

WESTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

Parents of Young Children

Their Perception of Teacher Quality and Access to Quality Care

Final Report

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Foreword

The origin of this research idea began with the follow up on a promise made to Mrs. Linda Kosko, Executive Director – Danbury Children First, Inc. in 2007. At the time, I was chairperson of the Education and Educational Psychology Department at Western Connecticut State University. Although



Mrs. Kosko and I had attempted to collaborate on a project previously, the project did not come to fruition. I stated that once I left the chairperson's position that I would work with Danbury Children First on a future project.

In 2012, I was invited by the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund to submit a proposal from the Knowledge Development Program Officer. The proposed project was to focus on the core of the Memorial Fund's learning through parent engagement and community collaboration. One of the priorities for the grant proposal was to work in partnership with one of the Discovery community partners (Discovery is an initiative of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund). It was this priority that allowed me to fulfill the promise made to Mrs. Kosko in 2007. Danbury Children First was already a member of the Discovery community and became the community partner for this grant.

This relationship with Danbury Children First began from the inception of the proposal idea, with the conceptualization of inquiry that was useful to the Danbury, CT community and was relevant across the Discovery network. The Danbury's Promise for School Partnership (DPSP) [of which Danbury Children First is a member], identified three categories of interest and listed priorities for implementation. The area of focus for this project was within the School Readiness/Early School Success Team's work. Within this category the priority action identified was training of childcare providers. This includes both home and center based care. The implementation outcome as outlined in the DPSP seeks high quality childcare experiences for children. Based on this local Danbury Discovery initiative, this study examined teacher quality in early education from the parent perspective and directly informed the WCGMF Discovery Collaborative's work.

Theresa J. Canada

Danbury Connecticut Parents Voices



Executive Summary

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund's (WCGMF) priority that "Connecticut children of all races and income levels are ready for school by age five and are successful learners by age nine" was a key factor in this research study. Understanding parent decision making was crucial to the Memorial Fund's result statement and its strategy of system building. The goal of this study was to support these efforts. In particular, this study provided knowledge about parents' perceptions and concerns with early childhood care, and how these influence parent access and decision-making about early childhood education. Questions that guided this study were: What do parents view as the characteristics of quality early childhood education and why do these parents believe these factors are important? What teacher qualities, traits and behaviors do parents perceive as important and why are these factors important to them? What do parents define as quality ECE curriculum and teaching approaches? Finally, given all the important characteristics of ECE programs defined by parents, which if any, are the most important in influencing their selection of an ECE program for their children. The report presented here is a summary of our findings.¹

To accomplish the research objectives an exploratory study using a mixed methods cross-sectional study design was chosen. Data was collected from 22 parents using a representative sample of Danbury, Connecticut (CT) parents identified and recruited by our research partner Danbury Children First. Our study collected parent data using 3 different methods: 1) focus group, 2) structured interview and 3) surveys.

The Criticality of Pre-Service and Continuous Teacher Training to Parents

¹ A comprehensive report providing much more insight into parent perceptions and the basis of these perceptions and a technical report is stored at Western Connecticut State University with the Principal Investigator.

The presence of quality teachers was identified by parents as the highest determinant of a quality ECE program. What did parents define as the characteristics of a quality teacher? The most important characteristic was the teacher qualifications. Parents felt that **the 21st century ECE teacher must not just be formally trained, i.e. possessing a degree or certification, they should have advanced training or certifications in such areas as child development and developmental stages, infant and toddler care, preschool education, e.g. early literacy and numeracy, and child assessment.** Moreover, teachers must be lifelong learners. That is, ECE teachers must constantly update their knowledge. Parents' emphasis on teacher's qualifications is quite reasonable. To parents preschool teachers are the first teacher a young child encounters. In this manner ECE teachers are responsible for setting the stage for all future learning.

The Importance of Teacher Affective Characteristics To Parents

Though parents expressed the need for teachers to be well trained, what parents really wanted from teachers was for them to be loving and caring individuals. To working parents, in particular, the quality of the child-teacher relationship was paramount. To assess the quality of child-teacher relationships parents observed teachers' attitudes and behaviors. For example, they looked to see if teachers were patient with children, were they child-approachable, did they appear happy, and finally did they show a balance between reasonable discipline and firm "strictness". However, to parents the greatest determinant of the quality of child-teacher interactions was their child's happiness. This factor was so important that it deeply influenced a parents' decision to keep or withdraw their child from a preschool. In short, **to parents the happiness of their child in the preschool setting could and did supersede all other ECE decision criteria, including the superior quality of a preschool's curriculum, its teachers' experience or qualifications, and its facility or resources.**

Parents Fears of High Teacher Turnover Rate

The second most important factor identified by parents as a characteristic of a high quality ECE program, was low teacher turnover rate. **Parents felt that high teacher turnover rates could result in their young child's development being frequently interrupted. Since, each new teacher might have a different personality, behaviors, and teaching style, frequent teacher turnover would make critical child-teacher bonds harder to maintain. This in turn would affect the quality of the child-teacher relationship.** In addition, it made it harder for parents to maintain the valuable parent-teacher relationship which was also seen as crucial to ensuring their child would be prepared for kindergarten.

The Importance of Parent-Teacher Relationships and Communications

Frequent parent-teacher communications was viewed as paramount to the development of quality parent-teacher relationships. However, **it was not the *quantity* of parent-teacher communications that matter most to parents, but rather the *quality* of communications.**

Because working parents are not with their child during large portions of the day, the teacher's de facto role was that of a 'surrogate parent'. **As such, to parents the teacher is the only source of information about their child's academic progress, and of greater importance, their child's daily social-emotional well-being.** That is to say, parents want to know what they 'missed', "how was their child's day?" "What did their child experience" in their absence? Was their child crabby?, Did they eat all their food? Findings suggest that this type of information allowed parents to maintain the continuity and strength of their parental bond with their child, a bond which is essential between parents and young children. Findings further suggested that **the greater the quality of communication between parent and teacher, the more confident the parent felt in trusting the teacher. The greater the trust or confidence in the teacher the more likely the teacher is considered to be a quality teacher.** The less information interchange between parents and teachers, the less comfortable parents felt, and the less the preschool was perceived as a quality school. **Thus, to parents high teacher turnover was detrimental to the quality child-teacher relationships and parent-teacher relationships, and thus made the preschool as a place incapable of providing a high level of care for their child.**

Parents attributed the high frequency of teacher turnover to the low salaries paid to preschool teachers. They were particularly concerned that so many they knew to be quality teachers were choosing other career paths. **Parents fear that the decline in the supply of quality teachers will continue until ECE teachers are paid as much as their colleagues in elementary and middle-schools.**

Parents Advocacy of Cultural Diversity in Preschools

The third most identified ECE preschool quality characteristic by parents was cultural and racial diversity. Parents expected a quality ECE program to play a major part in socializing their child to the multicultural world they live in. To accomplish this, parents believed that young children should be exposed to the diversity in our society and in our world. Thus a child should have frequent interpersonal contact with children and adults from different races, cultures and languages in their environment. **As such, a quality preschool should have a "multicultural environment" which should include students,**

parents, administrators and teachers from a variety of racial backgrounds and cultures.

The influence of the Physical Characteristics of the ECE Facility on Parents Perceptions

Parents viewed a deteriorating physical building and unkempt facility as an unfavorable setting to place their children. Besides being unappealing, **a poorly kept facility signified to parents that the staff working in the preschool did not care about their workplace and thus, more likely would not care for the children within the facility.**

Parent views of a Quality Preschool Curriculum

The fifth factor parents consider in determining the quality of an ECE program was the presence of a structured curriculum, which would specify what children should be learning at each level. More importantly, the curriculum should prepare the child for kindergarten. This was a cause of worry for some parents. **In some cases parents did not feel that there was a curriculum in their preschool at all. In other cases parents were fearful that they no longer understood what a child *really* needed to learn to be ready for kindergarten.** This anxiety of not knowing what their child should know prior to entering kindergarten was particularly felt by foreign-born non-English speaking parents.

