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Early Childhood Education and Care: Special Issue Introduction

Linda Houser, *Widener University, Chester*

Jessica M. Kahn, *City University of New York*

Corey S. Shdaimah, *University of Maryland, School of Social Work, Baltimore*

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has rarely been examined from a social work perspective (Azzi-Lessing, 2010; Kahn, 2014). Yet, the case for attention from social work seems obvious. Early childhood education and care services and systems touch the lives of millions of people around the world from the children participating in programs and their family members to the workers providing the care and education, employers, and broader society. Not only are millions of people affected, but there are profound social justice considerations related to structuring the provision of and access to quality ECEC services. In addition, social workers can enrich research, policy development, and administration of systems with a focus on a holistic perspective and foundational social work values.

The articles in this special issue address ECEC through a social work lens in several ways. First, they draw from social work values, such as social justice, equality, and self-determination. Second, they elucidate the value of using a holistic, person-in-environment orientation to analyze and develop the many aspects of early education and care. The person-in-environment perspective is familiar to social workers but often missing from discussions when early education and child care programs and policies are designed and evaluated. Third, the articles explore the ways that, like social work, ECEC work tends to be essentialized, naturalized, and gendered (coded as "women's work"), despite the fact that such work requires skill and has, as its focus, the well-being of future generations. Finally, taken together, these articles demonstrate the need for advocacy from social workers and our allies to find common ground to improve the systems and daily operations of early education and child care. Social workers are policy practitioners who can build the bridges necessary to unite groups that may seem to have disparate interests, such as providers and parents. Social workers can also bring together academics and others such as funders, activists, policymakers and providers, whose work often proceeds on parallel but separate tracks. Indeed, this special issue includes voices of not only academic researchers but also work with funders (the Robinson and Mathew article) and an ECEC educator (the Beaudin article). Informed by high-quality evidence, we can work together to develop more just programs and systems for all members of society.

Social Work Values

Although the proportions of children who participate in non-parental care prior to their entry in public school vary by country, the general trend is toward increasing participation worldwide. As the majority of children are in families where parents work at least part time and most children participate in non-parental care prior to their entry in public school (Brooks-Gunn, Markman-Pithers, & Rouse, 2016; Magnuson & Shager, 2010; Mamedova &

Redford, 2013; OECD, 2017), ECEC is a practical issue. But it is also a social and economic justice issue. For example, workers who provide early education and care services tend to be poorly paid and often live in or near poverty (Lokteff & Piercy, 2012; Phillips, Austin, & Whitebook, 2016; Porter, 2012; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Not only is care work for children and others performed by a primarily low-wage workforce, but care workers are disproportionately women, migrants, and racial and ethnic minorities (Hirata, 2016; Ergas, Jenson, & Michel, 2017). To the extent that low pay may lead to a discouraged and disaffected workforce, it can affect the quality of care children receive.

In addition, for years now, the children who could most benefit from high-quality early education, such as those from lower-income or geographically isolated families, are the ones who are least likely to receive it (Bassok, 2010; Brooks-Gunn, Markman-Pithers, & Rouse, 2016; Elango, García, Heckman, & Hojman, 2015; Gormley, 2013; Gormley & Gayer, 2005; Gormley, Phillips, & Gayer, 2008; Karoly et al., 1998; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Magnuson & Shager, 2010; Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Waldfogel, 2006). Susan Roll's article in this special issue points out both the similarities and differences in child care access faced by families in rural locations relative to families in other areas of the United States. Roll also reveals the trade-offs that low-income families in the United States make between income-limited benefits and better working conditions. Families just above income-eligibility levels are unable to simultaneously realize financial gain and child care stability due to the "cliff effect," a problem that would be rendered moot if there were universally accessible and affordable child care.

Is early education and child care a public good or a private resource? The U.S. government has signaled its position by its lack of a clear, unified, subsidized system informed by research evidence (Palley & Shdaimah, 2014; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). Unlike children in most other developed nations, children in the United States are not uniformly served by public programs, and there are not enough slots or funding to serve all children who are eligible for publicly funded or subsidized programs or to provide universally high-quality services (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, Brown, & Horowitz, 2015; Barnett & Hustedt, 2005; Currie & Neidell, 2007; Currie & Thomas, 1999; Schmitt, Matthews, Smith, & Robbins, 2013). Other nations have more integrated, universal systems (Moss, 2012) and serve almost all of their three- and four-year old children through public programs (Ellingsæter, 2015; Fagnani, 2015; Gambaro, Stewart, & Waldfogel, 2015; Lokteff & Piercy, 2012; Ploug, 2012; Warner & Gradus, 2011). That ECEC policies have a social justice impact can be inferred from the insights of a study by Esping-Anderson (2009) showing that although the cost of care is not significantly higher in countries with more generous policies, such as France and Sweden, than it is in the United States, it is distributed more equally. In the United States, the primary social goals that are promoted through the limited ECEC policies are maternal employment of low-income women through child care subsidies and, to a limited extent, provision of educational opportunities and services to low-income children through programs such as Head Start.

