

## **Teachers' Preparation and the Quality of Early Childhood Programs**

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### **Abstract**

The educational requirements for early childhood education teachers have been a concern to those inside and outside the field. The United States has not established state or national standards or certification processes for teachers in non-public school early childhood education programs. Rather they are embedded in licensing standards for centers and contain minimum requirements for classroom teachers. This paper reviews studies regarding the relationship between the teachers' qualifications and the quality of programs in their classrooms. It concludes that early childhood teachers with a higher educational level provide a more positive quality of early childhood education program in relation to motivating children to follow directions, using innovative and high-level activities, and providing a more sociable and cognitive environment where children develop better use of the language and perform at a higher level on cognitive tasks. It suggests that to improve the quality of programs for young children we must raise the standards and increase the qualifications of early childhood education teachers.

**[Key Words]** teachers' qualifications, quality of early childhood programs

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There is increasing concern regarding the quality of education in the United States. This concern is manifest in a number of ways. The most evident way is in the recent federal “No Child Left Behind Act (2001).” This act requires that schools evaluate children’s learning regularly in basic areas and that these evaluations show progress towards improvement in the schools. It also requires that teachers be well qualified in their field. While this act has been applied to public schools, there is serious difficulty in applying it to non-public school early childhood education. This is partly the result of the way such programs are regulated and the minimum requirements for programs and for teachers that have been established.

There are three parts to the early childhood education sector: (1) early childhood programs in the public schools, (2) private preschools and child care centers, and (3) Head Start Programs. With the exception of Head Start, which is a federal program, early childhood programs vary from state to state in the United States, though there are similarities among states. In general, public school early childhood programs are regulated by state departments of education, while child care centers and preschools are regulated by more welfare-oriented agencies, such as the Department of Children and Family Services in Illinois. These regulations provide the minimum standards that are acceptable for programs and the minimum requirements for teachers. If we are to improve the quality of programs for young children, these standards must be raised and the qualifications of teachers will need to be increased. This paper reviews studies regarding the relationship between program quality and teachers’ qualifications.

### ***HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS***

The quality of early childhood programs affects the children’s outcomes (Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Dunn, 1993; Peisner-Feinberg, Burchinal, Clifford, Culkin, Howes, Kagan, Yazejian, Byler, Rustici, & Zelazo, 1999). Teachers have a major role in determining that quality (Early & Winton, 2001). Their education and preparation as teachers contributes to the quality of programs (Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Team, 1995; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care