prek Efforts**

As one response to the need for high quality early education, states have become increasingly involved in providing educational services for children the year before kindergarten. Over the last decade the public investment in these educational programs for three- and four-year-olds has soared. The Children's Defense Fund reports that 17 states have started new prek initiatives and state spending on prekindergarten initiatives has increased by approximately \$1 billion since 1991-92 (Schulman, Blank, & Ewen, 1999). However, 10 states accounted for 75% of this national estimate of state prek spending.<sup>1</sup> In 1998, the Families and Work Institute estimated that 27 states funded prekindergarten programs for three- and four-year olds (Mitchell, Ripple, & Chanana, 1998). A 2000-01 survey of state early childhood specialists found that 48% of states (16 of 33) required a BA degree as the minimum teacher credential for their prek programs (unpublished data from the National Center for Early Development and Learning, NCEDL).

### **Prek Teacher Projections**

The recent federal legislation *No Child Left Behind* calls for "highly qualified" teachers, and the *Eager to Learn* committee recommends that each class of young children in an early care

and education program have a teacher with a bachelor's degree and specialized education in early childhood. A national survey of center-based programs suggests that no more than 50% of teachers of three- and four-year-olds have a BA degree, with 44% having a BA degree or higher in early childhood education<sup>2</sup> (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2001). If the BA degree is the standard for "highly qualified" then we have a long way to go before all children in prek programs have qualified teachers.

There is substantial difficulty in estimating the number of highly qualified teachers needed in prek programs. The existing studies referred to here tend to use definitions of prek that fit the data sources or populations available for examination. This is problematic when trying to combine estimates across studies and reports. In particular, it is difficult to know (a) what percentage of the current workforce is highly qualified, (b) how long these teachers will remain in the prek workforce, (c) how many teachers receive an early childhood BA degree each year, and (d) the number of children who enroll in prek programs each year. Given the limitations in the data available to us, we have included our best estimates in this paper.

If the U.S. offered a universal, voluntary prek program to four-year-olds today, we would need 200,556 teachers (assuming that 95% of the 3,610,000 four-year-olds were served in classes of 18). Using Census projections, we will need an additional 43,888 teachers to serve 4.4 million four-year-olds by 2020. Although the number of well-qualified teachers currently in prek classrooms remains elusive, we estimate that as many as half the prek classes are taught by qualified teachers. This means that there are about 27,778 qualified teachers in prek classrooms today—far from the hundreds of thousands we will need.<sup>3</sup>

## **Capacity for Training Prek Teachers**

*Preservice Training.* Most training for prek teachers in the U.S. is provided through preservice training (i.e., before someone enters the workforce). Approximately 1,244 Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) in the U.S. offer early childhood education programs, representing about 29% of IHEs that offer an AA or BA degree; of these, less than half offer BA degrees (Early & Winton, 2001). This and other studies have also documented the difficulty with articulation agreements across 2-year and 4-year institutions, which are critical to students moving from an AA to a BA degree program (Cassidy, Hestenes, Teague, & Springs, 2001; Early & Winton, 2001). The current IHEs are not prepared to produce the large numbers of teachers needed to ensure that every prek classroom has a highly qualified teacher. The Hyson paper will address future directions for preservice prek teacher training.

*Inservice Training.* Most inservice training for prek teachers in the U.S. is provided through workshops and does not lead to a degree. Because at least half of the current teacher workforce for three- and four-year-olds does not have a BA degree, inservice training strategies that are credit bearing and lead to a degree may be a promising approach to producing the needed number of qualified prek teachers. The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood<sup>†</sup> Project is one example of an inservice program that leads toward a degree. T.E.A.C.H. and other inservice training strategies will be highlighted in the Russell paper.

*Lateral Entry.* An estimated 6% of center-based teachers of three- and four-year-olds have a BA degree in an area other than early childhood (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2001). Additionally, some teachers prepared to work with older children might be interested in teaching prek. Both groups of teachers have BA degrees but do not have the specialized training in early

childhood education. New lateral entry professional development training programs are needed to ensure that these teachers are highly qualified in early childhood education.

### **Planning for Now and Later**

In the short term, the demand for early childhood teachers with BA degrees will be high as states quickly implement prek initiatives. We need creative strategies that can be mobilized quickly to meet the demand. The higher education system in the U.S. is not designed to meet this kind of need and specific incentives to help move the system to create these short-term strategies will be required. (While 5-10 years may not seem to be short term to most agencies, the higher education system with its tenure granting structure for faculty is geared to much longer time frames). We also must attend to the long-term needs and build a self-sustaining professional development system that will continually produce highly qualified teachers to meet the growing number and diversity of young children in the U.S. This level of need is much smaller, primarily focusing on the need to replace teachers that retire or move outside the prek system and to provide for population growth in the prek age groups.

