The underestimation of America's preschool teachers [1]

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EXCERPTS

There are, the New York City public-school principal Kristina Beecher discovered, an awful lot of types of play blocks. There are wooden blocks, cardboard blocks, magnetic blocks, clear plastic blocks, number blocks, letter blocks, and fish-shaped blocks, to name a few. And all of them are advertised as the best possible blocks for outfitting a preschool classroom.

Such choices have been faced by principals like Beecher across the city in the last two years as New York has moved to accommodate all of the city's public-school 4-year-olds in high-quality preschool classrooms. Between the 2013-14 school year and the 2015-16 school year, the city added about 16,000 preschool students and 2,000 teachers.

"We believe that preschool is an integral part of the public-school system and public school should be universally available because every child can benefit from it," said Josh Wallack, the deputy chancellor of New York City's Department of Education. "Therefore, preschool should be universal."

The changes have come with new money and support to ensure that they are not only offering preschool to all, but top-quality preschool to all. Teachers-many of whom are veterans of the city's smaller, existing preschool program-have been asked to change their classrooms and step-up their teaching to improve the overall caliber of the program. In particular, classrooms are now held to the standards laid out in the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), a tool designed to evaluate preschool-classroom environments. After a mixed review in 2014-15, P.S. 3 teachers were advised to add more dress-up options in their dramatic play area, purchase outdoor play equipment like tricycles, and grow its block collection.

Which is how Beecher, who has led P.S. 3 in the Bedford Village neighborhood of Brooklyn for 17 years, and her five preschool teachers came to be staring at never-ending lists of play blocks. Finally, they gave up on choosing the best blocks and just bought some of nearly every type to spread among the classrooms.

Hiring and supporting a better preschool teaching force has been more complicated. Ongoing support has been needed at every school site to support both new and veteran teachers in improving their classrooms. And school leaders, used to concentrating on the "testing grades," as Beecher put it, have had to be convinced that all this effort around the early years is worth it. To that end, district officials have led training sessions for teachers and principals on things like child development and creating welcoming classrooms. Coaches and evaluators have been deployed to every school. Social workers have been assigned to collaborate with schools on family-engagement initiatives.

"Trying to do something this quickly presents a lot of challenges," Wallack said. But so far, he said, the push for universal preschool here has proven to be "a great example of what a municipal government can do when focused on a really ambitious goal."

The city's experience with improving and expanding its existing preschool teaching force could provide a good test case for other cities or for the country as a whole, were the United States to pursue a national universal preschool program. Though many aspects of the city are unique, New York City's internal diversity resembles the country as a whole more closely than nearly any other single city. It's also very large, so officials here have had to do everything "at scale," meaning they needed to create systems that would work for thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of children-not just a few hundred.

Right now, as a country, the U.S. is way behind New York City when it comes to pre-K. The majority of the country's preschool teachers and child-care workers are poorly paid and under-educated. Changing that would be necessary to the success of any attempt to expand preschool options and improve quality on a national level.

Back on the first floor of P.S. 3, in a classroom stocked with a variety of blocks, Lauren Kendall, a teacher, was preparing to read The Very Hungry Caterpillar to her 4-year-old students. Before starting, she asked each child to turn to a partner and explain how he or she had changed since the beginning of the school year. One girl felt the need to describe how she had transformed since well before the start of the school year. "I couldn't walk," she told her partner, starting with her infancy. "I crawled. Then I grow a little. Now, I'm a kid. When I came [to school], I cried. Then I stopped crying."

Transformation was the key word in Kendall's classroom in June. It was the name of their unit, which was all about changes, from caterpillars turning into butterflies (there was a butterfly chrysalis in an enclosure near the class rug) to bricks turning into bridges (bridge building was the current focus of the block section).

Having a detailed unit plan in which all the activities relate back to a broad topic was new for Kendall. So were the open-ended questions she was asking students about what fate they expected to befall the hungry caterpillar after he'd eaten through two pears, five oranges, a slice of pie, an ice cream cone, and a pickle, among other foods. (Hint: He's going to turn into a butterfly.) Two girls started flapping their arms rapidly. "A butterfly flying in the sky!" one called out.

"I feel like children are learning so much more now," said Kendall, who was inspired to leave a communications job at Lehman Brothers, the now-defunct investment bank, and become a teacher after 9/11. When she got her first preschool classroom in 2003 though, she said she had to write her own curriculum and figure out what her kids needed.

Now, Kendall gets support from the district, including a curriculum that helps her plan classroom activities and personal coaching that helps her understand how to best engage young learners. She says she is less focused on rote instruction or on the discipline involved in keeping 4-year-olds sitting on a rug. Her kids are more independent now, she said, because they choose their own activities for part of the day. She also asks them to think critically about everything from the stories she reads them to math puzzles they are trying to solve. She says her new questions hold their attention better than asking them to memorize color patterns or the alphabet, for example. "I'm working now on allowing my kids to learn from each other," Kendall said.

The lessons Kendall has learned in the last two years about the best way to teach young children would please any early-education expert. But apart from her lack of specific early-childhood-development training before being hired to lead a preschool classroom, Kendall doesn't closely resemble the early-education workforce at large.

Two million adults, mostly women, care for 12 million children under the age of 5 in homes and centers across the country every day, according to the 2016 Early Childhood Workforce Index by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, a think tank at the University of California, Berkeley. Most aren't as well-educated as Kendall, who holds a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a New York State teaching certification. Just over a third of the people teaching preschool in centers or public schools hold bachelor's degrees. Home-based care providers are far more likely to hold only a high-school diploma or some college credits but no degree.

