

# NEPC REVIEW: WHEN DEGREE PROGRAMS FOR PRE-K TEACHERS GO ONLINE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES (NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION, NOVEMBER 2017)



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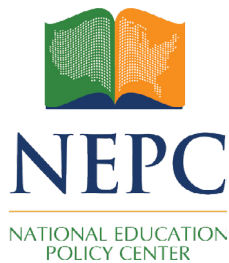
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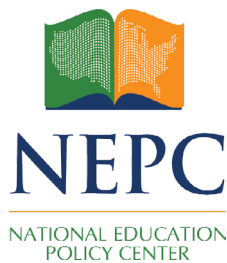
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## Summary of Review

A recent report from New America argues that online programs, appropriately structured, have the potential to professionalize many early childhood (EC) teachers. The report contends that online bachelor's programs offer more flexible and financially accessible pathways for pre-K teachers to obtain a degree, thereby propelling these teachers towards higher quality practice and higher salaries. The report presents a perspective on what a professionalized pre-K workforce should entail, recognizing the significant knowledge and skills required of these teachers, and equating raising pre-K teacher credential standards with professionalization, and therefore, quality. While the report draws attention to some of the unique considerations necessary for EC workforce policy, it underplays a number of critical issues in professionalizing the field. It lacks adequate treatment of the EC workforce's economic realities that place them at the poverty line, regardless of credential or degree. It presents testimonials rather than evidence of outcomes for online programs. It makes pre-K teachers responsible for closing the pay gap and for upgrading their low professional esteem. Finally, though recognizing the importance of high-quality EC programs, it leaves the term under-analyzed at best. Unfortunately, without a nuanced discussion of these issues, the report's usefulness is limited.



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## I. Introduction

Every day, approximately 13 million of the nation's young children<sup>1</sup> spend at least part of the day in some kind of care and education setting. The vast scope is critical when researchers and policymakers argue that participating in a high-quality early education program can enhance children's learning and development, in both the near and distant future.<sup>2</sup>

There is a trio of interwoven issues. First, childcare is one of the most significant costs in working families' budgets, and secondly, EC teacher salaries are troublingly low, with childcare workers who care for infants and toddlers earning an hourly wage of \$10.33 and preschool teachers of 3-5-year-olds making \$15.11 on average, less than nonfarm animal caretakers.<sup>3</sup> Third, only 45% of EC teachers working with children ages 3-5 have the professional education that results in teacher certification.<sup>4</sup> If an EC education knowledge base enhances the quality of EC teaching, requiring teachers to have an education that addresses that knowledge could improve classroom quality. Following this logic model, policymakers have called for lead teachers in EC programs to have a bachelor's degree.

It is in this gap that the New America Foundation has produced *When Degree Programs for Pre-K Teachers Go Online: Challenges and Opportunities* by Shayna Cook.<sup>5</sup> Taking up recommendations from a recent National Academies report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age*,<sup>6</sup> the paper explores the potential utility of online degree programs for upgrading credentials for EC professionals. Recognizing that many degree-seeking EC teachers cannot afford to step out of the workforce to complete a degree and that many would be returning to school after a long hiatus, online education seems a fitting solution to a multifaceted problem. The report recognizes the many barriers that the EC workforce faces in achieving a bachelor's degree and that no one solution will solve all problems; in this context, the paper frames online programs, appropriately structured, as having the potential to professionalize many EC teachers.

## II. Findings and Conclusion of the Report

The paper stakes its claim for online degree programs by locating the call for professionalization via bachelor's degree within the unique context of the EC workforce: low wages, limited schedule flexibility, and a range of EC program types. Within this complex world, the focus on pre-K teachers is explicit; joining the professional status of their colleagues in grades K-3. This view of the problem and the solution reflects a growing policy consensus that credentialing "will not only raise the esteem of EC educators generally and give them grounds for demanding higher salaries, but it will also raise the skills, core competencies, and general knowledge of teachers in the classroom, greatly benefiting young children" (p. 3).

Online degree programs are positioned as uniquely helpful in accommodating the accessibility and flexibility needs of the EC workforce. The report outlines the potential for flexible scheduling, reduced financial burdens of commuting and childcare, and options for taking remedial courses many students need. To strengthen the case for online bachelor's program, the report argues, without evidence that rather than being poor quality, online EC degree programs have similar or better quality to in-person programs, generate (virtual) community among students, and support students with technology use.

