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Infant Toddler Care and Education: Speaking Up for Young Children and Their Caregivers

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Infant-Toddler Care and Education: Speaking Up for Young Children and Their Caregivers

Sharon Ryan and Virginia Casper

Much of the policy-and practice-focused research on infant-toddler care and education has been concerned with the issue of program quality. That is, what elements constitute a quality program for infants and toddlers that ensures their ongoing developmental success? Researchers have sought to identify the structural and process indicators necessary for young children to receive the kinds of responsive interactions that contribute to positive developmental outcomes.

Paradoxically, while we do know a lot about what constitutes high-quality care and education for infants and toddlers, most policies ignore the research by regulating a bare minimum of requirements for programs. This situation has resulted in significant variation in what infant-toddler programming looks like, where it is located, and who gets access to high-quality programs. It's as if policymakers and the public assume that babies and toddlers don't need much attention because it is basically women's work and not an area of education warranting investment. The immense policy focus on public prekindergarten as the panacea to educational inequities and economic disadvantage has also complicated things, because infant-toddler care and education has had to take a back seat to the education of three- and four-year-old children. This not only has implications for children and families, but helps reinforce a significant salary differential for birth-to-three child care workers.

Yet the research base on the development of infants and toddlers makes clear that the first few years of life form the foundation for children's educational trajectories. A report sponsored by the federal Administration for Children and Families, after a careful review of available research, argues that birth through age three is a time of rapid development that sets the stage for children's later academic and social success (Horn, Norris, Perry, Chazan-Cohen, & Halle, 2016). Similarly, Linda Richter in this issue notes that international reviews of the empirical evidence (Black et al., 2017; Britto et al., 2017), argue that "the foundations for brain and mental development are laid down during the first few years of life, with demonstrable benefits and disadvantages over the long term for health, wellbeing, learning and earning." It is during the first three years that children become increasingly independent physically, when they learn to put words to their interactions with the environment, and when they are learning how to participate in social and cultural worlds. So it makes no sense that the care and education of infants and toddlers is marginalized in political and educational conversations.

This special themed issue of the *Occasional Paper Series* seeks to highlight and challenge assumptions about infant-toddler care and education. In the Call for Papers, we specifically asked for critical analyses of the state of the field; for contributions from practitioners, policy researchers and policymakers, teacher educators, and colleagues from international contexts to interrogate the status quo. We were not surprised, however, when the papers submitted, with one exception, came from university researchers or faculty working with students. Caregivers and teachers of the youngest children are overwhelmingly women, often with families of their own, with limited time, support, or incentives to

write about their experiences. Because of this, the focus for the issue that emerged from the submissions is more on policy and training than on the day-to-day experiences of the practitioners.

In addition to the call, we invited four internationally known researchers and thinkers in the infant-toddler-family field to express their thoughts about what they see as needed to move the agenda towards increased equity and excellence in infant-toddler education and care. The invited pieces by Hasina Ebrahim, Joan Lombardi, Linda Richter, and Marcy Whitebook are shorter essays with a policy lens that complements the more on-the-ground work of the other pieces.

All the pieces in the issue can be grouped around two main themes: 1) the centrality of relationship-based care, and 2) the tensions between local/contextual and larger-scale systems-level approaches.

The Centrality of Relationship-Based Approaches

The first three years of life not only set the stage for children's developmental trajectories in later years but also constitute a period when children are most dependent on the adults in their lives. It is young children's relationships with their caregivers that provide the foundations for their development as these adults create the social, physical, and linguistic environments in which children learn to become increasingly independent in space and time. These same adults, whether they are family members, infant-toddler practitioners, or community members, help young children to make sense of their world and support them to learn and practice the values of the cultures and communities in which they live and learn. As Susan Recchia and Seung Eun McDevitt highlight in their article, "Relationship-based Infant Care as a Framework for Authentic Practice," the practice of teaching, caring for, and developing relationships with babies is central to their education, and yet the importance of relationships is usually downplayed.

