



Mary Pauper: A Historical Exploration of Early Care and Education Compensation, Policy, and Solutions

Executive Summary

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Introduction

High-quality early care and education (ECE) is critically important. It supports children’s physical, emotional, and cognitive development; enables parent and caretaker participation in education, training, and employment; and contributes to the country’s economic productivity.¹ Despite this critical importance, the ECE workforce is undervalued and poorly compensated. This issue is even more challenging for Black, Native American, and other ECE professionals who have been minoritized.

Insufficient compensation, which includes salary, wages, and other benefits or supports (i.e., health insurance, retirement savings, paid sick leave, or paid vacation time), has remained a significant barrier to creating an accessible, high-quality ECE system. Inadequate compensation also impacts ECE professionals’ well-being and fuels high rates of turnover, which in turn can have a negative impact on children’s healthy development and school readiness.² In addition to compensation, access to opportunities for preparation (i.e., education and professional development) is another barrier that impacts ECE professionals and the children they serve.³

The poor compensation of the ECE workforce and challenges related to their preparation are a byproduct of the low value placed on child care in the United States. This devaluing of child care and the workforce has deep historical roots and is inextricably bound in patriarchy, the institution of chattel slavery, and the country’s perceptions of women, particularly Black women. These sexist and racist perceptions have been embedded into federal, state, and local policies since the country’s inception, impacting the funding and structure of the ECE system that we have today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and amplified the challenges of the ECE workforce while simultaneously providing a unique opportunity to reimagine the ECE system, including issues related to compensation and preparation. Increased public awareness and perception of the value of child care has placed ECE at the center of conversations related to the stability of families. As increasing numbers of people, including policymakers, recognize ECE as an essential part of the country’s economic recovery, there is a window of opportunity to advocate for policies that advance large-scale change.

A Note on Intersectionality:

Throughout these resources, we review and attend to the ways in which history has shaped the experiences of Black and Native American people in the U.S., particularly women. Race and gender, however, are just two facets of one’s identity. We understand the ECE workforce is complex and that ECE professionals have a multitude of identities, experiences, and characteristics that impact their existence including sex, gender, economic status, wealth, class, race, ethnicity, nativity, language use, ability status, and others. We focus primarily on the intersection of racism and sexism in this work (particularly as they impact Black and Native American women) given the history of attempted eradication, displacement, subjugation, and oppression of these individuals and the devastating and reverberating effects these activities have had. We also recognize the ways in which this much needed approach may limit the implications of our work.

¹ Bartik, T. J. (2011). Investing in kids: Early childhood programs and local economic development. Institute for Employment Research, 11-112. <https://doi.org/10.17848/9780880994002>

² Caven, M., Khanani, N., Zhang, X., & Parker, C. E. (2021). Center- and program-level factors associated with turnover in the early childhood education workforce (REL 2021–069). U.S. Department of Education. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2021069.pdf

³ Allvin, R. E. (2019). Making connections. Radical transformation in higher education is required to achieve real equity. *Young Children*, 74(5). <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2019/highered-required-to-achieve-equity>

Recognizing the need for a greater understanding of the historical context shaping the policies that impact ECE professionals, the Early Educator Investment Collaborative commissioned two papers to map the history of systemic racism and sexism in the U.S. and the ways in which they have influenced, and continue to influence, ECE policy and practice, with a focus on the compensation, preparation, and stability of the ECE workforce. The hope is that these papers will serve as a common source of information and understanding that can help to inform efforts to address workforce challenges.

The first paper, a landscape scan, examines how three dominant themes – race, gender, and class – have fundamentally shaped perceptions of child care and the policies that impact the ECE workforce. The second, a policy white paper, presents considerations for policymakers responding to the growing crisis in the ECE workforce, and poses the question – how can we use policies to address racial and gender inequities, instead of allowing those inequities to grow?

Methods

These papers are based on a targeted landscape scan of research and other literature relevant to the history of structural racism and other forms of institutional oppression in the field of ECE. The scan focused on the history of the U.S. from the ~1400's to present, highlighting key events such as the genocide and relocation of American Indians and the period of enslavement of Black individuals with African heritage and its aftereffects (i.e., policies of de facto and de jure racism/oppression).

To complete this scan, a series of key word and phrase searches using ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest to identify relevant peer reviewed and academic literature were completed. Google was also used to identify relevant gray literature (e.g., book chapters, policy briefs and reports) and journalism pieces (e.g., blog posts, magazine and newspaper articles, op-eds, podcasts, and videos). Resources that had an intersectional focus, written from either a racial equity lens or feminist/womanist lens were of key interest. Over 200 resources were reviewed, categorized, tabled and summarized.

Importantly, well-documented data limitations—for instance, limited sample sizes and the invisibility of certain populations—constrained our ability to make firm linkages between ECE and compensation or preparation for minoritized populations such as Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American populations, including American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Other Pacific Islander people.^{4, 5, 6} Additional attention to these populations would be beneficial to rounding out this work.

