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### ***Current questions in early childhood education and development***

#### **Historical context**

The early childhood period is usually recognized to be from 0 – about 8 years. In the U.S, children from the age of 6, and often from 5, enter the public elementary school system. Children below the age of elementary school entry are considered to be infants, toddlers or preschoolers. It is these children on which my paper will focus. Early care and education for children under 6 in the United States is quite disparate. Kindergarten for 5 year olds is included in the elementary education system in most states. First instituted in 1873,<sup>1</sup> public kindergarten was not widely available until recently. Today, only 15 states require children to attend kindergarten at 5, and only 11 states and the District of Columbia require school systems to offer full day programs.<sup>2</sup> Five states do not require school districts to offer Kindergarten.

There are approximately 23 million children under the age of 5 in the United States. About 67% of their mothers are in the labor force. Provision for these children is quite a patchwork. About 26% use organized child care centers. About 21% are cared for by Grandparents. Other relatives (not fathers) care for another 6%. Family Child Care Homes (These are family homes that are licensed by a state education or family service agency to care for non-relative children during the day or overnight) account for about 6%. Other non-relative care, including nannies or babysitters account for about 8%.<sup>3</sup> Many parents use multiple arrangements for child care and there are children for whom there are no regular child care arrangements.<sup>4</sup>

Much of pre-kindergarten care and education for children takes place outside of the official public education system, although since 1995, some states are beginning to support programs for 4 year olds. Several states have recently increased funding for this, but only 1 state has public school 4 year old enrollment that approaches 100%. In 12 states pre-kindergarten education is not supported through the public education system.<sup>5</sup>

National attention to preschool began with Head Start, a small program within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) legislation passed in 1965. Head Start was designed to provide education and health care for children in families whose incomes are below the federal poverty guidelines. These guidelines are determined each year, with variations according to family size. In comparison with Head Start eligibility, children whose family incomes are up to 130% of poverty guidelines are eligible for nutrition assistance and for free lunch in public schools. As of 2013, Head Start served just over 900, 0006. Although it serves a relatively small proportion of children, Head Start is a major systematically organized program for preschoolers. It has paid conscientious attention to research documenting best practices, and has had documented success on a number of levels. Care for infants and toddlers lags behind that for preschool children. Research relevant to and provision for infants and toddlers however is expanding. There is beginning to be federal support through Early Head Start.

#### **Quality of care**

In 1852<sup>6</sup>, the first state wide mandate for compulsory education was enacted for children from 8 – 14 years. Each state continues to be responsible for organizing state supported educational systems. Public school teachers are licensed. School systems are regulated by state boards of education.

Today there is intense debate within each state over the position of early care and education, and precisely what kind of support and recognition there should be. Care of preschoolers has traditionally been the realm of families and of social services. Most preschool programs are not part of public school systems. Many are regulated by Child and Family Services Departments, which focus on health and safety, space allocation, and group size. A large number of states still allow staff to be as young as 18 years old with only a high school diploma, or less.<sup>7</sup> The federally funded Head Start program is an exception to this.

Low qualification requirements accompany the low pay common within the field. With the exception of Head Start (nationally funded), child care programs that are not part of the Public Education system, do not receive systematic support. This leaves budgets to be supplied through tuition, various disparate subsidies and grants from charitable organizations. In turn, family ability to pay for child care limits the tuition that can be charged,

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia of children and childhood in history and society: Ke-Me. Retrieved from: <http://www.faqs.org/childhood/Ke-Me/Kindergarten.html>

<sup>2</sup> Education commission of the states: 50 state analysis. Retrieved from: <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRT?rep=Kq1416>