The paper notes that online bachelor's programs have been shaped by the persistence of low wages in EC; any policymaking around credentializing must address this barrier. Most directly, the paper concludes that low wages make most online programs (and related access to devices and broadband) unaffordable without financial assistance through loans, scholarships, and loan forgiveness programs. The paper also suggests that the infusion of funding will foster innovative approaches, like University of Washington's Early EdU and T.E.A.C.H.

*Online degree programs are positioned as uniquely helpful in accommodating the accessibility and flexibility needs of the EC workforce*

Indiana, which might not otherwise have online offerings. This is in contrast to some institutional decisions to discontinue online EC degrees due to the unaffordability of the program based on participants' low wages as EC teachers.

The paper explores the "dearth" (p. 10) of information regarding online degree programs, explaining that "the lack of data prohibits definitive analyses of which programs are successful and which are not" (p. 10), an issue further exacerbated by the wide variety of online programs offered across institutions. Without specific data for EC online bachelor's program, the paper suggests that "accrediting agencies and other quality assurance initiatives" (p. 11), such as NAEYC, Gold Standard for CDA granting institutions, Quality Matters, can serve the purpose of maintaining accountability to high standards.

The final section of the paper presents seven takeaways: 1) Reduce financial barriers to bachelor's degree programs, including scholarship and compensation funding; 2) Improve higher education data and research related to EC online bachelor's degree programs to distinguish elements of quality like graduation rates, loan defaults, and student experience; 3) Provide advisors to help non-traditional students navigate online degree programs; 4) Develop new models of program monitoring and evaluation to simplify information provided

to potential students, 5) Design programs with sensitivity toward the needs, expertise, and timelines of the current EC workforce as they participate in bachelor's programs; 6) Fund access to broadband and devices to ensure success with programs; and 7) Increase research on online EC degree programs in an effort to improve program design and dissemination.

### **III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions**

The report takes up a very difficult set of problems. Recognizing that EC teachers work in a dizzying range of program types with diverse education requirements, the report takes as a given that credentializing EC teachers will reduce inequities in education, compensation, and knowledge compared to the K-3 workforce. This approach also implies a focus on continuity across the birth-8 education system, attempting to make pre-K teachers more like their K-3 peers. It is also assumed that there is a proven causal relationship between having a bachelor's degree and teaching quality, framing quality in the teacher rather than in the act of teaching. Finally, the report takes an incremental approach to reform by focusing changes in preparation in public pre-K programs rather than changes to the systems in which the teachers work.

### **IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature**

This report relies heavily on earlier research compilations to support its description of the field, identify problems, and make suggestions for improvement. Relying on syntheses and advocacy pieces as a foundation, this work becomes a summary of summaries. As a result, it is challenging to evaluate the evidence presented. More specifically, the assumptions structuring earlier studies are baked into this work, in a way that is not always easily recognizable. This is particularly true in a context where the author creates an echo chamber by relying on other New America Foundation reports.

One particularly curious assertion is that the report debunks the myth that online programs are poor quality. The evidence provided is one study that evaluated the satisfaction expressed by early educators following online courses<sup>7</sup> and a second that had testimonials of higher ed faculty and students following diverse online coursework<sup>8</sup>. While informative, neither of these sources serve as evidence that online coursework (let alone online degrees) leads to better teaching or better outcomes for children.

Few references are made to individual studies that question the utility of bachelor's degrees to enhance education;<sup>9</sup> there is no attention paid to the vexed context of pre-K teaching.<sup>10</sup> The definition of high quality, so central to the investment in EC education, is opaque so that evaluation is impossible. Recognizing the importance of process quality is a great step forward, but is unbalanced if it does not examine social and cultural aspects of being stuck in the poorly paid EC workforce and for the limited professional development opportunities to improve practice.

