Why are child care programs open when schools are not? [1]

Society's perception of child care being of lesser quality to education has rarely been so pronounced.
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EXCERPTS

Although school buildings in Philadelphia will remain closed this fall, St. Mary's Nursery School, a secular child care center founded in 1964, will remain open. St. Mary's, which serves children ages 18 months to 12 years, typifies an odd juxtaposition:

As more public schools are moving to remote learning, child care programs and after-school providers in major cities are taking in more children of families who cannot work remotely.

The duality of the conversations around child care programs and public schools is rooted in a perceived gap between what "care" and "education" mean. That gap has set the two sectors on different paths of funding, governance and professional power.

Traci Childress, the executive director of St. Mary's, can see this schism playing out for her program. "There's a disrespect to early childhood and out-of-school-time providers that's inherent in just assuming we're going to make it work for everybody without giving us funding or support," Childress said.

That sense of disrespect is not new because of the pandemic. Sonya Michel, Ph.D., a University of Maryland historian who has written a book on the evolution of U.S. child care policy, said, "Child care for so long has been associated with poverty."

The first child care centers, known as day nurseries, were established by charities in the mid-19th century and were holding places for the children of low-income or single working mothers.

Until quite recently, Dr. Michel added, child care had a negative connotation in a society that has long looked down on mothers who work. This stands in stark contrast to the often high-minded ideals that animated the 19th-century common school movement that gave the United States the public education as we know today. Horace Mann, considered the "father" of the movement, spoke of education as the bedrock of democracy in his 1839 speech, "The Necessity of Education in a Republican Government."

Public school leaders and organizations have expressed resentment this summer at having child care concepts applied to their work. "Schools are not a day care," Cindy Marten, superintendent of the San Diego Unified School District, said recently on the news program "The Last Word With Lawrence O'Donnell."

"Schools are about educating our students, and it's about our future, and we're not cramming a bunch of students into a classroom until it's safe to do so," she continued.

The president of the American Federation of Teachers union, Randi Weingarten, echoed this sentiment, stating in an interview that "schools are not child cares."

Weingarten, like other public education leaders, is wary about the custodial usage of "care."

"Of course there is a real interrelationship, and you can't separate out schooling and academics from well-being and from caring," Weingarten explained. "And of course we have an absolute obligation in terms of custodial care and care of children when they are in an education setting."

But her point in saying schools were not child care programs was that "the driving force for education is education."

She continued, "The driving force for education should not be 'a parent needs to have a place for her kid to be so she can go to work.' We need to have an answer to that question, which is not school."

In contrast, early childhood leaders report more comfort in embracing a "both, and" scenario, in which the custodial element of care goes hand-in-glove with the developmental element.

Rhian Evans Allvin, the chief executive of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, said: "There is a path forward where early childhood education can both be a valued and revered profession, and we can honor care at the same time. We can say, it is valued and revered in part because it is also about care as well as education." Allvin pointed to nursing as an example of a field that has

embraced new scientific understandings to elevate its stature and successfully "weave care together with their pedagogy."

Similarly, Lynette Fraga, Ph.D., the chief executive of Child Care Aware of America, a national interest group for child care providers, said what was most needed was a coming together of parents and practitioners. "There needs to be a unified understanding — within and outside the field of child care — that what we are accomplishing, what the science is telling us, is that we are important."

Indeed, the divide between child care and education contradicts our current understanding of child development.

"All learning is relationship-based, all development is relationship-based," said Ellen Galinsky, the chief science officer at the Bezos Family Foundation, which has seeded several initiatives to communicate the science of learning.

Galinsky continued, "It's a fallacy that we can separate out our need to belong, to be respected, to be supported, to be challenged — all of those things that happen in an educational setting are relationship-based and come from care."

Galinsky added that the brain architecture for learning is built from birth and is inseparable from care. A growing understanding of inseparability has brought child care programs and public schools into a closer orbit. For example, as of 2019, 44 states had a public pre-K program for 4-year-olds, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. But the pressures of Covid-19 may have forced them apart again, much to the frustration of early childhood leaders and educators.

Robert C. Pianta, Ph.D., the dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, said the pandemic "pushes on a lot of the tectonics that are between those two systems." Dr. Pianta added that there has been a reversion to the erroneous assumption that, "What child care does is warehouse kids, keeps them out of parents' hair."

Racial and gender threads also pull child care and education apart. Today, the child care profession is disproportionately made up of women of color. Nearly 40 percent of child care staff are people of color, according to a 2018 report from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley. In comparison, 20 percent of K-12 teachers were nonwhite in the 2015-16 school year, according to the most recent data by the National Center for Education Statistics.

The fact that a low-wage sector so heavily made up of women of color is being asked by society to assume more risk by remaining open speaks to "the disposable nature of this work — the less-than approach to and appreciation of this work," said Myra Jones-Taylor, Ph.D., the chief policy officer at Zero to Three, a group that advocates for issues about babies and toddlers.

The United States' investment in early childhood care and education, compared with other countries, also indirectly contributes to the divide between public schools and child care programs. Among 37 developed nations, the United States ranks the third lowest in spending on the early years of care and education, according to 2015 data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. As a result, the fragile child care system, still seen largely as a personalized service instead of a public good, is heavily reliant on parental fees, and it has begun to shatter amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

A recent survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children of more than 5,000 child care providers from all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico found that about half of the nation's child care programs may close by December, absent additional government assistance. Unlike public schools, for most child care programs, temporary closure or reduced group sizes because of pandemic health concerns are pathways to shuttering permanently.

So can the artificial divide between care and education be bridged? Drs. Pianta and Jones-Taylor expressed hope that parents' pandemic experiences of working while juggling care and education will lead to a newfound appreciation for both elements, and the modern economy's reliance on them.

Childress of St. Mary's suggested that society isn't "really looking at the whole picture."

"Children need education, and they need to be educated by caring people," she said. "Parents need to go to work, and there's a whole system that supports that which has never been named."

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