<sup>3</sup> Child care in America 2012 State fact sheets. Retrieved from: [http://www.naccrra.org/sites/default/files/default\\_site\\_pages/2012/full2012cca\\_state\\_factsheetbook.pdf](http://www.naccrra.org/sites/default/files/default_site_pages/2012/full2012cca_state_factsheetbook.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Hofferth, S. I. (1996). Child care in the United States today. Retrieved from: [http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/06\\_02\\_02.pdf](http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/06_02_02.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> McGill, B. and Sullivan, A. (2014). You may be surprised by the states that support pre-k. National Journal. Retrieved from: <http://www.nationaljournal.com/next-america/early-childhood/you-may-be-surprised-by-the-states-that-support-pre-k-20140417>

<sup>6</sup> Compulsory education. Retrieved from: <https://www3.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/compulso.html>

<sup>7</sup> Education Portal. Preschool teacher educational requirements. Retrieved from: [http://education-portal.com/articles/Preschool\\_Teacher\\_Educational\\_Requirements.html](http://education-portal.com/articles/Preschool_Teacher_Educational_Requirements.html)

ultimately depressing staff salaries. This is the case even when very low income families are provided with direct child care subsidies. The US median salary for a Kindergarten or Elementary school teacher is about twice the salary for a child care teacher. That relationship assumes unequal qualification requirements, Bachelor degree for a licensed teacher, Associate degree for a child care teacher.<sup>8</sup> Even for well-prepared teachers with BA degrees however, salaries in non-public school programs are not commensurate with those of public school teachers. For example, in the city where I teach, high quality child care center pays a master (experienced) teacher with a BA degree less than 60% of what is projected for a relatively new 1 – 2 years teacher with a BA degree in the local school system. Average pay in some states leaves a child care worker supporting two children approximately at the Federal Poverty level, necessitating that the teacher obtain a second job, or leave the field entirely in search of higher wages. The ensuing turnover rate has a negative effect on program quality.

In the last decade or so, professional expectations for early childhood teachers and care providers even outside the public school system have been rising for a number of reasons. There is a growing body of research documenting the efficacy of high quality pre-school programs. The relationship between high quality preschool programs and professionally prepared teachers has also been documented. National professional organizations are making efforts to support high quality child care on a number of fronts. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) supports program accreditation for centers, including Head Start. Program accreditation documents a center's attempts to provide high quality content and relationships with families. The accreditation process includes the expectation that staff be progressing through professional preparation programs. The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) supports a parallel accreditation process for family child care homes, though the number of these programs that have been accredited is very small.

More recently, individual states also are beginning to provide support to centers and child care homes to help them initiate quality improvements beyond basic licensing requirements. Individual states also are beginning to encourage family child care providers to seek professional preparation. These processes allow centers and homes to gain recognition for quality improvements in small increments as they look toward national accreditation.

Recognizing the problem of low salaries, national professional organizations have campaigned to raise the level of professional qualifications. They have also supported "worthy wage" campaigns that call for increases in salary for early childhood providers. Since teacher licensure is often not the expected credential for preschool teachers, professional organizations have developed an accreditation process for Associate level Early Childhood Degrees, and are looking forward to developing degree program accreditation for non-licensure Bachelor degrees as well.

A parallel movement has emerged out of legislative efforts. Head Start began as an attempt to promote equity in education. In 1983 however, a large national report, "Nation at Risk" proclaimed publicized a continued "achievement gap" between white children and those of color.<sup>9</sup> In 2001, a reauthorization of the 1965 ESEA act, named "No Child Left Behind"(NCLB) was instituted for elementary and secondary schools.<sup>10</sup> No Child Left Behind put great emphasis on teacher preparation and accountability, claiming that standardized testing to measure child progress would be beneficial. Increased testing has subsequently affected children down to the lowest levels of elementary school.

NCLB has not mandated testing for preschool children, even those within public systems. Professional organizations have opposed testing for children in the early childhood age range, though children as young as Kindergarten are tested. There is however, increased emphasis on preparing children to enter kindergarten "ready to learn" so that they can do well on tests. This emphasis has spurred greater interest in professional qualifications for preschool teachers, especially in those states with publicly supported preschool, where teachers must have either a teacher license or a BA in early childhood. Head Start has also been increasing requirements gradually, currently mandating that least 50% of lead teachers have bachelor level qualifications that are early childhood specific.

