Professionalizing the Early Years

Examining US Public Pre-K Policy alongside Nordic Approaches to Early Childhood Care and Education

IEPM 6120

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EARLY YEARS, CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Each day around the world, as parents head to their places of employment and education, the important question arises: where will their children go? International attention has turned the spotlight towards early childhood education and care (ECCE) as a critical resource to enable both economic empowerment for a family and and a pathway to future learning for children. In the U.S., this valuable resource is facing a crisis in its workforce, however, as educators, advocates, and policymakers call out the disparities of compensation, training, and most of all respect for early childhood educators. Advocates for early childhood education, state and federal policymakers, and stakeholders at all levels can benefit from an honest assessment of the answer to two critical questions: How does the U.S. pre-K teacher workforce currently fare as a profession? And how can this workforce be developed and treated as a professional field, considering its importance, in light of the practices of leading ECCE systems internationally?

EVIDENCE FOR ECCE'S IMPACTS

Centers for early childhood education across the country have been called into the spotlight by recent attention to this issue. Elizabeth Warren's 2020 presidential campaign includes the promise for providing free childcare to all U.S. citizens, and major news outlets continue to expand their coverage of the debates surrounding Head Start, public pre-K, and the workforce issues related to ECCE. Scientific consensus supporting this attention is clear: the early childhood years, and the education received during them, matter for long-term development. Missed exposure to stimulation and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities can mean lifelong deficits. According to a 2015 study, by age six, disparities in early literacy skills of approximately 30% are apparent between children in the highest and lowest socioeconomic status groups, and these disparities only grow with time spent in school. Public ECCE systems can be a critical component of bridging this divide, as children of all backgrounds gain access to enriching early experiences.

Debate continues as to just how "long-term" the impacts of ECCE are, however, as multiple long-term studies have yielded mixed results on the persistence and fadeout of ECCE's impacts. There is evidence, however, that participation in ECCE leads to improved preparation for the transition to elementary school, particularly for children of low-income backgrounds, and a recent consensus statement from leading experts the field reiterated that despite some valid criticisms, there is still justification for continued scaling-up of ECCE [1].

In the U.S., pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) programs provide some level of services prior to Kindergarten entry at age five, and make up a core section of ECCE offerings nationally. While 43 states currently provide some level of pre-K to four-year-olds, only 29 do for three-year-olds. Although funding across states has remained uneven, total enrollment in public pre-K programs has expanded annually, growing from 14% of the nations' four-year-olds in 2002 to 33% of the nation's four-year-olds in 2017 [2]. Still, the U.S. lags behind many other developed

nations, ranking 26th in four-year-old enrollment and 21st in total investment in ECCE relative to country wealth [3]. While ECCE takes many forms in the U.S. context, examining the professionalization of pre-K educators provides a snapshot of the current challenges facing these teachers. Zeroing in on pre-K teachers might even provide a conservative estimate of such challenges, as pre-K teachers are often employed in better conditions (such as in a public school building) and earn higher wages than daycare, home care, or preschool teachers at center-based schools.

U.S. PRE-K TEACHERS: ACCOUNTABILITY, QUALIFICATIONS AND COMPENSATION

When assessing the status of the ECCE "profession," it's important to identify what factors are related to the professional regard given to the field, and the extent to which those factors are present. One way of breaking down professionalization includes the following sub-areas to assess, the full picture of which provides an idea of how professionalized a field is: credential and licensing requirements, induction and mentoring programs for entrants, professional development opportunities, specialization, authority over decision making, compensation levels, and prestige and occupational social standing [4]. A brief overview of a few of these factors and their current standing provides a snapshot of the challenges facing early childhood educators in gaining public respect and in advancing their profession.

