

Mind the Mindsets

A Case for More Coherent and Relevant Narratives from the Field

Marica Cox Mitchell

Editor's Note

Marica Cox Mitchell began in the early childhood profession several decades ago as a teacher assistant and then a teacher. Eventually, she moved into the arena of early childhood policy and advocacy. This included serving as deputy executive director at NAEYC, where she oversaw public policy and advocacy, accreditation of early learning programs, higher education accreditation, and the launch of the Power to the Profession initiative. Having this range of experiences and roles has given her a clearer understanding of—and vision to address—the gaps that exist between policy and practice in early childhood education.

Currently, Cox Mitchell serves as vice president of early childhood at the Bainum Family Foundation—a philanthropic organization focused on the well-being of children and

families. The foundation recently embarked on the WeVision EarlyEd initiative, which included gathering insights from families, educators, and administrators closely connected to the Washington, DC, child care system. It used this information “to identify the gaps between what is (current pain points) and what should be (the ideal).” WeVision revealed that outdated mindsets hinder and block the progress and change needed to attain this ideal.

Naming the outdated mindsets that permeate society and policymaking and proposing transformative mindsets can inform the work we all do. In this invited Viewpoint article, Cox Mitchell delves into these mindset shifts, which she argues are needed to center and respond to the needs of families, educators, and administrators and to work toward system change that will benefit all.

The early childhood education sector has received unprecedented attention over the past 10 years, and especially during the height of the pandemic. I am amazed when I read a news article about staff shortages in child care in the morning, watch a satirical TikTok video from a parent dealing with limited child care options in the afternoon, and hear a prominent business leader discuss the child care crisis on the evening news. Politicians across all parties have added the child care crisis to their list of priorities. A majority of governors across all parties understand that a robust child care sector is needed to grow their economies (Fillion 2023). This level of visibility is a result of decades of advocacy from the early childhood field and our allies.

With this level of unprecedented public attention, the early childhood field cannot afford to bring our complications and lack of clarity to the table. We need clarity on key issues. For example:

- › We need to define quality rather than say it can't be measured or provide conflicting responses.
- › We need to know what quality child care costs rather than say we don't know or provide an inadequately modest cost based on what the government subsidizes and families currently pay.
- › We need clarity on which credential is needed for entry or advanced roles in the field rather than say credentials don't matter or point to a complex “career ladder” that spells out credentials needed in one setting but irrelevant in another.

- › We need consistent professional roles rather than the mix of labels we now have, which include child care worker, daycare teacher, early childhood educator, teacher, teacher assistant (which differs from teacher aide), home provider, provider, kith and kin, and family child care provider. (I've even heard someone promote the use of the "baby brain scientist" title.)
- › We need a clear compensation target for early childhood educators rather than advocating for an increased minimum wage, which conflicts with those who prefer advocating for the public school salary scale.

While it can be helpful to have multiple viewpoints in a field, too much incoherence about the core elements of a profession can be paralyzing and perceived as chaos. Incoherent projects and professions are hard to comprehend and fund. Our work can be complex without being incoherent and confusing.

In this article, I offer four mindset shifts that are needed, and I also share recommendations to consider as we in the field work together to make transformative change.

Coherence and Relevance Are Most Needed Now

In this moment, the early childhood education field needs to have clearer messages that are rooted in our professional knowledge and in what families want. We often ask (implicitly and explicitly) those outside of the profession to create coherence but then raise concerns when they try to make their own sense of the complications we offer them. A policymaker once told a group of contradicting and siloed early childhood advocates, "You all figure it out and come back to me." In addition, our advocacy messages often promote mindsets that aren't relevant to families and the educators we advocate for.

We struggle with mindsets about who we are, what we do, who we serve, what families want, who pays, how we measure quality, and how we make policy. For example, we sometimes present child care as a pathologized intervention solely for "young low-income children" (Head Start) or a labor penalty for the racialized "welfare queens" (child care subsidy) rather

than a universal right of every child. We sometimes disregard families with infants and toddlers who prefer trusted caregivers (including family members) who operate outside of licensed settings. We sometimes struggle to define early childhood education as a distinct profession with professional standards that govern educators' preparation and practice. We grant government agencies significant autonomy to define professional standards (without reference to profession-driven standards and codes) and to determine (and cap) the cost of delivering high-quality early childhood education.

