

**“I love my work but...”**  
**The Professionalization of Early Childhood Education**

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*There are two separate but related issues that have challenged advocates, researchers and practitioners in the field of early education and care work for decades: improving the quality of children’s programs and increasing the wages and benefits of the workers. The solution has been framed as a need for professionalizing the workforce – professional development training, higher education and enhanced skills. While seeking professional status is expected to improve the quality of childcare programs and worker compensation, the relationship between quality, compensation and professional development training has not been fully explored. Through in-depth interviews with 32 early childhood educators I explored the relationship between educational qualifications and experience, with teacher pay and conditions of employment. Although the majority saw their work as “valuable and meaningful” they did not intend to remain in early childhood education. They experienced poverty wages, few benefits, high work related expenses and job insecurity. Their narratives highlight a crisis in early childhood education that requires radical change within the profession of early education. To retain the most qualified and motivated early childhood educators, pay and working conditions must be improved. Obtaining professional status and credentials for early education and care workers is not enough. Substantial increases in wages and benefits must be central to this movement; anything less suggests exploitation not professionalization. Keywords: Early Childhood Educators, Preschool Teachers, Professionalization, Professional Development Training, Compensation, Teacher Narratives*

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### **Introduction**

Education has always been important in determining one’s job and income. Indirectly education level is also correlated with benefits – health care, holiday pay, and company sponsored pension plans. Education continues to be perceived as the key to social and economic mobility and to democratic citizenry. With education as the social and ideological linchpin of our society one would think that those responsible for education – teachers – would be held in high esteem both economically and socially. This has not been the experience of the majority of teachers – especially those educating our youngest children. The devaluing of educators and especially those working with young children has been extensively documented (Bourgeault & Khokher 2006; Culkin, 1999; Fuller & Strath 2001; Lifton 2001; MacDonald & Merrill 2002; Whitebook 1999). Within the early childhood education workforce the relationship between education, training and compensation is problematic.

In 1995, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the major professional organization for the early childhood education workforce, revised their position statement on quality, compensation and affordability in early childhood programs stating that compensation remained inadequate for most early childhood educators. They argued for salaries and benefits to be linked to qualifications and responsibilities. The debate

on how to improve the quality of early childhood education programs and the salaries and benefits of the staff focused on the need to professionalize the staff; increase their knowledge, skills, and training; and require post-secondary education and certification. The emphasis was primarily on training and knowledge (Caulfield, 1997). Increased wages and benefits would be an outcome of achieving professional status.

In 1999 *Child and Youth Care Forum* furthered this discussion by publishing a series of articles in a symposium on the professionalization of the early childhood care and education workforce. Morgaine (1999) discussed the movement towards professionalization of early education and care workers in Oregon and argued there was a positive relationship between professional development and the status and salaries of the workforce. With further professional development and training Morgaine (1999) stated,

The public image and status of childhood care and education practitioners will be altered, salaries will become more equitable, and we will be able to recruit and retain talented, strong, and committed people. (p. 15)

It was expected that professionalization would inevitably lead to an improved system of early education and care that met the needs of children, families *and* staff. Culkin (1999) stated,

The sources of the low wages and the difficulties surrounding wages are embedded in a complex of economic issues that are related to the question of early care and education as legitimate work and as a real profession. (p. 56)

The need for improved child outcomes, quality programs and teacher qualifications has continued to frame the discussion around professional status. For example, Darling-Hammond (2009) argued that preschool teaching as a profession must settle what teachers need to learn and how they should learn it to achieve professional status. However, wages and benefits continue to be left out of the debate or sidelined into a separate campaign. The voices of workers are also missing. This research study seeks to address this need by listening to the voices of early educators and locating them at the center of the debate on professionalization. Without their feedback the move towards professional status may have minimal effect; or may even exacerbate the problem. As advocates and researchers we need to listen to and understand those most affected by our work. To contextualize the stories and experiences of early educators, a brief summary of the research connecting child outcomes, quality programs, teacher qualifications and compensation is provided below.

## **Literature Review**

### **Quality Programs and Child Outcomes**

The research concerning the relationship between the quality of early education programs and child outcomes – both short and long-term gains is substantial. Duncan, Ludwig and Magnuson (2007) argue that providing high-quality care to disadvantaged preschool children can provide both short and long term benefits for children and society. These benefits include: increased school retention, fewer special education classes, the reduction in poverty and crime and increased economic production. Researchers at the Institute for Research on Poverty found “children who attend higher quality childcare settings... display better cognitive, language, and social competencies on standardized tests” (as cited in Greenberg, 2007, p. 76). Mims, Scott-Little, Lower, Cassidy, and Hestenes (2008) found that children receive both short and long term benefits from high-quality early

childhood experiences and this is particularly apparent in children from disadvantaged families and neighborhoods. They state, “Children who receive high-quality early education experiences are more likely to be successful in a variety of areas later in their lives” (p. 227). Prentice (2007) argues that high quality childcare ameliorates child poverty in at least two ways – it provides children with a rich environment for social, physical, linguistic and cognitive development, and enables parents to work or study which indirectly increases family income.