Several articles in this special issue elevate the importance of relationships between infant-toddler educators and the children and the families they serve. In the sole piece by classroom teachers, Emmanuelle Fincham and Amanda Fellner describe their work with a child with autism, observing that their efforts to help him become a member of the classroom community did not always gel with that of the early interventionist who was using behaviorist-inspired applied behavior analysis techniques. They discuss how the disability label of "autism" made them second-guess their actions and consider whether they were acting in the best interests of the child who eventually left their classroom for a more specialized setting.

In drawing on a "funds of identity" model in their case study of a Korean-Canadian infant-toddler teacher, Recchia and McDevitt illustrate that relationship-based care is a cultural practice. Educators bring their own socio-cultural experiences and values to their interactions with young children. How one is parented and educated and where that education takes place mediates how caregivers themselves respond to families, colleagues, and children. These essays, along with others in this issue, highlight the importance of relationship-based care, not only with children but between and among caregivers themselves, and among the communities in which they work.

In their articles about the Guttman Center, a professional development initiative implemented by staff

of the Bank Street College of Education in East New York, Marjorie Brickley, Robin Hancock, Virginia Casper, and Rebecca Newman illustrate the importance of relationships between adults in the work of caring for young children. Robin Hancock describes how she carefully took the time to network in the community, listening to different stakeholders to ensure that the professional development approach would support the community's needs.

In her essay on the development of a curriculum for the Guttman Center delivered on Saturdays at a local community child care center, Marjorie Brickley talks about how the curriculum drew on the developmental-interaction approach, a signature of Bank Street pedagogy. Brickley underscores how a curriculum in a community-based learning initiative needs to ebb and flow in order to adapt to the knowledge the predominantly family child care practitioner participants bring and what they want to learn.

Virginia Casper and Rebecca Newman talk about their relationship as a coach mentor and coach and how their conversations helped Newman as the coach to work through some of her expectations and assumptions about what constitutes quality care. Across all of these essays, the common message is the importance of using a strengths-based approach, of listening to caregivers, and adjusting professional development opportunities to meet their needs. In her introduction to these three different views of the initiative, Casper asks whether the customary definition of a program's "success" allows for the contradictions between the program's ability to meet a specific community's needs and its "scalability."

Turning to preservice infant-toddler preparation, Jennifer Longley and Jennifer Gilken outline a program at the Borough of Manhattan Community College that places relationship-based practices at its center. Faculty develop individual relationships with students, teaching every student multiple times over the two years of the program. Students also work with the same group of infants and toddlers over several years to learn about the importance of continuity of care. Like the Bank Street faculty who worked with the Guttman Center, Jennifer Longley and Jennifer Gilken argue that their program seeks to advocate for the important and complex work of infant-toddler professionals and to do so in a way that gives voice to their students' experiences and perspectives.

The essays in this special issue attest to the give and take necessary to support children's development when families, communities, and infant-toddler educators come together— whether it is a family child care or center-based setting. Relationship-based practices are so much a part of this work that more must be done to elevate its importance in higher education programs and professional development opportunities.

Tension Between the Local and Contextual and Larger Scale Systems Work

Throughout the world, the care and education of infants and toddlers has often grown organically as needs within a community have arisen. Program offerings and the people who have cared for infants and toddlers have varied, depending on culture, context, and nation. In her article on infant-toddler care and education in Africa, for example, Hasina Ebrahim highlights how multi-generations of men, not always fathers, have taken social responsibility for very young children, a situation very different

from the one in Western nation states. Ebrahim also troubles dominant Western narratives about who is fit to be a primary caregiver, such as child-headed families within the context of HIV-AIDS, arguing that context is inextricably tied to how infant-toddler care and education is enacted.

Writing from Jamaica, Zoyah Kinkhead-Clark and Kerry-Ann Escayg illustrate how Jamaica's history as a country with a small island development status and limited funds chose to meet the demand for infant-toddler care by investing in day nurseries often within the homes of infant-toddler educators. In some ways this investment has contributed to more women being able to work, but the access to high-quality care arrangements for children under three is limited. Kinkhead-Clark and Escayg point to promising programs in other under-resourced countries to demonstrate what attention to local solutions can bring to the conversation. Both of these international papers highlight that history, economics, and community values shape what comes to be accepted as infant-toddler care.

