Deconstructing teacher quality in urban early childhood education

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to deconstruct the extant scholarship on quality in early childhood education and to emphasize the importance of extending the literature to explore the potential influence that a teachers’ educational background may have on kindergarten readiness for African American children in urban early learning settings.

Design/methodology/approach – Research has identified high-quality early education as a significant contributor to the academic success and development of young children. This paper examines current conceptualizations and trends in early childhood education related to the needs of African American children.

Findings – Our assessment indicates that the early learning of African American children in urban settings warrants further consideration by educational stakeholders. Specifically, the process and structural quality of urban early learning environments requires more culturally responsive approaches to policy and practice.

Originality/value – Improving the early learning opportunities of African American students in urban settings has practical and social implications that substantiate the value of the process and structural quality assessments. Recommendations for policy and practice are centered on a growth-based model of opportunities. Policy recommendations include creating urban teacher credentials and sustaining urban education, while practical recommendations include creating opportunities for vicarious experiences, affirming interactions and engaging in multicultural discourse.

Keywords Multicultural, Teacher quality, Early childhood education, African American learners, Urban education

Paper type Conceptual paper

One of the most enduring concerns in early childhood education is whether teachers in publicly funded pre-K programs should hold a four-year college degree. The educational requirements for pre-K teachers are lax at best and, at worst, severely negligent. According to Barnett (2004, 2011), less than half of all early education teachers hold a bachelor’s degree and many lack the technical training necessary to be considered effective.
Despite policymakers’ concerted effort to increase preparation standards for early childhood educators, the issue of teacher quality remains unresolved. The possible correlation between low-educational qualifications and teacher quality has raised questions about school readiness. Research largely suggests that children from low-income families are at great risk for school readiness deficits (Connell and Prinz, 2002; Sabol and Pianta, 2012), including, but not limited to, lower levels of classroom participation, limited vocabulary and marked differences in cognitive skills. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2015), approximately 58 per cent of children, aged 4 and 5 years, are not yet enrolled in kindergarten and do not attend center-based care (e.g. preschools, pre-K programs and/or Head Start); yet, by some estimates, too many preschool age children still struggle to meet school readiness standards (Barnett and Lamy, 2013).

While research has acknowledged the educational benefits of receiving high-quality early education facilitated by highly skilled teachers, with both experience and credentials in early childhood development or a closely associated discipline (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007), relatively few studies have addressed the importance of teacher quality in early childhood programs geared toward African American children situated in low-income urban communities. Given this, it becomes important, if not critical, to understand more clearly the influence that teacher’s educational background has on kindergarten readiness, with specific attention given to urban African American learners. This article attempts to deconstruct the extant scholarship on quality in early childhood education to make a case for why this body of literature should be extended to capture the effects, if any, that a pre-K teacher with a four-year college degree might have on kindergarten readiness for African American children enrolled in preschool programs in low-income urban communities.

To begin, this article provides a review of literature that discusses early childhood education and concerns of quality care for African American children. Next, an argument is put forth, calling for future research, to consider expanding the scholarship on teacher quality to address, more directly, its impact on African American school readiness. This article concludes with recommendations for both policy and practice.

### Early childhood education and African American children

In 2005, NCES conducted an early childhood longitudinal study on childcare quality in the USA, whereby they examined children’s experiences with respect to their interactions, physical environment, engagement and learning. In analyzing the data, Barnett, Carolan and Johns (2013) found that in 2005-2006 less than half of all children, receiving center-based care, had access to high-quality early education. Perhaps, even more disturbing were their findings for African American children. Approximately, 75 per cent of African American children, aged 4 years, receive low- to medium-quality early childhood education from center-based programs. Given the importance of high-quality educational experiences, this finding is particularly troubling, as it suggests that even when African American children have access to early education, the education that they receive is not as effective as it can and should be.

In the broadest sense, in comparison to other racial groups, African American children are more likely to attend preschool and experience low-quality care irrespective of their program choice, be it a daycare center, preschool or Head Start program (Magnuson and Waldfogel, 2005; Barnett et al., 2013). However, focusing specifically on Head Start, Barnett, et al. (2013) found that nearly half of all Head Start programs serving white (48 per cent) and Latin (43 per cent) children were considered high-quality programs, whereas only 26 per cent of all Head Start programs serving African American children were of a similar quality.
Teachers who work in urban preschools provide significantly greater emotional support and cultural competency to culturally diverse students (Murray et al., 2008). Interestingly, students whose race matches the race of their teacher are more likely to receive higher support from their teacher. Thus, ethnic matching can greatly influence teacher perceptions of student–teacher relationship quality, as well as socializing agents for students of color (Murray et al., 2008; Young et al., 2013).

