Worthy Work with Continued Unlivable Wages

An interview with Angie Roberson and Rosemarie Vardell

by Margie Carter

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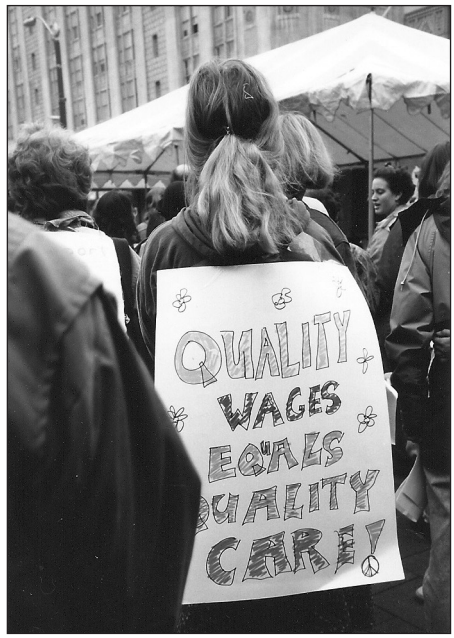

Reading the updated 2014 research report on the early childhood workforce, *Worthy Work, Still Unlivable Wages* (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014), both depressed and infuriated me.

Margie Carter is a Redleaf Press author and early childhood consultant with Harvest Resources Associates, which she and co-author Deb Curtis co-founded to offer professional development opportunities to early childhood educators. A longtime activist for Worthy Wages, Margie and her associates at Harvest Resources strongly believe that as teachers become thoughtful, competent decision makers, they use leadership to transform and advance the profession.

Angie Roberson received her bachelor's degree at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro where she has worked in a variety of child care programs as a toddler teacher. Her roles in the early childhood field have included being assistant director at a lab school, working for a national organization (Center for the Childcare Workforce), and coordinating all the training for More at Four. Currently, Angie is the coordinator of a new quality improvement project in Guilford County, EQuIPD (Education Quality Improvement and Professional Development). She is the mother of a middle schooler, former PTA president, and aspiring yogi.

Rosemarie Vardell has worked in the field of Early Childhood Education for over 35 years. Her work includes teaching, training, and supporting the early childhood workforce to offer high-quality programs for all children; facilitating the development of teachers as leaders and mentors; and advocating for fair and equitable compensation for the early childhood workforce. She worked for the Center for the Child Care Workforce on the Worthy Wage Campaign and continues working for Worthy Wages in her local community and state.

In case you missed it, the research highlights include these salient points:

- Child care providers' wage growth was lower than the growth in wages paid to fast food workers. The mean hourly wage of a child care worker in 2013 was $10.33 an hour or $21,490 annually. This puts child care workers in the Bureau of Labor Statistics' lowest income tier along with parking lot attendants and dry cleaners, meaning that most child care workers live in poverty.

- People providing early care and education to three- to- five-year-olds outside of a school setting earn two-thirds of what their peers earn in school-sponsored Pre-K, and half of what they earn in kindergarten. Those who seek out higher degrees still earn less than they would in another field. Pre-K teachers with a bachelor's degree make just three-quarters of what female college graduates make in the general workforce.

- The combination of low wages and the rising cost of living means that many child care workers aren't paid enough to meet their families' most basic needs. In fact, more than 46 percent of child care workers are in families using one of the four major social support programs — almost double the rate of use in the U.S. workforce overall.

- Nearly half of child care workers live in families that rely on one or more public programs, compared to a quarter of the overall workforce. Nearly three-quarters are worried about being able to pay their bills, while half are worried about being able to afford food for their families.

- Child care workers who endure the stressors of living in poverty are more likely to experience toxic stress, depression, and chronic health issues. As the number of children spending time in child care settings has increased, so too has our knowledge of the link between adult caregiving and early childhood brain development. Study after study has shown the connection between better-paid staff and higher quality care. The instability and stress experienced by caregivers dealing with economic insecurity or poverty shapes their ability to provide enriching and nurturing environments for children. Often, it can result in a decreased

ability to provide supportive spaces for children to develop and learn.

Perhaps it's a rhetorical question to ask how we find ourselves in this predicament. The importance of the first five years in a child's life is well documented, especially in light of ever more sophisticated neuroscience and how the human brain develops. Public discourse now endorses the need for universal pre-kindergarten programs while the early childhood profession continues to amass an ever-growing array of tools to measure and promote quality improvement. How, in this context, have we overlooked the urgency to upgrade compensation and viable working conditions for teachers in these settings? Despite evidence to the contrary, do we believe the lack of a livable wage won't impact the stability of the teaching workforce and thereby the quality of the program? Why have our professional initiatives and public dollars continued to burden teachers with more requirements, but failed to establish a parallel commitment to more pay and an infrastructure to ensure this as a viable profession for people to enter?