### **Barriers to Meeting the Need**

This section of the paper briefly highlights key barriers to producing a highly qualified prek teacher workforce.

*Defining the profession.* The defining characteristic of a profession is the existence of a common core of knowledge that is largely unique to members of the profession. The current collection of early childhood teachers in the U.S. does not share such a common core of knowledge. The teacher force consists of people ranging from less than a high school diploma to teachers with advanced professional degrees. At some level, many adults who have reared children feel that they have adequate knowledge to perform the task of teaching groups of young

children prior to school entry. This notion that parental knowledge is sufficient to serve as a preschool teacher presents a major barrier to overcome. While the content necessary for prek teachers is relatively well defined within the profession, the need for highly trained personnel in prek is not well accepted in the general population, making establishment of the profession still illusory.

An indication of the ambivalence of our country regarding the training needed by early childhood personnel is illustrated by the recent NCEDE survey of state prekindergarten programs. Of the 33 states reporting entry level education requirements for teachers, 48% required a BA/BS degree, 6% required an AA/AS degree (two years of training), and 24% required a CDA credential (equivalent to roughly one year of post secondary training). Part of this variation simply reflects the lack of available trained personnel, but few states have any major program to raise the level of training to the BA/BS level.

*Compensation.* Even those states striving to improve the prek teacher workforce have secondary, or in some cases primary, goals of using the training programs to raising the standard of living of low-income women and to provide work opportunities for moving low-income women off the welfare rolls. While these goals are laudatory, they place a particularly high burden on the professional development system because most of those living in poverty also have quite low education levels. Substantial financial investments will be needed if we are to meet the dual goals of producing a highly qualified prek workforce and moving the prek teacher workforce out of poverty.

*Diversity.* The early childhood population in this country is quite diverse and growing more diverse rapidly. Much of the recent population growth in the U.S. is attributable to immigration. The vast majority of people immigrating to the U.S. are non-Caucasian. These

immigrant families tend to have higher birth rates and more young children than the general population. The K-12 public school teacher population in the U.S. is skewed sharply toward White middle class in spite of the changes in population we are encountering. We should be careful not to repeat this problem in prek.

The current prek teacher workforce provides some hope of addressing issues of diversity. A recent survey of early childhood teachers suggests that the early childhood teacher workforce is much more reflective of the child population being served (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2001). For instance, 71% of classrooms in the survey in which at least three-fourths of the children were African American had teachers that were also African American and 46% of classrooms with at least three-fourths of children of Hispanic or Latino background had Hispanic/Latino teachers.

Designing professional development strategies that produce a highly trained and diverse population of prek teachers presents a major challenge. In their survey of higher education programs training early childhood teachers, Early and Winton (2001) found that over 80% of faculty members were non-Hispanic White. Thus the higher education system is not well prepared to attract and train ethnically diverse students to become prek teachers. In addition, while teachers in early childhood programs report being poorly prepared to teach children with special needs, the IHE's were similarly poorly prepared to train teachers to serve this population.

*Uncertainty of the need and resources.* Only a handful of states have a clear goal of providing prekindergarten to all families who want such a program for their young children. It is extremely difficult to predict when such a goal will become standard across the 50 states. Gallagher, Clayton, and Heinemeier (2001) report that prekindergarten initiatives do not usually come through the education establishment, but rather are to some degree forced on a reluctant education system. Such a situation makes for particularly difficult prediction of the rate of

increase in coverage of prek programs and thus for the need for trained staff. Even when goals are set, such as in New York, actual implementation is constrained by the availability of funds and the continuing political will to allocate scarce resources to expansion of prekindergarten programs. So, the tendency is to hold off on investing heavily in training of prek teachers until the programs are actually in place.

*Teachers are not the complete workforce.* Finally, we have considered only training of teachers in this paper. There is a pressing need to train other personnel critical to successful program implementation. The Cost Quality and Child Outcomes study (CQO, 1995) provided evidence of the importance of effective program administrators in high quality early childhood programs, particularly pointing to the active involvement of directors in working with teachers on curriculum issues. Yet we have virtually no systematic effort to train such personnel. Second, the *No Child Left Behind* legislation calls for highly qualified teacher assistants in the K-12 system. Little attention has been given to training assistants for prek programs.

## **Conclusions**

The need for highly qualified prekindergarten teachers is great, and the obstacles to providing a qualified teaching workforce are enormous. Yet the evidence is clear that the quality of prek teachers is central to the goal of ensuring that all children are prepared to succeed when they enter school. To date, there has been little systematic attempt to build a prek professional development system that meets the needs and overcomes the barriers. The current national and state interest in prek presents an opportunity for us to build the system we envision.