Accountability & Autonomy

In keeping with patterns in K-12 education, as public pre-K access and enrollment has expanded over the past two decades, calls for quality and accountability have arisen, too. Two major initiatives to expand accountability systems at this level are outlined below:

Good Start, Grow Smart (GSGS): This initiative was created under George W. Bush in 2002, calling on states to develop early learning standards, following the passage of No Child Left Behind. By 2005, 43 of 50 states had completed the creation of such standards for early literacy skills and early mathematics learning. However, this effort was criticized by some concerned that the assessment of such skills would diminish attention to developmentally appropriate socioemotional learning and integrated content in favor of an intensive focus on the targeted academic items being tested.

Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge: This grant program that awarded a total of $500 million in federal aid to improve access in state pre-K programs for low-income children, ensure "high-quality early learning" programs, and implement assessment in line with standards. States have since been awarded funding and implementation of a variety of initiatives are now underway, varying state to state.

The academic emphasis currently seen in many pre-K programs, and the ever-expanding and evolving program offerings are partly the result of these two programs. In a 2012 report by the Educational Testing Service, current pre-K assessment strategies were examined. It found that across 50 state pre-K programs in 40 states (reflecting the fact that some states, such as Iowa, Louisiana, and New Jersey, have multiple state-run pre-K systems simultaneously), 21 had policies allowing no teacher choice over assessment methods. While some form of assessment is certainly a component of ensuring accountable, high-quality systems, its current forms are critiqued as undermining teachers who seek to provide caring relationships and developmentally appropriate experiences for young children—neither of which are easily assessed. Further, the emphases on assessment have in turn promoted the trickling-down of academic curricular requirements, reducing teachers' freedom and flexibility to meet the diverse needs of their students.

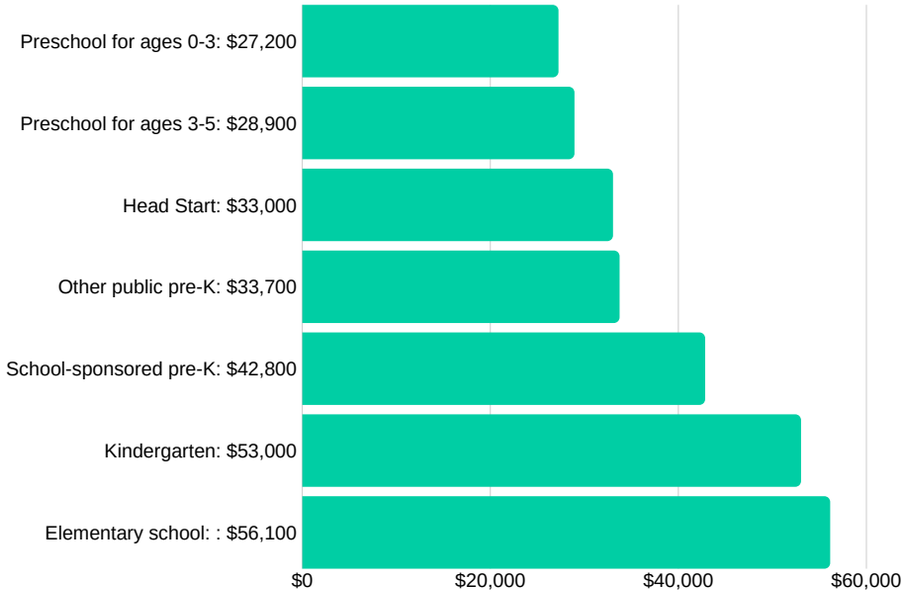
Qualifications

Currently, 34 of 60 public pre-K programs require a Bachelor's degree for lead teachers. While there is a body of scientific support for teacher qualifications leading to better student outcomes, some have reinvestigated the effects of degrees and found essentially no difference between Bachelor's and Associate's degree-level educators, implying that demanding the prior would be unnecessary [5]. On the other side of the argument, pre-K programs in New Jersey and North Carolina that have included an emphasis on teacher qualification, professional development, and compensation have done so to the benefit of student outcomes; worth noting is the concern that in these state analyses, all teachers examined possess the required degrees, making it difficult to truly identify the effect of teacher degree versus some other program component.