Among the many poignant comments at the conference the New America organization held to highlight the *Worthy Work, Still Unlivable Wages* report, those from Megan Gunnar, Director of the Institute of Child Development and Professor at the University of Minnesota, really grabbed my attention. Known for her work on the committee that developed *Neurons to Neighborhood* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), Gunnar reminded the conference attendees that the complexity involved in nurturing the development of young children in group settings requires a level of executive functioning in teachers that is not possible under conditions of high stress. Perhaps Gunnar's point contributes to the growing use of the term 'teacher proofing' as an anecdote or substitute for addressing a significant source of that stress — their own poverty wages.

'Teacher proofing' implies it doesn't matter who the teacher is: teachers just do what they are told to do without having to think about it. How does this preposterous idea fit with the research highlighting the importance of a child's relationship with attentive, caring adults as central to the growth of his or her brain, emotional intelligence, and ongoing learning into productive adulthood? If we give teachers a script to guide their curriculum, do we really believe this will reduce stress or lead to genuine relationships with the children?

While wages have not significantly improved since the first child care staffing study (Whitebook, Phillips & Howes, 2014), expectations and performance requirements have certainly increased, adding to the stress teachers already experience trying to manage their personal lives on inadequate salaries. Teachers want to do right by the children, take pride in meeting all the standards and scoring well on rating scales. More and more is required of them, while the delight of being with children is slipping away. The work remains worthy, but it is not sustainable.

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So what happened to the Worthy Wage Movement that held such promise? How did it lose momentum and become replaced by quality rating systems that don't address compensation as an essential ingredient for a stable, qualified workforce? As I watched the newscast of the New America report, I was heartened to see Angie Roberson on one of the panels, someone I knew 15 years ago when she worked at the Center for the Childcare Workforce (CCW). I caught up with her in North Carolina where she, along with Rosemarie Vardell and a cadre of other dedicated folks, continue to address compensation issues in their state.

Margie: As you read the update on the child care staffing report, I'm curious about your reaction.

Angie: I was shocked to be honest. I thought we had made more progress in wages for our workforce. But when you look at wages over 25 years, it is just sad. I know part of the reason that wages have not gone up is because money was used to put rating systems in place as a strategy to increase the quality; but the work of teaching young children has gotten much harder, too (more regulations, more education requirements, helping children in crisis). I worked at a lab school for years and watched soon-to-be teachers excited about teaching young children, and it was wonderful for me to be in that environment. I also felt that it was

my duty to be honest with the soon-to-be teachers about wages, because that is what my mentor (Rosemarie) did for me. Now I have to walk that fine line to not discourage them from teaching in child care but, instead, encourage them to seek the highest quality programs to work for and not settle for inadequate wages. We do the work of teaching because we love children, because we love to watch the process of learning 'when it clicks,' and because we love laughter and smiles. But we need to be able to afford to have families of our own, too, and not be in debt for the rest of our lives.

Rosemarie: In some ways it is unbelievable that our early childhood workforce is still being paid wages that in no way reflect the critical and complex nature of this work. This national report, along with our state level reports, provides such important tools for advocates as we educate decision-makers about the current reality of child care jobs. Today, we have social media as a tool for awareness and education, but we still have not answered the question of who will step up to make compensation the focus of organizing for necessary policy changes that will make higher wages possible.

Recent work with teachers in our community underlines their ability to express the urgency of improving compensation and the impact of continuing not to do so in a substantial, sustainable way. At our gatherings, teachers provide stories that call out the significance of providing children with foundational skills and experiences. One teacher described going to an emergency room and receiving excellent, compassionate care from a nurse who she had taught as a four-year-old. The teachers also identified a lack of political power and access to decision-making tables as barriers to making compensation an urgent issue to be addressed. Since many teachers are raising families, going to school and working second (or third) jobs, they are short on energy and time to organize and advocate for change.

Photo by Bonnie Neugebauer

Margie: How true! To me, that fact should compel those of us in more privileged positions to bring these teachers' stories to the table, even as we work to get the teachers there in person to help shape the way forward.

Rosemarie: One of the questions still unanswered is "Who will lead this effort to improve compensation?" Teachers still need 'facilitative leaders' or 'an organizational home' that will provide the capacity, resources, training, and support so that teachers can engage in efforts for fair pay and respect for their work.

Margie: Who will step up and provide this home? NAEYC and their affiliates? R&R organizations? QRIS state systems? What will it take for them to make this a top priority?

Will Educational Requirements Improve Compensation?