We hope that in this meeting we will create a vision for prek professional development in this country and identify strategies to move toward this goal. As we begin to build the system, we have the benefit of learning from the previous experience of others. In their paper for this

meeting, McCollum and Winton describe lessons learned from personnel preparation in early intervention. This experience offers valuable lessons about the relative roles that can be played by the federal government, state governments, and local governments and agencies.

In the end, it will be innovative groups like this who shape the future of professional development for those wanting to serve young children in the U.S. We hope this meeting will represent a symbolic *Carpe Diem*—seizing of the day—and launch a concerted effort to build the professional development system to ensure that all children in prek programs are taught by a highly qualified teacher.

## References

- Burchinal, M. R., Roberts, J. E., Riggins, R., Zeisel, S. A., Neebe, E., & Bryant, D. (2000). Relating quality of center-based child care to early cognitive and language development longitudinally. *Child Development, 71*(2), 339-357.
- Cassidy, D. J., Buell, M. J., Pugh-Hoese, S., & Russell, S. (1995). The effect of education on child care teachers' beliefs and classroom quality: Year one evaluation of the TEACH Early Childhood Associate Degree Scholarship Program. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 10*, 171-183.
- Cassidy, D., Hestenes, L., Teague, P., & Springs, J. (2001). The facilitation of the transfer of credit between early childhood education/child development departments in 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education in North Carolina, *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 22*, 29-38.
- Clifford, R.M., Early, D.M., & Hills, T.W. (1999). Almost a million children in school before kindergarten: Who is responsible for early childhood services? *Young Children, 54*, 48-51.
- Cost, Quality, & Outcomes Study Team. (1995). *Cost, quality, and child outcomes in child care centers, technical report*. Denver: Department of Economics, Center for Research in Economic and Social Policy, University of Colorado at Denver.
- Early, D. M., & Winton, P. J. (2001). Preparing the workforce: early childhood teacher preparation at 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 16*, 285-306.
- Gallagher, J. J., Clayton, J. R., & Heinemeier, S. E. (2001). *Education for four-year-olds: State initiatives. Executive Summary*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Center, National Center for Early Development and Learning.
- Henderson, L. W., Basile, K. C., & Henry, G. T. (1999). *Prekindergarten longitudinal study: 1997-1998 school year annual report*. Atlanta: Georgia State University Applied Research Center. Available at <http://cspweb.gsu.edu/prek/report/prek9798Long.pdf>

- Mitchell, A., Ripple, C., & Chanana, N. (1998). *Prekindergarten programs funded by the states: Essential elements for policy makers*. New York: Families and Work Institute.
- National Research Council. (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (2000). The relation of child care to cognitive and language development. *Child Development*, 71, 960-980.
- Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., Burchinal, M. R., Clifford, R. M., Culkin, M. L., Howes, C., Kagan, S. L., & Yazejian, N. (2001). The relation of preschool child care quality to children's cognitive and social developmental trajectories through second grade. *Child Development*, 72(5), 1534-1553.
- Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., & Burchinal, M. R. (1997). Relations between preschool children's child-care experiences and concurrent development: The cost, quality, and outcomes study. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 43, 451-577.
- Phillips, D. A., & Howes, C. (1987). Indicators of quality in child care: Review of research. In D. A. Phillips (Ed.), *Quality in child care: What does research tell us?* (pp. 1-20). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Saluja, G., Early, D. M., & Clifford, R. M. (2001, in press). Demographic characteristics of early childhood teachers and structural elements of early care and education in the United States. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*.
- Schulman, K., Blank, H., & Ewen, D. (1999). *Seeds of success: State prekindergarten initiatives 1998-1999*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.
- West, J., Denton, K., & Germino-Hausken, E. (2000). *America's kindergartners: Findings from the early childhood longitudinal study, kindergarten class of 1998-99, fall 1998*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Whitebook, M., Howes, C., & Phillips, D. (1989). *Who cares? Child care teachers and the quality of care in America*. (Final report of the National Child Care Staffing Study). Oakland, CA: Child Care Employee Project.

---

<sup>1</sup> California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Texas.

<sup>2</sup> Because of the low response rate of 40% for this study, these figures are likely overestimates of the education level for the general population of prek teachers. However, the 1990 Profile of Childcare Settings by Kisker et al. also reported that about half of prek teachers across multiple settings had a BA degree.

<sup>3</sup> Assuming that the 1 million children in prek programs currently are served in classes of 18, there are 55,556 prek classrooms. Half of 55,556 is 27,778.