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A Bizarro World for Infants and Toddlers and Their Teachers

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A Bizarro World for Infants and Toddlers and Their Teachers

Marcy Whitebook

A bizarro world reverses our everyday realities. You may be familiar with the concept if you have ever read DC Comics or watched *Seinfeld*. In the bizarro world I envision for our nation's infants and toddlers, family income would not determine whether their parents could afford to take time off work in the first months of their lives or their right to high-quality early care and education. In my bizarro world, the staff in every infant-toddler program, whether offered in a center or home, would be steeped in the science of child development and early learning pedagogy and could depend on good wages and working conditions.

In this world, the most revered teachers would be those who work with infants and toddlers. It would be widely understood that “baby” teachers — as early educators were once called — require as much knowledge and skill as teachers of older children and that the quality of children's experiences depend on their teachers' ability and well-being. These coveted jobs would be sought by men and women alike. Gender and racial bias would have no role in establishing pay rates, and the infant-toddler workforce would be racially and linguistically diverse.

Alas, every day early educators working with children not yet in kindergarten—a workforce comprised almost exclusively of women, 40 percent of whom are people of color—encounter the opposite reality. In our world today, respect and raises are seldom forthcoming, and disparities in pay reflect structural race and gender biases. Although the most pronounced pay differentials for teachers are between those working with children from birth through preschool and those in kindergarten and higher grades, early educators working with infants and toddlers face a sizeable wage penalty in relation to educators who work exclusively with preschool-aged children (see Figure 1).

Analysis of the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE), the most recent comprehensive national data on the early childhood education (ECE) workforce, shows that among center-based infant-toddler teachers, 86 percent earned less than \$15 an hour, compared to 67 percent of those working exclusively with preschool-aged children. More than one-half of those working with infants and toddlers earned less than \$10.10 an hour, compared to 36 percent of those working with

HOME-BASED PROVIDER EARNINGS

The 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) provides information for center-based teaching staff, yet it reports only estimates of home-based provider annual household incomes and the portion of household incomes derived from their work with children. Among home-based providers listed with agencies in their state, across racial and ethnic groups, 50 percent live in households with incomes that were less than the national median income of \$50,502 in 2011; for African American providers, this figure was 75 percent (Whitebook et al., 2019, p. 35).

older children (Whitebook et al., 2018, p. 36). African American educators are disproportionately affected by this wage penalty, as they are more likely to work with this age group of children than their peers in other racial and ethnic groups. Fifty-two percent of African American educators work with infants and toddlers, compared to 43 percent of all center-based early educators (Whitebook et al., 2018, p. 36).

Some differences in compensation can be attributed to the lower qualifications required for those working with infants and toddlers, as determined by licensing or program standards. But when qualifications are equivalent, differences in educational attainment among infant-toddler and preschool teachers only partially account for wage differences. At every level of educational attainment, there is a wage penalty for teachers working exclusively with infants and toddlers, compared to those working with children aged three to five. The magnitude of the difference increases at higher levels of teacher educational attainment, as shown in Figure 1.

For educators with no degree, the average pay penalty for working with infants and toddlers is \$1.05 less per hour (or \$2,184 less annually for a full-time, full-year worker), compared with educators working with preschool-aged children, and the average pay penalty for educators holding an associate degree is \$1.26 less per hour (or \$2,621 less per year for a full-time, full-year worker). For an early educator working full-time who holds a bachelor’s or higher degree, the wage penalty rises to \$4.03 less per hour (\$8,382 less per year for a full-time, full-year worker).¹ Even when controlling for educational attainment, an early educator working with infants and toddlers still earns \$2.00 per hour less than an educator who works with children aged three to five, not yet in kindergarten (NSECE Project Team, 2010-2012 cited in Whitebook et al, 2018).

	Infant-Toddler	Pre-K	Predicted Wage Penalty by Age
Bachelor’s or graduate degree	\$13.83	\$17.86	-\$4.03 per hour
Associate degree	\$11.85	\$13.11	-\$1.26 per hour
No college degree	\$9.68	\$10.73	-\$1.05 per hour

Figure 1. Mean Hourly Wage and Predicted Wage Penalty by Age of Children and Educational Attainment, 2012

F(3,4349)=393.67, p<.001.

Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment calculation using NSECE (2012) data. Whitebook et al., 2018, p. 36. Reprinted with permission.

This difference in earnings is partially explained by program funding and sponsorship. Compared to services for children aged three to five, services for infants and toddlers are more likely to rely on parent fees and less likely to receive public funding (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Approximately 15 percent of centers serving infants and toddlers report public funding as their predominant revenue source, compared to 50 percent of centers that serve only preschoolers.

1 Annual wages were calculated by multiplying the hourly wage by 40 hours per week, 12 months per year.

The 2012 NSECE allows us to examine wage disparities among early educators nationally, across four categories of center-based programs based on funding source and sponsorship: school-sponsored public pre-K, community-based public pre-K, Head Start, and other early care and education (ECE centers²) (see Figure 1). Seventy percent of center-based jobs working with infants and toddlers were in other ECE centers, which on average paid the lowest wages, regardless of whether the educator had a university degree or not (Whitebook et al., 2018, p. 36).