Parents also wanted their child to be exposed to more advanced topics like computing, more complex math, and science and technology. Indeed, **their greatest complaint regarding their child's preschool was that the curriculum was often "too basic".** It lacked the amount of enrichment that would "encourage critical thinking and understanding" of things within the child's environment. Parents felt ECE programs should also focus on bringing the world into the classroom by incorporating multimedia and experiential activities that bring science subjects into the classroom. As one parent stated, "they should not just see a picture of a rock, they should be able to touch a rock" **Parents felt that the concept of the classroom must be expanded to include a variety of means and avenues of learning and that the old concept of the classroom as the only place of learning was no longer valid.** A child is a young member of the world he or she lives in. This means that there should be an emphasis on educational field trips to museums, libraries, conservatories and biological gardens, the zoo, and public institutions like the library, fire stations, supermarkets etc. Parents believed that in many ways school outings provided a means for social learning. That is, it teaches children to not be frightened in different environments, to be tolerant of people different from themselves, and to interact with adults including teachers and other parents.

Parents also felt that a quality preschool curriculum should emphasize acquisition of social skills. Such a curriculum would include lessons on the benefits of sharing, learning of other cultures and languages, age appropriate social manners, knowing how to ask for help, when and how to express their needs, and recognition of emotional indicators, i.e. smiling means happy, crying means sad, and the proper response to these indicators. To parents the criticality of such social skills could not be understated. As a society we are required to interact with others every day of our lives. In kindergarten particularly a young child is required to have a certain level of social ability in order to have positive interactions with the teacher and other children. Parents felt that children unable to do this will become isolated and judged to be anti-social, the antithesis of well-adjusted. Parents also felt that a child who is well socialized may have less separation anxiety and more social independence. **Put all together, parents felt that a quality ECE program should support social learning both within the classroom and outside of the classroom.** Lastly, enrichment and extracurricular activities like music, dance and art, were particularly welcomed by working parents who often did not have the time to take their child on educational outings or take them to art, dance or karate classes

Parent Expectations of Support for their Involvement in Preschools

Another characteristic of a high quality preschool was its firm support for parent involvement in the preschool. Parents believed that the preschool should have a welcoming attitude toward parents. Besides having an open-door policy, that allowed parents to visit their child's classroom at any time, the preschool should encourage family visits and involvement in the preschool. Though parents wanted these things in a quality preschool, and while it was important to them, **working parents did not have the time or opportunity to actually be involved in volunteering in the classroom, planning classroom activities, discussing preschool matters with other parents or to be involved in decision-making regarding the preschool.** They were however very engaged in their child's learning. They actively reviewed homework. They engaged in learning activities with their child at home. They read to their child. They asked teachers questions about how their children were doing in preschool. In some cases however, the lack of communication between parents and teachers hindered parents' ability to directly engage their child in learning activities. Likewise, in a few cases parents felt their voices were not welcomed in their child's preschool; that is, the preschool did not attempt to engage parents or the community.

Constraints on Parent Preschool Choices

While parents were knowledgeable of the characteristics of a quality ECE program a series of overwhelming constraints prevented them from accessing quality care for their child. Since the majority of parents in this study worked outside of the home, the proximity of the childcare center to their home or place of work was one of the deciding factors for selection. They were in essence limited to an ECE program within 2 miles of home or work. Also, due to their work hours, parents required child care facilities that had hours of operation that would accommodate their work schedule, again limiting their choices. Finally, there was the issue of the high cost of quality early childcare. Most parents struggled with the costs related to sending their child to early childcare programs. **While the richest and the poorest households were often able to select preschools that met their quality criteria, through either paying costly private schools or well subsidized public preschools, those in between these two income levels mostly could not.** Some parents found themselves in the horrible position of having to decide whether to feed their families or pay for quality care. The situation became worse when parents had more than one child of preschool age. If programs offered a discount for multiple children enrolled, that became the overriding factor in the selection of child care programs. In other cases the parent had to choose which child would be able to go to preschool and which could not. In short, given these constraints **parents were forced to select an ECE preschool that they could afford, regardless of the quality of that preschool.**

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study gives insight into the parents' expectations and characteristics of quality young child care. It also illuminates what parents believe is critical to ensure their child's success. Perhaps of greater importance, this study highlights the many challenges ECE programs face today and for the foreseeable future. While we cannot in this space discuss all the issues that were uncovered in our study, we can highlight some of the major ones facing ECE stakeholders and provide recommendations:

1. Teachers of young children should have formal qualifications to teach children. Educators of teacher training programs must consider broadening the curriculums for ECE teacher training in order to meet the expectations of parents and the world in which we live. Likewise, ECE policymakers and administrators must support continuous learning and advanced training of teachers already employed in ECE programs. Such training must become the rule, not the exception.
2. Parents need the support of teachers. From the view of parents the role of the 21st century ECE teacher is changing from just teaching young children to include

parenting young children. Thus, the stability of teacher staff is of great importance to parents. High levels of teacher turnover must be addressed by policy-makers and ECE administrators. It is crucial that these stakeholders recognize teachers as critically important to the future academic success of children and the future of society overall. Thus, it is clear that ECE teachers' salaries should be commensurate with the salaries of teachers in the K-6 system.

3. What parents describe as the curriculum of the 21st century pre-school classroom is far from what would've been expected in the 1990's. The preschool curriculum can no longer focus on just teaching the 'ABCs' or numeracy. It now has an obligation to expose young children to higher vocabulary, computers, technology, science, and multiple non-English languages. It also has to engage children in activities that invite critical thinking and reasoning and experiential learning in addition to social skills. Educators, Practitioners, ECE policy makers and Administrators alike must come to accept that the ECE curriculum must keep up with the changes in our society.
4. Access to quality ECE care is prohibitively expensive. It is out of reach for many parents and in many ways mirrors the effect of inequalities of income in our society. Yet every parent should be able to have quality care for their children. **Parents should not have to decide which of their children can go to pre-school, or whether they should pay for pre-school or go hungry.** Since Connecticut has the widest racial and economic achievement gaps in the United States, the discussion from this article, and the findings from this study would confirm the need for quality early care for the State of Connecticut for more parents, particularly those just above the lowest income level. Barring Universal Preschool, policymakers may have to consider subsidizing more schools and or subsidizing parents.

In many ways what parents said in this study provides information that assists the Danbury Discovery community and others affiliated with the Discovery network with validated data. In February 2013, Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy established an office of Early Childhood to assist in closing the achievement gap in the state caused in part by the economic gap and academic gap between students of color and white students. The parent voices from this study can be used to support future initiatives for work with parents of young children in their communities and throughout the State of Connecticut to close this achievement gap. This past January, President Obama spoke to Congress about supporting the expansion of access to pre-school programs across America. Therefore, this research study not only supports local and statewide initiatives, it also supports federal initiatives.

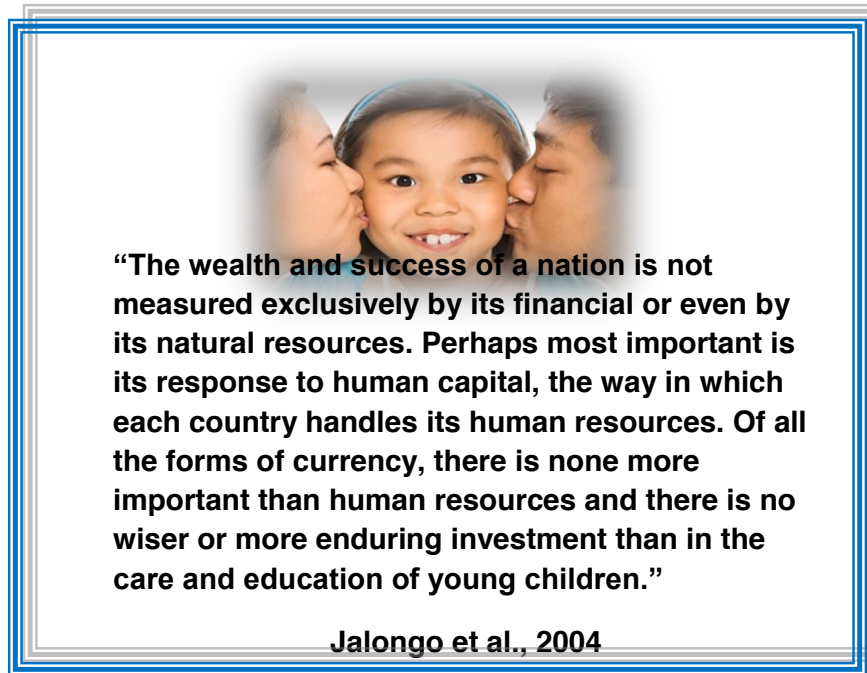
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Problem Background and Value of this Study

The benefits of Early Childhood Education (ECE) have been well recognized. Research provides the evidence that starting the learning process early in life is the best alternative (Lynch, 2004). Likewise, ECE has served as a means to better prepare young children for school and in so doing reduce the ethnic, racial and economic achievement gaps (Miller, 2010). One study in particular, conducted by Fantuzzo, Perry, & Childs, (2006), suggested that without access to quality ECE care a child's age, gender, ethnicity, economic status, maternal education level, and residential neighborhood were determinants for academic success and social/behavioral adjustment in kindergarten. Lack of quality care therefore results in cycles of uneducated adults and the inevitable poverty that is its outcome. Moreover by investing in ECE for low income children, not only can you reduce the achievement gap, but other social concerns including healthier life choices, reduced criminal activity and less admittance to special education programs are the results. Basically, "investing early in the lives of children allows us to shape the future; investing later chains us to fixing the missed opportunities of the past" (Heckman, 2011, p. 11).²

² A comprehensive report of the findings and discussions of these findings will soon be released.

