Raising Preschool Quality

Teachers’ degrees don’t guarantee better classrooms

Quality teaching is almost always the centerpiece of policy initiatives aimed at making sure preschool-aged children enter school ready to learn and improving the learning experiences they encounter in the early grades. And in most cases, the measure of quality is the level of a teacher’s education.

In early education, the trend is to require that teachers have at least a bachelor’s degree. But while better-educated teachers certainly offer benefits, research suggests that the focus on teachers’ education alone does not guarantee improved preschool classrooms or better academic outcomes among students.

In the United States, 17 of the 38 states that support pre-kindergarten programs require lead teachers to at least have a bachelor’s degree. Twelve others require at least some of a program’s teachers to have a bachelor’s degree.

The emphasis on preschool teachers’ education has foundations in research. Most childcare studies suggest that higher levels of teacher education is generally associated with higher quality in center-based care. However, there is no conclusive evidence that a teacher with a Bachelor’s degree or any other specific level of education will always produce a high-quality classroom.

Degree Not Enough

A recent study in the journal Child Development that examined seven major studies of early care and education reported that a teacher’s level education is an unreliable tool for predicting classroom quality and the academic outcomes of 4-year-olds.

On one hand, evidence that better-educated teachers had higher quality classrooms was found in two of the studies, including a national study that examined the effectiveness of Early Head Start programs.

That study found that classrooms taught by teachers with a graduate degree had higher Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) scores than classrooms taught by teachers with a Bachelor’s degree. It also reported that students taught by teachers with a Bachelor’s degree had higher scores than students taught by teachers with an Associate’s degree.

However, four other early childhood studies reported little evidence to support an association between teachers’ education and classroom quality.

Among the studies that included a pre-reading measure for students, for example, two reported that children’s scores were modestly higher when teachers had a Bachelor’s degree, but three others found no association between pre-reading scores and teachers’ highest level of education. When math skills were examined, five of the seven studies reported no association between children’s early math skills and whether the teacher had a Bachelor’s degree or higher.

Caution Urged

Researchers cautioned that the findings should not be considered an indictment of teacher education. Instead, the results likely reflect the current realities in the field and suggest that teachers’ education should be considered one part of a system of factors that contribute to teacher quality, classroom quality and children’s academic gains.

One possible reason cited by the researchers for the weak associations between teacher education and classroom quality may be that the teacher prepara-

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Among Pennsylvania child care centers, the higher the STARS level providers achieved, the higher their quality scores were. Overall, Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) scores ranged from 4.11 for centers at the STARS entry level to 5.42 for those at the highest STARS level. The average ERS scores for child care centers not participating in STARS was 3.94.3

The study also reported that teachers with college degrees provided higher quality early education and care.

In western Pennsylvania, Keystone STARS was an essential part of the Strengthening Early Learning Supports (SELS) project that improved the quality and quantity of early learning opportunities in four at-risk neighborhoods.

One successful SELS strategy was to assign coaches to work individually with providers to encourage their participation in Keystone STARS and provide them with support in raising the quality of their programs.

Before SELS, only eight of 123 neighborhood child care providers were participating in Keystone STARS. At the end of the 17-month SELS project, 84 providers were enrolled in the Keystone STARS quality system.4

References

This report is based on the following publications:


References noted in the text follow: