Who Are Child Care Workers?

The Search for Answers

Subjects & Predicates — Rich Rosenkoetter

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You receive a call from the local newspaper. The reporter wants to interview you about the early childhood profession: Terrific! She starts by asking you how many early childhood teachers there are nationwide. Your throat goes dry and your hands start sweating. Already you can't answer a question, and it's so straightforward.

Your State's human services agency has agreed to review the salary schedule for child care workers in state-subsidized programs. They've asked you to prepare a summary paper that compares child care salaries in different states and contrasts them to the salaries for other comparable professions. You grab the opportunity, starting with a call to the U.S. Census Bureau. After an hour on the phone you are still trying to understand how they classify child care workers.

As two individuals who have tried to make sense of our national statistics on the child care workforce, these scenarios are all too familiar. It is a frustrating task, like negotiating a labyrinth with no exit. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive, reliable information hinders the early childhood community's efforts to establish and promote its work as a vital profession.

Recognition of the importance of early childhood staff is increasing despite intolerably high turnover rates, a growing shortage of qualified personnel to fill vacancies, and persistent low morale among these underpaid, undervalued workers (Whitebook, 1986). The time seems ripe for a major initiative to improve the training, working conditions, pay, and, ultimately, the status of early childhood teachers.

Without accurate, basic data on the early childhood work force, however, advocacy efforts are handicapped. When we call for higher salaries, we are asked, "Higher than what?" When we state that job turnover is excessive, we are asked, "How excessive?" And, when we demand better benefits, we are asked, "What benefits do you get now?" Our answers come from local salary surveys conducted in a few regions across the country. Nationwide or even statewide figures do not exist. Informa-

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tion on benefits and working conditions is even harder to find.

Public perceptions of the early childhood field also suffer from our inability to provide basic information about ourselves. We cannot tell people who we are. We do not even have an accurate count of early childhood teachers.

The need for a comprehensive, national, up-to-date data base on the early childhood work force is critical. It is up to us to demand that it be developed and to offer our assistance. This article is designed to launch this effort. We start with an overview of data from federal agencies, their definitions of the child care work force, and major limitations of these data. We then propose several first steps in an effort to develop an accurate, realistic national profile of our profession.

Entering the maze

It is very instructive to call the U.S. Bureau of the Census (Census) and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) with a set of basic questions about the early childhood work force. These two agencies collect most of the available information on our national labor force—its size; worker characteristics such as age, sex, race, and education; distribution of workers across occupations and industries; rates of employment and unemployment; salaries and income; and average hours of work (Table 1 summarizes the basic characteristics of the Census and BLS data).

Let's start with basic information on the number of early childhood providers. The Census will tell you that there were 677,000 of us in 1984. You'll immediately question this number. And rightly so. The National Day Care Study (Divine-Hawkins, 1981) counted 1.8 million family day care homes, with one provider each, almost 10 years ago. Add to this our own 1985 count of 67,000 child care centers (NAEYC, 1986), each of which employs multiple staff, and you are well above the 677,000 figure from Census.

Well, you are told, there were an additional 383,000 child care workers who worked in private households. That helps, but your total is still well below what other sources would lead you to believe. Maybe you should add the 330,000 individuals classified as "Prekindergarten and Kindergarten Teachers," as differentiated from "Child Care Workers." That brings your grand total to 1,393,000 early childhood teachers in 1984, which still falls short of the 1.8 million partial count in 1977.

Moving on to salary information, the situation seems to improve—at first. You learn that the median annual earnings of full-time child care workers was $9,204 in 1984, unless they worked in a private household, in which case they earned $4,420. This compares to the poverty level of $10,610. So, the Census agrees

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with the reports from salary surveys and with the experience of the field: Child care workers, as a whole, are not even earning poverty level wages.

Now that you have some interesting data, you call the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to confirm the numbers. You learn that individuals working in "child day care services" earned an average $5.04 per hour in 1985. But the Census told you that child care workers earned $3.22 per hour in 1980. It's hard to believe that the earnings of child care workers could increase so quickly.