What is Quality Care?

While there has been a significant amount of research that extols the benefits of quality early childhood education (Imig, 2011; Olson, 2002), how one defines quality varies among parents, teachers, administrators and policy makers. Ceglowski (2004) found that parents associated a “quality ECE program” with culturally and community sensitivity, parent-friendly and parent-supportive learning environments. However, traditionally, the goal of the ECE institutions was to prepare young children for primary school (Arnold & Colburn, 2009; Le Tendre, 1999). Therefore program administrators tend to focus on quantitatively measured quality factors such as: child-teacher ratio; teacher retention rates; accreditation of the facility; teacher pre-service education; learning activities; and environmental factors like safety, space, cleanliness. To others the goal of ECE schools is more than academic-preparedness; it includes the social and emotional development of the child (Epstein, 1995; Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009).

Proponents of this view assert that a child does not exist in a vacuum; that is, many socio-cultural, cognitive learning style factors, both affective and concrete affect the child’s educational, emotional and social well-being. These differences in perceptions of quality are emblematic of the changing understanding of the objectives of ECE that cannot be ignored.

According to Ceglowski (2004) there is a similar disagreement between parents and ECE professionals on the expectations of quality care-givers, or teachers. While teachers and administrators define the attributes of a quality ECE teacher as professionalism and training, parents see positive teacher-parent communication as a defining attribute of a quality teacher. Research by Swick (2004), supports this finding. In a study examining the relationship between parents and child ‘care-givers’ the author found that parents wanted a closer relationship with the professionals that cared for their children. Such a relationship entails greater collaboration through frequent parent-teacher communication, greater respect for parents’ opinions and ideas, and an overall inclusion of the parent as a member of a team dedicated to ensuring the future success of children. Later studies by Knopf & Swick (2007) stated that those strong relationships between parents and the early child care teacher “significantly impact how parents feel about the care and education their child is receiving” (p. 292). Likewise, a number of researchers have found that understanding parent’s perceptions of quality care is central to increasing parent engagement and involvement with their child’s learning (Lawson, 2003; Knopf & Swick, 2007). Such parent engagement included selecting a child care setting, engaging in home learning activities, monitoring and observing their child’s progress and communicating with teachers or care-givers. Parent involvement included activities in which parents interact with those who care for their child including

such activities as attendance at parent teacher conferences or attendance at a school play, participating in activities in the classroom or involvement in school decision-making. It comes as no surprise that parent engagement and involvement in early childhood education is positively correlated to children's future academic success. Thus, more investigation is necessary to determine the type of relationship that exists between parents and teachers of ECE.

While the research discusses the need for more qualified teachers, more information is needed to identify what parents perceive as being a quality teacher, (Xu & Gulosino, 2006). Though the literature is replete with research that suggests teachers must have the appropriate training and some formal education (Bornfreund, 2012; Brown, 2012) (Upshur & Wenz-Gross, 2012), there is also constant debate as to what an early childhood teacher should be taught before entering service (Gibbons, 2011). Abbate-Vaughn, Paugh, & Douglass, (2011), investigated the credentialing of early childhood teachers. They found that early childhood teacher qualifications varied from state to state. They concluded that the inconsistency in teacher qualifications has resulted in inconsistent early childhood education settings and programs throughout the country. Perhaps because of this, the salaries of ECE teachers have historically been lower than those working in the K-12 system. Their study supports the need to investigate more thoroughly the need to better prepare early childcare teachers. Although there has been research that discussed the need for more qualified teachers, and since parents are the ones who place their children with these teachers, we need to identify what parents perceive as the qualifications and pre-service training of a quality ECE teacher (Xu & Gulosino, 2006).

Early Childhood Education Stakeholders and Policy Makers Initiatives

States and other institutions are coming to recognize the importance of ECE to their community and to society at large. From a state perspective, there is a strong emphasis on the development of commonly accepted ECE program quality rating assessments. Experts suggest that early care and education will improve only if states build the infrastructure to support high quality programs (Olson, 2002). There is a need to determine outcomes from ECE programs, how to measure these outcomes, and to be able to weigh the investment accordingly (McCarthy, 2010). This has resulted in several noteworthy attempts to identify factors that consistently lead to positive ECE outcomes and to further extrapolate from these standards agreed upon measures of ECE quality. This is the goal of the Governor of Connecticut's Early Childhood Research and Policy Council and their proposal for a quality assessment system called the Connecticut

Quality Rating and Improvement System, (The QRIS Work Group, 2008). This system is proposed to:

- Create meaningful and commonly accepted understanding of ECE program quality factors
- Consistent measurement of quality will in turn advance the quality of ECE programs
- Provide reliable information about the quality of ECE programs; this in turn is expected to promote parent and provider ‘buy-in’ by ensuring the integrity of quality assessments and the information it provides and to enable parents to make better decisions in selecting an ECE program for their children.

This last bullet is of great importance. To encourage parent ‘buy-in’ requires policy-makers to listen to parents ‘voices’. As our literature indicated, too few studies have examined parent quality care perceptions, much less their rationale for their beliefs. There is limited research available which investigates how child care programs and providers support parents—especially low-income working parents (Bromer & Henly, 2009). Studies that have investigated how parents felt about their child’s teacher/school, have just scratched the surface of this important area (Ceglowski, 2004; Fantuzzo, Perry, & Childs, 2006). The need for further research that listens to and examines parents’ perceptions of quality care is more important than ever. No initiative can be completely successful without parent involvement. Only by understanding parent’s needs and wants can we close the gaps among policy makers’, teaching professionals’, and administrator’s perceptions of quality care and those of parents.

Our study also recognized the larger collective objectives of the study stakeholders. The Discovery 2010-2014 initiative, sponsored by the William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund, and its community partners Danbury’s Promise for Children Partnership, and Danbury Children First, has as its central goal to improve early childhood education. Their strategies that support this goal include increasing parent engagement and leadership in early child care and education through information, support and leadership development opportunities. Understanding parent decision making is crucial to the Memorial Fund’s result statement and its strategy of system building. This study supports efforts in the area of early childhood education by providing more knowledge about parents’ concerns; their relationship with teachers and information related to early childhood education decisions and how these influence parent access and decision making about early childhood education.

Research Objectives

The goal of this study was to understand what parents felt was important to ensure their child's success: what was the basis of their attitudes and perceptions, e.g. what experiences have they had or shared that have been instrumental in validating these perceptions, and how these impact their decision to select an ECE program. Specifically this study sought to understand:

1. What do parents believe are the characteristic of a high quality pre-school?
 - a. Why do they believe these characteristics are important?
 - b. How important do parents believe each of these characteristics is in ensuring their child's readiness for kindergarten?
2. What do parents believe are the most critical characteristics of quality teachers?
 - a. Why are these characteristics important?
 - b. What are parents' expectations of teachers in terms of behaviors, actions, and attitudes?
 - c. What teaching methods, practices, or approaches do parents believe are most effective?
3. How satisfied are parents with their child's current pre-school and why?
 - a. What factors determine satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their current school?
4. What criteria do parents *actually* use to select a preschool for their child?

In short, the purpose of this study was to fill the gaps in the body of knowledge of quality ECE care.

Research Design

To accomplish the research objectives an exploratory study using a mixed methods cross-sectional study design was chosen. This study also employed grounded theory analysis methods. Grounded Theory methods are most appropriate for studies that attempt to not only understand what is going on but *why*. Moreover, unlike qualitative case study designs the outcomes of a grounded theory study can result in both descriptive data and quantitative data.

To 'validate' findings and reproducibility methodological triangulation was employed in data collection. That is, multiple data collection methods were used to examine each research factor as described below.

Data Collection Instruments

Our research plan used 3 data collection methods and instruments: 1) focus group, 2) structured interview and 3) surveys.

Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups have long been known to facilitate valuable parent insights in a study area that would be less accessible with a one-to-one interview. Knopf and Swick (2008) found that focus groups provide parents with an opportunity to speak to other parents who are similar to themselves. This in turn can help parents validate their own experiences and to communicate a perspective that their voices are important. However, as noted by the authors, focus groups are notoriously difficult to manage, resulting in discussions 'getting off track'. Focus groups can also produce 'group-think' responses, a situation where participants try to minimize conflict by concurring with views they don't personally believe. To prevent these known problems our study used a variant of focus group interviews called the dual moderator focus group. In this type of focus group one moderator ensures the session progresses smoothly, while the other ensures that all the topics are covered. In addition, in 5 of the 9 questions posed during each focus group, parents were also asked to write down their individual responses on paper, thereby allowing the researchers to capture individual parent voices and thereby reduce the possibility of 'group-think' responses.

Questions were created to elicit from parents their perceptions of the characteristics of a quality pre-school, their perceptions of the characteristics of a quality teacher, and their ideas of what they considered to be the most effective teaching practices for teaching young children. In addition, we included questions that assessed their satisfaction with their child's current pre-school. We also asked parents to rank factors they believed were critical to their child's success. Lastly, we provided an open-ended question to allow parents to comment on any issue they thought might be important for us to know about teachers, administrators or their child's school. A formal focus group protocol for each moderator and assistant moderator was developed to describe the objective of each question, the focus group agenda, and implementation considerations. At the very end of the protocol was a moderator's debriefing survey. This survey allowed the moderators to describe any problems they encountered and any suggestions they had for improving the focus group.

Parent Structured Interviews

Two parents from each focus group were randomly chosen to be interviewed after the focus group concluded. Like the focus group, the structured interview was developed to elicit from parents their perceptions on the characteristics of a quality pre-school, their perceptions of the characteristics of a quality teacher, and their ideas of what they considered to be the most effective teaching practices for teaching young children, using close-ended and open-ended questions. Like the focus group, the interview

questions included a question that required them to rank factors that they believed were critical to their child's success and an open question which allowed them to comment on any issue they thought might be important but was not covered. The interview questions also examined the extent of the parent's involvement in their child's preschool, i.e. teacher conferences, participation in decision-making etc., their satisfaction with their teacher, and administration interactions, and their satisfaction with the school resources available to the parents. The interview was also used to validate consistency between parent responses in the focus group and the interview setting.

Parent Survey

All parents in the focus group were required to take the survey. The parent survey was comprised of 4 different sections. The first section captured both pre-school and child data, including the number of children in the household and their ages, the number of children enrolled in pre-school, the names of the schools, the school's distance from their home, and the means of transportation to and from their child's school. The second part of the survey was the Parent Satisfaction with Educational Experiences (PSEE) scale. The scale consisted of 12 questions and was used to capture parent satisfaction with their child's school across three dimensions: teacher contact experiences, classroom contact experiences and school contact experiences (Perry & Fantuzzo, 2007). The third part of the survey looked at family home and school based involvement factors. Many of these questions were used to validate the consistency of responses to the PSEE. The last section of the survey was designed to capture parent demographic information, i.e. gender, age, education, race, etc. Parents were allowed to refuse to respond to any demographic question. When this was the case, the missing demographic information, e.g. sex, race, etc., was reported as 'missing' or in the case of quotes 'unidentified'.³

Selection of Parent Participants

Danbury Children First, our research partner in this study, had several responsibilities related to this research project. Among them was the recruitment of a representative sample of Danbury, CT parents whose children were enrolled in an early child care setting outside of the home. Children were enrolled in a licensed family day care, school based or center based care. The goal was to have a diverse group of parents who fit these criteria. This included male and female parents of various ages, languages

³ It should be noted that one study participant chose not to complete the survey.

(Spanish, Portuguese and English), and educational, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Parents signed consent forms and were assured of confidentiality and privacy of information that they provided. To provide an incentive, stipends were provided to all participants and they were reimbursed for child care and travel expenses by the Memorial Fund. Also, a light meal was provided for each evening of the focus groups. There were varying amounts paid to parents based on level of participation. In order to receive payment, participants had to complete both the focus group and the survey. Follow up phone calls and emails were sent to parents to encourage submission of surveys. Parents who participated in the focus groups and were randomly selected for the structured interview received extra compensation.

Study Implementation

As shown in Table 1 four focus groups were held during February 2013. Each focus group included parents that spoke the same language. This resulted in two English groups, one Spanish group, and one Portuguese group. Four to 6 parents were included in each focus group, resulting in a total of 22 participants. Each parent was given a unique user ID. Each focus group, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, was digitally recorded. Group comments, which were written on easel board paper, were transcribed and digitized. A Time-Stamp document was used by the researcher, who was also present in the focus group, to capture the time during which each parent spoke.⁴ This was synchronized with the digital recording, thereby allowing us to parse the focus group discussion by parent.

Table 1- Parent Participants by Language			
Group Number	Language	Date	Total
1	English	Feb-13	5
2	Portuguese	Feb -19	4
3	Spanish	Feb-21	6
4	English	Feb-22	7
TOTAL			22

⁴Additional discussion of research methods, research protocols, data collection instruments, data management techniques used, and techniques used to prepare the data analysis is found in the Technical Report.

Parent Demographics

According to the demographic data collected, about 81% of our sample was female parents and 19% of the sample was males. It is not unusual that any study examining young children have a greater female presence, since females still remain the primary care giver role, especially for young children. The mean age of respondents in our sample was 35.5, the median age was 35. The vast majority of our parents were currently married (80.95%) with 14.29% having never been married and 4.76% being married but separated. Our demographic sample deliberately oversampled Hispanics/Latinos and under sampled White Caucasian parents. As shown in Table 2 Hispanics/Latinos represent about 25% of the population of Danbury. Overall, approximately 30.7% of the population in Danbury is foreign born.

Table 2 - Racial Comparison of Sample to Census 2010		
Race	Sample	Census
African American	9.5%	7.2%
Hispanic Latino	42.9%	25.0%
White Caucasian	33.3%	68.2%
Asian / Indian	9.5%	6.8%
Mixed	4.8%	4.5%

Of all the foreign-born population, approximately 65.1% come from Latin America, 14.4% come from Europe and 16% come from Asia which includes India.

Sixty-six percent of parents in our sample spoke only English at home. Those who spoke Spanish as their native language spoke Spanish at home as well. Portuguese parents, as well as those who spoke other languages, appeared to speak English in the home.

Sixty-seven percent of our sample was fully employed; 19% worked part-time while 9.5% considered their status as homemakers. Most notable in Danbury are the number of individuals above the middle-class median. The 2010 census indicated that 35.3% of Danbury families had incomes above \$100,000, 28.6% of the parents in our study made over \$100,000. This is reflected in the education levels of our sample where 33% of our parents held more than a college degree. However, almost 30% of our parents held an Associate degree while in the general population only approximately 6% held an Associate Degree.

Table 3 - Comparison of Education Level between Sample and 2010 Census		
Education	Sample	Census
6 - 8 Years	4.7%	8.9%
High School Diploma	19%	30.4%
Some College	14.2%	16.1%
College Degree	-	17.9%
Associate Degree	28.6%	5.9%
More than a College Degree	33%	12.1%

The average family size (married or unmarried with children) in Danbury is 3.20. So it is not surprising that 66.6% of our parents had more than 1 child. Approximately 95.2% of parents had only one child in preschool. Parents' children were enrolled in a variety of ECE programs including public programs like Head Start and School Readiness Programs held in both public and private facilities, faith based schools, Montessori programs, and other schools.

Findings

In this section we describe parent's perceptions of program quality and the potential predictors (causes) of their perceptions. We also identify what parents see as the critical determinants of ECE quality. Within this context we will examine differences between the factors they use to choose an ECE facility and the quality characteristics they have stated are most important in a quality preschool.

Parents Perceptions of the Characteristics of a High Quality Preschool

Parents identified 7 major critical characteristics of a high quality ECE program. These, in order of priority, included:

1. The quality of teachers
2. Continuity of teachers within the program or school, e.g. low turnover rate
3. A multicultural environment
4. Physical characteristics of the ECE facility
5. Quality curricula
6. Support for parent engagement and involvement in the ECE; and
7. Safety and security of children within the ECE facility

Quality Teachers and High Turnover Rates

When asked “what things would you consider when trying to choose a preschool program for your child?”, the most common response was the quality of teachers. Teachers are not only responsible for teaching children they are also in a greater sense surrogate parents. Thus, as we discuss later in this section, the determinants of a quality teacher does not just include typical factors like teacher qualifications, professionalism etc., but more affective factors like loving and caring attitudes, attentiveness to the emotional and social needs of children, and quality parent-teacher communication. As we will discuss later these affective characteristics of teachers are so important to parents that even if the preschool does not possess the other six quality characteristics identified by parents, the presence of high affective characteristics of teachers is enough for parents to keep their children enrolled in a preschool that lacks a quality curriculum. Thus, it is not surprising that when choosing a preschool for their child at least some parents inquired about the teacher turnover rate in a potential preschool. Parents felt that high teacher turnover rates meant their young child’s development might be frequently interrupted. Because each new teacher might have a different personality, behaviors, and teaching style, it would make it harder for children to maintain the valuable teacher-child bonds that are needed for the child to become independent and well socialized. In addition, it made it harder for parents to maintain the valuable teacher-parent relationship which was also seen as crucial to ensuring their child would be prepared for kindergarten. Moreover, parents felt that more than likely the new teacher might have less experience teaching children.

Frequent turnover also indicated to some parents that the teachers may be unhappy with working in that particular preschool. As one parent commented: “an unhappy teacher, makes for an unhappy child”. For this reason parents often asked, not just about the teacher turnover rate, but also about the salaries of the teachers. As one parent stated “It’s always been difficult to find people that want to pursue a career in [early childhood education] because they are not paid as well as others”. Parents fear that there is a short supply of quality teachers and this decline will continue until ECE teachers are paid as much as their colleagues in elementary and middle-schools.

Cultural and Racial Diversity

Some parents felt that a quality preschool should have a “multicultural environment” including students, parents and teachers from a variety of racial backgrounds and cultures. Parents felt that the diversity in our society required young children to have interpersonal contact with children and adults from different races, cultures and

languages. Parents felt that this was a means for properly socializing children to their world:

"[My daughter] got all kinds of cultures and she's learning...and my daughter speaks Spanish. So she's interacting with the different children, the different teachers and she's learning other languages that I don't speak. (laughter from all). So yeah I would keep her [at her school] because of the interacting with the other students and she's learning other languages and she's getting to learn other cultures from the students and the teachers." (Female, Caucasian, age 41)

In her preschool currently she has Spanish she has Asian, she has Indian, she has white she has black. She's got all kinds of cultures and she's learning...and my daughter speaks Spanish. So she's interacting with the different children, the different teachers and she's learning other languages that I don't speak. (laughter from all). (Female, Caucasian, 41)

Bilingual staff was most important to non-English speaking parents. Without at least one bilingual staff member it became impossible for non-English speaking parents to communicate with preschool staff, especially teachers. More importantly it became impossible for their child to communicate with their care-givers. This type of language barrier was of great concern to parents:

Also, another thing for me is the language barrier. I mean, there are children that come from other countries; there are some that are living here already. The teacher should,... I'm not going to demand that all teachers should be bilingual but if, for example, ten kids have been assigned to one teacher, they would be able to relate to the language the[child] is familiar with. Because if the teacher only speaks English and is being assigned three kids from Ecuador or Dominican...my country... Dominicans.. they won't understand. The poor child [may]be saying "this" or "I have to go to the bathroom" and the teacher's going to be.... What's going on? (Female, Hispanic, age 42).

Still for most non-English speaking parents it was important that their child spoke English *in addition* to their native language. Several of these parents felt concerned that being taught primarily in English made their child less likely to speak or write in their native tongue. Indeed two parents described their children suddenly telling them that they no longer wanted to speak in Portuguese. In the most severe cases parents suddenly found themselves unable to communicate with their own children:

Physical Attributes of the Preschool

Many parents examined the preschool's physical environment to determine whether it was a quality preschool. A poorly kept facility, besides being unappealing, signified to

parents that the staff working in the facility did not care about their workplace and thus, more likely would not care for children within the facility:

I, particularly, the first thing I look at is the infrastructure. Like, you could tell if a building is well cared for, if you see the paint looks good, if you see that all the information is in its place, if all the lights are on, that means that someone's being taken care of. (Female, Hispanic, age 33)

The order and neatness of the classroom was a tell-tale sign of whether the teacher was well organized and therefore more capable of teaching effectively. A disorganized learning environment said the opposite.

But certain things you want to see in each classroom. It [should] be very neat, look very nice... At the school where my daughter is going, I didn't see it looking very nice. There were a lot of things on the desk and when I looked at another classroom it seemed a bit more spacious. I don't know why, but I also noticed that a lot. ...a lot of crap and a lot of paper and... It's better if [teachers] have things organized. (Female, Hispanic, age 28).

Parents Views on a Quality Curriculum

Parents also thought that a quality preschool should have a structured curriculum, which would stipulate what children should be learning at each stage. Specifically parents described a curriculum that would be used in a quality preschool as having the following qualities:

1. It should prepare children for kindergarten
2. It should provide more advance topics
3. It should be age appropriate; and
4. It should incorporate enrichment activities, activities to support social learning, and experiential learning

First, the curriculum should prepare the child for kindergarten. This was a cause of worry for some parents. In some cases parents did not feel that there was a curriculum in their preschool at all. One parent stated: *"I didn't feel like the kids were really doing anything... just playing around"*, (Female, Caucasian, age 38). In other cases parents were concerned that they themselves did not know what their child needed to know before they entered kindergarten. Parents were fearful that they no longer understood what a child *really* needed to learn to be ready for kindergarten, because of the standards of the "No Child Left Behind" operating in public elementary schools. The fear that the "rules" had changed, and their child would be unprepared for perceived 'rigors' of kindergarten was disconcerting to some parents.

I was really concerned about her knowing what types of things that they need to know now for kindergarten. Cause when I was in kindergarten, you didn't have to know anything (laughter). And now they want you to know, I don't know, like everything (Laughter). So, that was really important [be]cause I didn't want her to get into kindergarten and be far behind all the other students. (Female, African-American, age 26)

This anxiety of not knowing what their child should know prior to entering kindergarten was particularly felt by foreign-born parents, or parents with non-English speaking children.

Curriculum... I have no idea. After Pre-K three what he's going to learn? Does he use complete A-Z.? Or can he read? I have no idea. Still I don't know after Pre-K 4. I went to kindergarten where he supposed to go kindergarten. I visited his principal. And I said I want my son to be in kindergarten, what's he supposed to learn before he enters to kindergarten. Because I don't know about that, and I have to pay more attention to him because he... wouldn't know the English when he entered. Because we speak[a] different language. (Female, Asian, age 33)

Second, the curriculum should have some emphasis on topics that until recently would not normally be considered as part of a preschool curriculum. Parents wanted their child to be exposed to more advanced topics like computers and computing, more complex math, and science. In fact often the greatest complaint regarding their child's preschool was that the curriculum was often "too basic". It lacked the amount of enrichment that would "encourage critical thinking and understanding" of things within the child's environment, albeit at a child's level.

Third, parents felt that the curriculum should be age-appropriate. Age-appropriateness meant two things to parents, 1) the topics incorporated in the curriculum should be appropriate for young children; that is it should not incorporate topics that are controversial, i.e. sexual orientation, politics etc. and 2) the curriculum should meet the needs of children at their different stages of development. This recognized that a child of 3 might be at a 4 year-old developmental stage or vice versa.

Fourth, a high quality curriculum, in parent's view, included extracurricular activities like music and dance, field trips to the library and museums, etc. Enrichment activities were particularly welcomed by working parents who often did not have the time to take their child on educational outings or take them to art, dance or karate classes.

