



# Research Brief

## Making a College Course Matter for Pre-K Professionals: Supports Needed for Success<sup>1</sup>

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Given the increased enrollment in pre-K programs coupled with a lack of teacher education that consistently links to child development, this study examines a new course developed to support early childhood professionals in implementing effective teacher-child interactions. Findings suggest that an effective course can be scaled-up and used in different settings when clear supports are put in place to ensure quality delivery.

Recent policy efforts aim to increase early childhood teachers' education level, though there are mixed results linking teacher education to improved teaching outcomes. The National Center for Research in Early Childhood Education (NCRECE) designed and tested a course focused on effective teacher-student interactions, and found that early childhood teachers who took that course showed improved classroom interactions compared to those who did not take the course. This study examined the wide-scale implementation of the NCRECE course across ten cities across the United States with and fifteen instructors.

Early childhood teachers' level of education is not consistently linked to classroom quality or improved child outcomes. There may be many possible reasons for this including variability of content and/or the effectiveness in Early Childhood Education programs. To address this gap, NCRECE developed a course focused on teacher-student interactions known to promote children's learning and development.

The NCRECE course was effective in positively changing teacher's beliefs, knowledge, and teacher-child interactions. The course, if scalable, has the

### What is Effective Teaching?

For the course, effective teaching is defined as:

- Teacher behaviors that are characterized by responsive, supportive, and intentional.
- Classroom management that is child centered and flexible.

Effective teaching is centered on stimulating children's problem solving and language skills through feedback that is formative and individualized.

potential to be delivered through existing systems for teacher preparation (i.e., higher education), and could also address a critical gap created by policies requiring early childhood educators to earn a college degree. This study describes strategies and supports necessary to implement the NCRECE course well across multiple settings, evidence regarding course

<sup>1</sup>This research brief is based on the following published studies:

- LoCasale-Crouch, J., Kraft-Sayre, M., Pianta, R., Hamre, B., Downer, J., Leach, A., . . . Scott-Little, C. (2011). Implementing an early childhood professional development course across ten sites and fifteen sections: Lessons learned. *NHSA Dialog: A Research-to-Practice Journal for the Early Childhood Field*, 14, 275–292. doi:10.1080/15240754.2011.617527.

This published study can be purchased at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15240754.2011.617527>

- Hatfield, B. E., & LoCasale-Crouch, J. (2011). Making a college course matter at scale: The importance of implementation support. *NHSA Dialog: A Research-to-Practice Journal for the Early Childhood Field*, 14, 345–350. doi: 10.1080/15240754.2011.623798.

This published study can be purchased at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15240754.2011.623798>

instructors' implementation of the course as intended.

## The Study

The course was designed to incorporate research on effective teaching and learning into practical strategies and supports for teachers. Based on the definition of effective teaching for this study, the NCRECE team created the syllabus, activities, and materials for the course. Primary features of the course included reviewing classroom videos and then reflecting on the interactions, in-class activities, readings, exams, and lectures.

Teachers who enrolled in the course were a part of a larger research study examining the effects of professional development opportunities on classroom interactions and children's language and literacy skills in preschool.

Fifteen instructors with at least a Master's degree in early childhood education administered the course in 10 different locations across the United States. To support the instructors, two members of the NCRECE team served as course coordinators. The instructors conducted weekly phone calls with their coordinator and periodically submitting videotapes of their lessons for review and discussion with coordinator.

## Findings

The goal of this study was to identify the feasibility of and supports needed to ensure successful implementation across 10 cities throughout the United States. Information about course implementation was collected from 149 teachers and the 15 instructors.

Instructors indicated that they delivered all of the lectures, assignments, and activities except for the few cases in which time did not allow for a planned in-class activity. Instructors reported high levels of comfort with the course materials, and course coordinator review of their videotaped lessons indicated high quality teaching.

The participating teachers (current early childhood teachers who were enrolled in the study), on average, completed 95% of all in-class and out-of-class assignments and perceived the course to be of high-quality and appreciated the learning experience. As noted previously, study findings indicate teachers who took the course positively changed their teaching practice.

## Conclusion

Results from this study suggest that, with careful coordination, support, and teamwork, a research-based college course that improves teacher-child interactions can be implemented successfully across multiple and varying sites with a range of different instructors.

There are two take-home messages from this study for future courses geared toward improving teachers' classroom quality:

1. Course content must be intentionally organized and rooted in research concerning best practice. In this study, this was achieved through tight alignment of increasing teacher's knowledge and skills in effective teacher-child interactions with observational skills that help apply this knowledge to classroom video examples.
2. Instructors benefit from individualized supports to respond to questions, concerns, and provide formative feedback to successfully implement effective content. In this study, instructors were provided with ongoing support and guidance, as well as an intensive training on delivery and content.

## Implications

With growing emphasis on the need to increase early childhood teachers' education level, this study suggests it is possible to educate and support more and more teachers in ways that increase their effective teacher-student interactions. Noting the challenge in maintaining the integrity of curriculum and effectiveness of delivery tested in this study, future work could examine if components of this course could be incorporated into existing courses to support scalability. With appropriate supports in place, this course could be offered in two- or four-year early childhood education university programs. This has the potential to begin positively changing a whole system intended to support early care quality.

## Additional Information

For more information about NCRECE or other research studies associated with the center, please visit the following website:

<http://curry.virginia.edu/research/centers/castl/project/ncrece>

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