For Marcy Whitebook, the director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, who has been focused on this group of workers for three decades, the very fact that there is debate about qualifications for teachers of young children is evidence of how little the country values their work. "What's perplexing to me is: How come we haven't moved?" she said. "There were all these excuses you could make 40 years ago about why we were stuck. But now, there's no excuse."

Existing brain science, Whitebook said, backs up what educators could only theorize in the 1970s: The first five years of a child's life are key to their overall brain development. What children learn before age 5-both academic skills like critical thinking and social skills like taking turns-sets the stage for the rest of their lives. The single most important element in capitalizing on that crucial window, Whitebook said, is who provides education in those years. "People don't tend to think teaching young children [is] as complex work as teaching older children, but in fact, it is," Whitebook said. "It's hard for people to see that because of the nature of young children and because we have a historical approach that anybody can do it."

Caring for young children can't be separated from teaching them, Whitebook said. Wiping a nose or accepting a hug is part of the work of encouraging children to become confident young learners who will ask questions and try new things. Without the caring, little learning can take place.

Teachers like Kendall know this. Over the course of one morning in her Brooklyn preschool classroom, she never really stopped moving-patting backs, leaning forward to ask questions, crouching to talk to upset kids face-to-face, twisting to show everyone a picture book. Constantly weaving together care and education, she admired a girl's painting of a butterfly in the art corner, resolved a dispute over sharing a pair of dress-up butterfly wings, then checked out the butterfly-free bridge taking shape in the block area.

When the dramatic play area was full, Yeison Dixon, 4, jutted his bottom lip out so far tears seemed inevitable. But Kendall noticed, told him it would be okay, held his hand, and asked if he wanted to go to the butterfly table to draw the lifecycle of a butterfly. Minutes later, Yeison was smiling again and happily drawing a picture of a caterpillar.

In fact, brain science shows that this combination of caring and educating must go hand in hand for this age group. While a 14-year-old might manage to learn something about the Constitution from a social-studies teacher he doesn't like, a 4-year-old is incapable of learning much from an adult he does not trust. That truth contradicts the idea that the care and education of children can ever be separated, Whitebook argues. "A child doesn't think, 'Oh now I'm in child care and I'm being cared for. Oh, I'm in preschool, now I'm learning,'" Whitebook said. "They're learning all the time and there's the potential to facilitate their learning all the time."

That is also an argument for paying everyone in charge of young children more than they're paid now. While teachers like Kendall, who work in public-school districts, tend to be paid on par with their K-12 peers, other public-preschool teachers, private-center teachers, and home-based child care workers are paid far less. Three-quarters of the early educator workforce is paid less than $15 an hour, according to the National Survey of Early Care and Education. Forty-six percent of child-care workers, a group that does not include "preschool teachers," receive state or federal benefits available to very low-income earners, according to the Workforce Index. Among preschool and kindergarten teachers, that figure is 34 percent. Among workers overall, it's 26 percent.

"People want good, cheap child care, which doesn't really exist," Whitebook said. "When you don't put enough resources into it, it's not like

those costs don't show up somewhere else."

And while the low education requirements applied to much of the early-childhood labor force are one of the drivers of the low pay, another critical element is that caring for and teaching young children is primarily seen as women's work. Ninety-seven percent of the early-educator workforce is female. And research has shown that work considered the province of women is routinely devalued, both in terms of pay and respect. And that's on top of the fact that women are paid less-79 cents on the dollar-than men for the same work.

It's also worth noting that most preschool classrooms have at least two teachers: a lead teacher and an assistant teacher. Assistants are critical team members, because they can focus on individual students who need extra help, lead activities with small groups, and facilitate the logistical acrobatics involved in making sure every kid goes to the bathroom before recess, among other daily tasks. However, these women, who are more likely to be people of color or speak a second language, or both, are generally not as well educated as lead teachers and are usually paid even less.

Some efforts have been made to help assistants improve their educational credentials and move up the career ladder, but such efforts can backfire. Preschool directors routinely lose their better-educated staff to better-paying jobs elsewhere. That means hiring and training new people, which means more churn for kids.

Making the changes needed to usher the country's current early-educator workforce from where it is to where it needs to be to provide every child with the opportunity to attend a high-quality program won't be simple or easy.

With a shake of her head, Desarie Forde, another preschool teacher at P.S. 3, describes her past year as "really one big learning experience." Despite her 18 years teaching preschool, she said that much of what she learned from the district in the past two years was new to her. And like Kendall, her colleague, Forde already held a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a teaching certification when she started the year. The learning curve for someone with less training and experience would be even bigger.

For Forde, the extra work it took to make her classroom a better learning environment for her young charges was worth it because of students like Josiah Taft, 4. Josiah wasn't talking on his first day of school. By June, after months of playing with his peers and being gently pushed by his teachers, he was able to chat steadily with a visitor to his classroom. The boy had learned to love copying the patterns Forde set out with his own colored blocks, doodling with a pencil and "going to see the flowers" in the school's garden. His mother was ecstatic about his progress, Forde said. "She cries and grabs us," Forde said, smiling. "She's very excited."

The work put into revamping her school's preschool program has also had an effect on Principal Beecher. "It's opened up my eyes," said Beecher. "It's unfortunate it took 17 years, but it's been good. I can say now that our children are going up stronger through the grades."

And it's changed the way she's thinking about later grades too. "I'm having a conversation about kindergarten teachers using best practices from pre-K now," she said. "I would like to see blocks in kindergarten."

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