# Rights, Raises, and Respect for Early Childhood Teachers

## A Four-Decade Perspective

by Marcy Whitebook and Rory Darrah

In its landmark 1972 report, *Windows on Day Care*, the National Council of Jewish Women spoke of the inadequate supply and quality of child care services in the United States:

> Large numbers of children are neglected; still larger numbers of children now receive care which, at best, can be called only custodial, and which, at its worst, is deplorable. Only a relatively small proportion are benefitting from truly developmental care.

The plight of child care teachers was central to the report's analysis:

> Those interested in children must face the reality that good care is expensive, because good care requires people of ability and training who must be paid adequately if they are to be attracted to this field of work. The quality of child care depends on what we are willing to pay those who are responsible for it. We are shortchanging children when pay scales such as those reported by survey participants were found characteristic of so large a proportion of centers, both non-profit and proprietary.
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> Clearly, when wage scales such as those reported occur so widely and on so large a scale, we are asking thousands of non-professional workers to subsidize the care of children of other women. We are also excluding from the child care field many women . . . who cannot afford to accept salaries as low as some of those described, no matter how rewarding work is with youngsters in human terms (Keyserling, 1972).[1]

Against this backdrop in the 1970s, small groups of child care teachers in a number of communities across the country — Ann Arbor, Berkeley/San Francisco, Boston, Madison, Minneapolis, and New Haven — began to talk about their rights as early educators. They understood firsthand the consequences of a system resting on an underpaid, unstable, and often untrained workforce. They set out to do something about it.

From their inception, the issue of the 'teacher voice' stood out as a unique feature of these groups. Members' on-the-job experiences as teachers were the cornerstone of the movement they created, and were reflected in how they framed the issues and chose advocacy strategies. We were two of the founders of the Berkeley-based group called the Child Care Employee Project (CCEP).[1] We and our fellow teacher activists saw our efforts as being central to women's liberation, racial equality, and economic equity; we were also steeped in child development practice and theory, proud of that knowledge base,

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Achieving rights, raises, and respect for early educators has been the organizing principle of our work lives for more than 40 years. We began our careers as teachers of young children. Throughout the '70s up to the present we have been engaged in research, public education, policy development, training, and advocacy efforts focused on the early care and education workforce.

1 A few years later *Day Care Centers in the U.S., A National Profile 1976-1977* further explored the problem of inadequate wages (Ruopp et al., 1979): "While the great majority of these staff earn more than the minimum wage, day care classroom staff are paid far less than the average annual salary of public schoolteachers. Even those staff whose salaries are at the upper end of the average salary range are earning barely enough to support a family."

2 At first, CCEP was called the Child Care Staff Education Project. Eventually CCEP became the Center for the Child Care Workforce (www.ccw.org/).

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and viewed teaching young children as skilled and professional work.

From the onset, this movement was about more than improving our lot as child care teachers. We connected the well-being of children and families with our own, and were explicit about the link between the quality of child care jobs and the quality of services. We wanted more respect and better pay for ourselves, but we were just as deeply committed to upgrading the care and education of young children, and to making child care affordable and accessible to all families. To us, teachers' rights were essential to ensuring the rights of children.

Peggy Haack, a long-time early childhood practitioner, formerly the Worthy Wage Coordinator for the Center for the Child Care Workforce and currently the Outreach Coordinator at the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association (WECA), was active in MACWU, the Madison (Wisconsin) Child Care Workers United from its inception:

"My first child care experience was a very, very oppressive work environment that put me on the path to activism as soon as I got out of college. I thought, 'Oh my God, what is happening here?' I got involved with several people who formed a support group and met for Sunday brunch. We were bonded by the fact that we knew that what was happening in child care was wrong. The people who were gathered together were all from small nonprofits, all taking care of poor children, engaged with families and really wanting to make a change in society."

Nancy DeProsse, a leader of the BADWA, Boston Area Day Care Workers Association and a union activist now with the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), attributed her involvement in organizing, in part, to her education at Wheelock College:

"I received a good education from Wheelock. I had been taught about quality early care and education programming. So when I got to my first day care center I realized that the actual situation going on was nothing like they said early care and education should be."

CCEP began by offering drop-in support sessions for child care teachers, focusing on legal rights with respect to wage and hour laws, and developing handouts addressing specific problems such as breaks, inadequate materials, unpaid overtime, grievance procedures, and lack of input into decision-making at their centers. (These handouts would be expanded into articles that appeared in 1981 and 1982 issues of *Exchange* magazine). This was literally a 'bake sale' movement, although the most common goods sold were buttons, bumper stickers, and t-shirts with such slogans as "Give a Child Care Worker a Break" and "Rights, Raises, Respect." CCEP also focused on documenting the conditions of teachers[2], and gradually turned to public policy strategies, for example, winning 'whistle-blowing' protection in California for child care workers who reported licensing abuses in their programs, and securing cost-of-living increases for teachers in state-funded centers, partly as a result of a 'play dough' campaign.[3]

In the early 1980s these groups formed the Child Care Employee Caucus within NAEYC and began to meet annually to compare notes on their local efforts and to craft strategies to engage more members of the early childhood field, and NAEYC itself, in advocacy focused on the rights and needs of the workforce. In combination with reports that documented their low pay and inadequate benefits and drew the link between turnover and child well-being, it became more and more difficult to ignore this organized group of teachers at conferences and meetings.[4] While many of the issues raised had already been articulated by the National Council of Jewish Women in the early 1970s, there was something more compelling in the fact that teachers themselves were now raising them.

