

What we learned about the challenges and commitment of early childhood educators ^[1]

This story is part of an EdSurge Research series about the early childhood education workforce

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Source: EdSurge

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Feb 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Cindy Decker had big plans when she began her job as executive director of an early childhood education program in Tulsa, Okla. She was excited to launch new professional development opportunities, hoped to strengthen the coaching model for teachers and was eager to come up with a more sophisticated set of data points for examining educational quality.

But Decker soon realized that her staff had more urgent concerns, and one in particular stood out: the student-teacher ratio they needed to maintain, which, for Decker's Early Head Start program, was federally-mandated.

Teachers told her that paid time off requests were sometimes denied, which seemed to Decker like a straightforward problem. But soon, she realized that the ratio issue had spiraled into a series of greater challenges for staff, and it was taking a toll on morale.

Teachers lamented how uprooting children from their classrooms or redistributing staff when a teacher was absent or a position was vacant detracted from learning. Administrators, meanwhile, were often called into classrooms to cover for teachers, disrupting the other work they were doing around professional development, recruitment and curriculum planning.

Early on, Decker realized some of her big plans had to wait. She needed to focus on this critical staff need first.

The spiral of the ratio problem—which nearly every educator EdSurge interviewed at dozens of programs across 15 states mentioned as an obstacle—is emblematic of the assortment of challenges early childhood educators voiced during the course of EdSurge's nine-month research project to document the experiences of the early childhood education workforce.

In the case of the student-teacher ratio, a regulation rooted in science, a concern for child safety and a desire to create effective learning environments has resulted in demoralization for many teachers. During our interviews, many educators said it was hard to take a break to use the bathroom, much less a sick day. And when they were in the classroom, they spent their time counting students, covering for coworkers who needed to take a bathroom break, and shrugging off nagging coughs because a trip to the doctor would mean that their already overworked colleagues would need to fill in.

Teachers, support staff and administrators across center- and home-based early childhood programs raised many other examples of seemingly minor issues spiraling into grand challenges.

Some said a lack of paid planning time forced them to develop curricula in the evenings or create lessons on the fly. Others voiced frustration that while policies change often, there aren't always clear, affordable pathways to meet the new requirements.

A patchwork of problems and complexities create major obstacles that can ultimately impede educators' ability to do their most effective work—and leave them feeling demoralized.

Both Similar to K-12 and Wholly Different

Many of the challenges early childhood educators shared with us bore a resemblance to the problems that K-12 educators face: poor compensation, demoralization, overwork and stress. But others—such as the ratio problem or the issue of planning time—were either unique to serving the youngest learners or more intense than in the context of K-12 education.

This is partly because teaching and learning look different in early childhood learning environments than they do in K-12, due to the unique needs of young children and the different responsibilities that many early childhood education programs assume. For example, while it's relatively rare for K-12 educators to conduct regular home visits, the practice is common for early childhood educators. And while home visits have considerable benefits, they also pose challenges. Many family engagement efforts are also more intensive than those in K-12 schools, with dedicated staff for outreach to families. This is because many early childhood programs—including the federal program Head Start—are premised on serving two generations in order to break the cycle of poverty. And in some programs designed to support a unique population, such as children who have experienced trauma early in their lives, directly supporting families offers perhaps

the only way forward.

But it also has to do with the fact there is little consistency across states when it comes to early childhood education policy and regulations. Data on the early childhood education workforce is incomplete and inconsistently reported, making it difficult to answer basic questions such as, “How prevalent is paid planning time?” And understanding more complex issues such as the relationship between higher educational attainment, career advancement and higher pay becomes thorny.

There’s even a disconnect between practitioners, school systems and experts on the ages that are covered by early childhood education. Most early childhood education programs serve children under age 5, even with the growing consensus among researchers that the 0-8 years should be addressed as a unit, as it is in Nebraska.

To an observer, a typical early learning environment also appears distinctly different than most elementary school classrooms—even chaotic. After all, the children are young, and in addition to their many teaching responsibilities, teachers of infants and toddlers must also change diapers, fill sippy cups and coax children to sleep. But through carefully designed structured and unstructured play experiences, early childhood educators teach young children how to interact with their peers and play fair, how to respect boundaries and space, how to regulate their emotions and, perhaps most importantly, how to learn.

At their core, those goals aren’t so different from K-12 educators’, even if those working with young children feel that they are not afforded the same level of respect—a sentiment that is based on significantly lower compensation, fewer pathways to advancing their careers, and lack of the professionalization that the K-12 system’s requirements for teachers has produced.

A Matter of Respect

Nearly every early childhood educator EdSurge met, interviewed or shadowed, conveyed the sentiment that at some point in her career, she had been misperceived as a babysitter, rather than an educator.