You decide to ask about job turnover. First they ask if you want separation rates or transfers or both. Given what you learned from your efforts to get a total count of child care workers, you ask for both, rather than try to figure out the difference between separations and transfers. The answer is astounding: Child care workers have the highest rates of turnover of all occupations. Between 1980 and 1990, 42% of all child care workers will need to be replaced each year, just to maintain the current supply of child care providers. You knew things were bad from the salary surveys that showed turnover rates between 15% and 30%. Now the federal government has added 12% to this. Why are these numbers different? Which numbers should you believe?

To summarize what you have learned so far, the Census count shows that there are about 1.4 million child care workers nationwide, even though this doesn't even account for all of the family day care providers 10 years ago. You also know that people working in child care earned either $3.22 per hour in 1980 or $5.04 per hour in 1985, but they probably didn't earn both. And, you know that turnover rates are very high, maybe 15% or maybe 42%.

Tackling the definitions

As you ponder these numbers, you begin to wonder if the problem lies with how the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics define early childhood professionals. The Census provides numbers of child care workers from three different categories: (1) Child Care Worker, Private Household, (2) Child Care

Worker, Except Private Household, and (3) Teacher, Prekindergarten and Kindergarten. That's a start. Now all you have to do is figure out who fits where.

Child Care Worker, Private Household includes any individual who provides child care in a private home, either the child's home or the provider's home. That sounds like in-home providers and family day care providers. But, it also includes part-time babysitters.

Child Care Worker, Except Private Household would appear to include everyone else. But, there's a third category: *Teacher, Prekindergarten and Kindergarten.* How does this differ from Child Care Workers who work outside of private households? Child Care Workers, Except Private Household work in out-of-home child care settings such as centers, nursery schools, preschools, and child development programs. Teachers, Prekindergarten (which cannot be counted separate from Teachers, Kindergarten) also work in preschools, day care centers, and child development programs. Where's the distinction?

You really have to dig for the answer. An arcane volume called the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (nicknamed the DOT) lists specific job descriptions for the occupational categories used by the Census and the BLS (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1977). The answer revealed by the DOT is reminiscent of the worst stereotypes that create artificial distinctions between caring and learning, and place child care several notches below teaching on the status continuum.

According to the DOT, Child Care Workers "read aloud," "organize activities of prekindergarten children," "teach children in simple painting, drawing, and songs," "direct children in eating, resting, and toileting," "maintain discipline," and "help children to remove outer garments." Prekindergarten Teachers "plan group activities to stimulate learning," "instruct children in activities designed to promote social, physical and intellectual growth," and "prepare children for primary school." The use of the term "instruct" is restricted to preschool teachers, and descriptions of nonacademic responsibilities are reserved for child care workers.

This is not only aggravating and inaccurate, it also poses serious problems for our efforts to obtain a statistical profile of early childhood professionals. Specifically, foster parents and grandparents, lunchroom and playground monitors in elementary and secondary schools, attendants in residential institutions, and school bus attendants are counted under "Child Care Worker, Except Private Household." There is no way to separate these workers from individuals we would define as early childhood teachers.

Perhaps the Bureau of Labor Statistics can improve on this situation. Alas, not only does the same distinction between caring and teaching exist, but the BLS places all Child Care Workers in a category that includes staff of residential institutions and schools for the handicapped.

If you think this is confusing and illogical, try asking about resource and referral professionals. They may be categorized as a Child Care Worker or maybe as a Social Service Technician by the Census, or as a Social Worker by the BLS. Professionals who work with abused children in respite care programs may fall under Social Welfare Service Aid (BLS) or just Welfare Service Aid (Census). Finally, directors of early education programs theoretically fall under Education Administrator in both the Census and BLS systems. This merges them with university deans, principals, directors of education in prisons, and directors of university admissions, among others.

Where does this leave us? We know that preschool teachers and child care workers may be the same people who simply choose to describe themselves differently. In the information available, sterotypes of child care staff who "remove outer garments" and preschool staff who "instruct children in preparation for primary school" abound. Kindergarten teachers cannot be separated from prekindergarten teachers, and early childhood directors cannot be separated from university presidents. Family day care providers and resource and referral staff can fall almost anywhere.