This finding echoes the fears of many African American families and supports the assumption that African American children are less likely to receive the types of high-quality educational experiences necessary for future academic success. Despite this dismal view of early education, there is a solution. The most promising strategy is to increase access to high-quality center-based early childhood programs for African American children from low-income urban communities (Rouse et al., 2005). To fully grasp this recommendation, it is important to understand how quality is assessed.

**Quality assessment practices**

Quality of early childhood programs is measured in different ways. Typically, it is assessed under two elements: *process quality* and *structural quality*. Both quality measures are integral to the establishment of high-quality care; however, when independent of each other, neither is enough to establish a program’s effectiveness. In fact, Cryer (1999) suggests that the core necessities of high-quality early childhood programs are the promotion of safe and healthful conditions, developmentally appropriate stimulation, positive interactions and the facilitation of increased social and emotional growth. Such characteristics are represented by both process and structural quality, thereby reinforcing the claim that neither element of quality, in isolation, is a sufficient determinant of program quality for early educational programming.

By definition, process quality addresses the procedures used to facilitate learning in a program including adult child interactions, physical environment and activities provided for the children (Magnuson and Waldfogel, 2005; Rashid, 2009). Essentially, it describes the quality of care and activities that children experience on a daily basis including safety and health provisions. In high-quality programs, process quality is characterized by warm and nurturing relationships between teachers and students, adequate resources to create significant learning experiences and a variety of daily educational opportunities such as art, music/movement, science, math, block, sand, water and dramatic play. When measuring process quality, observers document whether children are encouraged to communicate, think critically and solve problem. Additionally, observers note the degree to which parent involvement is encouraged (Espinosa, 2002). The Environmental Rating Scale is the most commonly applied instrument used to quantify process quality. Using this and other measures is essential to providing equitable process quality across early programs.

Although equally important, structural characteristics have a more indirect and less apparent influence on quality than the process components. Structural quality refers to the infrastructure of a program, such as class size, staff to child ratios and teacher qualifications (Cryer, 1999; Magnuson and Waldfogel, 2005; Rashid, 2009). Unlike process quality, which is assessed by a universal rating scale, structural quality is monitored and regulated through state licensing requirements. Auditors will look for smaller class sizes and lower teacher to child ratios, as these characteristics represent the fostering of more intimate, supportive and nurturing relationships that promote social competence and academic success. Additionally, auditors will examine the experience levels and educational credentials of staff. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2001) identified essential knowledge for teachers as understanding young children; promoting child development; and learning and implementing integrated curriculum, assessment and multiple teaching strategies. It is
often assumed that early childhood education teachers will possess specific foundational knowledge of the development of children’s social and affective behavior, thinking and language; knowledge of teaching and learning and child development; information about how to provide rich conceptual experiences that promote growth in specific content areas and knowledge of effective teaching strategies, subject-matter content, assessment procedures and teaching diverse learners. Albeit this is a common assumption, it is far from the reality of much of the preschool teaching force as only half of the states with early childhood programs require pre-K teachers to have the type of pedagogical training that is embedded within many degree programs in early childhood education and child development (Barnett, 2011).

Interestingly, while teacher qualifications are considered a significant indicator of structural quality, it has not been given adequate attention in practice as judged by much of the research. Why is this that considering much of the teacher quality literature has consistently suggested that a teachers’ certification status, degree level (bachelor’s and/or master’s), preparation and experience are each positively associated with achievement (Darling-Hammond and Youngs, 2002)? Furthermore, if teacher quality and student performance are linked, as confirmed by prior studies, it begs the question, why are so many inexperienced teachers employed in under-resourced, predominantly African American, urban schools? Those who attend these schools, on average, start kindergarten behind in basic academic competencies as a result of the lack of academic skill development in early childhood (Stipek and Ryan, 1997; Zill and West, 2001). The dearth of literature on the benefits of retaining high-quality preschool teachers in urban communities is apparent, and for this reason, it is deserving of further exploration.