But nations have some problems in common. For example, child care providers around the world tend to be poorly paid and trained (Lokteff & Piercy, 2012). At a most basic level, various countries and regions struggle to meet demand, and supply and demand have been mismatched for years (Queralt & Witte, 1998; Queralt & Witte, 1999). What happens to the recruitment and retention of qualified staff as enrollment increases (Oberhuemer, 2015)? And how is quality affected? A perceived move away from more nurturing care, particularly for the youngest children, to more academically focused "edu-care" (Ploug, 2012, p. 521) worries

some who see these as competing rather than complementary paradigms. In addition, nations struggle with inclusion of linguistically, intellectually, developmentally, economically, and culturally diverse children and their families.

Social Work Perspectives

Early education and child care is influenced by different kinds of relationships. As shown by the Palley and Shdaimah article in this special issue, providers may express strong emotional commitment to their work, as well as to the holistic well-being of the children and parents they serve, even as they rely on fair remuneration for this work to secure their own families' well-being. However, in the literature in general, the influences that such personal connections have on the discourse is often an undercurrent but rarely explicitly acknowledged. The intimate nature of connections between the children, families, and providers comes with tremendous advantages, yet also presents some challenges. For example, the distributed leadership approach that Beaudin describes in her special issue article is largely possible in early education and care because of the personal nature of the work. However, the intimacy among the workers, children, and parents can be used to reify caregiving as a private matter rather than a public problem.

Social workers tend to understand the kind of complexity that ECEC raises, as the social work profession is grounded in and accomplished through professional helping relationships. Indeed, early social reformers often focused on the family domain and relationships. Hull House reformers, often viewed as the foremothers of social work, set as one of their first agendas the provision of child care to low-income immigrant women in the impoverished neighborhoods of Chicago (Addams, 1910). Their focus was often one of necessity; while low-income families needed child care in order to ensure the safety of their children, it was considered inferior to the care of children by their own mothers.

As part of its person-in-environment perspective, social work is well-suited to illuminate the interplay between individual decision-making, workplace and cultural norms, communities and other environments, and social policies. For example, Jennifer Otten and colleagues' article in this special issue examines the impact of legislative minimum wage increases in Seattle, Washington, on child care providers and staff. While some workers either had received or would be receiving higher wages, these were often achieved by cutting staff hours and staff-child ratios, which was burdensome to staff and potentially detrimental to children. This article reveals the importance of comprehensive approaches to child care policy that consider the interconnected interests of children, families, and providers through broader societal lenses.

Essentialization, Naturalization, and Gender

Still today, non-paid child care often falls on mothers, which absents them from the paid labor force far more often, and for longer periods, than fathers. Many of today's feminists and scholars who are in favor of policy reform in the realm of ECEC emphasize the need to acknowledge care work in order to mitigate the burden on care providers. They draw connections between recognizing care work and the ability of women to fully participate in society as citizens (Fineman, 1995; Young, 1990). Martha Albertson Fineman (1995) argued that the designation of caretaking[1] as part of the private rather than the public sphere has perpetuated the dependency of both those who receive care and those who care for others.

[1] Fineman (1995) chooses the term "caretaking" as she believes that it denotes the value and importance of the activity, whereas she sees the term caregiving as reinforcing the devaluation of caring for others (p. 9).

Because caretaking is either completely unremunerated or poorly paid, those who carry it out must depend upon the earnings or support of others for their own survival (upon which the care of their charges also hinges). In the idealized nuclear heterosexual family, providing support through "productive" (i.e. wage earning) labor is the role of men. Families that are "lacking" a successful male breadwinner to support those needing and giving care are seen as incomplete or failing. Feminist theorists like Iris Marion Young who propose a reframing of caretaking as a valued activity note that such a reframing requires that we challenge the

> deeply held assumption that moral agency and full citizenship require that a person be autonomous and independent...Female experience of social relations, arising both from women's typical domestic care responsibilities and from the kinds of paid work that many women do, tends to recognize dependence as a basic human condition (cf. Hartsock, 1983, chap.1). (Young, 1990, p. 55).

