

Are They Prepared? Raising the Bar for New York City's Early Childhood Workforce

A growing consensus has emerged about the importance of a high-quality early childhood education. A substantial body of research points to the impact of early experiences on lifelong learning and success.¹ Nearly 200,000 of New York City's youngest citizens five and under are cared for and educated outside their homes, in a wide variety of center-based programs.² The quality of these settings, research confirms, is linked to the quality of their staffs, including the consistency and sensitivity of their interactions as well as their levels of formal education and specialized training in early childhood development and education.³ As the city works to guarantee the best outcomes for all children, raising the bar for the early childhood workforce is critical.



This brief examines the relationship of teacher qualifications to quality; the current status of the national early childhood workforce; and how New York City's early childhood practitioners are doing, as measured by their levels of education, specialization in early childhood, and certification.

WHAT WE KNOW

- The developmental needs of children can best be met by teachers with bachelor's degrees who have completed specialized teacher preparation programs in early childhood education.
- Numerous disparities in levels of education and certification in early childhood education exist between NYC's community- and school-based early childhood practitioners.
- Twice the percentage of community-based assistant teachers as their school-based counterparts have the high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment.
- While 88 percent of school-based teachers have master's degrees, versus 43 percent in community-based programs, nearly 60 percent hold degrees that are not in early childhood and 92 percent have had no education or experience in management.
- A large majority of teachers find study plans and the certification process challenging; most difficult are the financial constraints and passing the certification exams.
- By hiring generalists instead of early childhood-certified teachers, some public school leaders choose convenience over best practices for young children.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create a task force to examine teacher preparation programs to ensure that they are of high quality and meet the needs of working professionals.
- Refine and clarify requirements for certification, make the process more affordable and accessible, and provide increased support for candidates, including tutoring for certification exams.
- Require mastery of the early childhood knowledge base, including birth to eight child development, as a prerequisite for those seeking additional certification in early childhood.
- Align the education and professional development of practitioners with early learning standards in NYC and NYS.
- Encourage teachers to consider career paths that include the pursuit of the Children's Program Administrator Credential (CPAC) as well as subsequent leadership development.
- Make the case to principals and other hiring authorities about the advantages of hiring individuals certified in early childhood, most notably the positive impact on child outcomes.

This portrait of NYC’s workforce is based on a recent study of center-based early childhood educators—including teachers, assistant teachers, and directors—conducted by the New York City Early Childhood Professional Development Institute (PDI) and the Cornell University Early Childhood Program. The brief also provides a series of recommendations for policymakers as they seek to address the needs of the city’s youngest residents and those who serve them.

Teacher Qualifications and Quality

*The quality of early childhood settings has traditionally been measured by observing teaching and the actual experiences of children in the classroom as well as “structural” characteristics,” such as child-adult ratios; group size; and teacher education and specialized training.*⁴ A solid body of research has confirmed the link between higher levels of education and credentials and classroom quality and children’s outcomes. Numerous studies have shown that children educated by teachers with a bachelor’s degree and specialized training in child development and early education are more sociable, exhibit more sophisticated use of language, and perform at higher levels on cognitive tasks than those cared for by less-qualified adults.⁵

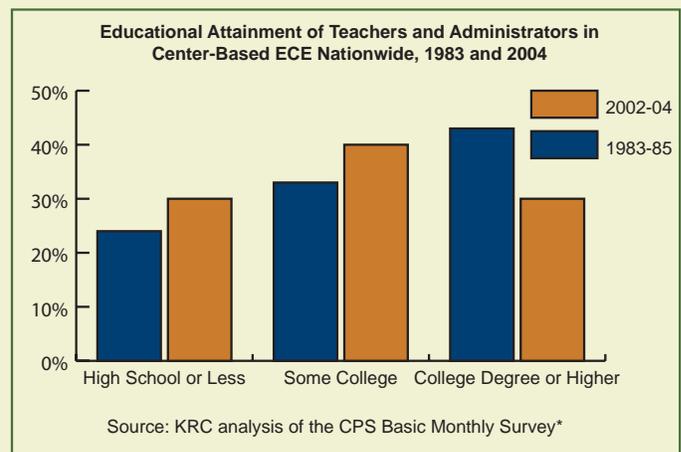
The field, in fact, has been rapidly converging on the idea that all pre-K teachers should hold a bachelor’s degree.⁶ Many early childhood experts now question the ability of minimally educated teachers to connect new scientific research about how children learn with their teaching practice.⁷ Standards are predicated on the science of learning, and early learning standards, which have been developed, and are under development in many states, including New York, are setting the bar higher for expectations of early childhood educators, who will be increasingly responsible for children’s outcomes.⁸

