

# Early Childhood Professional Development: Creating a Plan to Support Child Care Quality

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## Early Childhood Leadership & Policy Network

The purpose of this paper is to inform constituents about the role of early childhood professional development (education and training) in enhancing child care quality. National and state trends are discussed and policy recommendations made. This brief supports the development of a professional development plan for North Carolina that pieces together the many initiatives that support the quality of early learning environments as well as the many efforts made by teachers to improve their practices.

**Professional Development.** Professional development in early childhood can be obtained through education and training.<sup>1</sup> Education includes classes that are taken within the formal education system and is distinguished by the level (e.g. years or degree earned) and the content (e.g. major or coursework). Training includes professional development experiences outside the formal education system such as workshops or conference sessions. There is variation in training that is distinguished by the type (e.g. pre-service, in-service, conference), content (e.g. topic area), and duration (e.g. half day, full day, over several months).

**Increasing Professional Development Requirements.**

Under the Bush administration, the Good Start, Grow Smart Initiative requires states to develop a professional development plan to increase the education and training of practitioners working with young children. Federal and state funded early childhood programs have responded by increasing education and training standards. For example, all teachers in Early Head Start must have at least the Child Development Associate credential by 2010, and Head Start reauthorization requires 50% of teachers to have a bachelors degree by 2013. Currently, 86% of teachers in state Pre-K programs have a bachelor's degree, and 13 states require Pre-K teachers to have a bachelor's degree with content in early childhood education.

The Good Start, Grow Smart Initiative includes a goal for states to create professional development plans

**Education.** Research indicates that the quality of child care is related to teachers' education and that teachers with bachelor's degrees create more optimal learning environments for children compared to teachers with less education.<sup>2,3</sup> However, participation in as little as 2 to 4 early childhood courses has been found to improve teacher practices.<sup>4,5</sup> Research also indicates that education content is important. For example, teachers with more education focused on child development and early childhood education have a better knowledge base of developmentally appropriate practices.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, a recent study re-examined seven major studies and found that neither teachers' level of education or their major predicted differences in classroom quality.<sup>7</sup> This study raised many questions about the content included in teacher education programs, the level of support teachers have to implement best practices, and the way in which both education and child care quality is measured. In response, using a meta-analysis, another study reviewed 32 studies and found that higher levels of education were related to higher quality teacher-child interactions and classroom quality.<sup>8</sup> Important to consider is the role of teacher education programs, supports for teachers to implement best practices, and issues surrounding how education and child care quality is measured.

**Training.** Training as a mode of professional development seems to have an important role for teacher practices. Research indicates that family child care practitioners and center-based teachers who participate in trainings have higher quality interactions and create more optimal learning environments for children.<sup>9,10</sup> However, there is wide variation in the kinds of training that are offered. Therefore, these results likely depend on the content and intensity of the training. For example, one study found continual training versus intermittent training to be more effective.

**North Carolina Rated License.** In January 2008, North Carolina's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) revised their criteria for earning 1 to 5 stars so that education had a heavier weighting. Additionally, child care programs attempting to earn higher stars (3, 4, or 5) must undergo an observational assessment based on the Environment Rating Scales. A recent analysis of ECERS-R scores from the *North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project* indicates that higher education among teachers yields better classroom quality with a 2-year degree pushing scores into the "good" (above 5.0) quality range and a 4-year degree in

North Carolina raised education requirements of higher stars

Teacher Education	ECERS-R Scores
High school	4.68
Some college	4.93
2-year degree	5.14
4-year degree in other field	5.26
4-year degree in ECE/CD	5.3
Graduate work	5.32

early childhood education or child development resulting in significantly higher quality compared to teachers with high school, some college, or a 2-year degree.

**Policy Implications.** In response to the Good Start, Grow Smart Initiative, direction for early childhood professional development in North Carolina is needed. Education and training have important roles for promoting high quality learning environments for children. Through many initiatives, North Carolina has been a leader in promot-

ing high quality child care. Integrating current efforts with future steps to promote education and training into a professional development plan for the state supports a more qualified workforce to create higher quality learning environments for children.

- Policy and Research Directions**
- Examination of teacher education programs in relation to early learning standards.
  - Supportive policies for teachers to access education and training.
  - Improved articulation between 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education.
  - Supportive work environments as well as salary and benefits tied to teacher qualifications.
  - A continued focus on increasing the required level of pre-service education.
  - Examination of the measurement of teacher performance.

<sup>1</sup>Maxwell, K. L., Feild, C. C., & Clifford, R. M. (2006). Defining and measuring professional development in early childhood research. In M. Zaslow & I. Martinez-Beck (Eds.), *Critical issues in early childhood professional development*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.  
<sup>2</sup>Helburn, S. W., Ed. (1995). *Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers, Technical Report*. Denver, Department of Economics, Center for Research in Economic and Social Policy, University of Colorado at Denver. *NICHD Early Child Care Research Network* (2002). Early child care and children's development prior to school entry: Results from the NICHD study of early child care. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39, 133-164.  
<sup>3</sup>Arnett, J. (1989). Caregivers in day care centers: does training matter? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 10, 541-552.  
<sup>4</sup>Cassidy, D. J., Buell, M. J., Pugh-Hoese, S., & Russell, S. (1995). The effect of education on child care teachers' beliefs and classroom quality: Year one evaluation of the TEACH early childhood associate degree scholarship program. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 10, 171-183.

<sup>5</sup>Nsider, M. H., & Fu, V. R. (1990). The effects of specialized education and job experience on early childhood teachers' knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 5, 69-78.  
<sup>6</sup>Early, D. M., Maxwell, K. L., Burchinal, M., Alva, S., Bender, R. H., Bryant, D., et al. (2007). Teachers' education, classroom quality, and young children's academic skills: Results from seven studies of preschool programs. *Child Development*, 78, 558-580.  
<sup>7</sup>Kelley, P., & Camilli, G. (2007). The impact of teacher education on outcomes in center-based early childhood education programs: A meta-analysis. Retrieved April 1, 2008 from <http://nieer.org/resources/research/TeacherEd.pdf>.  
<sup>8</sup>Tout, K., Zaslow, M., & Berry, D. (2006). *Quality and qualifications*. In M. Zaslow & I. Martinez-Beck (Eds.), *Critical issues in early childhood professional development*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.  
<sup>9</sup>Fukkink, R. G., & Lont, A. (2007). Does training matter? A meta-analysis and review of caregiver training studies. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 22, 294-311.