It's time to change how we prepare and support early childhood educators [1]

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EXCERPTS

My husband is among about 50 adults who are participating in an Oakland Public Library program to train volunteers to read to low-income three and four year olds in preschool and Head Start classrooms for a half hour each week. He has just completed his 18 hours of mandatory training, plus two observations of storytime conducted by child librarians. Once he presents his assignment to fellow volunteers (which involves two books, several fingerplays and songs as well as ideas about how to handle challenges that might arise with eager and squirmy listeners) he will be cleared to face his assigned preschoolers.

Some hear about this training and think it is excessive; as a former preschool teacher, I consider this level of preparation appropriate for a volunteer, but far too little for a preschool teacher. Disturbingly, however, my husband's volunteer training exceeds that of many teachers working with preschool-age children each day across our country.

In contrast to the uniformity of qualifications for K-12 teachers nationwide, only 30 of 53 state pre-K programs in 2014 required teachers to have a bachelor's degree. Slightly less than one-half of all teachers working with three to five year-olds in center-based early care and education (ECE) programs (a category which includes Head Start and public pre-K) have bachelor's degrees, while more than one-third have completed no or just a handful of college classes.

Despite all we have learned about the crucial development in the first years of life and the important role of teachers in facilitating early learning, ECE jobs offer little premium to those teachers who have earned degrees. ECE has the dubious distinction of affording graduates the lowest life time earnings of any college major. As was true a quarter century ago, teachers with four year degrees employed in Head Start and many public pre-K programs earn between 60 and 70 percent of the average kindergarten teacher salary. These low paying jobs often do not offer benefits or professional supports, such as paid time for planning, reflection and professional development.

As a result of these low wages and limited educational premium, many teachers of our nation's youngest children report high levels of economic insecurity. In one recent study, 42 percent of teaching staff with associate or higher degrees working in ECE settings —and this included Head Start and public Pre-K— reported worrying about having enough food for their families.

Additionally, many rely on public supports such as food stamps to augment these low wages and to meet their families' needs. ECE viewed as a strategy for ameliorating poverty, is in too many instances generating poverty for teachers and their own children.

The knowledge and skills necessary to teach effectively in ECE are every bit as complex as in K-12, with equally high stakes for children's development and lifelong success. But alas, as noted by the National Academies of Science, unequal qualifications for early childhood teachers perpetuates the idea that teaching younger children requires less skill and is easier than teaching those in K-12. Relying on these early childhood teachers to be drivers of educational reform, as we increasingly are, requires reforming how we understand and value their work and how we prepare, support and reward them.

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