They have enrichment programs, so being a working parent I don't have to find these things for them to do outside of the school they're there. I don't have time on Saturday and Sunday to drag him to music class...it's there. It goes for

camp as well. They have a camp program, so that I don't have to worry about transitioning him into another setting as well. (Female, Caucasian, age 39)

In many ways school outings and activities provided a means to socialize a child. That is to teach children to play and interact well with other children, to not be frightened in different environments, to be tolerant of people different from themselves and to interact with adults including teachers and other parents. Within the classroom setting social learning can be accomplished by including in the curriculum lessons on the benefits of sharing, recognition of other cultures, age appropriate social manners, knowing how to ask for help, when and how to express their needs, etc.

Providing activities to support health and hygiene and activities that engaged the child with physical activities was also seen as beneficial.

Also with this school they teach the kids how to brush their teeth (focus group parents say oh!) after lunch they brush their teeth and they do yoga once a week. The director goes in and does yoga with them. My daughter shows me all her yoga moves. I like that cause its teaching them the importance of exercise, physical health, I mean every day after lunch they have their toothbrush so they brush their teeth. They don't use toothpaste, but its teaching them how to be independent and do those certain things on their own and the importance of, you know your personal hygiene and your physical health by doing the yoga and being calm and collective. (Unidentified)

Parent Involvement with their Preschool and Engagement with Child Learning

Another characteristic of a high quality preschool was its firm support for parent involvement in the preschool. Parents believed that the preschool should have a welcoming attitude toward parents. Besides having an open-door policy, that allowed parents to visit their child's classroom at any time, the preschool should encourage family visits and involvement in the preschool. Though parents wanted these things in a quality preschool, and while it was important to them, very few had the time or opportunity to actually engage in volunteering in the classroom, planning classroom activities, meet and discuss preschool matters with other parents or to be involved in decision-making regarding the preschool. This was especially the case with working parents. The survey responses indicated that parents never or rarely met with other parents, (66.67%, or 14 out of 21 parents), they never or rarely volunteered in their child's classroom (61.9% or 13 out of 21 parents), and they never or rarely participated in planning classroom activities in their child's class (66.67% or 14 out of 21 parents). These findings were also substantiated by the interview data. These parents often felt

torn, guilty, and even defensive of their inability to be more involved in their child's preschool as shown below:

...I see that the parents think like this, "Well, if I'm not going to the school, it's the teacher's responsibility that my child is educated." And a child's education is not only up to the teachers. It's us as well. I know have to work. But, the person who teaches is also a human being. I believe, here, the blame is not placed on the parents. When it comes to education, more responsibility is placed on the teacher than on the parent. The parent only dresses them and takes them. Even when it comes to food, "Did you eat? I didn't prepare you food, but did you eat? Okay. They gave them food I imagine it was good." I think that the parent needs to be more involved. (Female, Hispanic, age 42)

In response to this comment a parent in the same focus group stated:

The only thing I would like to clarify is my point of view of [about what was said]....I don't want anyone to impose on me that I have to be with my son and educate my son. I know how to educate my son. I don't want anyone to tell me, "Oh, there are twenty assignments and the twenty assignments must be signed by the parent." Because that implies, sometimes, that if I can't attend a PTA meeting, my son could feel bad because they might make him feel like an outcast. That also implies that I have more responsibilities than just to give him guidance. The education...[is done by]... the school- -academically, I don't want to worry [about that] because I have to check on my son all the time... that's why they have teachers. Like, I want [to] educate my son. Maybe I'm taking [what you said] the wrong way but, I want to educate my son...the kind of education I want to give my son is that of family values, guidance at home, but I don't want to teach him math, or chemistry, or any of that. I want to help them, but I don't want to teach them. I want to be mom. (Female, Hispanic, age 33)

In a few cases parents felt their voices were not welcomed in their child's preschool or the preschool was disengaged with parents and their community.

"I am not involved in any activity and volunteer work at school because [there's]no encouragement or discussion with School. you only get involved in discussion with teacher or principal if your child behavior is not good in school and [or with] other kids. There are 2 times a year I have asked to set up time with teacher where I talked about my child and can hear from teacher how he has been doing. No group meeting with teacher and parents to discuss "

"The school my child attends does not have many of the programs listed ex..no parent volunteer workshops, no parent involvement in planning activities, no warnings if schools are close during inclement weather."(Unidentified)

Overall, parents were very engaged in their child's learning. They actively reviewed homework. They engaged in learning activities with their child. They read to their child. They asked teachers questions about how their children were doing in preschool. In some cases however, the lack of communication between parents and teachers hindered parents' ability to directly engage their child in learning activities in the manner expected.

[I'd like to] see what they [the students] worked on during the [school] day. For example, if they learned about the letter "A" so we go home and let's work on it like, "Let's work with the letter 'A'. What starts with 'A'? We can't encourage the child at home to do a little more if we don't know what was done in school. The teacher and parents should talk more with each other. (Female, Caucasian, age 33)

Protecting Children

By all accounts the safety and the security of their child in the preschool were of critical importance to parents. On first glimpse parents tended to use the words 'safety' and 'security' synonymously, often with the words used together, i.e. "I want my child to be safe and secure. Through analysis within the context of their comments it was found that safety and security had different meanings to parents, even if they interchanged the words. Security meant the protection of children from factors outside the preschool like violence or vagrants. For example:

Safety, because...how do we say [it]? Ah! I think there's a lot of stress with so many things that are happening, so one of the most important things is their [the children's] security. It [means that when] you arrive and leave your children inside their [pre-school] and go to work, without...without worrying, you know, that a door will be left open, (nervous laughter) that someone will enter, things like that. (Female, Hispanic, age 46)

Safety meant the protection of children from a host of environmental factors within the preschool, including child-predators, unclean and non-child-proof areas, and an environment that did not attend to children's needs, inattentiveness to the children's health, emotions, or moods. The preschool in essence became a part of their family; an entity/individual that could be trusted to love and care for children. This made parents, especially working parents, more comfortable in leaving their child at their preschool.

I needed a facility.... almost a family. Where I could drop my child off and be comfortable and secure that he was going to be looked after and taken care of (Female, Caucasian, age 39)

What's important...A nice atmosphere where the children feel cozy and comfortable (Female, Hispanic, age 46)

I would notice that the installations, the most important ones, are childproof. Because kids put their hands anywhere or something may happen and they get hurt. So, that's also very important (Male, Caucasian, age 34)

Parent's Insecurity with Security

Parents' emphasis on security is not hard to understand in light of the violent event at Sandy Hook Elementary School, located very close to Danbury. What is surprising is the expressed heightened concern and of anxiety expressed by parents about the security and general anxiety of facility security. Take the following comments:

The first thing I look at is safety. After what happened here with Sandy Hook, right now, what I look at is the local security. To me, a place may look very nice, but if it's not very safe... I prefer to put [my children] in an uglier place, but for someone to be there. Yes. For whatever reason, right now, we are not only seeing a change in attitudes, I mean in the violence. We are also seeing a change in the atmosphere and above all, in reference to global warming, there are a lot of earthquakes and things. One doesn't know what's going to happen....First of all, classrooms shouldn't only have one door. I believe there should be two. The reason why I say that is if someone goes in through the main door... You would be able to exit from the other. The teachers should be trained. It's not like... just... put [the children] underneath the table. I would like for the teachers to be trained. (Female, Hispanic, age 42)

*... Because of recent events that have happened. Umm, my school has a pass card. You know so you have to swipe the card and go in. There's plenty times that there's people there that don't have cards and they linger around in the hallway waiting for people to let them get in. And I don't let them in. I don't know you I don't care if you have a child in here or not, I'm not letting you in. And you can get mad and you know, do whatever you want to do, but I'm not going to let you in... I don't care... **what are you going to do, hit me? I don't care.** You're not getting in here without your card. (Male, Other, age 40)*

The fact that a parent is willing to come to blows with another parent shows the intensity of emotions parents felt. Clearly these parents are deeply concerned with the physical protection of their children.

Parent's suggestions for enhancing security in and outside preschools include use of security cameras both inside and outside the facility, teaching children what to do in case of emergency, emergency communication systems within the preschool, enhanced emergency plans and greater parent vigilance.

Though this is not a definitive study, it should be noted that the fear of violence against children was more pronounced in parents who were born in Central America, e.g. Mexico. We can only speculate why parents born in Central America, mainly Mexico, would have such heightened fears associated with violence against children while mostly American born parents seemed to have much less fears.