While at face value this requirement seems to lends itself to professionalization, insisting upon a one-size-fits-all degree requirement could be ignoring the challenges such a requirement would pose. The effort to promote a pre-K workforce with higher qualifications has raised equity-related and practical issues. For many pre-K teachers, seeking an advanced degree means leaving the workforce to obtain training, an unreasonable choice for many financially. In 2017, Washington, D.C. made the decision to require an associate's degree of all early childhood educators working not only in public preschool settings, but also in home-care settings. This raised concerns that pressure on an already understaffed workforce would hurt the poorest teachers serving in the most in-need settings, taking educators out of settings if they were unable to complete the required degree by December 2020. In pursuit of professionalization, a degree in of itself will not be enough to build professional competencies; additional systems of professional development and practice are needed.

Compensation

A critical concern is the level of compensation provided to pre-K teachers. Based on a 2017 assessment by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), funding differs widely from state to state, with some investing as much as $16,000 per student (D.C.) and others investing as little as $1,900 (Nebraska).



Preschool teachers with higher education levels find little financial incentive to teach preschool, when comparing ECCE wages with Kindergarten and Elementary school salaries. (Adapted from New York Times article "Do Preschool Teachers Really Need to Be College Graduates?" by Emily Miller [April 2017]).

Despite dollar-amount increases in investment, this has failed to keep pace with inflation. ECCE workers at large in the U.S. experienced only a one percent increase in wages between 1997 and 2013, falling behind service industry positions and indicating that wages are not keeping pace with cost of living increases; according to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at UC Berkley, on average, ECCE teachers make $13.74 an hour. The stress of living in poverty while teaching children in the same economic situation is documented and diminishes the ability for these educators to effectively provide early education and care. Central to the issues posed by low compensation is that it fails to attract a highly qualified workforce (who can receive a return on their investment in advanced degrees through requisite payment), retain quality teachers, and incentivize increased entry into the field.

LESSONS FROM NORDIC ECCE

One set of countries consistently ranked highly on international indicators of ECCE quality are the Nordic states of Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden. These are rated highly on international assessments of ECCE, meeting quality benchmarks across a variety of levels (including teacher qualifications, teacher-student ratio, funding amounts, teacher salary, and level of enrollment) in the most recent 2017 OECD assessments. While the nations representing the Nordic context are far from identical, there are common threads uniting approaches to the professionalization of the ECCE workforce in these countries.

Qualifications

Finland serves as a case study example of teacher qualification in the ECCE field while looking to Nordic countries as an example. All ECCE teachers in Finland are required to have a three-or four-year bachelor's degree in education, although a master's degree is a common next step. The curriculum of these programs is centered on research-based practice, while emphasizing the "whole child" and freedom of play and exploration. The clearly defined goals of ECCE in Nordic contexts reflect a holistic, play-based model that pushes back against the academic, school-preparation model common in England, France, and the U.S.

Compensation

In each of these countries, families pay small portions of the total cost of tuition for early childhood education, which is further reduced for low-income families, and enrollment in services is high compared to most other OECD countries, with over 90% of 3-5 year olds in all countries (with the exception of Finland, whose 3-year-olds are largely cared for at home) enrolled in ECCE, based on OECD data. High teacher pay is reflective of an all-around well-funded approach; according to a Lien Foundation assessment, Denmark tops rankings in this regard, with annual teacher salaries of approximately $50,000 USD.