The requirements of NCLB, with its emphasis on standards and accountability, have radically altered classroom instructional practices in preschools and kindergartens, many in the field contend.⁹ For all young children—including English Language Learners, those with special needs, and those in poverty—practice grounded in child development and child-centered pedagogy has been found to be most effective.¹⁰ The shift from traditional child-centered curricula to more scripted, didactic approaches imposes new demands on teacher preparation programs and practitioners who have specialized and are certified in early childhood education (ECE).

Researchers are continuing to explore the relationship between teacher education levels, specialization, and child outcomes. In contrast to earlier work, some recent

studies have not found consistent relationships between teacher education levels, majors, and credentials and outcomes for young children.¹¹ These findings have fueled the debate on teacher qualifications and provoked intense scrutiny of the researchers’ methodology. Among the points of contention: Ninety percent of the classrooms in this sample of children in state-funded pre-K classrooms met only the “minimal quality” or below on the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale; the time between initial and final assessment of children’s skills was too short to reflect gains; and 70 percent of the teachers in the sample had at least a bachelor’s degree, which would make it difficult to isolate the impact of education level on children’s outcomes.¹²

The authors of these recent studies argue that they are expanding the discussion of teacher preparation beyond levels of education and credentials to include a deeper understanding of how teachers instruct and interact with children.¹³ This latest research does, implicitly, pose important questions about the quality of early childhood teacher preparation and professional development, the foundation for quality. What is known is that there are great variations in teacher preparation programs across the country. This lack of consistency raises real concerns about the quality of the education of ECE teachers as well as the repercussions for children.¹⁴ Further research and evaluation of teacher preparation and ECE teacher-education programs should be well supported.



*Source: *Losing Ground in Early Childhood: Declining Workforce qualifications in an Expanding Industry, 1980-2004* (Economic Policy Institute, 2005)

ECE Workforce Qualifications: Across the Nation

A wide range of education and certification levels characterizes the national early childhood workforce. Qualifications vary across states, settings, and positions.

Outside of the public school system, there are no federal education standards for early childhood teachers.¹⁵ As of 2006, 38 states had no minimum entry requirement in early childhood education for teachers in licensed child care programs.¹⁶ This stands in stark contrast to state entry requirements for K-12 teachers, the vast majority of whom are required to have a teaching credential before they are licensed. A bachelor's degree is required, as are an approved formal teacher education program and a passing grade on a certification exam assessing skills and knowledge.¹⁷

Although the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has set higher standards for initial licensure,¹⁸ a credit-bearing Child Development Associate (CDA) remains an acceptable entry-level requirement in various states. Twenty-three percent of pre-kindergarten teachers are in possession of a CDA, 22 percent in Head Start, and about a fifth in other center-based programs.¹⁹

Pre-K teachers generally have the highest levels of formal education, with nearly 75 percent holding a bachelor's degree or more, as compared to 36 percent, for example, in Head Start. While 33 percent of lead teachers hold a BA, 43 percent of lead teachers hold a bachelor's degree or less.²⁰ Moreover, a recent report by a team of labor economists and policy analysts confirmed an overall decline in educational attainment levels across various sectors of the early childhood workforce.²¹ Certification is also variable, with the majority of pre-kindergarten teachers (57 percent) certified by their states.

A Profile of NYC's ECE Workforce Qualifications

New York City's early childhood workforce reflects many, if not all, of these trends, with different levels and gaps across settings and positions. While New York City's standards for preschool teachers are the highest in the country and the certification rate for early childhood teachers in the public schools is a hundred percent, only half of all teachers with a higher education degree of some sort—including associate's and doctoral degrees—claim specialization in early childhood. Moreover, certification rates among community-based educators are considerably lower than those of their school-based colleagues.