These variations in wages by program sponsorship and funding across educational levels serve as a powerful incentive for all early educators to change jobs in order to improve their economic status and remain in the field. For infant-toddler teachers, the variations are an incentive to work with older children. Infants and toddlers, for whom stable caregivers are so essential to their well-being, suffer the consequences of poor compensation, wage disparities, and the turnover they fuel.

Additionally, economic insecurity and the stress it feeds can undermine educators' capacity to remain focused and to engage in the intentional interactions that facilitate young children's learning and development (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). Until recently, scant attention has been paid to how living on the edge negatively impacts educators' financial security, health, and practice, but surveys show that early educators have high levels of anxiety about providing basic needs for their families, including paying for food (Whitebook, et al, 2018). A 2017 study of more than 1,200 early educators in Arkansas found that four out of ten preschool teachers (40 percent) and five out of ten infant-toddler teachers (50 percent) reported being food insecure, meaning they were skipping a meal or cutting meal portions due to lack of money (McKelvey, Forsman, & Morrison-Ward, 2018, p. 5).

The bizarre world I envision need not be an imaginary one. Such a world for babies does exist outside of the United States. I glimpsed it when visiting an infant-toddler center in the heart of Copenhagen in 2018. The right to child care in Denmark, regardless of family income, is guaranteed for all children one year and older. The four-story facility in the heart of the city I visited accommodated up to 90 infants and toddlers. Each room is carefully purposed and designed, whether it is home rooms for small groups of children, each with dedicated teachers who remain with the toddlers until they move onto preschool, or a shared room dedicated to sensory exploration, water play, and even carpentry. Teachers also enjoy dedicated spaces—one for meetings, another for office work, and a lounge connected to the kitchen—and their schedules allow them generous time for planning and professional exchange without child responsibilities. Groups of children cycle in- and out-of-doors, often in carefully designed ergonomically designed wagons for carting children along city streets. The space never felt crowded or out-of-control, despite the many children interacting with each other, their teachers, and their physical environment with obvious enthusiasm, trust, and curiosity. Most striking was the absence of the stress that is generated by poorly planned and equipped spaces, and understaffed

2 These program types correspond to NSECE program classifications based on program funding source and sponsorship. The labels for each program type have been edited for clarity as follows: "school-sponsored public pre-K" refers to NSECE's *school-sponsored*; "community-based public" refers to NSECE's *public pre-K-funded, not school-sponsored or Head Start-funded*; "Head Start" refers to NSECE's *Head Start funded, not school-sponsored*; and "other ECE centers" refers to NSECE's *all other ECE*.

and overstretched adults we commonly encounter in programs here in the U.S. In Denmark and other countries where they are getting it right by their babies and their families, they are also doing right by their teachers, and manage to finance high-quality early care and education services as a public good, a universal right rather than a privilege for some.

As a young woman, I was optimistic about the ability to reform and build an early care and education system in the United States that addressed the rights of children, families, and their teachers. A half century later, my outlook has sobered, and I am humbled by my understanding of the enormity of our challenge, both within the early childhood field and in the larger community. I remain no less committed to advancing change.

Those sitting at the tables of power where early childhood policy decisions are made see teachers as objects to be transformed rather than as actors with the critical perspective necessary for shaping effective reforms. Over the last two decades, the focus of quality improvement strategies has been on inputs into educators without a parallel investment into the conditions that allow those inputs to take hold. In essence, the early childhood field, by prioritizing professional development over improving educator compensation and working conditions, reinforces the misconception that our early educators need to improve themselves before their jobs will improve. This condones a system in which teachers subsidize the cost of quality services and sacrifice their own well-being, seemingly for the benefit of children who themselves are shortchanged by this status quo.

As I see it, a new reality requires an organized collective voice of early educators—led by those working with children each day—that demands that ECE leaders, fellow citizens, and policy makers face the urgency of our early educator teacher crisis. Only with the empowered voices of teachers and a reconceptualization of early childhood teachers' value, their needs, and their role in our systems—along with sufficient resources—can we move from the unacceptable realities of today to my bizarre world with an equitable future for children and the adults who care for and educate them.

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About the Author



Marcy Whitebook began her career as an infant-toddler teacher, which taught her the importance of improving child care jobs as key to ensuring children’s right to high- quality early care and education. Joining with teachers who shared her understanding of link between child and adult well-being, they founded the Child Care Employee Project (CCEP) in 1977. In 1989, CCEP conducted the National Child Care Staffing Study, which first brought public attention to the low wages and high turnover of child care teachers and their impact on child outcomes CCEP (later to become the Center for the Child Care Workforce), and also spearheaded the national Worthy Wage Campaign. Marcy founded and serves as the Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at the University of California at Berkeley. Her recent works—the *Early Childhood Workforce Index* and *Worthy Work*, and *STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Care and Education Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*—document the current status of the workforce and analyze how workforce policies serve to support and/or undermine effective teaching, contribute to inequitable services for children and families, and often pose risks to the personal and familial well-being of the workforce itself.