### Quality Programs and Teacher Qualifications

Research has generally found a positive relationship between teacher qualifications with quality programs. Teacher qualifications are also positively correlated with child outcomes. Research by the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development and The Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD ECCRN, 2002) suggests that, “in contrast with teachers who have less formal education or no specific training in early childhood education, providers with BA degrees specifically in early childhood education provide higher quality learning experiences for children in their care” (as cited in Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford, Early, & Barbarin, 2005, p. 147). Pianta et al. (2005) found, “Teachers with a 4-year college degree and a teaching certificate in early childhood were rated as creating a more positive emotional climate and providing more activities on the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) than were teachers with no formal training in early childhood” (p. 153). Early, Maxwell, and Burchinal (2007) discuss the relationship between quality childcare programs and teacher education and training. They state,

The push for every preschool teacher to have a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education is based on two lines of past research: (1) Studies, generally from community-based child-care settings linking teachers’ education to classroom quality; and (2) Research linking early care and education classroom quality to children’s academic gains. (p. 560)

Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, and Bidema (2004) also found a positive relationship between education level of providers and child outcomes. The Obama Administration has invested more than \$600 million in the Race to the Top: Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), a new competition that challenges states to transform their early learning systems with better coordination, clearer learning standards and meaningful education and training for early educators. (The White House, President Barack Obama, n.d.).

### Teacher Qualifications and Compensation

Regardless of education level, childhood certification or professional development training, early childhood educators continue to be among the poorest paid professionals. Early education and care work is dominated by women paid low wages and receiving few if any work related benefits. Lifton (2001) noted that childcare workers and particularly home-based caregivers are subject to low wages, no health or retirement benefits and poor working conditions. A report by the Bessie Tartt Wilson Initiative for Children (2010) found that in 2009 the majority of early educators in Massachusetts earned less than \$25,000 a year. Holochwost, DeMott, Buell, Yannetta, and Amsden (2009) sampled 846 early childhood educators in a mid-Atlantic state and found that while the majority had some college credits or a college degree they earned between \$10,513 and \$25,785 and did not have any

workplace benefits. Research by Gable and Halliburton (2003) found that teachers recognized the need for further education and training but they also believed “higher education warrants higher levels of compensation” (p. 188).

As noted above, the research linking teacher education and training with quality programs and child outcomes is substantial. However, connecting this to teacher compensation still seems secondary. Vance (2010) recognized the challenges of hiring qualified staff due to low wages, minimal benefits and limited chances for upward mobility but remained committed to building professional skills and competencies as the route to better wages and benefits. Barford and Whelton (2010) writing on burnout within the child and youth care profession suggest that a lack of respect from other professionals and society limits the ability to attract and retain experienced and qualified staff. They state, “This discrepancy between the type of work provided and the compensation offered by agencies employing child and youth care workers is perhaps the greatest obstacle faced in the profession” (p. 274). However, their recommendations focus on more skills and training not improved wages, benefits and career mobility.

### The Professionalization of Teaching

The movement to professionalize teaching has been growing for decades. Ingersoll and Perda (2008) state, “Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, educators have repeatedly sought to promote the view that elementary and secondary teaching is a highly complex kind of work, requiring specialized knowledge and skill and deserving of the same status and standing as traditional professions like law and medicine” (p. 106). They go on to suggest that this desire by educators reflects a “movement to professionalize teaching” (p. 106). Professionalization generally refers to the degree to which an occupation meets the criteria used to assess professional standing: credentials and licensure, mentoring of new entrants, professional development, specialization, authority, compensation and prestige (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008).

It is argued here that the movement towards professionalization of teaching now includes early childhood educators and extends beyond our national borders. Miller (2008) argues that in England “the early years workforce is under qualified, poorly paid and predominantly female” (p. 20). Miller states that the government of England is committed to the reform of the children’s workforce with the development of a “new Early Years Professional (EYP) role” (p. 20). In Canada, Friendly (2010) suggests that there is a growing discussion between policy-makers, researchers and educators to “join – up” early childhood education with the public school system. This would improve the quality of children’s programs and standardize and regulate qualifications, pay and status.

Research suggests that the movement towards professionalization of early education and care workers has resulted in increased education, training and skills of the workforce; however, low wages, few if any benefits and poor working conditions remain unchanged. How have teachers experienced and responded to the need for further credentials as wages and benefits remain stagnant? This study seeks to build on previous research concerning the professionalization of early education and care work by interviewing those most affected by this movement – early childhood educators. Seeking to understand the relationship between teacher qualifications and experience with the pay and conditions of work – this study set out to explore three central questions:

1. As early education and care workers obtain more education and training have they experienced an increase in their wages and benefits?
2. Has the move towards professionalization changed their work roles and responsibilities and if so in what ways?

3. Has further education and training increased job satisfaction and their intent to remain within the profession?

The educators' were asked to talk about the work they do and the benefits and challenges they experience as early educators. Their stories suggest that the relationship between education, training and compensation remains weak and unless this changes child outcomes are unlikely to improve; the most qualified and experienced will leave for better jobs.