Each of these mindsets has major policy implications with real-world consequences for the field. Until the field addresses these mindsets to advance more coherent and relevant narratives, I fear we will continue to be disappointed, just as we were when the Build Back Better legislation failed in 2022. Borrowing from what I have learned from families, educators, and administrators through the WeVision EarlyEd initiative (Bainum Family Foundation 2023) and my understanding of some of the field's challenges navigating Build Back Better, here are four mindsets we need to address to create more coherence and relevance at this critical moment.

1. Define early childhood educators as a distinct profession

Although we have made significant progress on this issue in the past 50 years, many continue to downplay the importance of early childhood as a critical stage of human development.

Practitioners continue to hear comments such as "Learning doesn't really begin until elementary school," "Child care mainly allows parents to go to work," and "It's just babysitting; anyone can do it." Although years of research make it clear that the first five years of life, particularly the first three, are the most important in human development (IOM & NRC 2015), these outdated mindsets hang on.

Downplaying the complexities of early childhood also impacts how early childhood educators are perceived (Brown 2022). This is especially true for Black and Brown early childhood educators, who are the most stigmatized and penalized given the United States' history of racist and sexist policies that regulate women's labor and the care of children. Even within

Families and Early Childhood Professionals Want a Transformed Child Care System

The Bainum Family Foundation seeded the development and launch of the WeVision EarlyEd initiative. We worked closely with Catapult Design, which brought together focus groups involving a diverse group of 35 educators, administrators, and families from across Washington, DC, to discuss their current challenges and to reimagine a system that would work for all. The District has invested more per capita in early education than any state in the United States (NIEER 2022). It has passed key legislation such as the Birth-to-Three for All DC Amendment Act of 2018, which recommends fully funding child care, so no family pays more than 10 percent of their income on child care for infants and toddlers; improving compensation for early childhood educators; and creating new positions to assist child care business administrators with licensing.

Yet even with successful advocacy and investments, the District's child care system still has gaps and inequities. Accessible, affordable child care remains out of reach for far too many families, and early childhood educators' compensation and working

conditions do not come close to matching the value we know high-quality early childhood education offers children, families, and society.

Therefore, the centerpiece of Catapult's human-centered design approach was to capitalize on users' lived experiences and use that wisdom to reimagine what is possible. We were committed to capturing a broad diversity of participants from all parts of the city and turned to our partners to drive recruitment. We compensated them for their time as the bona fide experts they are. The core team of five included one Spanish speaker and four women of color. Materials were presented in English and Spanish.

In addition, during the NAEYC Annual Conference in November 2022, we engaged more than 900 early childhood professionals. The feedback they provided about their current and ideal child care experiences were aligned with what we learned from the 35 educators, administrators, and families. We used what we learned from them to launch WeVision EarlyEd. To read more about what we have heard, see "What Is and What Can Be" on page 39.



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What Is and What Can Be

As we gathered information for the WeVision EarlyEd initiative, educators, families, and administrators shared their journeys through the current early childhood education system in Washington, DC. These included similar pain points and compromises. Stakeholders used some of the following descriptors to describe the system:

- › community is strength
- › the math doesn't add up
- › inconsistent quality
- › fragmented information
- › tradeoffs and risks
- › lack of work/life balance
- › mistrust
- › confinement with limited options
- › time and resource scarcity
- › constant regulatory changes
- › top-down regulations
- › too many roles/hats
- › difficulty making child-centered and quality-centered decisions
- › fragmented and inequitable
- › advocacy only for self

The Current Experience:



In contrast, educators, families, and administrators have a clear idea of what early childhood education can look like in the District. This includes an experience with the following characteristics:

- › child-centered
- › quality-centered
- › the math adds up
- › appropriate resources
- › simple and streamlined processes
- › connect to public schools
- › viable choices
- › collaboration
- › easy access to information
- › quality drives regulations
- › fair
- › decentralized regulations
- › seat at the table
- › fewer hats
- › constructed by the people in the system
- › unified language/shared vocabulary
- › advocacy for self and others
- › adult well-being

The Ideal Experience:



Source: WeVision EarlyEd, Bainum Family Foundation

the field, Black and Brown women earn less than their White counterparts and are more likely to be in positions that earn the lowest wages (Lloyd et al. 2021).

As Berna Artis, who leads an early childhood education program in DC, shared with us: “I’ve been in the education field for 22 years, 16 as the head of school. It’s harmful and disappointing that policymakers, the media, and even some folks in the field have this day care mentality about the work. They don’t realize how damaging this language is.”

