



WORK PROCESS AND QUALITY PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Eileen Appelbaum, Director, Center for Women and Work, Rutgers University¹
Carrie Leana, G.H. Love Professor of Organizations and Management, University of Pittsburgh
Iryna Shevchuk, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Center for Health and Care Work, University of Pittsburgh

Benefits of Quality Early Education

Childcare is an issue of emerging prominence in public policy debates. Quality preschool education is important not just to families and children, but also to employers and to regional and national economies. High-quality, center-based preschool programs have positive effects on children's brain development and cognitive and language skills, provide the foundation for school success, foster academic and social growth, establish the basis for skill acquisition later in life and improve non-cognitive skills such as perseverance and motivation.¹ Such programs are associated with better educational and developmental outcomes for children from all backgrounds, but the effects are especially pronounced for low-income or high-risk children.² Additionally, these children are less likely to be placed in special education classes or, as teenagers, become pregnant or engage in criminal or other risky activities.³ Effects persist into adulthood, raising levels of earnings, education, and home ownership, reducing socially undesirable behaviors, and providing benefits in the form of increased tax revenues, decreased public expenditures on crime and public assistance programs, and stronger economic growth.⁴ Parents also benefit from quality childcare, as do their employers, in the form of lower rates of employee absenteeism and turnover and higher levels of educational attainment in the workforce.⁵ Access to quality preschool increases parents' – and especially mothers' – commitment to employment, can improve parents' job performance, and allows all adults to fully participate in the workforce.⁶

Quality Problems and Remedies

Despite these findings about the importance of high-quality early education, other research has documented the mediocre quality and high turnover rates in many childcare centers.⁷ Thirty-eight states are addressing this situation by publicly funding preschool. Oklahoma, Georgia and Florida offer voluntary pre-K to all 4-year olds. New Jersey offers it to all 3- and 4-year olds living in low-income communities.⁸ Public funding carries with it regulations that mandate educational requirements for teachers, adult-child ratios, and maximum class size – generally thought to enhance the quality of care.

Human Capital Initiatives. Human capital initiatives are aimed at enhancing the quality of early education by way of enhancing the education and credentials of teachers. Earlier research suggested that quality is higher when preschool teachers have higher levels of formal education.⁹ More recent research, however, has challenged this connection. A major study of the relationship between teachers' qualifications – operationalized as years of education, highest degree attained, college major, state teaching certification, and CDA credential – and classroom quality in state-funded pre-K classes found no consistent relationship between teacher qualifications and classroom quality.¹⁰ A series of common analyses using comparable data from seven major studies found no or contradictory associations among the lead teacher's educational degree and college major and classroom quality and children's academic skills.¹¹ There is wide variability among teachers at every educational level in the quality of care. The researchers conclude that, "...policies focused solely on increasing teachers' education will not suffice for improving classroom quality or maximizing children's academic gains."

Social Capital Initiatives. Social capital initiatives are aimed at enhancing the quality of early education by way of enhancing collaboration among teachers. Preschool teaching is inherently improvisational work as classroom staff work to meet the often unpredictable needs of young children.¹² Preschool teaching is also inherently collaborative in most centers due to state licensing requirements which mandate staff-child ratios of 1:10 or 1:12 for three- and four-year olds, with a maximum of 20 or 24 children in a class.¹³ As a result, work in center-based childcare programs is usually performed interdependently with teams of

¹ Address correspondence to Eileen Appelbaum, Rutgers University, School of Management and Labor Relations, New Brunswick NJ 08901, eappelba@rci.rutgers.edu.



teachers and teacher aides jointly attending to the education of children in their care. Consequently, there are ample opportunities for childcare workers to collaboratively define their tasks and carry out their work. Achieving high quality is complex in this situation, and attention to work process and collaboration are at the heart of social capital approaches to assuring high quality care. This key feature of center-based classrooms contrasts sharply with the experiences of teachers in K-5 classrooms, who essentially work alone, and suggests that the K-5 professional model may not be an appropriate one for teachers in early education classrooms.

Research Findings

We recently conducted a large-scale study in New Jersey and Pennsylvania to examine the potential benefits of teacher human and social capital in preschool classrooms. We interviewed over fifty center directors, and conducted numerous focus groups with childcare teachers and teacher aides. We also surveyed 232 classroom teachers and aides and commissioned independent performance assessments in 62 centers to examine the factors that contribute to high quality care.¹⁴ Like other recent studies, we found that teacher education and experience (i.e., human capital) do not explain differences between classrooms in the quality of care. Something more is at work. We found that interaction and improvisation among staff in pre-K classrooms (i.e., social capital) are far more important elements in affecting classroom quality. Moreover, the effects of such collaboration on quality are greatest for less experienced teachers. We found a one standard deviation increase in collaborative work is associated with a 7% increase in quality of care among more experienced teachers but a 17% increase in quality of care among teachers with less experience in early childhood education.

Policy Implications

The aspects of quality that tend to be regulated through state licensing requirements, or are the focus of teacher and professional development, are teacher education and qualifications, teacher-child ratios, class size, and teacher compensation. Our research suggests that other – usually unobserved – job process characteristics also have important effects on the quality of care in pre-K classrooms, and are amenable to action by state policy makers. For example, education requirements to be state certified in early childhood education could be expanded to include training in teamwork and joint decision making in order to promote effective collaboration among staff in preschool classrooms. Our findings also yield important insights for center directors and others in leadership positions in early education. We found that developmental and supportive supervisory actions – providing helpful feedback or being available to discuss particular challenges in the classroom – can foster a culture that supports stronger ties and more collaborative interaction among teachers and aides.

A second issue of particular concern to policymakers is the retention of teachers and aides in the field who provide the highest quality care to preschool children. Mediocre quality of care and high turnover rates are significant problems in many childcare centers and have been the impetus for much of the legislative interest in early childhood education. Clearly it is important not just to attract high-quality teachers to a center but to also retain them. We found that collaborative work does not affect turnover intentions for all classroom staff, but it does have a significant effect on the intentions of those teachers and aides who provide the highest quality care. Specifically, a one standard deviation increase in collaborative work is associated with a 14% *decrease* in turnover intentions among teachers providing high quality care. Thus, collaborative work is associated with the retention of high performing teachers.

In summary, our research suggests that the current emphasis by policymakers on extending the K-5 model of teacher preparation to pre-K classrooms may be misplaced. Instead, policy makers should combine existing policies directed at improving teacher human capital with a new focus on professional development that fosters the skills needed for effective collaboration among classroom staff to build social capital. In pre-K classrooms, differences in the extent of collaborative work are associated with differences in the quality of care, especially for less experienced teachers. At the same time, differences in teacher education and experience alone have no significant effect on quality. These findings offer policymakers an enhanced repertoire of tools to help ensure that young children and their families derive the greatest value from investments in early education.



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