Accountability & Autonomy

Importantly, while there is a national curriculum system with important expectations for teachers related to educational equity, teachers are provided a great degree of local autonomy and freedom over their practice. As one respected Finnish education expert, Hannele Niemi, described:

"*Teachers are expected to prepare students for lifelong learning. This requires a high degree of pedagogical competence and a wide professional role because students' learning is often connected to their attitudes, self-efficacy, and values. It also requires an ethical commitment to the profession."*

Educators are provided with strong pedagogical training and continued supports, while national curriculum but local implementation choices allow for teacher autonomy and trust, and compensation reflects the preparation and dedication required for employment in a professional field. This is not to say that there are no flaws in these systems of education. Just as described in the U.S., patterns of "schoolifying" the early years in response to increased and earlier assessment schedules in recent years have been critiqued here. The contexts of Nordic and U.S. systems are very different, in their history, funding structures, and more, which creates limitations in the transfer of policy from one to the other. However, in these Nordic contexts, ECCE educators are seen as professionals by the very nature of their chosen field, and are trained and trusted as such. Educators are provided with strong pedagogical training and continued supports, while national curriculum but local implementation choices allow for teacher autonomy and trust, and compensation reflects the preparation and dedication required for employment in a professional field. From this combination, the U.S. has much to learn.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

In the U.S., as calls for accountability in pre-K classes have increased, teacher autonomy has decreased as the ECCE years have come to resemble K-12 approaches to accountability. Compensation has failed to incentivize entry into the field, and qualification requirements have only recently begun to become widespread and currently pose considerable concerns over reducing workforce participation through heightened requirements. What this means for ECCE in the U.S. is a cycle of minimal respect and minimal quality.

In contrast, ECCE policies in Nordic contexts foster an environment of high expectations, high trust, and high quality, all the while maintaining a focused determination to uphold the "care" part of the ECCE acronym, and provide a holistic early childhood education experience. As a variety of approaches to increase teacher quality continue in the U.S., policymakers should consider the successes across these critical domains that have occurred in the last 30 years and prioritize the development of a highly trained and adequately paid workforce who can create stimulating, engaging environments for children.

Innovations such as registered apprenticeship programs and "earn-to-learn" pathways to advanced qualifications for current pre-K teachers, and collaborative and reflective professional development systems trickling down from K-12 contexts to pre-K environments are among the first steps toward creating a better trained workforce without drastically reducing participation [7]. These initiatives should be further studied and considered as methods to improve the quality of existing pre-K classrooms and provide educators feasible pathways toward professional growth.

Through coherent systems for teacher preparation, incentivizing qualified candidates to enter the field with pay parity between pre-K and K-12 systems, and an emphasis on holistic methods that encourage teacher autonomy (without the academic assessments appropriate for higher grades) while creating developmentally rich environments, a transformation in the ECCE profession can begin. The U.S. has the potential to develop a competent workforce by first affording it respect and pay parity, and from this point will be able to improve quality and scale up programs, to the benefit of young children and the nation at large.

NOTES

[1] For additional discussion of the empirical evidence surrounding ECCE, consider reading “The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects Consensus Statement from the Pre-Kindergarten Task Force” by Phillips, Lipsey, Dodge, and several other leading ECCE researchers (2017).

[2] Statistics presented are from the 2017 annual report titled “The State of Preschool” published by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

[3] Herman, J., Post, S., & O’halloran, S. (2013). The United States Is Far Behind Other Countries on Pre-K Preschool participation, 1–6. Retrieved from https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/InternationalECEBrief-2.pdf

[4] Ingersoll, R. M., & Merrill, E. (2011). Reading 23: The Status of Teaching as a Profession. Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education, 185–198.

[5] Manning, M., Garvis, S., Fleming, C., & Wong, G. T. W. (2017). The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood education and care environment. https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2017; Whitebook, M., & Ryan, S. (2011). Degrees in Context: Asking the Right Questions about Preparing Skilled and Effective Teachers of Young Children. Nieer, (14), 1–16.

[6] Niemi, H. (2017). Teacher Professional Development in Finland: Towards a More Holistic Approach. Psychology, Society, & Education, 7(3), 279

[7] For more detailed recommendations surrounding registered apprenticeships, New America has released a series entitled “ Earning While Learning with Early Educator Apprenticeship Programs,” highlighting this promising, realistic approach to improving the quality of the field.