### **Methods**

This research project came out of a larger study investigating child outcomes as a result of an early childhood education professional training program. As one of two research coordinators on this larger project I could not help but notice the high staff withdrawal rate from the training. Anecdotal and media reports suggested it was related to state cutbacks in family childcare vouchers which caused many sites to cut staffing and home-based programs to close. I was interested to learn more – if training was intended to improve child outcomes we needed those trained and skilled to remain in early education. The training organization allowed me to conduct qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of early childhood educators involved in the larger study to explore if and how the move towards professional status had affected them. This project was not funded. The training organization provided a list of all educators involved in the professional development training study. IRB approval was given through my educational institution and I obtained written consent from all teachers and providers who participated in the qualitative interviews.

There is limited qualitative research that has focused on how professionalization of early education and care work has been experienced by those within the field. Many of the teachers in this study voiced their frustration at the perception that they are babysitters rather than teachers; lazy rather than hard-working; unskilled rather than professional. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2000) state; “Qualitative research allows us to ask and answer a wide range of socially relevant questions and develop theories with both descriptive and explanatory power” (p. 13). The intent here is to explore the experience of professionalization for early educators and to understand the outcomes for teachers and young children.

#### **Recruitment**

The study included early educators working in Head Start sites, community centers and in home-based programs involved in a professional development training program in a large city in New England. The training consisted of two 14 week courses and approximately 90 hours of instruction. The educators in this study began their training in September 2007 and completed at least three months of training. 32 teachers across all three sites were interviewed.

The author and two assistants called educators at their place of work and invited to participate in the qualitative interviews. The training organization that provided the list of participants to the author had also noted which educators were Spanish speakers. One research assistant was fluent in Spanish and made those calls. She also conducted interviews in Spanish. Teachers were listed by work site and were called beginning at the top of the list. If a teacher was not available a message was left with a brief introduction to the study and that they would be called back. They were also provided contact details and invited to return the call.

All but one interview took place at their work site. Interviews at home based sites were conducted while children were being cared for but during a quiet time of the day. Site directors provided staff cover in classrooms and also a quiet and confidential place for the interview. It was explained to all teachers that the researcher was not affiliated with the training organization or their place of employment – they were guaranteed confidentiality and encouraged to talk about all aspects of their work

It is difficult to know if there were differences between those who agreed to be interviewed and those not interviewed. However, those called but not interviewed were generally off sick or busy when initially called – they did not decline the invitation to participate. Three teachers were not able to participate due to being on maternity or sick leave during the interview stage. Five could not be located because they had recently left their jobs or were laid off. All interviews took place between November 2008 and March 2009. Interviews were between 45 and 70 minutes long and eight were conducted in Spanish at the request of the educator. All Spanish interviews were transcribed into English by the Spanish speaking research assistant.

### Data Analysis

Following the principles of qualitative methods data collection, transcribing and data analysis was carried out simultaneously. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state; “There is a reason for alternating between collecting and analyzing data. Not only does this allow sampling on the basis of concepts emerging as relevant to that particular research situation, but it furthers verification of hypotheses while they are being developed” (p. 46.) This provided the opportunity to reflect on the questions and information received early and to add or amend any questions as I continued to interview. This was important and resulted in additional questions related to work related expenses and feelings of respect and validation that were not initially asked.

I read and re-read interview transcripts many times before I started to code to get a sense of the recurring issues that were discussed. Initially I stayed within the interview questions and noted words, concepts and text fragments that seemed to reflect the meanings and sentiments of each educator. These initial concepts were shared, discussed and checked with interviewees to increase validity. Inductive coding continued until no new codes emerged in the transcripts. A final coding scheme was created and then all interview transcripts were coded.

The frequency of codes was noted and codes were grouped into categories and subcategories that reflected the overall sentiments of the educators. Initial categories included work roles and responsibilities, reasons for being an early educator, education and training, rewards and challenges and career plans. Themes were formulated that reflected the general meanings and experiences of the educators. Quotes and text fragments were noted and attached to themes that conveyed participants’ meanings and to “move beyond description to conceptualization; that is, to the story line” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 120). Careful attention was paid to similarities and differences by specific categories including; site location, language spoken, education and training. Initial themes, concepts and codes were checked with interviewees for validation. Sentiments and experiences that differed from the dominant themes were also noted.

## Sample Demographics

Teachers and home-based providers ranged in age from 28 to 56 years. Teachers' level of education varied greatly across sites (see Table 1).

Table 1. Educational Attainment by Site

Work Site	Education Attainment			
	<High School	High School Diploma or GED	Associate Degree	BA Degree or Higher
Community Centers	1	5	2	3
Head Start Program	--	5	3	3
Home-Based Sites	2	8	--	--
Totals	3	18	5	6

It is important to note that 66% of the teachers in this sample had either a high school diploma or less. One home based provider had achieved a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education and another had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education – both from outside the United States. One teacher had a Master's Degree in Education. These results confirm that qualifications for early educators have not been standardized or regulated. These findings are similar to a report by Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, and Kipnis (2009) that found; “teacher qualification standards vary widely, based on program types and funding requirements – from little or no pre-service preparation to a Bachelor's Degree or higher” (p. 2).