## V. Review of the Report's Methods

Four core biases go unacknowledged despite the important issues they surface in EC workforce development. First, though pre-K teachers may well be the closest to achieving this metric of professionalization, a focus on pre-K teachers obtaining bachelor's degrees overlooks the complicated reality of the broader EC workforce, specifically the variety of settings in which the EC teachers work - private, non-profit, for-profit, approach-based, community-based, and in-home - as well as the range of wages earned in these settings. Second, positioning the paper in the "professionalization" discourse implies that pre-K teachers are unprofessional until they achieve a degree. This undermines one of the purposes of the paper, to elevate the esteem of the EC workforce, by denying the wealth of experiences that many pre-K teachers bring to their classrooms through knowledge accumulated over years working with young children, or rich understandings of the communities, children, and families they serve. Third, by equating professionalization, credentials, and quality, the paper locates quality as a teacher characteristic that can be instilled through education instead of a teaching practice that is responsive to unique local contexts, children, and families. Fourth, drawing from *When Degree Programs Go Online*, this paper foregrounds the assumption that improving educational attainment will uplift the EC workforce. However, without digging into nuances around obstacles to improved wages, the highly variable work environments and day-to-day realities of EC teachers, or any specific details on the quality of bachelor's program or EC learning contexts, these foundations for the paper's findings lose their strength.

A closer examination of the methods employed exposes both contributions and missed opportunities to the policy discussion around "professionalizing" the EC workforce. The paper briefly states that collaboration produced "synthesized findings" (pp. 2-3) from published reports on teacher preparation, interviews and a group meeting with experts, information from online bachelor's programs, and national data sets on EC teacher preparation programs, and surveys of the EC workforce. While these are all important voices to bring into the discussion of pre-K teacher professionalization, the synthesizing process is not articulated and the use of sources remains descriptive rather than analytical.

Most data sources receive cursory analysis or no explanation whatsoever. For example, the experts on the advisory group are named and represent universities and think tanks and advocacy groups, but their selection and influence on the paper are not discussed. Glaringly missing from this advisory group are the perspectives of the pre-K teachers who will bear the largest burden if policymaking continues to favor a push towards bachelor's requirements. In another section, a chart with information about programs is shared, with little indication of the significance of these categories and how they fit within the landscape of issues present in professionalizing the EC workforce.

While the paper surfaces challenges and possibilities for making online bachelor's programs accessible to the EC workforce, it falls short of deepening examinations of these issues in important ways. What's missing in the paper is a systematic analysis that examines assumptions about EC workforce development. Further, those assumptions are not tied to the complicated and compounded circumstances of the EC workforce, both the economic

and day-to-day realities. And these are absent a robust investigation of the “quality” early learning opportunities we hope to foster in pre-K classrooms through 3rd grade. This last point is worth reiterating. The term quality is used 47 times but is barely defined (as teacher-child interactions) and never questioned. The tendency to rely on existing assumptions, and reporting and describing, rather than analyzing, undermines the contribution the paper can make to meaningful policymaking to improve the early learning experiences of children through teacher growth.

## **VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions**

At its heart, *When Degree Programs for Pre-K Teachers Go Online* is a recommitment to the idea that ECE is the period from birth to age eight and that there is a professional knowledge base common to teaching young children within this developmental period. While the author gets some of the complexity of the EC workforce right, this report is built on assumptions that go beyond our empirical knowledge base. Sadly, it misses the mark of improving the lot of pre-K teachers because it makes them responsible for their own esteem, challenging the huge pay gap, and for anchoring the knowledge base in public pre-K-grade 3. This asks pre-K teachers to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps in a system that is marked by deep inequities. Finally, it has an incomplete understanding of what makes a quality EC system.

## **VII. Usefulness of Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

*When Degree Programs for Pre-K Teachers Go Online* plays out the potential paths to increase education quality by requiring pre-K teachers to have a bachelor’s degree. Recognizing the considerable barriers to achieve this goal, the report suggests online bachelor’s programs that are more accommodating to their needs. While having a bachelor’s degree is one element that might contribute to quality, in the current landscape of EC education, it is insufficient. In a context where we are uncertain about how a bachelor’s degree contributes to EC teaching, the major thrust of the report requires a leap of faith. To expect that an online bachelor’s degree will solve the deep economic problems that keep preschool educators at the poverty line is blaming the victim, requiring them to solve a deeply seated problem.



## Notes and Resources

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