There is now federal aid to support college preparation of preschool teachers and child care providers from basic to BA levels. It is available to full time child care workers who earn limited salaries. The program is managed by individual states, and requires cooperation between provider organizations and teachers. Federal funds supply tuition assistance. Child care facilities are expected to support flexible scheduling for teachers so that they can attend classes, and to offer small incremental pay increases. Teachers commit to remaining in place for at least 1 year after finishing coursework. The intended result is an increasingly stable and better qualified workforce. As infant and toddler programs are more widely offered, these funds will also support professional development for those teachers.

### **Curriculum matters**

There are currently several particular focus points for preschool curriculum experiences. These do not always determine specific curricular approaches. Instead, they are areas in which conversations are taking place among those interested in "best practices".

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<sup>8</sup> US department of labor. Bureau of labor statistics. Occupational outlook handbook. Retrieved from: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/childergarten-and-elementary-school-teachers.htm> and <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/preschool-teachers.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Graham, E. (2014). A Nation at risk turns 30: where did it take us? NEA Today. Retrieved from: <http://neatoday.org/2013/04/25/a-nation-at-risk-turns-30-where-did-it-take-us/>

<sup>10</sup> Editor projects in education research center (2011, Sept. 19) Issues A – Z No Child Left Behind. Education Week. Retrieved 10/18/2014 from: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/no-child-left-behind/>

*Competent teachers provide better support for children's learning experiences.* Increased emphasis on teacher accountability at elementary levels has led to increased focus on curriculum to prepare preschoolers for kindergarten and first grade. Although preschool children are not generally subjected to testing that has individual consequences, there is a much greater curricular emphasis on specific skills in recent years. In addition to social, emotional and self-help skills, well prepared preschoolers are expected to be familiar with books, and the pleasures of being read to. They are expected to be able to identify at least some letters and sounds, as well as to be able to write their names. Math and Science are not as heavily emphasized, but children are expected to be able to count accurately to 10 and to demonstrate 1:1 correspondence.<sup>11</sup>

Understanding of the teacher's role has changed. In contrast to earlier expectations that teachers would provide a stimulating environment with self-directed learning activities and would respond to children as they interact and question, preschool teachers are expected to take a much more active instructional role in children's learning. It has been proposed that teachers would benefit by more specifically defined curriculum guides and should have more curricular guidance.

There is ample evidence that many young children are capable of and interested in reading and mathematics before first grade if given the encouragement and opportunity, but many are not yet developmentally ready to do this. Intense focus on achieving skills such as letter recognition and phonemic awareness puts pressure on teachers to insist. The expectation that all children will achieve specific skills tends to lead toward a narrowing of teacher focus, and subsequent restriction of opportunities for child oriented, child directed play.

*There have been particular gains for children with disabilities.* The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142, now called IDEA Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)<sup>12</sup> provided for education in the "least restrictive environment". Beginning in 1975, public schools have been required by federal mandate to provide free and appropriate education for children with disabilities. Since then, there has been much progress in understanding the importance of and techniques for educating children with special needs. Currently, inclusion of children with special needs is commonly expected in elementary classrooms, although adequate support for teachers often remains an issue in practice. Least restrictive environment is applicable to preschool programs as well as to those for older children. Federal funds provide moneys, which states are required to match in order to educate children three years and older who have documented disabilities. Individual states decide how to implement this, but these programs are part of and administered by public school systems. Not all children who might benefit from special services qualify for these special education programs however. Head Start programs, though not state funded, are also required to and supported in serving a designated proportion of children with special needs in each classroom. These children are not restricted to the income limits of other Head Start children.