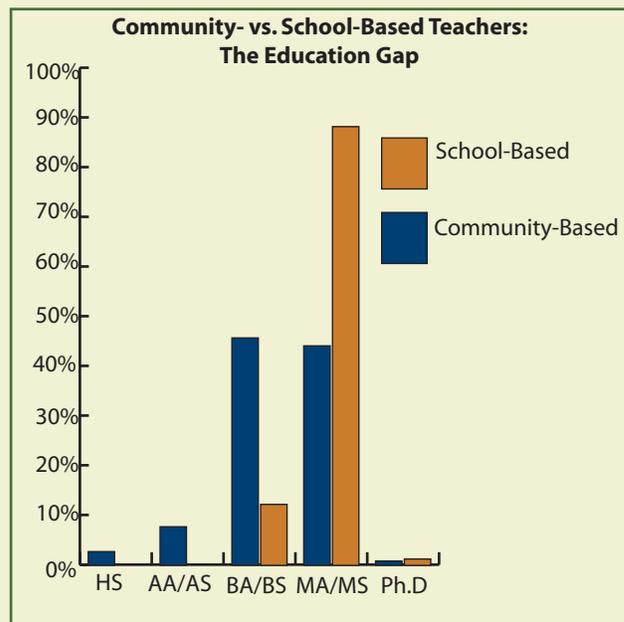
Education

The educational requirements of early childhood practitioners vary, depending on the regulatory agency involved in the program's operation. All licensed community-based centers are subject to the regulations of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). Those centers funded by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) are subject to their regulations as well. Community- and school-

based universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) programs have additional educational requirements.

The DOHMH requires preschool teachers to be permanently certified in early childhood. This certificate, which demonstrates specialized knowledge of children from birth through grade 2, is currently under review, and may be extended to include grade 3, in keeping with the definition of early childhood specified by NAEYC. Individuals may be hired with an associate's degree but must be enrolled in a study plan leading to teacher certification. For programs serving infants and toddlers, the minimum entry requirement was recently changed from a high school diploma to an associate's degree through the revision of Article 47 of the Health Code of the Bureau of Day Care. UPK teachers, on the other hand, must have a least a bachelor's degree in early childhood or a related field as well as a NYS Teaching Certificate.

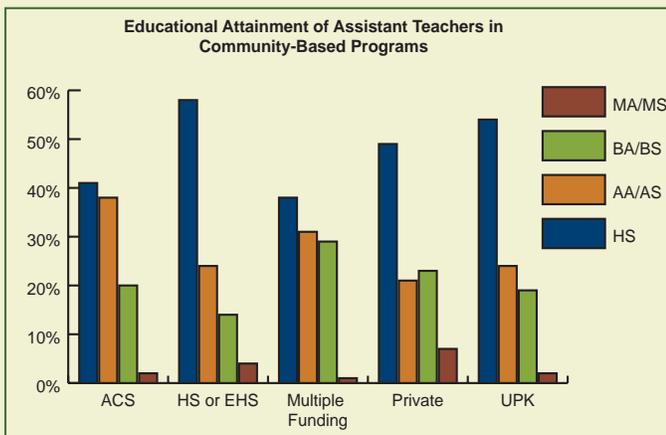
Among early childhood teachers in the city overall, 61 percent have master's, and 30 percent bachelor's degrees. Half with a higher education degree of some sort—including associate's and doctoral degrees—claim specialization in early childhood. While there are no significant differences in early childhood specialization between school- and community-based settings, it is interesting to note the reversal at the master's level, where almost 60 percent of teachers hold degrees that are *not* in early childhood.



Most striking among the key findings of PDI's recent workforce study, is the significant difference in the levels of education by setting. Nearly 90 percent of school-based teachers have master's degrees, while only 43 percent of community-based teachers have reached the

master's level. A look at the various community-based programs reveals that individuals with master's degrees are most prevalent in private centers. Head Start and Early Head Start boast the greatest percentage of teachers with bachelor's degrees, followed by UPK and multiple-funded programs. Associate's degrees are most commonly found in ACS programs.

Requirements and levels of educational attainment for assistant teachers also vary across school- and community-based settings. The current DOHMH regulation requires that assistant teachers have at least a high school diploma, a CDA, or 60 college credits. In both community-based UPK programs, those with a high school diploma are required to have college credit hours after three or more years of employment. Their counterparts working in the schools must have a minimum of a high school diploma or GED and are required to take the NYS Assessment of Teaching Assistant Skills (NYSATAS) exam.