We sometimes seem apprehensive about presenting early childhood educators as a distinct profession that requires specialized preparation and commands compensation that is at least similar to public elementary school educators (Goffin 2018–2019). We make statements like “Everyone who touches the life of a child is an early childhood educator.” Our advocacy messages for the workforce can be confusing when we use different terms like child care workers, preschool teachers, early childhood educators, caregivers, home providers, family child care providers, and providers; a shared or common understanding is often lacking.

This essentially forces policymakers to create coherence out of our confusion. Dentists practicing at a facility that is part of their home are dentists. So are dentists at hospitals and community health centers. The herbalist and pharmacist coexist and are valuable to those who need them, but they are

Here are a few recommendations to consider:



distinct. Coherence and consistent use of the label “early childhood educators” among all advocates regardless of child care setting—as Power to the Profession recommends (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees et al. 2020)—was how policies for the DC Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund (OSSE, n.d.) were framed. The law that made the funding possible was The Early Childhood Educator Equitable Compensation Task Force Temporary Amendment Act. It was clear to policymakers who the compensation was for and why it mattered across all licensed child development settings. That framing was intentional and equity driven.

<p>Instead of promoting narratives like these . . .</p>	<p>Let’s advocate together with narratives like these . . .</p>
<p>Everyone who touches the life of a child is an early childhood educator.</p> <p>Everyone who supports the development of young children outside an elementary school is a child care worker.</p>	<p>Young children thrive when the adults in their lives are supportive and responsive.</p> <p>Early childhood educators are a specialized profession competent in what it takes to plan and implement intentional experiences that support children’s learning and development.</p> <p>Early childhood educators work in all settings: school-based programs, home-based programs, and center-based programs.</p>
<p>Increase the minimum wage to better compensate child care workers.</p>	<p>All workers should earn a living wage.</p> <p>Early childhood educators should, at minimum, be compensated like their counterparts in the education sector.</p>

2. Clarify who needs child care, and define the child care options

Too many advocacy messages and policy recommendations continue to promote the mindset that government-funded child care is mainly an intervention for “those kids”—children from racially and economically marginalized communities.

Families receive child care support only if they commit to working in low-wage/high-needs industries. Federal child care subsidies are only available based on income eligibility for the most economically marginalized families. Families needing these supports are penalized and pathologized. Choice of child care is only given to high-income families who can afford it. And even families who can afford child care are often on waitlists because the supply is low (Thayer 2023).

Of course, the reality is that most families—regardless of income, employment status, race, gender, or geographic location—want access to high-quality experiences to support their children’s development from the earliest years. We cannot present child care solely as an intervention for a few, then make the case for universal child care. The intervention framing is

also irrelevant to families across all demographics who reject receiving support that has been pathologized and deficit-based.

Access should be universal and equitable, prioritizing the needs of children who need it the most.

Families want funded child care options, but they often struggle to understand the range of choices, terms, and designations of quality (Szczypinski 2019). Some prefer trusted caregivers in home settings or community organizations. However, this option is rarely included in universal child care plans, making these plans irrelevant to those families. Minimizing the importance of this trusted caregiver option contributed to President Richard Nixon’s vetoing the Child Development Act of 1971 (Rosenthal 1971). Fifty years later, it was the mindset that a fully publicly funded system would give the government too much control over decisions like cost and families’ limited options (Stevens 2021) that helped to bifurcate key early childhood advocates when the Build Back Better legislation failed to advance through Congress in 2022 (Goldstein 2022).

Here are a few recommendations to consider:

Instead of promoting narratives like these . . .	Let’s advocate together with narratives like these . . .
Publicly funded pre-K should be provided only for 4-year-olds.	Publicly funded child care should be provided for all young children birth through age 5. This includes early childhood education and other child care supports.
<p>We need publicly funded child care solely as an intervention for “those kids”—children from racially and economically marginalized communities.</p> <p>Government funding should only support a few families and under extreme conditions.</p>	<p>All families—regardless of income, employment status, race, gender, or geographic location—need high-quality experiences to support their children’s development from the earliest years.</p> <p>Access should be universal and equitable, prioritizing the needs of children who need it the most.</p>
Families must choose licensed settings like center-based, home-based, and school-based programs. These should be the only government-funded options.	Families should have public funding to support their preferred options. Some families want to be their child’s primary caregiver. Others want a trusted relative, friend, or neighbor to serve in that role. Others want support from competent early childhood educators. Some want a combination of these options.

3. Quality early childhood education needs a true cost

As interest in publicly funded child care grows, we must be clear about how much the child care options cost. Because policymakers have too narrowly defined what early childhood education is and who it is for, they continue to grossly underfund our field (Aigner-Treworgy, Osborn, & Smith 2022).