**Teacher training and teacher quality**

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2001) requires that at least 75 per cent of pre-K teachers meet one of the following criteria; they should:

- have the minimum CDA credential awarded by the Council for Professional Recognition or equivalent;
- hold an associate’s or advanced degree in early childhood education, child development/family studies, early childhood special education or elementary education with a concentration in early childhood education or the equivalent;
- hold a degree (associate’s or higher) outside the early childhood field and three or more years of work experience in an NAEYC-accredited program; and
- hold a degree (associate’s or higher) outside of early childhood education with three or more years of work experience in a program not accredited by NAEYC and at least 30 contact hours of relevant training during the past three years (Willer *et al.*, 2011).

Considering the NAEYC requirements, having proper educational training coupled with a college degree is considered vital if one desires to effectively teach in an early childhood setting. Holding a four-year bachelor’s degree affords early childhood teachers the opportunity to develop knowledge in a broad range of fields and content areas demonstrating their skill set in the following areas:

- the ability to align models of professional development and anchor them in a measure of practice that is linked to children’s gains in a developmental domain;
- the ability to bridge theory and practice; and
- the ability to promote and foster teacher–child interactions.
For many, a four-year college degree simply implies that an educator is better prepared to teach versus someone who lacks these credentials.

However, because not all states require early educators to hold a bachelor’s degree, many teachers miss the opportunity to acquire these fundamental skills that are traditionally taught in university- or college-based teacher preparation programs. To further illustrate this point, Figure 1 presents recent demographic data from NCES on the preparation of early childhood educators. The data in the figure suggests that although the majority (67 per cent) of early childhood educators have at least a bachelor’s degree; there is a significant group of teachers, approximately one-third (33 per cent) of the teaching workforce, that holds only an associate’s degree or no degree at all.

University- or college-based teacher preparation programs provide early education teachers with opportunities to learn how to meet the holistic needs of a child beyond pedagogy. As such, fully credentialed teachers are more likely to understand the science behind students’ emotions and behavior, and how to create positive and safe learning environments. Preparation programs can also provide opportunities for critical inquiry and self-reflection both which help teachers personalize their instruction making learning more meaningful and relevant to those whom they teach (Willemse et al., 2005; King and Butler, 2015). In sum, teacher preparation programs yield discernible benefits for teachers and children and for this reason are likely to improve overall teacher quality (Fuller, 2011). Many urban public preschools require formal professional development suggesting that higher levels of formal training enhance the quality of teacher–child interactions (Fuligni et al., 2009). Considering the current trends presented in the aforementioned sections, we offer recommendations for practices and policy.

**Recommendations**

The preparation of early childhood teachers encompasses many specific skills and competences. For instance, Loeb (2004) found that children’s cognitive growth was stronger between 2 and 4 years of age when exposed to teachers who regularly matched the child’s readiness level in listening carefully, recognizing success on a task and actively reasoning with the child when social or cognitive problems arose. While Tiko (2012, p. 373) suggests:

> Teacher training should pay considerably more attention to developing the personality of the teacher in order to meet children’s needs and families’ expectations and to guarantee the continuous development of every child.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Note:** The data in this illustration were obtained from the U.S. Department of Education, NCES, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and Public Teachers Data File 2011-12 (Source)
We thus provide the following five recommendations to better prepare the next generation of early childhood educators to support process and structural quality in early learning programs.

Recommendations for policy
While many states mandates require multicultural curriculum as part of their accreditation process, it is imperative that this coursework be extended throughout a student’s education coursework (Young, 2017). This requires teacher educators to attend professional development and training on culturally responsive teaching, specifically for urban students, with subsequent accountability measures (Young et al., 2013). This would help to improve the structural quality of early learning programs. The following are recommendation for policy:

- Opportunities to certify urban educators in early childhood education – Nationwide, under the umbrella of culturally relevant teaching, programs have specific undergraduate certifications for English as a second language, bilingual education, as well as special education. However, urban education teacher certification has yet to reach mainstream acceptance as a certifiable teaching credential. Rather, once a teacher begins working in an urban environment, they are often expected to learn by trial and error or received professional development through their school district. Policymakers have the capacity to be proactive, instead of reactive, in preparing these teachers with the induction of a formal certification track, which would allow for specific coursework, expertise and attention given to urban learners. Specifically, at the intersection of urban education and early childhood, schools would greatly benefit from the creation of a certification track. The potential influence of this policy on the educational eventualities of African American and other culturally and linguistically diverse students has substantial educative importance.