While the organic and community-responsive histories of infant-toddler programming has worked in some geographies, there still remains a need in most nations for families to have access to and be able to participate in high-quality programming for their infants and toddlers. One dilemma is how to do this on a larger scale while remaining supportive of the local and the contextual. This tension was present in the work of the Guttman Center described in three essays in this issue, which provided the resources of Bank Street faculty as well as regular coaching visits to help community infant-toddler caregivers. When funding for the pilot ended, the question of scale was raised. We are left with the question of how policymakers invest in infant-toddler programming in a way that is responsive to local needs and inclusive of cultural values and community priorities.

This is one of the challenges that Joan Lombardi takes on in her essay, "Overlooked Too Long: Focusing on the Potential of Infant and Toddler Child Care." She suggests several pathways for action. In addition to increased government spending on programming for children under three, Lombardi calls for development of an infant-toddler scholarship system rather than the use of vouchers, for provision of networks of support in communities for infant-toddler educators, and for adequate compensation for infant-toddler providers.

Working from an international perspective, Linda Richter echoes Lombardi's vision and suggests that the World Health Organization's (2018) Nurturing Care Framework be adopted internationally. Richter outlines this approach as a nested set of activities that begins with providing adequate health care, nutrition, shelter, early childhood programming and support services for children and their families. At the larger societal level, this framework calls for meaningful government policies and investments that ensure young children receive a high-quality educational foundation in the earliest years. This includes parental leave and the provision of accessible, affordable, and high-quality early educational programming. From Richter's perspective, it is crucial to consider the interdisciplinary nature of infant-toddler education and care that requires policymakers to invest in education, housing, and health care.

Two final essays argue that the only way to build a system of high-quality early childhood opportunities for young children is to focus on the compensation and preparation of the people who work with infants and toddlers. Jennifer Mortenson, Maryssa Kucskar Mitsch, Kalli Decker, Maria Fusaro, San-

dra Plata-Potter, Holly Brophy-Herb, Claire Vallotton, and Martha Ball succinctly present the many paradoxes that shape the current system of infant-toddler care, showing how the lack of certification requirements, limited standards, and a focus on families has resulted in an underprepared and under-compensated workforce, which in turn contributes to variable quality in the programs children attend. They outline a new initiative entitled the Collaborative for Understanding the Pedagogy of Infant and Toddler Development (CUPID), which brings a group of 57 scholars from 45 institutions of higher education to research and map out extensive programs of preparation that do not subsume infant-toddler knowledge and competencies within other age-group programs.

In her essay, “A Bizarro World for Infants and Toddlers and their Teachers,” Marcy Whitebook argues forcefully that professional development and educator preparation are not enough unless infant-toddler teachers are recognized and compensated for the complex work they do. In her words, “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.” Without attention to the quality of the work life of infant-toddler caregivers—without paid preparation time, reasonable benefits, and compensation on par with those of colleagues in the public education system—infant-toddler care will remain fragmented and variable in quality because professionals will leave for better job opportunities.

Over the past decade there has been significant policy interest in creating systems of high-quality early education in many countries. The essays in this issue caution against assuming that a one-size-fits-all approach is possible, because communities vary considerably. Scalability itself is not the answer, nor is focusing solely on supply of child care opportunities, which in most countries cannot meet the demand for infant-toddler care and education. Instead, as Joan Lombardi suggests, the field needs “new resources, new strategies and a new orientation.” And for many authors in this volume, many of these strategies and resources must focus on the infant-toddler workforce.

The papers in this issue call to all of us in early education to advocate forcefully for infant-toddler education, for the communities in which it takes place, and for the workforce that facilitates children’s development and family members’ ability to work outside the home. They challenge the dominant narrative that the care and education of children aged zero to three has little impact on children’s futures, that it is not work worthy of a living wage, specialized preparation pathways, or major policy investments. Together, this collection offers a vision of new pathways and resources that the field might utilize to address the under-resourcing and inadequate attention given to policy and practice addressing the zero to three space. This issue of the *Occasional Paper Series* makes clear that infants and toddlers and those who educate them are gaining more of the policy and research spotlight. It behooves all of us in the field of early care and education to muster our networks and resources, including the empirical research base, to push for the reforms that have been deeply needed for a long time.

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