Educator pay is driven by what families can afford or low government reimbursement rates, which are never enough to fully cover the costs of quality early childhood education. Child care workers earn, on average, \$13.22 per hour nationally, and nearly half are eligible for government assistance (CSCCE 2020). Not surprisingly, they move to other, higher-paying sectors when they earn industry-recognized credentials and degrees.

Administrators are reluctant to share hidden expenses because they do not trust that those expenses will be reimbursable. Some early childhood educators in home settings cannot afford to pay themselves without transferring that expense to families who are already burdened by the cost of child care. Expenses like facility maintenance, outdoor play spaces, competitive salaries and benefits, professional development, and adequate staffing do not drive government reimbursement rates.

Meanwhile, families foot most of the bill for child care, and the burden can be crushing. Although the weight is heavier for families with low incomes, even families with higher incomes are affected. In 33 states and DC, for instance, a year of infant care is more expensive than a year's tuition at an in-state college (Schulte & Durana, n.d.). To the extent the public invests at all in child care, the subsidy helps families pay for support only if they promise to get off public welfare; the support is punitive and pathologizing. Families who prefer a trusted caregiver (themselves and a designee) rarely receive support; when they do, it is under extreme conditions like a public health pandemic or a punitive labor program.

To make financial matters worse, smaller programs carry a higher share of the costs because they do not benefit from the economies of scale of larger multisite programs. Experts suggest that operating a

high-quality center that serves fewer than 100 children is extremely difficult. The industry is populated by these small, single-establishment programs (USDT 2021). We continue to make the case for increased public funding but do not have a coherent response to questions about the cost of quality early childhood education. The military child care system approach to costing out child care could be a resource. In this system, there is a “child space unit cost” that includes direct and indirect expenses (AEM Early Childhood Services, n.d.). Compromising quality and reducing standards in this calculation is not an option.

Violeta Chirino, who runs an early learning center in DC, shared with us that she has many responsibilities: overseeing programming; hiring, training, and retaining staff; and managing the finances (mainly wages, rent, food, materials, and supplies) and legal affairs (mainly compliance with state regulations, payroll, insurances, IRS, unemployment, and workers compensation cases). But she is forced to take a second job at a local public school in order to get health insurance.

And there is JP Coakley, who cofounded a center that serves mostly higher-income families in DC, who told us that families in their program can afford higher tuition and benefit from many amenities such as We Work-style office space and gym facilities in the building. Even for his program, though, the numbers don't add up: “Early childhood education has to be thought of as a public good. And not starting at age 3, but at birth.”

The lack of adequate funding for child care means that quality is an optional luxury when it should be the baseline.

Going forward, we need to be more accurate and coherent about “child space unit cost,” which should be determined by early childhood education professionals and the organizations that represent them.

Here are a few recommendations to consider:

Instead of promoting narratives like these . . .	Let's advocate together with narratives like these . . .
Quality child care costs.	Early childhood education for infants is <i>at least</i> \$ _____ per child for 12 months in the _____ area. Anything less than that is unsustainable and will likely compromise quality.
The cost of child care should be based on our current realities or historical costs.	The cost of child care should be based on what it costs to implement the quality practices defined by the early childhood education profession with consistency. The cost of child care should also provide some level of support for families who prefer a trusted caregiver.
Early childhood professionals should be accountable for implementing quality practices with the rates the government unilaterally establishes.	Early childhood education professionals and the organizations that represent them should establish the cost of quality early childhood education seats or "child space unit cost." This should inform government policies.

4. Baseline quality needs a unifying definition and cannot be a five-star luxury

The field's stance on quality can sometimes be incoherent and irrelevant. We talk about quality, but we struggle to name a baseline set of standards. While this level of autonomy has benefits, too many variations of quality standards within a profession can cloud the clarity of advocacy messages. The lack of adequate funding for child care also means that quality is an optional luxury when it should be the baseline.

Quality early childhood education is everyone's to define. Over the years, early childhood education professionals have had to navigate multiple rating systems and performance standards, each emphasizing different expectations (Tout et al. 2017). There is no common baseline within and across states. Even some classrooms supporting children who are the same age and under the same roof have to meet different sets of standards.