Experience as an early childhood educator ranged from 3 years to 30 years with a mean of 10.4 and a median of 8.5 years. When interviewees were asked about their race their responses included: Caucasian (10); Black (7); Hispanic (7); and Brown (8). Many were first generation immigrants and gave their country of origin – Cape Verde; Guyana; Honduras; El Salvador; Columbia; Guatemala; Puerto Rico; Italy; Liberia; the Dominican Republic and the West Indies.

## Results

### Professionalization and the Changing Nature of their Work

All educators sampled said they valued the professional development training offered to them and recognized they needed more. They also said that the nature of their work has changed – generally they felt more responsibility and higher expectations from their administrators. Many also stated that the children today were often on individual education plans (IEPs), and had behavioral issues beyond what they were used to. One Head Start teacher stated:

Some kids just don't know how to function in a school setting and so were getting them ready to go to kindergarten – the public schools don't take a lot of ...you know. They will send your child home or tell you to come get them.

We teach all the skills, being able to sit, to listen to the teacher, to make eye contact with a teacher. We get a lot of kids that are special needs now.

Teachers stated they often struggled to communicate with parents whose first languages are other than English and to teach children who are English language learners. Teachers stated they also must act as cultural brokers, supporting and guiding new immigrant families' access to other resources and services. Teachers also stated they were now providing an enriched educational curriculum with on-going assessments and expected to early identify any potential learning, behavioral, emotional or language problems. Their job demanded educational expertise and skills and a tremendous amount of emotional labor. The demands for higher educational qualifications and training reinforced their belief that they are professional *teachers* not babysitters. This sentiment was common across all sites although all home-based providers also talked about themselves as childcare workers.

While some mentioned that parents and administrators did value their work as professionals the majority felt they received little respect or recognition of the educational work they do. Barford and Whelton (2010) argue "child and youth care workers have faced considerable difficulty gaining respect from society as well as other professionals" (p. 274). The majority of teachers interviewed also felt they were not regarded as professionals. A community center teacher explained,

We're not really taken as seriously as I think we would like to be taken but little by little some of the parents understand that we're more than just a babysitting service but it's been a long process.

One home based provider gave an example of a time when a parent took advantage of her. She said,

In a job like this you have to constantly be on top of the children, educating them, checking that nothing goes wrong. It is very stressful and at times you are crazy ready to finish and there are many parents who forget that they have to come (to collect their child). They get out of work and go and get their hair done or go someplace and you are checking your watch so there are many parents that don't value you and who don't appreciate you.

What is important to note is that regardless of their level of education, experience or professional development training teachers and providers felt they did not receive recognition as a professional. The Bessie Tarrt Wilson Initiative for Children (2009) has been a strong advocate for compensation reform. They state, "While numerous conferences focused on early education and care have mentioned compensation as a peripheral issue, there has not been a focused discussion on this topic within the Commonwealth; yet the field and the state government (of Massachusetts) can no longer discuss impactful improvements for all without dealing with compensation" (p. 12).

Qualifications and experience must be tied to compensation *and* reflect parity with similar professions. The demand for an expanded career lattice that would reflect qualifications and experience and be tied to compensation does not really address the problem here – those at the top of the career lattice continue to be perceived and treated as non-professionals.



## Internal Validation

Across all sites teachers and home-based providers framed their work as “meaningful and rewarding.” They saw themselves as providing an educational curriculum and giving social, emotional and physical care to young children. One teacher explained her work provided benefits to the child, the family, herself as a teacher and to the wider society. She explained,

I think the benefits are that I’m doing something that I love to do – it makes a difference, I think, in our world, its meaningful to me. I’ve met some terrific people over the years, people that I see, keep seeing in the community and people come up to me and say you made a difference in my, in our life, in my child’s life.

Another teacher felt she made an important contribution to the lives of the children and families in her care by helping to early diagnose and then support parents if their child had a disability. She said, “For children that have a learning problem or other issues the fact that you recognize that early and you got the child and parents’ help – that really makes a difference. It’s important.”

Many of the teachers saw their role as providing emotional support to often very vulnerable children. One teacher explained how she felt she provided a sanctuary for some of her children and that is what was most important to her. She explained,

You make a difference in their lives, like for a lot of kids you can see where you kind of [provide] a safe haven or something, you provide a safe place for them you know. So I have an impact on the children’s lives. I knew a family and they had 3 kids and there was a lot of domestic violence in the family you know, knives and police and all that so this was like the place she wanted to be.

Although the overwhelming majority of teachers and providers saw what they did as meaningful and important the majority stated external rewards and recognition of their professional roles and responsibilities was missing. Internal validation was often not enough. Their willingness to upgrade their professional skills, education and training was not rewarded with better compensation and professional status. Many stated, “I love my work but...” While most did not use the language of exploitation their stories suggest that acquiring professional credentials without receiving professional status and compensation is workforce exploitation.