In general, assistant teachers are much less likely to hold higher education degrees than their colleagues who are lead teachers—despite the fact that many assistant teachers substitute for lead teachers and are often responsible for all aspects of programming each day. Twice the percentage of community-based assistant teachers as school-based assistant teachers have the high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment. Overall, only a small proportion hold master's degrees; about a quarter, bachelor's; nearly a third, an associate's degree; and less than half, a high school degree or the equivalent. Nearly half of school-based assistants have associate's degrees, and more than a quarter have bachelor's degrees.

Certification

Like education requirements, those for certification vary by setting and age of children in the program. As of September of 2004, all UPK teachers in New York State and New York City are required to have NYS Teacher Certification. Teachers

in NYC's community-based UPK programs must have a bachelor's degree in early childhood or a related field and a study plan to obtain certification within three years. UPK teachers working in school-based settings must have NYS Certification and a NYS license.

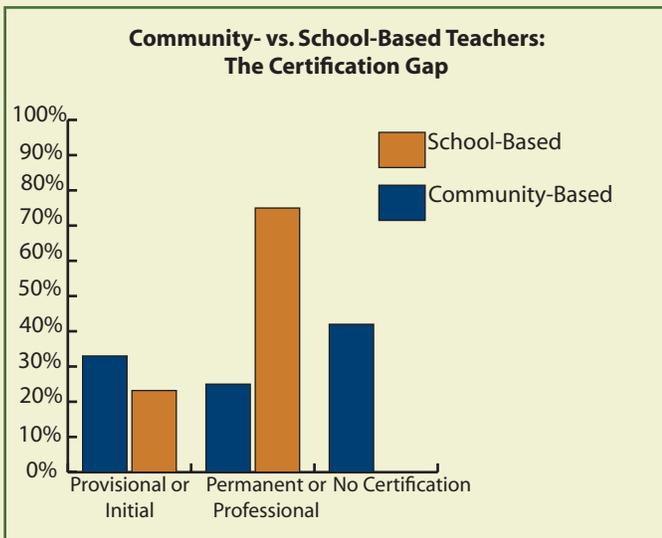
Teachers serving children of preschool age need a combination of a bachelor's degree and New York State certification. Uncertified teachers are permitted to work in child care programs, including Head Start and Early Head Start, as long as they are enrolled in a study plan. Infant/toddler teachers, as of September, 2008, will be required to have an associate's degree in early childhood education, or a CDA or GED and experience in the field as well as a study plan leading to an associate's degree in early childhood education within seven years.

The certification process is extremely complex, with various types of teaching certificates, including initial and professional certificates, as well as several pathways to certification. Among these routes is the study plan, sponsored by the DOHMH, which includes a particular course of study as well as a timeline for completion, and must be submitted by an accredited college. Approval of the plan is contingent upon supervision by a qualified educational director. Of those directors with staff on study plans, 90 percent report that they monitor their employees, providing technical assistance when needed. Nonetheless, the rate of uncertified teachers is cause for alarm.

Nearly a quarter of teachers and a small percentage of assistant teachers in community-based programs are currently pursuing study plans. Many teachers view the process as challenging, with nearly half reporting that they find it somewhat difficult and nearly a third, extremely or very difficult. Most challenging are the financial constraints of the process and passing the certification exams. NYC faculty of teacher education programs point to changes in the Content Specialty Test (CST), in particular, as a concern for early childhood students; while the exam previously included a section dedicated to early childhood, it now focuses more generally on childhood education and requires a broader knowledge base.²²

Certification rates vary considerably according to setting and age of children served. Seventy-five percent of lead teachers in school-based UPK programs hold permanent, or professional, certification. Combining teachers with permanent or professional certification with those holding initial or provisional certification yields a 100 percent overall certification rate. This stands in stark contrast to their community-based colleagues, 27 percent of whom are permanently certified, 34 percent provisionally certified, and 39 percent uncertified. While certification is not required

of infant/toddler teachers—and more than half of these lead teachers in community-based programs remain uncertified—the upgrading of the city’s regulations may begin to transform this scenario.