Subsequent to 1975, laws recognize the importance and efficacy of early intervention to prevent or ameliorate various developmental challenges that infants and toddlers may have. Federal funds administered and supplemented by each state provide the means for assessing children 0 - 36 months at no charge to parents. Individual states determine processes for distributing these funds. They provide services for children with obvious disabilities, but also to those who may be at risk for such difficulties or delays. Parents, therapists and health providers work together to develop an Individual Family Service Plan for each child. Several months before children turn 3, transition plans are developed for those who will continue to receive services, and will enter public school special education at 3.

The challenges of funding and implementing education for children with special needs continue at all levels. Individual states must allocate funding to match federal funds. Individual states develop plans and procedures. Not all children who might benefit from special education continue to be included after the age of 3. There is need for better identification of children who may have special needs. Coordination of services is often difficult or inadequate. Nevertheless, children's special needs are being addressed more than ever before. The professional focus on ways to include children with the larger community of typically developing children has been initiated and continues to develop.

Teachers and care providers need much more support and education to do this well. Some progress has been made in this regard. The national Council for Exceptional Children has developed guidelines for preparation of teachers of children with special needs at all age levels. There are specific license programs for teachers of children with special needs both at early childhood and elementary levels. Perhaps more important, there are beginning to be blended license programs through which teachers are prepared both in content areas and for providing inclusive education for all children. Non-licensure baccalaureate programs are also beginning to include specific attention to working with children who have special needs and with their families.

*A final curricular issue is that of English for speakers of other languages.* The problem is an old one for public education that has been addressed in numerous ways. There is a long history in the U.S. of private and parochial education in non-English languages. Even some public schools offered bilingual education historically, although policies were generally "permissive" or "tolerant", rather than philosophically supportive. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and

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<sup>11</sup> National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. School readiness goals for preschool children in Head Start Programs: examples from the national center on quality teaching and learning. Retrieved from: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/docs/sr-goals.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Public Law 94-142. Education for all handicapped children act. Retrieved from: <http://www.scn.org/~bk269/94-142.html>

early 20<sup>th</sup> century, policies became much more restrictive. In particular, Native American children were prevented from speaking their native languages. Some of this language restriction was in response to the big influx of non-English speaking immigrants. English mastery was a political goal believed to be essential to Americanization during the period of 1880s to around 1915.<sup>13</sup>

The civil rights movement raised the question of bilingualism once more. Specifically, Cuban refugees garnered support for bilingual education in Florida in 1963, and a successful 2 way bilingual program was established there. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 included bilingual education, with implementation left to individual states. Since then, two significant rulings have been introduced. The first, *Lau vs. Nicholls* in 1974, determined that Chinese children given equal access to learning materials, but only in English, were being deprived of their right to instruction. The second, *Castaneda vs. Pickard* in 1981, provided some guidelines as to how to implement bilingual education.<sup>14</sup> There have traditionally been several different approaches to bilingual education:

1) Structured immersion, in which children are placed in English language classrooms, with specific attention and techniques used to bolster English Language Learning (ESL). 2) Partial Immersion, in which children in English language classrooms receive ESL instruction, along with a small amount of instruction in their native language, perhaps 1 hour per day. 3) Transitional Bilingual programs, in which children receive most instruction in their native language for two, or up to five years, along with ESL instruction that is aimed toward integrating them into English classrooms. 4) Maintenance or Developmental Bilingual classrooms, in which children are transitioned from Native Language to English, but continue to receive instruction in their native language as well. 5) Two-way immersion classes. In this approach equal numbers of students speak English or another language, and both languages are supported equally so that all students emerge fluent in both languages.<sup>15</sup>

There has never been a unified policy as to how children who speak other languages should be taught. The most common approaches have been those that assume children should move from use of native language to use of English in school. In the last 20 years, there have been moves in a number of states toward supporting only English; some have been more successful than others. Current intense debate over immigration emphasizes the language issue; however there is still a great deal of disagreement over whether it is possible or even desirable to support children developing two languages. More and more research that confirms the value of bilingualism may influence the public conversation. Further, the need for bilingually competent business people is more commonly recognized. In at least one state, there has been experimentation with two-way English and Mandarin immersion classrooms.