## Long Days and No Over-time Pay

Most of the teachers interviewed worked full-time, between 35 and 40 hours a week. Four of the community center teachers worked part-time, generally 24 - 30 hours per week, however, two of them had additional part-time jobs that when added together exceeded 40 hours per week. Almost all home-based educators worked greater than 55 hours per week; they started work at 6:00 a.m. and did not finish until 5:00 or 5:30 p.m. Two worked very long days; one from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. and another from 6:00 a.m. until 12:00 a.m. Both said that they have children whose parents work days and some who work evenings or nights.

Children arrive and leave at different times making it difficult to have any time off. One home-based provider explained her very long work day.

I have children that come at 6 a.m., there are those that come at 8 a.m., children come at 11 a.m. I finish at 9 p.m. and some nights I have a group that finishes at 11 p.m. but mostly it is 9 p.m. This is because the parents come from school.

Another talked about her 18 hour day explaining, “I open at 6 a.m. and then I have these two children now that arrive at 3 p.m. that I take care of until 12 a.m. It is a long day.”

One center teacher said that when she first started caring for children as a home-based provider she gave 24 hour care.

I was caring for some kids before school getting them on the school bus and picking them up after from the bus. And then some kids were through the day and then I would even have a child that I had through the night as mom had a third shift. Four nights I was doing the overnights which were alright as usually the child slept.

While both community center and Head Start teachers generally worked 35- 40 hours a week many of them complete their lesson plans and assessments in the evenings which added to many additional hours. When asked if they ever take work home with them one replied for many when she said; “All the time! I must put in 25 extra hours (a week) with assessments, portfolios and lesson plans.”

Another teacher said that she put in many extra hours each day doing planning, assessments and searching for resources. Head Start teachers are not supposed to take work or files home but many do – adding a further 2-3 hours of extra work each night. Head Start teachers are not supposed to take work or files home but many do. One teacher explained,

We are not supposed to but I do my paperwork (at home) I can’t do it here as they turn the lights out when they get on their cots so it’s hard to do paperwork then. Often I need to do another 2-3 extra hours a night. I can’t do it here. It’s crazy (busy) around here, you see.

Another Head Start teacher said,

I do take work home every evening. We are not paid for this time but it is hard to manage to get it all completed during the day for it is a lot of detailed paperwork, daily lesson plans focusing on specific goals for each child - this is very time consuming and requires a lot of thought and writing.

Although the majority of educators across all three sites were working in excess of 40 hours a week, paid hours were much less and wages remain very low.

#### Poverty- Level Wages

Heizenberg, Price, and Bradley (2005, as cited in Whitebook & Ryan, 2011) found “Wages and benefits for early childhood professionals remain among the lowest of any occupation, contributing to a host of problems that impact the quality of services such as high turnover and declining educational levels” (p. 7). Using U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and

federal poverty level data, The Bessie Tartt Wilson Initiative for Children (2009) state; “Early childhood educators are among the lowest paid working in the United States and have been for decades” (p. 12). Home based provider said they received \$150 per week per child as the subsidy from the state for low-income families. They generally received \$160 per week for a private placement. Payment related to the number of children – not education or training levels. The home-based providers had 3-4 children in their care and many of these children were part-time. Their income was generally under \$30,000 per year – not much higher than the 2009 federal poverty level for a family of four (\$21,954 per year).

Community and Head Start teachers were paid by the hour and did not fare much better. Not all teachers were willing to share their rate per hour but 9 of the 22 teachers gave either their rate of pay or the range their pay fell within. The hourly rate of pay for community center teachers ranged from less than \$8.00 per hour to \$14.00 per hour. For Head Start teachers their rate of pay ranged from less than \$8.50 per hour to \$15.00 per hour (only one earned \$15.00 per hour). Therefore, these teachers were also earning less than \$30,000 per year. It is unlikely that the teachers who were less willing to share information about their wages were earning in excess of \$15.00 per hour. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) gave the median rate for a childcare worker was \$11.59 per hour; \$24,120 per year. In comparison, a security guard earns \$16.65 per hour; \$34,630 per year. A brief issued by the National Head Start Association (2009) stated that their average teacher salary for those holding a CDA or state certificate in child development is \$21,600. Their teachers with a BA degree earn \$28,000 annually. In comparison the average kindergarten teacher with similar credentials earns \$48,874. This discrepancy illustrates the lack of standardization across early education programs.

It is also important to note that the rate of pay for an early childhood educators did not always correspond to objective criteria such as years of experience, training or educational qualifications. This was true for home-based providers and community center teachers but less so for Head Start staff. For example, one community center teacher earned less than \$8.00 per hour but had been teaching in early education for nearly 20 years. She also had a BA in Child Psychology. Another community center teacher (at a different site) with 6 years of experience in early education and a two year Associate’s Degree was earning \$13.00 per hour. For Head Start teachers their pay did correspond much more to their qualifications and experience but wages remained very low. The lowest paid Head Start teachers earned less than \$8.50 per hour. Many teachers also complained that pay increases were rare. One Head Start teacher said that she had not had a pay increase since 2002.

