

The Value of Effective Preschool Education

Highly effective preschool education for all children has the potential to greatly improve school success, adult productivity, and quality of life in the city of New York. Good preschool programs have been found to: increase cognitive abilities and school achievement, improve classroom behavior, decrease grade repetition, decrease special education, and increase high school graduation. These benefits are largest for the most disadvantaged students. The later consequences include increased employment and earnings, decreased reliance on welfare, and decreased crime.

The problems of school failure and dropout are not just problems of children in poverty. Rates of school failure are surprisingly high for children from middle class families. In fact, *most* children who fail a grade in school or dropout prior to graduation are not poor. New research on the benefits of universal preschool education in Oklahoma reveals that good preschool education can help children from middle-income families. Yet, it turns out that children from some middle income families have even less access to good preschool programs than children in poverty (and less than half of 3- and 4-year-olds in poverty attend preschool).

Economic analyses show that the rate of return to society from good preschool programs for disadvantaged children is extremely high—as high as 17%, which makes preschool a better investment than most public or private sector investments currently available. Even if the return to preschool for all were only half this rate (a plausible estimate), this would still be a remarkable public investment. The taxpayers should insist that additional educational funding be directed to preschool education as a first priority.

Yet, if preschool programs are to produce the promised educational benefits and economic return, they must be educationally effective. This requires that preschool programs have highly qualified teachers, small classes, a broad curriculum that addresses both social and cognitive development, strong leadership and supervision, and high standards with accountability. The cornerstone of an effective preschool program is a highly qualified teacher.

Unfortunately, most preschool teachers in the United States are not highly qualified. Fewer than half of preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree, and many never went to college at all. The average preschool teacher is paid only about half what a public school teacher is paid. This situation has serious adverse consequences for the education of our young children, and it shows in studies of preschool program quality which find most programs to be less than good.

The Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy of the distinguished National Research Council (National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine) has recommended that the minimum requirement for teachers of 3- and 4-year olds should be a four-year college degree with specialized preparation in teaching young children. This recommendation was based on an extensive assessment of what we now expect teachers of young children to do based on new research on the learning capabilities of young children and of research on the connections between teacher qualifications and the quality of teaching and outcomes for young children.

Researchers at NIEER have been conducted a meta-analysis, a quantitative summary, of the research on the effects of preschool teacher qualifications of the quality of their teaching and on the cognitive and social development of the children they teach.

We found 33 studies where the effects where at least one effect size could be calculated from the results presented and calculated 153 effect sizes. The studies fall into two basic categories: 18 studies (100 effect sizes) which examined categories of educational attainment and where teachers with a BA degree can be compared to teachers with lesser qualifications (often a mixture of teachers with AA degrees, some college, a CDA, or a high school diploma); 15 studies (53 effect sizes) which looked at years of education and for which correlations are calculated rather than effect sizes in standard deviation units.

The average effect size from studies comparing teachers with BA's to other teachers is .51 with a 95% confidence interval of .41 to .61. The average correlation from the other studies is .16 with a 95% confidence interval of .12 to .20. Let me be perfectly clear what this means—the average effect of a BA degree is clearly positive as is the average effect of more education compared to less and this effects are highly statistically significant.

What are does it mean in practice if teachers have BA degrees? Research finds that teachers with a BA:

- Respond more sensitively to children's needs
- Give children more positive feedback and encouragement
- Are more actively engaged with their students.

Young children taught by teachers with a BA:

- Play more creatively and imaginatively
- Spend more time in goal-directed activities
- Exhibit less problem behavior and more positive social interactions
- Are more self-confident

- Score higher on cognitive tests.

Teachers with BA degrees have higher literacy levels themselves than do others, including teachers with AA degrees. They are better teachers (especially if they also have specialized preparation in teaching young children) who construct better lessons and interact better with their students. As a result, their students learn more, behave better in class, and develop better social skills.

To the extent that policy makers wish to make maximum use of the existing teaching pool, the experience of New Jersey is relevant. The state Supreme Court ordered the provision of high quality preschool programs beginning at age 3 to $\frac{1}{4}$ of the state's children. All teachers were required to have BA with an early childhood certification within 4 years. To meet this demand, the state created a preschool teacher college loan fund and an alternate route to certification for teachers already in classrooms. Four years later nearly all of teachers who wished to continue had achieved this goal and only a handful applied for an extension.

Finally, it is important to note that such progress and the full benefits of fully-qualified teachers can only be achieved if teachers are paid salaries and benefits comparable to those of public school teachers with the same qualifications. Otherwise the newly prepared teachers will leave for the public schools and other fields. However, this can be done with the knowledge that the pay-off will exceed the costs, and that if this path is not followed the promise of preschool will remain unfulfilled.

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