Further, most government systems have outsized expectations for what the rating systems can produce based on what they are willing to spend. Public spending never aligns with the system's expected quality measures and outcomes. In 2017, the largest

source of federal funding for child care assistance, the Child Care and Development Fund, served just 14 percent of children eligible under federal rules, and in most cases, the subsidy amount is too low to support the cost of high-quality child care (USDT 2021). We have Maserati expectations but Chevrolet spending. Spending on quality is not typically baked into the system's baseline financing.

Unlike other sectors, where the professionals and practitioners in the field (with leadership from their professional organizations) are relied on for their expertise, governments regulating child care can unilaterally determine the measures of child care quality and then require programs to fit within those measures. Worse yet, some states are contemplating the removal of standards and regulations as a strategy to increase the supply of affordable child care (NAEYC 2022).

NAEYC accreditation for early learning programs, the oldest and largest profession-led standards and accreditation system, is often positioned as the "gold standard." The standards describe quality practices that (in the ideal child care system) should be a minimum for all programs supporting young children, not an out-of-reach luxury. In such an under-resourced sector, however, NAEYC's early learning program standards and accreditation system are not affordable and attainable for many programs: it is not a scalable,

equitable model that can be widely implemented. The number of NAEYC-accredited programs reflects this lack of equitable scalability.

To make matters even more complicated, the field has had to navigate the rise of multiple quality rating systems over the years. Each emphasizes different qualities, and few leverage profession-led standards or accreditation systems. Each state has created its own quality rating and improvement system. (Some states have created more than five.) With more than 41 quality rating and improvement systems—in addition to standards driving Head Start, Early Head Start, and publicly funded pre-K programs—there is no common baseline.

The increased interest in child care will likely increase accountability and standards. Billions of federal and state dollars will require standards. The early childhood education field must identify a unifying set of standards that defines quality practices. Our recent history with rating systems has proven that when the field does not unify and promote a core set of baseline, profession-driven standards, it leaves room for individuals outside the field to define them. We all bear some responsibility for the rise of rating systems and the government funding that fed it.

Here are a few recommendations to consider:

Instead of promoting narratives like these . . .	Let's advocate together with narratives like these . . .
Quality is too subjective and can't be measured.	<p>Baseline professional standards guide all professions. Standards protect both the professions and those they support.</p> <p>Professional standards must be routinely reviewed to minimize bias, remove harm, and reflect an inclusive research base.</p> <p>Baseline professional standards are the minimum expectations, not an optional luxury.</p>
Every community, funder, and government agency should define quality their way.	All early childhood education programs should, at minimum, meet a baseline set of quality standards that is developed by early childhood education professionals and held by the professional association(s) that represent them.
Government agencies should define professional standards and establish accountability policies.	Government agencies should establish accountability policies by leveraging (not duplicating or supplanting) professional standards and providing the resources needed to meet the standards. The US General Services Administration (gsa.gov/resources/citizens-and-consumers/child-care-services/resources-for-parents) and Military Child Care system (hechingerreport.org/how-the-military-created-the-best-child-care-system-in-the-nation/) are examples.
Quality is simple. Focus solely on what government agencies and private corporations have funded and deemed relevant. Nothing else matters. (Note: We cite the Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project, and other research to make the case for increased government funding but simplify the range of quality inputs it took to meet their outcomes.)	Quality is complex when supporting the development of the “whole child.” Standards should measure multiple domains of quality. These include the environment, interactions, curriculum, educator qualifications and well-being, administrative practices, family relationships, belonging, cultural competence, and other elements that are important for the development of the “whole child.”



Reflections for Success

To summarize, the early childhood education field has made significant progress. Decades of advocacy have ushered in a new phase. There is increased interest and demand for action from diverse stakeholders. Let's celebrate, recalibrate, and position ourselves for the inevitable—the building out of a universal child care system. Taking advantage of the moment will require us to respond to the following questions with coherence and relevance:

1. Who are early childhood educators? Why are they needed in a universal child care system?
2. Who needs child care? What child care options are needed in a universal child care system?
3. What is the annual cost per slot or “child space unit cost” for quality early childhood education in each area?
4. When the annual cost per slot and child-centered regulatory conditions are provided, what baseline professional standards and practices should stakeholders (families, government, and the public) expect from early childhood educators and administrators?

History tells us that we either respond as a collective or deal with whatever we're handed.

About the Author

Marica Cox Mitchell is vice president, early childhood for the Bainum Family Foundation. Marica has worked in the early childhood field for more than 20 years. Her diverse experiences have allowed her to view the field from many perspectives, including the classroom, program, district, state, and national levels.

References for this article can be found online at [NAEYC.org/yc/summer2023](https://naeyc.org/yc/summer2023).

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