It is important to state that the professional development training grant from The Department of Education targeted low income neighborhoods. One site did ask to participate, and were granted permission even though they were not part of the target population. This site was located in a mixed social class neighborhood and had the most qualified (but not the highest paid) teacher. Without a more diverse sample I could not determine if teacher training, qualifications and compensation differs by neighborhood characteristics. This warrants further investigation.

Many teachers said that the low wages were a reason to consider finding other work, often to teach older children in the public school system. Machado (2008) summarized the research concerning wages and found that early childhood education centers lose teachers and have a hard time recruiting quality teachers and the main issue is “compensation – pay and benefits” (p. 3). One teacher explained that she feels very “exploited and angry” at the

treatment she has received at her place of employment. Despite having an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education and many years experience she felt her employer did not respect her or treat her as a professional teacher. She explained,

I had to take a pay cut. I was laid off for 3 weeks and when they offered me my job back they told me I had to accept a \$2.00 an hour pay cut and the loss of my status – so they have me down that I just started when I have been teaching 13 years. I now get \$12.25 per hour. When I was laid off I had a doctor's appointment and I had to pay almost \$200 as I had no health insurance and so it was very hard.

Another teacher explained how she too felt exploited by her employer in that she now has to work longer hours to receive the same rate of pay:

I don't want to keep switching jobs you know but now they are going to freeze the wages and loosen up the hours. Right now I am on 35 hours a week and in January I will be working 37½ hours but we are not getting a raise. So the only way they are going to help us is they are giving us more hours to get paid the same. That's not right.

Research that suggests the need to link professional development training and compensation is substantial (Bessie Tartt Wilson Initiative for Children 2010, 2009; Gable & Halliburton, 2003; Holochwost, DeMott, Buell, Yannetta, & Amsdem 2009). Gable and Halliburton (2003) argued that "incentive programs that provide wage enhancements or bonuses for continued employment and ongoing professional development are clearly needed to stabilize and improve the child care workforce" (p. 190). Almost ten years later and this has not happened. Wage enhancements must be substantial and match other similarly qualified educators in public education or retention of the most qualified teachers will continue to be a problem.

### Work Related Expenses

While many of the teachers and home care providers talked about low wages as a problem – some also mentioned that they experienced high work-related expenses. Teachers and home-care providers explained how they had to purchase additional books, arts and crafts materials and cooking supplies if they wanted the children to have an educational learning environment. They also said the money they spent, often between \$20 and \$50 per month was not refunded. One community center teacher said,

Well last time I spent close to \$100 because I wanted to make a farm and I had to spend a lot of money. I wanted to do a water table but there was really nothing to put into it so I had to go out to buy it. I keep saying I am not going to do it but you look around and you have to. If we do anything with the kids we buy our own stuff.

A Head Start teacher said,

Sometimes we just do it because we can't wait and we need it now to do the planning and it can take a while to order so I spend about \$20-\$30 a month.

Another Head Start teacher explained:

Well you see I spend a lot of money (your own money) oh yes – I spend a lot of money. They give us basic supplies and they will say if you need something put it down but it can take months and months and meanwhile my curriculum is come and gone and so I might be able to use it next year (laughs). (You could be paying up to how much a month?) “\$100 – Yes definitely. If you want your classroom to run a certain way you have to.

A home based provider explained that she was worried about her low income and increasing expenses. She wondered about the viability of her business.

I want to do this but also it gives me great sadness because I want to continue with this work but the government is putting us in a situation that is bad. I don't receive one dollar to buy paper, look I have a lot of expenses and the parents are not helping me, the state is not helping me to buy the pencils, crayons, paper and books. I am always buying things for the children always, but I make very little.

It was interesting to hear that while many of the teachers, and particularly the Head Start teachers stated that they paid for resources out of their own wages one teacher in Head Start challenged this. She explained, “I have loads of resources, books, toys, paper, pencils...anything I want really.” When asked how she managed to get all the resources she wanted she said ‘it’s easy you just ask.’ This discrepancy in access to resources was difficult to understand or explain and warrants further investigation.

Many teachers and providers noted a dilemma; the professional development training emphasized the need for quality and age appropriate resources to provide an enriched educational curriculum but extra funds were often not available. Many of these low-waged workers were talking money away from their own families to fulfill their professional responsibilities. This exemplifies one of the fundamental tenets of a profession that was outlined by Flexner (1908) in his iconic report on what constitutes a profession; a professional is motivated by altruism. Culkin (1999) also suggests early educators are altruistic in their work with young children for little pay and low status.

### Few and Shrinking Benefits

Early educators and care workers have always received few benefits with their jobs. A report by the National Afterschool Association in 2006 (as cited in Vance, 2010, p. 424) found that “36% of youth workers have been in their position less than one year, earn on average between \$25,000 and \$30,000 a year and approximately 22% receive any benefits.” Most home based providers said they could not afford health insurance although they did have it for their own children. They also said they did not get paid for holidays or sick days so generally take few days off.