The Importance of Preschool Teachers: Characteristics Important to Parents

Whether examining parent's responses to the criteria they use to choose a preschool, or to their perceptions of the characteristics of a high quality preschool, the teacher is perceived by parents as playing a major role in the social and cognitive development of a child. That is, in many respects the preschool teacher is critical to ensuring their child's future success. When asked specifically what attributes or characteristics of teachers would most likely meet their expectations, parents offered the following:

1. High qualifications and skill sets
2. Positive attitudes and personalities, including high quality child-teacher relationships; and
3. High quality parent-teacher communications

Teacher Qualifications

It is not a surprise that the most commonly cited concrete attribute was teacher qualifications. They defined qualified teachers as teachers who had been formally trained, "as opposed to just stepping out of the door and coming into the classroom." The teacher should not only be formally trained in education, but hold additional training or certifications in such areas as early child care, child development, preschool education, i.e. early literacy and numeracy. They should be qualified to teach all ages and levels of children while being well acquainted with developmental stages. That is, they must be familiar with cognitive development and cognitive learning styles. The reasons for parent emphasis on teacher's qualifications are quite understandable. Said simply, teachers are responsible for setting the child on the path of learning. They in essence set the stage for all that comes next. Thus, it is critical to parents that teachers "should know what [they're] talking about":

...The teachers ... making sure, umm they're educated... know... what they're doing. Because this is a young child that they're looking up to. And I want to

*make sure he's getting you know, learned-- being taught the right thing.
(Female, African-American, age 30)*

Moreover, teachers should be lifelong learners. It is not enough that they receive a degree; they must constantly be updating their knowledge. One parent put it this way: "how are you going to teach a computer class to a child, today, if you graduated from Window 95?" (Female, Hispanic, age 33).

The Importance of Teacher's Attitudes and Personalities

While teacher qualifications, e.g., their education credentials and continuous education in their area of expertise, and their professionalism was critically important to parents, other affective characteristics like patience, love of children, approachability, and flexibility were also of considerable importance.

Well, another characteristic that is important to me in a quality program is to be able to observe the kids during a visit while the kids are in class..and see if they are happy, if anyone is crying, how the kids are doing, what kind of facial expressions they have, if they are happy or if they were scolded or if the teachers suddenly lose their patience or how they manage the stress of the class (Female, Hispanic, age 36)

[I look to see] Are the teachers happy with working there. Umm I 've been at a couple of day cares and that's not really the case... some of them aren't happy to be there. And if they're not happy to be there I really don't want my children being there (Male, Other, age 40)

The importance of a child's happiness was a reoccurring theme that came up in parents' discussions over the course of multiple questions. So important was their child's happiness with their teacher and their preschool that parents were inclined to withdraw their child from a preschool that made their child unhappy, or even leave their child in a preschool that perhaps was not providing the best instruction, simply because their child was happy:

*The kids are safe **and they're happy**, and to us **that's the most important thing....** And you know, my wife and I have had discussions about perhaps they're not learning as much...they haven't learned how to write their letters yet. Umm, and we see other kids their kids age who have learned that. But, we're putting more emphasis on social skills at this point. There's plenty of time to learn letters and other stuff. (Male, Caucasian, age34)*

For my son in 3 years he changed 4 daycares. First one... the teachers so young, they are like so [immature]. So [the] second one I picked the teachers are mature

*and very, like, educated. But that's again the problem... very strict. **That.....that center he don't want to go. I change to another one...now he's happy in the new one.** (Female, Asian, age35)*

To parents the happiness of the child was determined by the interpersonal relationship between teachers and child. For them the balance between appropriate class rules or discipline and “strictness”, was the determinant of a child’s happiness: if a teacher was too strict, the child would be unhappy. One parent described how her son was very scared to go to preschool because the teacher was so strict. These parents believe that teachers should be approachable or “friendly”. They needed teachers to have rules, but should be “flexible” in imposing those rules.

it's important that they understand they're children. So as far as like when discipline, you know. That things are explained to them, like she said I've seen teachers not really understand that they're children. And they need to be talked to like children umm (Female, African-American, age 26)

Teachers should be friendly not ... so strict. Like [in] some daycare I see like [teachers] care ...like... when kids enter, they are like different totally different. They just care [about children]. (Female, Asian, age 35)

A school is like a family, you're closer to the children, I think it is missing here [in this pre-school] a little bit, you see? The rules...they are too much... I agree that there must have rules, I agree completely, but sometimes I think it is too strict and I think it ends up separating the teachers from the children. This is what I think. [There should be more closeness] between teachers and children...More closeness, more friendship (Male, Hispanic, age 32)

Quality of Parent-Teacher Communication

Findings suggest that the higher the frequency of communication between parent and teacher, the more content and confident the parent feels in trusting the teacher. The greater the trust or confidence in the teacher the more likely the teacher is considered to be a quality teacher. The less information interchange between parents and teachers, the less comfortable parents feel.

As might be guessed it is not just the quantity but the quality of child-parent interactions that matters. Parents want to be a part of their child’s life, especially when it comes to helping their child to learn. Working parents cannot be deeply engaged during most of their child’s day; meaning that they are not present in the classroom during the time their child is engaged in learning activities. As a result parents absolutely want to know what they can do to reinforce what children learn in their preschool. That can only happen when teachers share this information with parents.

When that does not happen, parents feel left out; not even partially involved in teaching their child.

I think it would be useful if we got a little bit more information about what they're doing subject matter so maybe I could supplement or enhance it...like if there studying animals, we could go to the zoo, or you know. It's hard for a child that age to communicate what's going on (chuckle) no idea... so I would find that useful. And there're doing stuff, but it is what, when and trying to keep track of it is a little bit hard... you know, cause you are on the outside . You're not there all day...not inside that room. (Female, Caucasian, age 38)

[I wish] that the teacher would communicate with the parent. if they [see]something that need's to improve...when it comes to discipline, any issue. Even saying, "Your daughter was crying a lot on this day. Is something going on?" That there can be [better]communication like that with the teacher. It's very important. (Female, Asian, age 35)

In addition, because working parents are not with their child during often large portions of the day, the 'surrogate parent', e.g. the teacher, is the only source of information about their child's daily social-emotional well-being, not just their academic progress. Parents want to know what they 'missed', "how was their child's day?" "What activities did their child experience" in their absence? In this manner parents can maintain the continuity of their parental bond with their child, which is essential between parents and young children. Thus, parents want and need daily information from the teacher, even information that might be considered minutia.

Every day they have a daily log of what they did throughout the day. Whether they ate, how much they ate, if they took a nap. Stuff like that. So even if you don't have a chance to talk with the teacher it's in all the kids' mailboxes... Whatever they did today. The activities what books they read what they played, during play what they did. You know and it's important to know if they ate their lunch and if they didn't and if you can't come to the school, you have all that there. And whether they took a nap, were they screaming, crying when they picked them up. You know why! Cause they didn't take a nap (chuckle) that day, you're prepared. I really like that cause not every day you [can] be with your kid. With all the teachers, it is easier to have a lot of kids. But at least that way you know what your child did all day long. That's what they love about that". (Unidentified)

Parent Reality Check: Factors Affecting Choice

While it might seem that preschool quality would be the greatest criteria for choosing a preschool, other ‘reality’ factors often cause parents to send their children to what they defined as less than high quality pre-schools. For these parents factors outside their control prevented them from choosing a high quality preschool for their children. These factors included:

Location Convenience

For working parents the proximity of the preschool to home and or work was critical. Parents needed the location of the pre-school to be as close to their home and their job as possible in order to be able to drop their child off and arrive to work on time.

Preschool Hours of Operation

To working parents the ability to drop off their children and pick them up after work is extremely important. Preschools with late opening times and early closing times put a strain on parents who did not end their work day until 5:30 or 6:00pm or started work at 6:30 or 7:00am. Several preschools closed at 5:00 or 5:30, while a few stayed open until 6:00 or 6:30pm. Many preschools actually charged a parent for each hour they were late in picking up their child. The more affordable half day programs were particularly hard on parents since it required parents to not only leave work during lunch hour, but also required an additional caretaker if the parent worked more than half a day.