- Opportunities for sustainable urban education in early childhood – Teachers who work in urban settings, have the highest attrition rates of any geographic setting, yet the number of urban schools is on the rise across the nation (Aragon et al., 2013). Many initiatives and programs are based on grants and other funding sources that are temporary, yet the challenges of urban education are prevalent, persistent and, if left unresolved, permanent. More attention to the early instructional needs of African American urban learners can improve the educational experiences of young learners. Educational agencies dedicated to teaching and learning in urban schools can help secure the resources necessary to sustain the quality of instruction in urban schools. More research congruent to Barnett’s work, and subsequent funding in this area, is vital to improve the quality of preschool education for African American learners in urban settings.

Recommendations for practice
Teacher preparation programs can vary in their approaches to preparing educators to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. A common thread across these programs is often a foundational multicultural course, designed to facilitate culturally relevant pedagogy (Hartlep et al., 2015; Young, 2017). These courses can and should serve as a catalyst to effective and high-quality teaching in urban settings, which has the potential to positively affect change for African American students. The following recommendations are designed as extensions to traditional multicultural coursework to support process quality in early learning environments.
• Opportunities for vicarious experiences to support culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy in early childhood teachers – Pre-service teachers should be placed in urban environments whenever possible as part of their field experience. However, if this is not possible, exposure to high-quality instructional interactions through analysis and viewing of multiple video exemplars are an ideal alternative (Siwatu, 2011). These exemplars can be dissected to include the identification of best practices, as well as practical implementation of many of the theories and ideas presented throughout their coursework. Additionally, pre-service teachers should be afforded opportunities to observe effective instruction in urban schools early and often. These experiences are most effective when the pre-service teacher can relate to the teacher in the demonstration. These prescribed vicarious experiences are necessary to build the pre-service teachers capacity to envision themselves as effective instructors across a multitude of educational settings.

• Opportunities to develop affirming interactions with students in urban schools – Cultural interaction projects, project-based learning and service learning are several ways in which teacher preparation programs can hone their pre-service teacher’s skills in identifying appropriate and inappropriate instructional, linguistic and social responses to children’s cues. These interactions, both in and out of the classroom, can be beneficial in promoting a caring disposition, as well as providing exposure to various cultural groups. To maximize the instructional benefits of these activities to support the needs of students in urban schools, we recommend that teacher educators and leaders encourage pre-service teachers to complete these projects in urban schools. Because it is difficult to teach what we do not know, it is understandable that pre-service teachers cannot serve populations of students that they do not know. Thus, we recommend that purposeful and affirming projects in urban schools become more commonplace in early childhood education.

• Opportunities to engage in multicultural discourse in the context of early childhood education in urban schools – Teacher educators possess specialized skills and foci in training pre-service teachers. These practices should routinely involve critical conversations about equity and diversity within the urban educational context. These content-specific practices should be inclusive of practices to develop students to thrive in urban settings. While this is an important recommendation across all preparation levels, it is uniquely important in early childhood, given the identity development needs of African American students and other diverse learners. Oftentimes, many pre-service teachers assume that issues of race, poverty, sexuality and other multicultural concerns are not developmentally appropriate concerns for children in early childhood. However, many of these students struggle daily with the effects of these issues. Therefore, we recommend that teacher educators make a conscious effort to engage pre-service teachers in critical conversations related to equity and diversity in early childhood programs in urban schools.

Conclusion
While there is a considerable amount of research on teacher quality, this body of research still has substantial gaps, as it relates specifically to urban early childhood teacher quality. This article provides a rationale to support the need for further research and recommendations based on existing data. Children who experience high-quality early childhood education tend to start school with stronger language, academic and social skills (Duncan and Magnuson, 2013; Vandell, 2004). Thus, educational stakeholders have an
obligation to ensure process and structural quality in urban settings. To support high-quality early programming, we posit that it is important to assess the effects of teacher quality on student learning outcomes in early childhood.

Barnett (2011) analyzed the effects of preschool teacher qualifications on student achievement and concluded that teacher preparation and quality are intimately tied to student success. Barnett’s findings, coupled with the aforementioned studies, indicate that the current literature fails to attend to the effects teacher quality has on early learning in urban environments. This is problematic, to say the least. So then, how much more unjustified is it to discount the effects of teacher quality on African American children in urban low-income communities – one of the most vulnerable populations and one in desperate need of high-quality early education experiences? Understanding the potential impact that a teacher’s educational background may have on African American kindergarten readiness could be the difference between early engagement met with future academic success or early disengagement met with more difficult long-term educational challenges. Our hope is that educators and policymakers will answer the call to improve the early learning experiences of African American children in urban environments. Establishing more rigorous and comprehensive credentialing practices is one step in the right direction.

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Further reading


About the authors

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