A Word about Directors

*Directors are widely acknowledged to play a significant role in creating the context for a high-quality early childhood program. As is the case with the teachers whom they supervise, directors’ formal education and specialized early childhood training are linked to quality.*²³

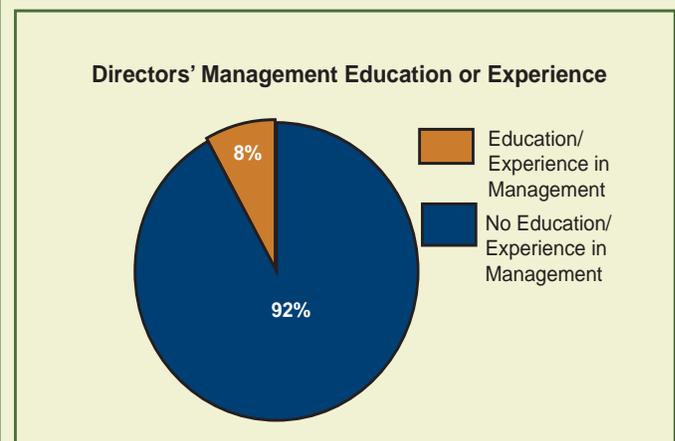
The educational and licensing requirements of early childhood directors vary, depending on the regulatory agency involved in the program’s operation. Directors in child care centers with more than 40 children, for example, are required to have a NYS Teaching Certificate in early childhood education. Directors in infant programs are required to have two years of group teaching experience and a bachelor’s degree with a NYS Teaching Certificate in early childhood or a master’s degree. Early Head Start or Head Start programs require that directors have a permanent NYS Teaching Certificate.

UPK standards require that directors in community-based programs have a valid NYS Teaching Certificate in early childhood. UPK programs in schools, on the other hand, are licensed by the State Education Department and are overseen by school principals that have master’s degrees in educational leadership or a related field, a NYS School Administrator’s Credential, and a minimum of two years of school-based approved experience in an administrative position.

PDI’s research revealed that more than three quarters of directors are certified to teach. Those who are not

certified must have written plans to obtain certification, and are affiliated with programs in which there is more than one director and the educational director holds a NYS Teaching Certificate. One out of every four directors holds an administrator’s credential such as the State Administration and Supervision Certificate, which prepares individuals to be principals in K-12 settings, which tend to be radically different from those of early childhood.

Research has consistently found that administrative practices are critical to positive outcomes for children.²⁴ In New York City, 85 percent of directors have master’s degrees. Of those directors who are currently taking courses, more than half are working towards a master’s, and 21 percent toward a doctoral degree. Moreover, two thirds of directors hold their higher education degrees in early childhood. Ninety-two percent, however have had no education or experience in management prior to assuming their current position. Few directors in the state, and no directors in New York City, possess the New York State Children’s Program Administrator Credential (CPAC).



Moving the Workforce Forward

Are New York City’s early childhood teachers prepared? Great gaps persist in levels of education and certification in early childhood education between community- and school-based practitioners. Many educators lack higher education degrees, most prominently assistant teachers, the “next in command” for the care and education of our children. Large numbers of those who are highly educated hold degrees that are *not* in early childhood. Few directors, whose administrative practices create the context for high quality, have had any education or experience in management. Certification remains elusive, a complex process that challenges even the most tenacious.

A number of new policies are emerging, both locally

and at the state level, that speak to concerns about early childhood workforce preparedness, adaptability, and effectiveness, including the recent revisions to the Health Code of the Bureau of Day Care; the proposed extension of the NYS early childhood certification to include Grade 3; and the proposed downward extension of early childhood education to holders of childhood education and special education certification.

While these efforts are significant, much work remains. The city must cast a more critical eye on teacher preparation programs. Certification must be refined, and the process made more affordable and accessible. The education and professional development of practitioners must be aligned with early learning standards. Teachers must be encouraged to pursue opportunities for management and leadership development. And early childhood principles and best practice must be valued by public school administrators. New York City's policies must reflect our aspirations toward the highest levels of quality. Nothing less will do.

ENDNOTES

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Developing Adults Working with Developing Children

The New York City Early Childhood Professional Development Institute is a public/private partnership that brings together a range of city agencies, a consortium of private funders, and the nation's largest urban university to build a comprehensive system of professional development for individuals who work with young children in New York City.

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