At the preschool level, there has long been some recognition that home language is important for young children, and should be encouraged and maintained, at least at home. Head Start programs began to provide some bilingual and bicultural programs in 1977, most particularly for migrant children. Nevertheless, preschool programs are not much farther along than elementary programs in offering solid bilingual support. Parents often subscribe to the idea that children need to be immersed in English so that they can be successful in school. Preschool teachers, given their general low level of preparation are often not in a position to argue for bilingualism, nor are they prepared to support it, even if they include some examples of literature in the curriculum. When teachers or assistants are bilingual themselves, most often the result is that they respond to children in their home language, but are not proficient in supporting, maintaining or advancing native language. Even Head Start programs, continue to focus on English language learning, though in areas where there are concentrations of children who speak other languages, an effort is made to maintain bilingual classrooms in which both languages are accepted. A complicating issue in urban areas is that there are children who speak many different languages in the same classroom. It is not uncommon to have a classroom that includes 3 languages, such as English, Spanish and Arabic. Teachers often try to include bits and pieces of all the languages, but there little concentrated focus on any but English.

There is some movement toward increasing teacher awareness of the need to support children in their native languages, but it is at beginning stages, and most programs are geared toward transitional bilingual programs. In 2010, Illinois was the first state to require all state supported preschools to provide bilingual preschool education in children's home language.<sup>16</sup> In that state, there is still a significant shortage of bilingual early childhood teachers. Teacher preparation programs are only beginning to address the issue. Some teacher licensing programs are beginning to include coursework focused on supporting English Language Learners or Dual Language Learners, as are some non-licensure programs. There is a long way to go to address this issue.

Overall, the field of early education and care has been in great flux over the last 50 years. Opportunities and support for very young children and their families have increased substantially, yet there is no coherent national policy, and states vary widely in the amount of support that they offer. At this time, there is increased funding for early education programs at both the state and federal levels, but there is still wide variation between states, and the issue is still hotly debated. There is encouraging federal support for professional preparation of teachers and other child care providers but the wide variation in provider qualification requirements between different states

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<sup>13</sup> Ovando, C. J. (2003). Bilingual education in the United States: Historical development and current issues. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27:1. Spring. Retrieved from: [http://www.cwu.edu/~hughesc/EDBL514Syl\\_files/Readings/Bilingual%20Ed%20Ovando.pdf](http://www.cwu.edu/~hughesc/EDBL514Syl_files/Readings/Bilingual%20Ed%20Ovando.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, R. (2013). Bilingual Teachers in short supply for preschools. *Catalyst Chicago*. Retrieved from: <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/2013/06/17/21193/bilingual-teachers-in-short-supply-preschools>

remains. Even when provider qualifications go up, salaries are not yet equal to those of other teachers. The cycle of low qualification, low pay, low program quality still remains a problem, though it is being addressed from a number of perspectives.

Curricular issues are of critical importance. The balance between fully developed and supported play opportunities and challenging academic possibilities has not yet been realized. Test driven academic pressure from higher elementary levels having complex effects on the nature of preschool care and education programs.

There is much positive movement toward including children who have special needs in with typically developing children in more and better ways. Teachers need much additional preparation and support as they find ways to be more inclusive. There are increasing opportunities for them to gain this knowledge. There is much more discussion of the importance of supporting children's native/home language as a way to enhance their learning capacities. Despite much positive research about the value of bilingualism for children and adults, the question remains a thorny one. There is wide variation of opinion about whether and when to support or introduce new language. There is also much variation of opinion as to how much support should be granted to English Language Learners. As always, it is challenging to find ways to address the issue in ways that best support children.

The field of early education and care is still struggling for definition and recognition from the larger population, nevertheless the overall outlook is optimistic.

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