The Cost of Quality Child Care

Most parents struggled with the cost of childcare. The cost of their ECE programs varied from nearly free for those at or below poverty levels (\$22,050) to over \$12,168 per year for those whose incomes exceed \$89,000, which was a large portion of both Danbury and our sample. Even what might be called moderately priced preschools cost well over \$7,000 per year. The effect of these high costs forced parents to make the harsh decision between feeding their families healthy meals, or providing quality care for their child.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several insights have resulted from conducting this study. Among the most important is the importance of teachers. **Parents’ perceptions of an ECE program are determined by their perceptions of the quality of the teaching staff.** To parents one of the most important factors that define a high quality ECE teacher is the quality of child-teacher

relationship. This study showed that the quality of child-teacher relationship is important to parents because of their perception of the role of the teacher. **To parents a teacher of young children is not just responsible for teaching the child, but *caring* for that child.** During the time the child is with the teacher, the teacher becomes the de facto parent. By this perception the preschool and its staff become part of an extended family. Thus the child-teacher relationship becomes almost as important as the parent-child relationship. Because of this, parents are particularly concerned with high levels of teacher turnover currently plaguing ECE programs. To parents, teacher continuity in the classroom is important to their child's academic and social growth. The continuity offered by schools in the form of routine, structure, and particularly in the constant presence of the same teachers and peers, makes parents view ECE programs as a place of security both physically and emotionally; it is a nurturing place where their children can play and grow. In addition teacher continuity allows parents to feel more comfortable and therefore trusting of leaving their child in the care of the preschool and its staff. So what does this mean to educators, policymakers and ECE administrators? **Ensuring teaching staff stability within ECE institutions would seem to be paramount.** The voices of parents suggest this is more critical than at any other time. Findings in this study suggest that parents placed in a position of choosing between quality care for their child and teacher continuity will choose continuity. No parent should have to make that decision.

The high turnover rate of preschool teachers has its roots in three factors: 1) historically low salaries, 2) high stress, which in turn results in high dissatisfaction with the job, and finally 3) the belief by teachers that their jobs are perceived by ECE administrators and policymakers as 'babysitters' rather than a profession (Lanigan, 2011). This is coupled with a lack of consistent credentialing requirements on a national basis. For example, Connecticut happens to be one of the states that until recently required only minimal education and training for early childcare teachers (outside of the public schools). As others have suggested, the need for standardizing teacher qualifications is overdue. Having defined teaching qualifications will make it easier to justify higher salaries. To achieve this condition **it is important that policymakers and ECE administrators recognize ECE teachers as critically important to the future academic success of children and the future productiveness of our society overall.** They are often the first teacher within a school setting that children experience, thus they pave the way for all teachers that follow. Following this reasoning, ECE teacher salaries should be commensurate with the salaries of teachers in the K-6 system. Until this happens, there are some other things that ECE administrators can do. **Administrators should show appreciation for what teachers do.** Often simple moral support, through a compliment, can make the difference. **Administrators should support teachers.** Showing support for

teachers can be done in a variety of ways. One way is to sympathize with the stresses that teachers confront in their job and ask for their opinions on how administrators can help. More concrete efforts include providing a support staff that can offload tasks that distract teachers from their real task of teaching young children. Lastly, **administrators should show interest in teachers' ideas**. Teachers work where 'the rubber meets the road', thus their ideas are likely to be more practical and efficacious. Along these lines administrators should have an open-door policy, which would encourage teachers to come into an administrator's office and talk about concerns or issues. Such open lines of communication allow ECE administrators to take proactive measures before emerging concerns or issues become serious. Moreover just the act of listening is a morale booster; it says without words that "I care about how you feel".

This study shows **that parents want highly qualified teachers**, and they particularly want teachers trained in the area that they teach. Their voices suggest further that they want teachers to have specialized training. This suggests that **today's ECE teachers must have more than a BS in Education**. They need a specialty degree in infant and toddler care, preschool education, child development, child psychology, cognitive and learning styles, etc. There is also a need for more bilingual teachers in non-English speaking communities and culture diversity training. In addition **ECE policy-makers and administrators should support advanced and continuous training for teachers**. Most businesses, public school systems and post-secondary schools find some way of compensating professionals who seek to advance their careers. They do so because they see it as beneficial to their business or school and a worth-while investment in the future of the institution. Given the importance of preschools to society it is important that policymakers try to do the same.

Teachers should also cultivate better parent-teacher relationships. This includes frequent feedback to parents about their child's progress and accomplishments, even very small accomplishments. More importantly parents want to know about their child's social and emotional state: was Jenny happy? Did she get upset over something? Did she play with other children? What did she eat? Did she finish her meal? Did she take a nap? Was she cranky? **Findings in this study indicated that the more parents heard about the daily socio-emotional state of their child the more satisfied they were with the teacher and with the ECE program.**

ECE Cost Factors

As described in our findings, quality care can be prohibitively expensive. It is out of reach for many parents. Yet every parent should be able to have quality care for their children. **Parents should not have to decide which of their children can go to pre-school, or**

whether they should pay for pre-school or go hungry. Since Connecticut has the widest racial and economic achievement gaps in the United States, the discussion from this article, and the findings from this study would confirm the need for quality early care for the State of Connecticut. Barring Universal Preschool, policymakers may have to consider subsidizing more schools and or subsidizing more parents.

Administrators Should Welcome and Prepare for Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

We are increasingly living in a culturally and linguistically diverse society. ECE administrators should recognize and be prepared to welcome these differences. First, it is very important that ECE administrators know their community. Because parents will typically enroll their child in an ECE program near their home, it is important to recognize changes in demographics of the ECE serving area. This also means **administrators must know what portion of the school's service area is foreign-born, and what languages they speak.** The plan to hire bilingual staff and teachers should occur before children show up. No child should be left isolated.

Parent Involvement in ECE Programs

Parents want to be involved in their child's school. **It should be the goal of ECE administrators to find creative ways to involve working parents.** The best way to accomplish this is to utilize communication technology. E-mail, online surveys, on-line focus-groups, electronic discussion groups, and electronic bulletin boards are just a few examples that can support one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication. These technologies can allow parents to engage in ECE decision-making, plan classroom activities, generate ideas, provide valuable feedback, and discuss preschool matters with other parents, teachers, and administrators.

What do Parents Expect Quality ECE Programs to Teach Their Children?

First, parents want to know that there *is a curriculum being followed*. The presence of a pre-K curriculum is essential in promoting the development of children. **ECE policymakers need to determine how many ECE programs operate without a curriculum.** Parents also want to be aware of what their children should know at each stage of development. Particularly, what should their children know before they enter kindergarten? **Administrators and teachers should make sure that parents are provided with information that communicates the honest expectations of outcomes and progress at each developmental stage.**

Parents expect ECE schools to teach more than academic related topics. They expect the ECE to provide opportunities for social and emotional learning, i.e., common social protocols like proper manners and emotional sensitivity, safety precautions, healthy nutrition, physical education, and personal hygiene. This kind of learning can help the

child become more independent and socialized. A quality ECE program also provides enrichment activities, like music, dance, art, or extracurricular activities, like educational field-trips. Providing such activities and lessons not only benefit the child, it also provides support for busy parents who often cannot find the time to do these types of activities. In addition it allows parents to feel confident that their child has been exposed to multiple settings that will allow them to be aware of the world they live in.

Future Directions

The results of the current study in the Danbury community will provide information for local community agencies, schools, universities and state policy makers regarding the characteristics that parents seek in quality teachers and access to quality care. It will also provide guidance for future research on parent engagement and early child care teacher preparation.

Our literature review indicates that parent's perceptions of ECE programs and teachers are not simplistic; rather their perceptions are derived from a complex set of interactions among ECE teachers, administrators and parents. For example, even if a teacher might be approachable and have a positive relationship with the children in their care, a lack of classroom resources for learning can make teachers frustrated, and thereby affect parent's perceptions of the quality of the teacher-child relationship. Obviously, such issues can confuse findings of a study. To avoid misinterpretations of findings requires that such factors as perceptions be examined from multiple perspectives, including parents, teachers and administrators. In this manner, we can not only discover the perceptions of parents, but understand them within their proper context of all those who are responsible for quality child care. This represents a means for ensuring not only better insight into a problem area but reliability and validity of those insights. Thus, future research should examine the perceptions of both the teachers and administrators of the parents they serve.⁵

Still, the completion of this exploratory study provides a baseline for similar communities in the State of Connecticut in better understanding parents views on access to early childcare and teacher quality. In tandem, there needs to be more curriculum developed that would prepare teachers to work with parents in these settings. This would result in better prepared children in the early grades and beyond.

⁵ A research methodology for implementing such a study is discussed in the comprehensive report.

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