Landscape Scan: historical antecedents of systemic racism and other forms of oppression on the ECE workforce

This paper presents relevant contextual events, factors, and prevailing ideologies—emphasizing race, gender, and class—that in turn influenced the perception and creation of policies and laws tied to ECE, the ECE workforce, and workforce compensation. The landscape analysis covers five distinct periods in U.S. history, beginning in the 1400s and ending at the present day. The paper traces the origins of structural racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression across the last four hundred years and links them to their impact on the ECE workforce today. Several key themes emerge across these periods of history:

⁴ NCAI Policy Research Center. (n.d.). The asterisk nation. <https://www.ncai.org/policy-researchcenter/research-data/data>

⁵ Golden-Vasquez, A. (2019). The invisible Latino in America. Aspen Institute. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/the-invisible-latino-in-america/>

⁶ Asian Americans Advancing Justice. (n.d.). FAQs: Data disaggregation and Asian Americans. <https://censuscounts.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FAQs-on-Data-Disaggregation-and-AsianAmericans.pdf>

1. **Black, Native American, and other women who have been minoritized have experienced overlapping systems of discrimination and oppression (e.g., racism and sexism) throughout history.** Understanding the intersection of race, gender, and class (along with other identities or experiences) is key to understanding the entrenched, structural inequities that exist today for ECE professionals. Women who are minoritized and women of color in the ECE workforce experience compensation disadvantages because of their gender, occupation, *and* race. For example, even after accounting for factors such as education level or work setting, Black ECE professionals earn less than their White counterparts.⁷ This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, the labor of Black women has enabled the gains of White women: from the ways White women gained wealth through the inheritance and ownership of enslaved people in the 18th and 19th centuries⁸ to the ways in which the labor of Black domestic workers enabled White mothers to enter the professional workforce in high numbers in the 20th century.⁹
2. **Ideas about the value of child care are rooted in racist and sexist ideologies and stereotypes that can change based on circumstances.** The U.S. was founded on racist and sexist ideologies including the theft of land and labor and the superiority of White patriarchal culture. These ideas have been reflected in laws and policies over the centuries. The devaluing of child care reflects a longstanding public perception of child care as “women’s work” – an unskilled, domestic task not deserving of respect or adequate compensation. This has been especially true for women who are minoritized and women of color, who have been “literally and effectively coerced into domestic labor” for centuries, for little or no compensation.¹⁰ These issues are also inextricably bound in class.

Importantly, these ideologies are subject to change. During World War II, the federal government passed the Lanham Act, establishing a system of federally subsidized child care facilities to support the high number of women entering the workforce to support the war effort.¹¹ While these centers were short-lived, this is a clear example of federal policies responding to a shift in public perception about the value of child care. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a similar increase in public awareness about the vital role child care plays in the stability of families and the economy.

3. **Policies and laws are both a vehicle for maintaining and disrupting systemic oppression.** Throughout history, racism and sexism have been embedded into laws and policies at all levels (e.g., federal, state, and local). These policies have been used to systematically discriminate against Black women and other women who have been minoritized. At the same time, policies – especially on the federal level – have been an important vehicle for disrupting this discrimination and promoting equity, although tensions abound between federal policy and state and local rights. For example, as constitutional amendments at the federal level abolished slavery and gave basic rights and citizenship to Black Americans in the 19th century, a strong backlash emerged at the state and

⁷ Austin, L., Edwards, B., Chavez, R., & Whitebook, M. (2019, December 19). Racial wage gaps in early education employment. Words on Workforce. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/racial-wage-gaps-in-earlyeducation-employment/>

⁸ Jones-Rogers, S. (2019). *They were her property: White women as slave owners in the American South*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

⁹ Daniels, J. (2014, March 4). The second wave: Trouble with White feminism. Racism Review. <http://www.racismreview.com/blog/2014/03/04/second-wave-white-feminism/>

¹⁰ Ullrich, R. Hamm, K., & Herzfeldt-Kamprath, R. (2016). Underpaid and unequal: Racial wage disparities in the early childhood workforce. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/01073800/NSECE-report2.pdf>

¹¹ Herbst, C. M. (2017). Universal Child Care, maternal employment, and children’s long-run outcomes: Evidence from the US Lanham Act of 1940. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 35(2), 519-564.

local level in the form of Jim Crow laws and Black Codes, resulting in policies that put Black people—especially Black women—at a significant economic disadvantage.¹²

These tensions between federal, state, and local policy are an ongoing challenge that has persisted into the 20th century. As an example, Head Start was created in 1965 in part to address racial disparities related to poverty. The federal-to-local funding structure was designed intentionally to circumvent the ways states, particularly those in the south, refused to spend money on or include Black children in state-funded human service or ECE programs.¹³

Policy White Paper: addressing inequity in compensation and preparation of the ECE workforce

To date, the policies and programs that have been enacted to address the compensation and preparation of the ECE workforce are generally focused on a narrow set of outcomes and are not aimed at transforming the overarching systems or structures that have maintained and perpetuated inequity. The second paper provides an overview of the current challenges facing the ECE workforce, shares examples of policies and programs aimed at addressing compensation and preparation, and lays out recommendations for centering racial equity in policy and advocacy efforts to support the compensation, preparation, and stability of the ECE workforce.

