Washington, D.C.: Child care providers want degrees. We have to figure out how to pay for them. [1]

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EXCERPTS

Out with friends in D.C. the other night, I heard one say to another, “Have you seen the city’s new regulations for child care? They are so crazy. I don’t need my kid’s day care providers to have degrees. I just want them to love and snuggle my kid.” I looked around the table: There we were, four white women with well-paying jobs and young children in public schools, child care centers, andnannies. Though I am the only one working in early childhood education, each of us has a B.A. and most of us have more. We pursued our degrees because it was expected or because we wanted to grow our knowledge and skills; because we wanted to be better at our jobs, or because our jobs required it; or because we wanted to increase our compensation, advance in our field, achieve better outcomes, and help support our families. Why didn’t we understand that child care providers might want advanced education in their field for these same reasons?

By the end of 2020, Washington, D.C., will require all lead educators to have earned an associate degree (child care center directors will need to earn a bachelor’s degree). While the policy is there to help kids, some early childhood educators are happy about what this means for them too. “Early childhood educators are hungry for opportunities to support the children they serve, and advance their careers,” says Sue Russell, executive director of the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood National Center, which provides comprehensive higher education scholarships and support to educators around the country.

Some of those educators, who are currently in the field, told me about why they got or want a degree—and they said the same things my friends and I would. “I wanted to be the best possible teacher I could be,” said Donna. “I was limited in my opportunity to advance without it,” said Angela. Michelle wanted to “better understand child development.” Lesley “needed to be able to support myself and my daughter.” Kayley wanted a degree “to be better equipped to help my school, staff, and children.”

Yet the ambition of these educators isn’t always supported by their realities. Unlike my dinner companions, the women taking care of our children are often not white. Their first language is not necessarily English. Frequently failed by an educational system designed to help people like me succeed, they may experience daunting barriers in going back to school. Because our system underfunds early childhood education, they are often poor; because they are poor, they lack transportation options. And although they are child care providers, when they themselves have to be in class or working, they often lack child care. In addition to all of this, they suffer from a lack of respect—or, to be more precise, they suffer from being told they are respected, but so often shown, by word and deed, that they are not.

The parents at my dinner table love the people who care for and educate their children. They pay them, often as much as they can possibly afford. They appreciate them and support them; they care about their well-being; and they may ruefully note that they wouldn’t want to do their jobs. They often understand that an early childhood educator’s job is “difficult;” but by this they mean “tedious,” not “intellectually challenging.” And because of this, they do not yet believe that being an early childhood educator means having a complex demanding job that requires specialized skills, knowledge, and competencies that go beyond patiently sitting on the floor to work with the little ones.

Many Americans—including voters and politicians on both sides of the aisle—do recognize that high quality early childhood education is more than hugs and safekeeping. Neuroscience has demonstrated the rapid growth of children’s brains in their earliest years; economic studies have shown significant returns on investment. Other research shows that low compensation undermines quality. As a systematic review from this year summarizes, “Higher teacher qualifications are associated with higher quality early childhood education and care.” In other words, having educated educators is good for kids.

The less-discussed truth, however, is that having educated educators is good for educators too. It’s good for their own families and communities. It’s good for the school systems in the towns where they live; it’s good for the tax base of the nation. It’s good for them, full stop.

Let’s be clear: I’m not advocating for degree requirements, accompanied by a small increase in dollars, crossed fingers, and a hope it all works out. We have to collectively, carefully, and intentionally attend to the structural, institutional, and individual barriers that fall disproportionately on women of color. Washington has made a start in the right direction with its regulations and the BEGin Act, now

under consideration by the D.C. Council to establish an infant and toddler educator compensation task force, and provide increased reimbursement rates to educators caring for infants and toddlers—but policymakers need to stop making compensation an afterthought. It can't come later, for then (after newly educated educators have left the field for higher wages elsewhere), it will be too late.

There has to be a balance. If the field of child care on the whole makes educational gains, but loses the diversity that makes it both unique and effective, then we will have failed. On the other hand, if we start with the diverse field we have, and reject the opportunity to help these smart, undervalued workers gain education and an equitable, accessible path to higher-paid work that can't be automated or offshored, then we all lose.

So let's debate, as D.C. and states across the nation have done and continue to do, over the shared responsibility for how to pay for it. Let's debate over the size and scope of initiatives; over what the right policy choices are and how to target funding. But let's stop debating over whether these choices are worth the investment.

We can do better by the people—most of them women of color—who care for and educate our kids than thinking degrees aren't for them, especially when the science is clear. We need high expectations and high levels of support to accompany them; our children and the people who love, care for, and educate them are worth nothing less.

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