Teachers also explained that the few benefits they did get with their jobs were recently cut. For many of the Head Start teachers they complained that their pay had not increased but they were now responsible for paying their own health care benefits and this has been a major difficulty for many of them – especially now they have had their hours reduced. One explained,

Now we have to pay health insurance and our hours have gone down as I used to be on 40 hours a week and now I am on 35. I used to do the maintenance and here I do not do that so my pay went down. I make less than \$8.50 per hour.

Another said,

It's hard for you sometimes, just the stress, thinking about like when we (now) have to pay for health insurance, how much their going to take every other week from my pay check, how much I'm going to bring home when I'm not getting any raise.

Many interviewees stated that low income and status were not the only workforce issues they felt needed to change. Income is important but for low-waged workers benefits were often equally if not more important. Some teachers complained that their childcare subsidy for their own children was recently cancelled forcing them to remove their child from their own work site. One explained,

We have to pay if we want our children to come here – pay in full. We used to get a benefit but no more. I am a single mother of 4 children and having to pay full rate for my daughter – she is not in the daycare here as I can't afford it.

One teacher said that it is not just the childcare subsidy that has been removed but other benefits too. She stated, "We used to get bereavement days and now we get none – things are worse now than before." Income is important but for low-waged workers benefits were often equally if not more important. In looking at factors that influence retention of early childhood education staff Holochwost, DeMott, Buell, Yannetta, and Amsden (2009) found that health, disability, and pension benefits were the main environmental factors associated with workers' intent to remain in the field. The recent loss of benefits and low wages were often explained as reasons to seriously consider leaving the early education and care workforce in search of better jobs.

### Job Insecurity

For many job insecurity was a major problem that had affected them directly or was a constant concern. The recession which began in 2007 resulted in high unemployment hit the child care work force very hard and forced cutbacks at the local and state level. Many states reduced the number of subsidies for childcare places and this had a direct effect on reducing the number of children in centers and in home-based setting. This led to many sites to cut back on the number of staff employed and/or their hours of work. Many families were forced to withdraw their child from an early education program as they searched for employment. Early education workers experienced heightened job insecurity. One community center teacher stated:

Well it's just that this place is so unpredictable. I mean they just laid off someone like out of the blue you know. We've known about lay-offs because when the toddler program got closed down you know two people that were working got laid off but it's been quiet around, no talk of layoffs for a while and then out of nowhere it happened. So it's like I can come to work today and I'm going to get called into the office and find out I'm laid off.

Many teachers said that the only way they manage the stress related to job insecurity was to take one day at a time. A teacher explained,

I mean at times I'm like are we going to survive because the enrollments are very low but we've been doing a lot of things to help boost enrollment. Basically I take it one day at a time, I get up every morning, come in, and if it's going to happen, it's going to happen.

Not all teachers however felt concerned about job security. Three Head Start teachers, all with a degree in early education, stated they were not worried – one said that she had a second job and could go there, another mentioned she felt sure her job was safe. Community center teachers and home-based educators voiced the most concerns – this may reflect that within this low-waged workforce Head Start teachers were paid on average more than other teachers and providers. They also had higher credentials giving them more opportunities for other work. Head Start programs also have more stable funding compared to the other two programs.

### **Credentials, Compensation and Long-term Plans**

Of the 32 educators who were interviewed; only 15 (47%) had definite plans to remain in early childhood education. Nine educators had definite plans to leave, and eight were undecided. It is important here to note that while many said they were leaving early childhood education they were *not* leaving education. Eight educators stated they had plans to move to the public school system either as a teacher or special education worker. One had plans to be a college professor. For many who wanted to remain as teachers and not administrators the public school system was a good career move. However, this does not address the need to retain qualified, experienced and committed teachers in early education programs – and ultimately the needs of young children.

Home-based providers were more likely to say they planned to stay in early education with eight of the ten saying so. Their willingness to remain may be explained by limited options. Home - based providers had lower education levels, limited English skills and had less experience on average than Head Start and center-based teachers. They were also older – on average 48 years compared to community center teachers' 33 years and Head Start teachers' 42 years.

Educators who had plans to leave or were undecided were a diverse group. They cut across level of education, years of experience, and age – most said they really loved working with young children. This study indicates that teacher retention continues to be a critical issue for early education. The demand for higher education and further professional development training will ensure early educators have the necessary skills and expertise but may also raise expectations and provide access to better jobs.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

There is little doubt today that receiving a quality education is important and necessary for all children to reach their full potential. Researchers, policy analysts, politicians and families agree that education is the key to individual success and social mobility. Quality early childhood education is critical to this process. The demand today for quality early education programs and improved child outcomes has focused on improving teacher

qualifications; higher education and professional development training in early education. This demand is grounded in substantial research; there is a positive relationship between teacher qualifications and quality early education programs (Early, Maxwell, & Buchinal, 2007; NICHD ECCRN, 2002; Pianta et al., 2005). There is also substantial research linking teacher qualifications and child outcomes (Dunkin, Ludwig, & Magnuson, 2007; Mims, Scott-Little, Lower, Cassidy, & Hestenes, 2008; Prentice, 2007). Encouraging or requiring all early educators to have or achieve an Associates or Bachelors Degree in early education and participate in further professional development trainings has been central to the movement within early childhood education to obtain professional status. While there is substantial research that links the professional qualifications of early educators with quality programs and improved child outcomes, empirical research exploring the relationship between enhanced professional qualifications and improved teacher outcomes is limited.

