

A critical problem affecting America's childcare system (but ignored by policymakers) ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Congress recently passed the bipartisan federal K-12 Every Child Succeeds Act to succeed No Child Left Behind. While ESSA proposes to allocate \$250 million for quality preschool programs, it does not propose allocation of any funding to address the devastating consequences of what I call the mirroring of disadvantage in America's childcare system. Americans do not know that up to a million childcare teachers today are at-risk for functional illiteracy. Below is an explanation of how the mirroring of disadvantage helps explain this risk and others and why it matters.

After working for nearly two decades in community-based childcare settings in disadvantaged communities in Massachusetts, mirrors became a way for me to comprehend what I was seeing, and to capture and reveal this world in a way that others could understand.

Massachusetts is not alone. Childcare systems across America can be viewed through a Preponderance of Mirrors. Mirrors provide cogent evidence of the real-life consequences of "pairing" vulnerable young children with under-paid, under-educated, and under-valued childcare teachers (early childhood educators).

The roots of the word "mirror": miradoir (Fr.) an observation, mirer (Fr.) to look, to contemplate and mirari (Lat) to wonder at, to admire, perfectly describe young child/early childhood educator relationships. Merriam-Webster's definition of "mirror" — something that shows what another thing is like in a very clear and accurate way — is definitive and telling.

Millions of young children (many disadvantaged) and a million state-licensed/ nationally credentialed childcare teachers (many overwhelmed) do share their days, weeks, months or more, looking at, observing, and contemplating one other. They bond in relationships rooted in learning and caring, wonderment and admiration, and sometimes, sadness and frustration. The child(ren) and childcare teachers are separate mirrors unto themselves, yet both reflect to the other in very clear and accurate ways just how to make sense of a world around them, much of it steeped in social, educational and economic disparity.

If you've ever stood between two mirrors then you are familiar with the seemingly endless line of images appearing to fade into the distance. This same effect beautifully describes the fading into the distance (the future if you will) of young children and childcare teachers. Wrapped together, hearts and minds tied, they move from a reality filled with persistent, durable and complex adversities into futures that are, uncertain at best.

Poverty wages, unsatisfactory work environments, job burnout, lack of career pathways for the nation's childcare teachers and a dehumanization of the caring process regularly threaten this teacher's ability to cope effectively in her workplace. As such, she naturally reflects (as big mirrors) to the children in her care, the uncompromising work-induced stresses she feels AND the powerlessness to change it.

Disadvantaged young children reflect (as little mirrors) to childcare teachers the risks they face outside of their school's walls. Exposure to physical/emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse/mental illness, family violence, economic hardship, homelessness, etc. are real risks to them. These risks threaten child well-being. Under-served children are particularly powerless to change such conditions.

The mirroring of disadvantage in this context is part and parcel of America's childcare landscape today. The literacy, social emotional, opportunity, and achievement gaps of BOTH young children and childcare teachers IS real, whether or not policymakers admit to it, or the public does not yet understand what is happening.

Five vital areas (mirrors) are particularly relevant when explaining the mirroring of disadvantage in childcare settings.

Mirror #1 Economic Health and Well-Being

Financial stability and human well-being are strongly correlated. The devastating effect of poverty is readily mirrored in childcare settings,

where low-income children and the low-wage childcare workforce meet on a daily basis. Poverty is the “single greatest” threat to the well-being of young children. The U.S. childcare workforce is one of the lowest paid workforce constituencies in the nation. Childcare teachers today earn less than garbage collectors or animal caregivers. Many childcare teachers are in fact dependent on government housing, medical, health, and food subsidies to survive.

Mirror #2: Literacy Competence

The shared and mirrored young child/childcare teacher risk for illiteracy is compelling. The foundation for lifelong literacy ability is laid between birth-five years (early education years). Children’s brains are built through early language exposure. The presence (or absence) of the word-gap by age four fundamentally affects a child’s intelligence, stability, opportunity and achievement potential over his/her lifetime. Though invisible to the American public, hundreds of thousands in the childcare workforce today are at-risk for functional illiteracy. Low education levels and a lack of access to economically supported adult education programs puts and keeps these teachers at-risk for low adult literacy competence. Functionally illiterate childcare teachers are woefully unprepared to teach young children how to read, to write, or to develop healthy social-emotional competencies.

Mirror # 3: Socio-Emotional Growth and Development

The mirroring of child/childcare teacher social/emotional status is a constant in childcare settings. The social emotional well-being of both the child and teacher is determinative of the mental and physical, cognitive, and behavioral health of each. Children are especially influenced by the quality of their relationships with those caring for them. Positive and nurturing early experiences (or the lack of) will impact how children learn to understand who they are, what they are feeling, and what to expect from the adults in their lives. High job stress and low-morale compromises the childcare teacher’s ability to be the consistent, sensitive, caring and stable role models young children need. Under-valued, under-educated childcare teachers are particularly unprepared to meet the social/emotional demands of significantly at-risk young children. It is well documented that low-income children are at much greater risk for serious behavioral problems in childcare settings. Unfortunately most young troubled children are not being treated by highly trained mental health professionals in childcare settings. Instead, childcare suspensions are on the rise and job burn-out in the childcare workforce is a serious problem.

Mirror (#4) Cognitive Foundations in Learning

Young children both learn and mirror cognitive skills: thinking, reasoning, creative expression, in childcare settings. The more the child knows, the better adapted s/he will be. A knowledge base in mathematical thinking/expression, scientific exploration/knowledge, technology, and health/physical development, are integral to the child being optimally prepared for kindergarten. In a perfect world early childhood educators would reflect to the children in their care, a strong knowledge base in each of the above noted knowledge areas. Due to low education attainment many in the childcare workforce are insufficiently prepared to build the cognitive foundations in learning that young children need, because the childcare teacher’s cognitive foundations in learning have yet to be built.

Mirror (#5): Cultural, Racial, and Linguistic Diversity.

The mirroring of diversity in childcare settings is reminiscent of a many-faceted sparkling diamond. Children and childcare teachers share and mirror countless numbers of these facets. Facets represent, for example, the innumerable languages heard/spoken, the diverse customs and practices seen/ used, the range of ethnic/ racial diversity, and the complex belief systems felt/shared in childcare settings. It is well documented that low-income children are segregated by race and ethnicity in childcare settings. The childcare workforce while culturally, racially and linguistically diverse, this workforce is regularly segregated into low-income jobs. While the childcare workforce is considerably more diverse than public school teachers, diverse childcare teachers glean few benefits from the enormous strengths they bring to the workplace as a result of their cultural, language and ethnic competencies.

In the end, a childcare workforce that is under-paid, under-educated, over-worked, under-valued, and experiences job burnout at alarming rates, will simply be overwhelmed. These teachers are already woefully un-prepared to close the word, achievement and opportunity gaps for millions of young children in care, whether or not states have hired (for low wages) and licensed (with few requirements) them to do so.

Now more than ever, the American public views early childhood education as a national priority. Perhaps it will be through a Preponderance of Mirrors, that politicians, policy makers, philanthropists and the public can come together to frame to build consensus about how to fix the realities unfolding in these mirrors. To do so means there is a greater chance that our nation’s youngest children and their childcare teachers will fade into the distance with futures filled with promise, instead of uncertainty.

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Region: United States ^[3]

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