The simplest way to help young kids is to pay their teachers better [1]

Early childhood educators earn too little and it could hold kids back

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EXCERPTS

Decades of research have shown that one of the best long-term investments a government can make is in improving vulnerable children's start to life.

Research shows that support for pregnant women and for infants until they start school could help countries make a 10 to 13% return on investment each year. This would be in the form of enhanced productivity and better life outcomes, while the state would spend less on remedial education, healthcare, and the criminal justice system. That's because young children's brains are like sponges; they absorb every experience and interaction around them and use that to learn about who they are and how they fit into the world. By the time a child turns five, 90% of their brain will have developed, which means that the quality of the care and education they receive during that time can influence how the rest of their life unfolds—where they go to school for example, or whether or not they end up in jail, have developmental delays, and more.

Experts say that's the reason it's so important that the people who educate and care for kids during the early years be trained, paid, and valued commensurate with their responsibility to shape the next generation of healthy and productive adults. And yet the reality on the ground in most countries is that the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce is undervalued, underpaid, and overworked.

In a bid to learn more about this workforce, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) surveyed staff and leaders in early care and pre-primary settings in nine OECD countries: Denmark, Israel, South Korea, Chile, Germany, Iceland, Japan, Norway, and Turkey. The TALIS Starting Strong Survey (p. 256) was conducted in phases between 2016 and 2018 by a consortium made up of the OECD, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), RAND Europe, and Statistics Canada. It involved distributing a questionnaire to nearly 12,000 ECEC staffers in 2,085 pre-primary centers in the selected countries, as well as roughly 4,000 carers in 745 centers for children under the age of three. The questionnaire was available both online and in paper form, as well as in English and the language of the nine OECD countries surveyed.

The biggest limitation of the survey is also what makes it most interesting: It relies exclusively on self-reporting by ECEC staffers, meaning that it reflects their biases and beliefs. Data was also limited for certain countries: Denmark, for example, had a relatively low participation rate, and the report rates the data collected there as "insufficient."

While the countries are all different in terms of size, population, and GDP, the survey provides insights into the common barriers these workers say they face. These include staff shortages, classroom size, and lack of funding and professional development opportunities. But perhaps one of the biggest barriers is pay.

The survey shows that in all the countries surveyed "fewer than two in five staff members report being satisfied with their salary," and across the board, pre-primary teachers earn less than their peers who teach older children—78% of the former's average salaries, to be exact. The report clarifies that part of this difference could be chalked up to the fact that some ECEC staffers have lower qualifications and don't work full-time, but other research shows that, all things being equal, teachers who work with younger kids typically earn less than those who work with older ones.

Better pay helps attract and retain higher-quality workers in any field. But it's especially important for early caregivers because, as the report states, "[s]taff perceptions of being valued by society are likely shaped, at least in part, by the salaries they receive." The survey showed that staffers across all nine countries (p. 121) were more likely to report feeling valued by their students and their students' parents than by society. In Israel, about 75% of pre-primary staffers either agreed or strongly agreed that they were valued by society; in Japan, it was about 31%.

One of the key factors to which the OECD report points is salary progression and its effect on attrition rates. This means that turnover could be reduced, even if ECEC workers earn very little when they start out, by offering them the possibility of earning a lot more if they stay on. The TALIS Survey included data on pay scale progression, which was collected by the OECD for an earlier report called "Education at a Glance," in seven of the nine surveyed countries. The data showed that four countries provided very little opportunity for wage growth over time, while three provided more opportunities for it.

For example, in South Korea, a public pre-primary staffer's average salary at the start of their career could be as low as $32,485 (US dollar equivalent, converted using purchasing power parity). It could rise to $57,179 after 15 years of experience and reach $90,911 at the top of the scale—an almost 180% increase over time. But in Iceland, a country otherwise known for the quality (pdf) of its early childhood services, a pre-primary staffer would earn almost the same amount at the beginning and end of their career: $37,367 at first and then $41,400 after 15 years, as well as at the top of the scale.

While pay is clearly important, it is not the only thing holding back professionals in the early childhood field. As the survey shows, ECE staffers also report concerns about having too much administrative work, as well as the extra responsibilities that come with high staff turnover or crowded classrooms, and changing requirements from authorities.

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