The teachers interviewed here generally agreed their complex roles and responsibilities requires higher education, training and expertise. They saw themselves as professional educators, early diagnosticians, and cultural brokers. They were involved in designing, teaching and evaluating complex learning objectives and child outcomes as well as looking to early identify any speech, language, behavioral, emotional and/or psychological issues. They were also teaching and caring for children and families with many different racial, ethnic and national identities and diverse cultural experiences. However, similar to the research by Bourgeault and Khokher (2006), Culkin (1999), Fuller and Strath (2001), Lifton (2001), MacDonald and Merrill (2002), and Whitebook (1999), teachers explained how they felt devalued and exploited. They were expected to increase their qualifications, participate in professional development trainings and take on more responsibilities while at the same time experience wage stagnation or cutbacks and a decrease in their benefits.

The findings from this study also concur with research from The Bessie Tartt Wilson Initiative for Children (2010); Gable and Halliburton (2003); and Holochwost, DeMott, Bruell, Yannetta, and Amsden (2009), that compensation and benefits remain low and they are not consistently related to teacher qualifications. A critical finding here is that additional professional development training and educational credentials may in fact reduce teachers' income. Teachers said that they were made aware through the professional development training program that improving their classroom environments would enhance child outcomes. However, most said they had to purchase these resources with money from their own paycheck thus reducing further their already low income. The relationship between teacher qualifications and work related expenses warrants further investigation.

The experiences the teachers shared with me suggest enhanced professional attitudes, values and behaviors but little external recognition of their new professional work roles, responsibilities and qualifications. This study also found that an increase in professional qualifications and skills without a corresponding increase in professional status, benefits and wages led many early educators to consider leaving the early education workforce. Less than half (47%) had definite plans to remain within the early childhood workforce despite saying that they loved their jobs and really wanted to stay. Further educational qualifications gave many of the teachers the opportunity and incentive to look for work with better wages and benefits – within elementary schools and social services. Further research is necessary to investigate the relationship between teacher qualifications and retention. If the most qualified teachers leave the workforce then child outcomes are unlikely to improve; lower retention may destabilize the workforce reducing child outcomes further.



The findings from this qualitative study raise important questions and concerns about the movement to professionalize the early education workforce and outcomes for children and educators. It is important however, to acknowledge that this was a small sub-sample of early childhood educators who participated in a professional development training program in New England. The grant from the Department of Education targeted low income communities and families and therefore early educators in middle or upper class educational programs were not part of this study. It is possible that teachers in such communities are paid better, receive more benefits and have higher status. This warrants further investigation.

This was also a self-selected sample and therefore caution must be made in generalizing the findings. Teachers who were unable or unwilling to participate were not included in this study. Also excluded from the study were managers or directors of Head Start or community center sites and they may have a very different view of pay, benefits and/or roles and responsibilities of their staff. I was not able to verify the credentials, wages or benefits told to me by the teachers although their stories of wage stagnation and few benefits do correspond with the findings of other researchers.

Another possible limitation is that all but one staff was interviewed at their place of work. Managers and directors did give me a quiet, unused office or room to conduct my interviews but it could be that some teachers were uneasy with talking about their frustrations at work or career plans within their work environments. However, if this did happen then the crisis within early childhood education may be much worse than found here.

It is also important to acknowledge that interviews were conducted at the beginning of the recession and therefore many workers across employment sectors experienced unemployment, underemployment and/or cutbacks in their wages and hours. However, research does show that early childhood education workers have been and continue to be poorly paid in comparison to other teachers and to other workers with similar credentials. Wage stagnation and/or a reduction in the number of paid hours for early childhood education workers can push them closer to the poverty line.

The movement for professionalizing the workforce of early childhood educators is an important and necessary goal for policy makers and educators. We must have highly trained and skilled early educators to meet the diverse educational and learning needs of our nation's children. However, without supporting this trained and educated workforce with status and benefits comparable to other similarly credentialed professionals early educators are likely to leave the workforce. A high turnover of qualified and experienced teaching staff is not good for children, families or communities.

The Race to the Top: Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) has awarded states funds to set priorities including "Building a great early childhood education workforce, supported by strategies to train and retain quality teachers, providers and administrators" (The White House: President Barack Obama, n.d.). Absent from the list of priorities was a requirement for states to improve the pay and benefits for early educators. In his State of the Union Address (January, 27, 2010) the President outlined his plans for investment in education and stated that the "best anti-poverty program around is a world class education." If education is the best anti-poverty program we need to start with young children *and* their teachers. Education policies, programs and resources must be directed to change the trajectory of those most disadvantaged and provide economic, social and professional status to those charged with this critical task. Despite over thirty years of research, advocates have had limited success in improving the status, income and benefits of early educators. It is critical that early

educators, families and other stakeholders recognize their common interests and raise their voices to demand change. The stories and experiences here are powerful testimonies of exploitation not professionalization – they must be heard and lead to change.

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