That issue of respect is deeply intertwined with compensation and the structure of the workforce. As Rhian Evans Allvin, the CEO of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) explains, compensation for early childhood educators is notoriously poor. Nationwide, the median pay for child care workers is just \$10.72 an hour. More than half of child care workers are enrolled in a public assistance program. At \$13.83 an hour for teachers of infants and toddlers, and \$17.86 for teachers of children ages 3-5, pay for bachelor’s degree holders is still low, with early childhood education as the lowest-compensated college major. Those stats are far worse than the stats for K-12 teachers, a group that already suffers from low pay.

The educators EdSurge interviewed surfaced the significant toll poor compensation takes on educator well-being, longevity in the field, staffing and, ultimately, on educational quality.

After a decade in the early childhood education workforce, with a bachelor’s degree and masters degree coursework under her belt, and working a second job to make ends meet, one lead preschool teacher shared that she could afford a single vacation each year—a weekend in a nearby city—and that she had recently canceled her gym membership because it was too expensive. Several teachers reported their colleagues bolting for better-paid preschool or kindergarten roles within the public school system.

In nearly every interview, teachers explained that they wanted to be working with the littlest learners for the long haul, but that they were considering leaving the profession altogether for better compensated and less stressful work. This parallels one study which found that less than half of early childhood educators expect that they “definitely will continue” in the profession.

According to researcher Kyong-Ah Kwon, that makes sense. In her story, Kwon describes how the physical demands of these tasks contribute to alarming health outcomes experienced among members of the early childhood education workforce—but she also describes how early childhood education programs can address some of these problems.

At the end of the day, it isn’t just educators who suffer as a result of the industry’s financial stress and high turnover rates. Research shows that children are affected by these instabilities as well.

Developing the High-Quality Workforce of the Future

Working with young children effectively requires training, though the field is divided on how much and what kind. Few states require teachers or administrators to have an associate’s degree, while none require a bachelor’s degree. Many states require no training at all.

A critical challenge when it comes to policy around training and credentialing is how to increase requirements while maintaining the existing diversity of the early childhood education workforce. This is important both because research shows that children’s outcomes are better when there is consistency in teaching staff and when students are exposed to diversity in the classroom.

Some of the stories in this series explore solutions to help early childhood educators improve their craft, advance their careers or even increase their compensation, which in turn supports professionalization of the field of early learning, allowing educators to achieve the respect that they desperately want and deserve.

These solutions vary in approach, especially depending on the region and size of the workforce they’re designed to support. But one common thread across these approaches is a commitment to creating flexible learning arrangements in order to maintain diversity and ensure equal opportunity. An apprenticeship program in Philadelphia, for example, is helping educators earn associate degrees and advance in their careers, while rewarding them with incremental pay raises. In another case, the executive director of a public preschool in New York City developed a program to prepare teacher assistants for the demands of serving children with special needs. In Connecticut, a home-based child care provider draws on resources from a nonprofit to address the social and learning needs of mixed-age learners.

Across the country, it's clear that investments in approaches to developing new groups of educators—whether Head Start parents or home-based providers creating their own businesses—can produce a committed, diverse and well-trained workforce.

There are also some statewide efforts to help early childhood educators skill up. Educators in Utah are leveraging online education courses to improve their teaching, a state policy in New Jersey allows a district to provide opportunities for career advancement and continued learning to staff, and the state of Louisiana has mandated an observation to assess teacher quality and recommend improvements for teachers.

A Sense of Commitment

These stories are hopeful. But ultimately, there is something else that gives us enormous hope for the future of the early childhood education workforce.

There was a moment in the course of nearly every interview when the educator smiled, or sometimes even cried tears of gratitude. For one teacher, that moment occurred after she described her heartbreak about the children she served who didn't have enough food to eat. For another—an assistant teacher—it came after she shared how hard it was to find time for ongoing coursework. And for one administrator, it came after she rattled off a long list of acronyms to describe the piecemeal funding sources that she uses to ensure that children from low-income families could attend her school, worrying about what might happen if that funding fell through.

This was often the moment when we asked why the educator stuck with this role, given all the challenges of her work.

One teacher described how a child with behavioral challenges came to her to be soothed when no one else would do. Another remembered how a mother called her to intervene on behalf of a former student who had been suspended in elementary school. An administrator proudly explained the look of each child and parent when she greeted them by name every morning, and a family advocate described how a mother had confided in her about past trauma, demonstrating the trust that she had built with families.

These educators provide a glimpse into the importance of this work and the dedication that early childhood educators bring.

This is a field that has attracted deeply committed educators who take seriously their responsibilities for educating and keeping safe the littlest learners. They are often doing so with few resources and in the face of significant challenges. But many have hope for a better future. They are hopeful because of the small, but growing ecosystem of emerging opportunities and programs to support their career advancement and professionalization of their field. But also because they understand—at both a visceral and intellectual level—their own value and their ability to help the youngest and most vulnerable learners.

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