Beyond data and definitions

Maybe there is a clue in the salary data that will solve this puzzle. The Bureau of Labor Statistics mentioned "Child Day Care Services." Could this be the missing link?

The answer to this question calls attention to several important distinctions between data collected by the Census and that collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unfortunately, it also makes the picture even more complicated.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census collects all of its data from individuals, or "households" in the language of the Census. People report their own living arrangements, occupations, earnings, child care arrangements, and so on. The Bureau of Labor Statistics collects information from employers, or business "establishments." For example, the BLS asks employers what they pay their employees, whereas the

Table 1

Summary of information from the Bureau of the Census and Bureau of Labor Statistics

	Census	BLS
Information sources	Households/individuals	Work establishments State employment agencies
Definitions	*Child Care Workers, Private Household:* In-home and family day care providers.	*Child Care Workers:* provide child care in centers, nursery schools, work sites, residential institutions, and schools for the handicapped. Also includes babysitters.
	Child Care Workers, Except Private Household: provide child care in out-of-home settings, including foster parents, lunchroom & playroom monitors, schoolbus attendants.	*Teacher, Preschool and Kindergarten:* provide educational services in a nursery school, preschool, kindergarten, or other group setting, defined as a school.
	Teachers, Prekindergarten and Kindergarten: provide educational services in a nursery school, preschool, kindergarten, or other group setting defined as a school.	
Major surveys	*Decennial Census:* survey of all U.S. households; every 10 years.	*Current Employment Survey:* monthly survey of payroll records from sampling of businesses.
	Current Population Survey: monthly survey of sampling of 60,000 households; core questions asked every month & supplemental questions added in certain months (e.g., June 1982—child care arrangements).	*Occupation and Employment Survey:* mail survey conducted by state employment offices of nonfarm businesses, on a 3-year cycle.
Other characteristics	All self-report data of principal occupation; includes only individuals with earnings.	No self-employed or private household workers, or workers without earnings included.

Census collects information from individuals on what they are paid.

This explains some of the discrepancies between BLS and Census data. Because the BLS goes to employers for its information, no data are collected on self-employed workers or unpaid family workers. This information comes only from the Census. Yet, the Census data also exclude workers without earnings. As a result, child care providers who are not paid or who exchange services in a cooperative fashion are not included in any national count of the early childhood work force. Also, the Census asks individuals to report only their principal occupation. As a result, private family day care and in-home providers are probably undercounted by the BLS and the Census. Moreover, individuals who split their work year between child care provision and a more established career or who provide very part-time child care in addition to another job, may not be recorded among the population of child care workers if they do not consider child care their primary occupation.

Finally, both the BLS and the Census collect information on the number of employees in various occupations, average hours of work, and average hourly and weekly earnings. However, the BLS reports this information by industry, characterized by the major project or activity of the work site, and the Census reports it by occupation, characterized by the training and responsibilities of a specific job. "Child Day Care Ser-

vices" is an industry classification, whereas "Child Care Worker" is an occupation code. Some people employed in Child Day Care Services are Child Care Workers and some are not. Some Child Care Workers are employed in Child Day Care Services and some are not.

Proposals for change

You are probably throwing up your hands and thinking, "What a mess!" You're right. Our major national statistical agencies demonstrate little understanding of the early childhood profession in the ways they collect and report employment data. Data from the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics are difficult to compare, creating mismatched pieces of information. The two agencies use different definitions; not widely different, but different enough to create tremendous confusion. And, not surprisingly, the information that emerges from this maze often makes no sense, given what we already know about the early childhood work force. Furthermore the portrait masks important distinctions within the work force with regard to type of service, job titles, and level of experience and responsibility.

We need a national profile of our profession to assess the extent of the problems that plague it, to formulate realistic goals, and to measure improvement. We need to examine the variables that influence the recruitment and maintenance of an adequately prepared child care work force. Clarification is necessary if those outside the child care community are to develop a realistic image of the field. We also need ready answers when parents, reporters, and policy makers ask us about ourselves.