In other words, Young and other feminist thinkers ask us to recognize that we are all dependent upon someone else at some point in our lives. Therefore, dependency should not diminish or stigmatize either the person needing care or the person providing care. Recognizing the value and worth of caring and being cared for means acknowledging and supporting care work as part of human interdependence rather than relegating it to the invisible realm of the private sphere where families must fend for themselves as best they can.

Even in countries that have relatively robust, public ECEC systems, these systems may serve different or even competing purposes (Morgan & Zippel, 2003). Child care and early education may be used to shore up a maternalist agenda rather than promote women's equality. In one study that compared parental leave in 21 countries, Misra, Budig, and Boeckmann (2011) found that countries with both the shortest and the longest leave policies had higher maternal wage penalties, indicating that both ends of the spectrum - forcing women to choose between work and child rearing or encouraging women through incentives to stay home rather than utilize child care - may have negative impacts on women's equality in the workforce. In some countries, policy has shifted to provide women with opportunities that allow them to combine work and child-rearing through government-supported child care and education programming so as to combat the declining birth-rates that have been attributed to an increase in the number of women choosing career over childbearing when the two seem incompatible (Grant et al., 2004). Still other countries, such as Sweden (Ploug, 2012), have used early child care policy to increase paternal bonding and participation in family life through paid leave incentives. I-Hsuan Lin's article in this special issue presents a multi-faceted approach for assessing how countries' policies of leave, ECEC, and flexible work arrangements compare on both measures of gender equality and measures of comprehensive coverage.

Advocacy and Common Ground

While each article in this special issue highlights challenges in early childhood education and care, the authors ultimately move readers from challenge to opportunity via recommendations for changes and additions that - like the social work profession itself - may operate at individual, local, communal, national, or international levels. For example, in their special issue article, Robinson and Mathew describe a dynamic partnership between a philanthropic organization, child care advocates, and worker justice organizations that was attentive to women and color and low-wage workers as both providers and consumers of early childhood care. In an example of how macro issues (i.e. public policies) can spark micro-level connections, Guo and Zan, in their special issue article, analyzed the legislative process

behind a proposed paid family leave policy in Hawaii. Hawaii has a Democratic super-majority that has considered a number of legislative proposals, yet none has been adopted. Businesses, unions, and others have come together around this issue, demonstrating the far reach of ECEC policy to many and various stakeholders.

In their 2014 book, *In Our Hands: The Struggle for U.S. Child Care Policy*, Palley and Shdaimah write from a compelling premise that we believe can be extended internationally: namely, that the challenges we face in ECEC are remediable not in a single grand gesture, but through concerted, sustained, creative efforts by multiple stakeholders. The specter of limited resources is felt, in a very real way, by parents, caretakers, educators, and administrators. In this context, it makes sense that concerns might come to be framed as "either...or" dilemmas: *either* we raise wages for child care providers *or* we reduce costs for families; *either* we raise standards of child care quality *or* we increase available child care spots; *either* we invest in securing paid time off for parents *or* we invest in workplace gender equality. In bringing together this set of articles, we argue that, as long as our conversations about ECEC remain siloed and zero-summed, comprehensive and sustainable solutions will remain out of reach.

Social workers are well-equipped to contribute to the ECEC sector in at least two ways: first, social workers view issues as having - simultaneously - individual, community, and policy dimensions; and, second, social workers' skills sets include collaborating with groups towards "common ground." It is our hope that, taken together, these articles will provide social workers and their allies with both knowledge and direction for work in early childhood education and care.

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Author´s Address:
Linda Houser, Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Ph.D. Program Director (Social Work)
Widener University
One University Place, Chester, PA 19013
(610) 499-1169
ldhouser@widener.edu
www.widener.edu

Author´s Address:
Jessica M. Kahn, LMSW, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Social Work
MSW Program Graduate Advisor
Lehman College/City University of New York

Author´s Address:
Corey S. Shdaimah, LL.M., PhD
Professor
Academic Coordinator, MSW/JD Dual Degree Program
University of Maryland, School of Social Work
525 W. Redwood St.
Baltimore, MD 21201
cshdaimah@ssw.umaryland.edu
410-706-7544