Compensation

Inadequate compensation in the ECE workforce is well-documented and is compounded for women who are minoritized and women of color, who experience compensation disadvantages because of their gender, occupation, and race.¹⁴ Alongside low pay, ECE professionals face an additional burden of having minimal access to benefits and professional supports.¹⁵ Without public investment and funding that supports the true cost of child care, ECE settings are left with few options to address affordability and compensation. Their only viable option to increase worker compensation is to raise care costs for families, an option that is as unpopular as it is untenable.

Policies and programs to address ECE workforce compensation to date have included:

- **Short-term financial relief payments** for ECE professionals, such as tax credits and wage supplement programs.
- **Compensation parity policies** that align salary and benefits for ECE professionals (most often state-funded pre-K teachers) with those of early elementary educators.
- **Increasing the minimum wage** at the federal, state, or local level to encourage wage growth for ECE professionals.

Preparation

Increased attention has been paid to the importance of the preparation and qualifications of the ECE workforce in recent years, including calls for increasing minimum educational requirements. While this

¹² Blackmon, D. A. (2008), *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

¹³ Lloyd, C., Carlson, J., & Alvira-Hammond, M. (2021). Federal policies can address the impact of structural racism on Black Families' access to early care and education. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/federal-policies-can-address-the-impact-of-structural-racism-on-black-families-access-to-early-care-and-education>

¹⁴ Yearby, R. (2017). The impact of structural racism in employment and wages on minority women's Health. *Human Rights Magazine*, 43(3), 21-25.

¹⁵ Gould, E. (2015). Child care workers aren't paid enough to make ends meet. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. <https://files.epi.org/2015/child-care-workers-final.pdf>

shift in sentiment is encouraging—showing that the public has greater recognition of the skill needed to provide high-quality ECE services—it also obscures the historic and structural reasons behind the low minimum qualifications that currently exist for most of the workforce. The lack of rigorous qualifications for early educators reflects a fragmented and underfunded system based on centuries of public perception that providing care and education for young children is not a skilled profession, and that those who provide it — including women who are minoritized and women of color — are not deserving of adequate compensation.

Policies and programs to address ECE workforce preparation to date have included:

- **Scholarships and loan forgiveness programs** to help students afford the cost of continuing education and degree programs, sometimes in exchange for completing a certain number of years of service in a qualified setting.
- **Career pathways that provide a blueprint for career advancement** by aligning ECE competencies with training courses and stackable credentials that are tied to job roles or titles.
- **Apprenticeship programs for ECE educators** that combine classroom training (e.g., earning a CDA or AA) with on-the-job training.

Recommendations

Confronting the ways that structural racism and sexism affect the ECE workforce is a challenging and long-term endeavor that will require changes in predominant cultural hierarchies, existing power relations, and policy. Making meaningful and sustainable changes that center racial equity and that do not put an undue burden on families — who already struggle to access and afford high quality child care — must also be accompanied by a commitment to equity, accountability standards, and significant public investment. In short, strengthening the compensation and preparation of the ECE workforce requires a multi-pronged and comprehensive transformation of the financing and structure of the ECE system that includes direct and targeted strategies to shift public perceptions about the value of ECE and to create equitable opportunities and compensation for ECE professionals—including those that level the playing field for ECE professionals who are Black and minoritized—that do not reinforce biases or inequities in their implementation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the necessity of having a strong and equitable ECE system. Because of the pandemic, families have been unable to work, children have missed out on high-quality interactions and ECE environments, members of the ECE workforce have suffered personal and professional losses, and the economy has slowed. While troubling and damaging for many, this situation has resulted in shifts in public opinion regarding the value of child care that can serve as a catalyst to push policymakers, philanthropists, and other stakeholders to ensure that ECE is an essential component of our nation's infrastructure. As centuries of U.S. history show, these windows of opportunity for changing public perception, and in turn changing policies, are brief. Moving decisively and swiftly —while there is significant national attention turned to the issues of child care, the ECE workforce, and the economy—is important for disrupting the current status quo.

In this paper, we outline ten short- and long-term recommendations for policymakers, advocates, and funders to consider as they advance strategies and solutions to strengthen the ECE workforce. These recommendations aim to answer the key question posed for the commission of this work: How can racial equity be centered in policy and advocacy to support the compensation, preparation, and stability of the ECE workforce?

1. **Strategies must consider systemic barriers and create systemic changes.**

2. A diverse range of early childhood professionals and the families they serve must be part of the policymaking process.
3. Draw on the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate policy changes in ECE.
4. Public investment is needed to support policy, infrastructure, and oversight issues.
5. Improve oversight and monitoring of the use of federal dollars at the local and state levels
6. Draw on existing efforts to advance racial equity to inform equity in compensation and preparation approaches.
7. Build on already existing initiatives and efforts underway such as free college, scholarships, and loan forgiveness.
8. Consider policy strategies and solutions, like reparations, to facilitate home ownership for ECE professionals of color.
9. Monitor policy implementation to ensure policies do not replicate or reinforce existing inequities.
10. Invest in data to better understand inequities and progress.