Admittedly, defining the child care work force challenges even those most familiar with its intricacies. As we know from NAEYC's attempts to establish a consistent nomenclature within the field, assigning job titles which satisfy even a majority of the community's members is a Herculean task. And, because the field is growing and changing so quickly, it is difficult to track changing assumptions.

It is more important than ever that information about the child care community accurately portray who we are rather than reflect and reinforce long held and damaging stereotypes.

In many professions, government data are both supplemented and are enriched by data collected by professional or other organizations linked to a specific work force. Given the limited resources of both federal agencies and the early childhood community, it is perhaps most realistic to develop an agenda for change based on dual responsibility for the much needed information. Within the field, examining our practices and priorities will help us develop better vehicles for collecting information about ourselves. We must also commit ourselves to working with federal agencies to insure that the data collected will be accurate and useful. Following are some preliminary recommendations which address communication between the field and government agencies, and suggest future agendas for improving data collection.

Review mechanisms

Efforts to influence the way information is collected must necessarily focus on the BLS and the Census since these are the only two sources of regular national data collection. We recommend that a review panel be established to guide these agencies' efforts to clarify their current data collection system. Panel members should include experts from the early childhood community, social demographers, labor force specialists, and survey researchers. The panel's central task should be to critique the current data collection system and to formulate more accurate categories and definitions.

Following a revision of the current system, an ongoing advisory committee of early childhood experts should be established to work with federal agencies. Its functions should include informing the agencies about significant changes in the field, assisting with the interpretation of data, and assuring that new information is disseminated to the early childhood field.

Pressing issues

A newly established review panel will immediately confront certain problems to address. We need:

1. *An accurate count of the number of child care providers.* This may be accomplished through the development of more accurate and consistent definitions of who provides care.

2. *Labels based on the field as it now is.* Whereas 20 years ago many people would have classified child care work as a noneducational service, this is no longer the case. Yet there is no explicit mention of educational activities in the occupational definitions of child care worker. Rather, those early childhood workers considered to be ed-

ucators fall into the classification of preschool/kindergarten teacher. A major first step is to redefine the occupational categories into which child care professionals fall.

3. *Clarification of salary data based on 12 month versus 9 month positions.* Preschool and kindergarten teachers face tremendous distinctions with regard to their typical work year, as well as in their pay rate. The current coupling of this information makes much of the data about both groups of educators misleading.

4. *Job categories that reflect differences in education and experience.* Currently there is no way to distinguish between starting and career level salaries, nor to assess whether there is a logical relation between salaries, turnover, and the average education and experience of workers in a particular job category. Comparisons of different careers with varying salaries are also difficult to interpret without an understanding of the education and experience of their work forces.

5. *Data on enrollment in training programs and final job choices of students.* Without this information it is impossible to plan for the projected growth of the child care work force.

Research agenda

For many years the child care community has relied upon findings of the National Day Care Study (NDCS) to answer questions about both the quality of services and the characteristics of those who provide them. But the NDCS was conducted almost a decade ago. The time is ripe for a new, national study that examines growth in the field. It should examine major indicators of the health of the early childhood profession, such as recruitment and turnover. Additionally, data are needed on variables that affect these major indicators, such as wages, training, benefits, and hours of uncompensated work.

Within the child care community, national organizations like NAEYC and the new National Resource and Referral Association could coordinate discussion about the profession and the information we need. For example, efforts might be made to work with foundations to support research in this area and to develop consistent guidelines and resources for early childhood institutions such as resource and referral programs and NAEYC Affiliates, to assist their local information-gathering efforts.

Child care is fast becoming a major institution in the lives of American families. As a result there is growing concern and interest about in whose hands we are placing our children. It is more important than ever that information about the child care community accurately portray who we are rather than reflect and reinforce long held and damaging stereotypes. As we formulate efforts to upgrade status and advocate for more resources, accurate data will be a major ingredient in our reform efforts. We must be ready to answer essential questions about who we are. Only then will we be equipped to discuss who we want to become. YC

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(2) *Earnings by Occupation and Education,* PC80-2-8B.
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All available from the U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.

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