> The Child Care Employee Project's materials carried the following statement, which was echoed in the writings of other groups:
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> CCEP believes that the quality of care children receive is directly linked to the working conditions of their caregivers. Low pay, unpaid overtime, lack of benefits and little input into decision-making create tension in programs and lead to high staff turnover. The exit of trained staff from the field gnaws away at the morale of those who remain, and limits efforts to build consistent, responsive environments for children.
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> (*Child Care Employee News*, 1982)

The Child Care Employee Caucus eventually became the Worthy Wage Caucus within NAEYC, and in the early 1990s launched the Worthy Wage Campaign, a multi-year public education campaign, which fueled many public workforce initiatives. Some of these, like T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood and California's CARES initiative (AB212), which supported higher edu-

3 When CCEP published its study of 95 San Francisco child care center teachers, "Who's minding the child care workers: A look at Staff Burn-Out," in *Children Today in 1981*, the article was circulated among teachers and advocates around the country (Whitebook, Howes, Darrah, & Friedman, 1981). Other studies published by Kathy Modigliani in Ann Arbor, the Minnesota Child Care Workers Alliances, and others broke important ground in the arena of action research.

4 Several hundred teachers mixed an enormous batch of play dough on the Capitol steps in Sacramento, and delivered it to legislators with the message, "We need real dough." Similar strategies were pursued in other communities, with Boston and Madison actively involved in union organizing as well.

5 By demonstrating the link between low pay and poor-quality care, the widely publicized National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1990) drew supporters into the movement who had previously been reluctant, but now felt more comfortable talking about compensation as it related to the well-being of children.

cation access for thousands of practitioners, still operate today.

As the movement grew, so did the concept of educators' rights. In the 1970s teachers focused on their legal rights, but by the 1990s teachers began to speak more comprehensively about their right to a broad swath of workplace policies outlined in CCW's *Creating Better Child Care Jobs: Model Work Standards for Center-Based Child Care,* which covered the following topics[5]:

- wages
- benefits
- job descriptions and evaluations
- hiring and promotions
- termination, suspension, severance, and grievance procedures
- classroom assignments, hours of work, and planning time
- communication, team building, and staff meetings
- decision and problem solving
- professional development
- professional support
- diversity
- health and safety
- physical setting to assure good jobs for adults and good jobs for children

(See Preamble to Model Work Standards below).

In addition, the Worthy Wage Campaign expanded the notion of rights to include access to affordable education and professional development for teachers. Better pay was understood to mean the right to a living wage and benefits, not just an incremental raise. Viral by the standards of the day, the Worthy Wage Campaign shined a light on early educators' rights in hundreds



6 A similar document was created by and for family child care providers (see References).

## Worthy Wage Campaign Principles

Whether we call ourselves child care workers, family child care providers, preschool or early childhood teachers, teacher assistants or caregivers, we are working in a field where most employees are underpaid and undervalued — a field that is continually losing its best workers because of poor wages and benefits.

The Worthy Wage Campaign is a five-year grassroots effort to empower ourselves and mobilize to reverse this child care staffing crisis. It is organized around the following three principles:

- To create a unified voice for the concerns of the early care and education workforce at the national, state, and local levels.
- To increase the value and respect for those who provide early care and education through improving their wages, benefits, working conditions, and training opportunities.
- To promote the accessibility and affordability of high-quality early care and education options that meet the diverse needs of children and families.

Each year the focal point of the Campaign is a nationwide Worthy Wage Day.

(*CCEP News*, 1992)

of communities across the country, even drawing national attention from CBS and ABC news. (For a detailed discussion of the strengths and weakness of the child care compensation movement and the Worthy Wage Campaign, see *Working for Worthy Wages: A History of the Movement to Improve Child Care Compensation* (Whitebook, 2002), portions of which have been adapted for this article. www.irle.berkeley.edu/cscce/?s=Working+for+worthy+wages

Today early educators are very much on the nation's mind, perhaps at the level they were during the Worthy Wage Campaign. We, like so many others in the field, are heartened to hear President Obama declare, "This is not babysitting. This is teaching," in reference to what early educators do and call for comparable wages with K-12 teachers for those early educators who find themselves working with four year olds through his proposed universal preschool program (www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/

video/2013/02/14/president-obama-early-childhood-education). At all levels of policymaking, not just the White House, there is increased attention on effective early childhood teaching. States have already or are engaged in developing early educator competencies, and, realizing, to some extent, the Worthy Wage Campaign Principles by acknowledging the importance of supporting teachers and providers in accessing education and professional development as central to early childhood quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) across the nation.

But amidst this focus on what teachers need to know and be able to do, and developing policies to assess their practice, there is almost no discussion of educators' rights: what teachers *need* from their work environments that will enable them to apply what they know and continue to grow and develop on the job. These include earning a living wage. Criteria in quality rating and improvement systems — arguably the most widely accepted quality improvement strategy — are mostly silent on issues of educators' rights, such as, adequate opportunities for teachers to share ideas and learn from one another, paid time for planning, and policies to promote initiative and teamwork among teaching staff. They are also very weak on financial rewards for practitioners (Austin et al., 2011). It's time to hear from teachers and providers again to remind us about what they need in order to engage in good practice and to continue to learn.

After four decades we have not traveled far enough from the conditions described by the National Council of Jewish Women. (See a recent article by Jon Cohn: www.newrepublic.com/article/112892/hell-american-day-care.) The interdependence of quality early care and education, quality environments, and appropriate compensation for teachers can no longer be denied nor refuted. As we move into an era of increased national attention and rigorous, quantitative monitoring of quality, the voices of teachers are needed now more than ever. We must join with other stakeholders, including parents who are justly concerned about high costs. It is also time to find the answer to the Worthy Wage Campaign plea, "Parents can't afford to pay. Teacher and providers can't afford to stay. Help us find a better way."

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