Margie: While we want all teachers and providers engaged in ongoing learning, how can they take on this financial and time burden in the context of their already stressed lives? And, what's the real incentive with these educational requirements when people can leave the field and get equal, if not better, pay doing something else? I'm struck that given the low wages we haven't see a robust scholarship, along with student loan forgiveness program for early childhood educators.

Angie: The teachers that I am working with through my current job have been able to access TEACH scholarships and some even have supports at their workplace to pay for classes along with release time to attend classes. I think until our field is viewed as a profession, we are not going to see the incentives across the board to encourage teachers to seek more education in a low-paying field. On the other hand, although there are not more incentives in place, I hear teachers talk about how more education changed the way they teach because they've gained a 'why' for what they do and gained more effective strategies for their toolbox.

Rosemarie: Adding to Angie's point, the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® (T.E.A.C.H.) Initiative is active in 24

states and the District of Columbia. Through this scholarship effort, 15,622 early educators working in 8,289 early childhood programs have continued their education. With this support, providers and teachers are doing their part to attend college and earn degrees. However, while this has resulted in somewhat higher wages, they are not even close to wages of similarly educated members of the general labor force.

What Kind of Teacher Preparation Will Make a Difference?

Margie: Going back to Megan Gunnar's point about the complexities and stress of working in early childhood education, I'm concerned that teacher education or ongoing professional development experiences aren't really preparing teachers to be professionals, but, instead, lower paid technicians. What learning experiences do career-oriented teachers need to strengthen their ability to negotiate all the expectations in light of their desire to address each child's competency and learning opportunities? So much of what is called teacher education or training today is focused on meeting requirements and delivering curriculum. Advocacy and leadership skills are not often part of their higher ed curricula. To counter the notion of 'teacher-proof curriculum,' Parker Palmer asserts that good teaching comes from "strengthening the identity and integrity of the teacher." To my mind, this notion should be central to our teacher education and ongoing professional development work. How do we advocate for teachers learning not just techniques, but critical thinking and reflective practices so they are genuinely able to do right by children and fulfill the meaning of their work?

Angie: I am concerned about these issues, too. I visited a program recently for transitional families (families new to the United States, learning English) and the teacher was so amazing. I remember saying, "There could have been crying children there all day, but she set the tone for safety, happiness, and making friends." Teachers have to sometimes take on the emotional pieces for their children and help them through it. I was changed as a teacher when I had to help a toddler deal with his mother dying. No one prepared me for that and how I felt or how he felt. I hope I did it right; I think I did. During and after that experience we were able to get the supports we needed, but not all programs can identify or afford the resources needed to support teachers. Teachers are not being prepared for the kinds of teaching situations that they have to take on. I think we could advocate for portions of education classes to be dedicated to critical thinking skills or more field experiences enabling teachers learn reflective practices.

We have started a peer mentoring project in our community to show teachers how to think about what they do and why that intentionality is so powerful. We see a change in their classrooms soon after their mentor starts working with them (and a change sometimes in the mentor's classroom too, as he or she begins to understand more about reflective teaching practices through their conversations and work together).

A Call to Action

Margie: The data in the recent report on wages and teachers' lives is so powerful. I'm wondering what we can do at the community level to turn it into a call for action. We can't just wait and hope that someone else will deal with this. We now have even more data to press on our professional organizations to make this issue a priority and to urge them to create an organizational home for teacher efforts to gain better compensation and professional respect. What approach are you taking to address these issues in your work and what are you learning from your efforts?

Angie: We are taking data from this recent study and our local data and putting it in the hands of teachers, family child care providers, directors, and families to help them be articulate about the problem. We have to be clear about our messaging and goals. We are not asking for families to pay more for their children's care and education; rather, we

Working on Compensation Issues

Thoughts from Angie Roberson

- Start the conversation with teachers and providers; give them the data that we have and a way to understand it and share it.
- Talk with families as allies, not as the source to fix the problem.
- Talk with businesses to help them understand the role that the child care industry plays in their businesses and ways they can support our efforts.
- Encourage decision makers to spend time with the child care workforce in child care programs to see how crucial and valuable the work is.

are asking for a larger investment from communities and particularly businesses that benefit from child care programs whose services support their community of workers.

Rosemarie: Yes, we are focusing on strengthening grassroots leadership, including advocacy, and increasing teachers' knowledge of early childhood systems and how decisions are made about public funding. Teachers are getting stronger in describing their roles in quality early childhood education and communicating the compensation research to the public. These are crucial skills because the current political discourse does not tie how well children are being educated to teachers and their skills. This makes their role and economic plight invisible.

The Worthy Wage group in our county included a "90:1" campaign as part of its advocacy activities leading up to Worthy Wage Day, May 1, 2015. The "90" stands for the percentage increase in parent fees over the last 25 years, while the "1" stands for the increase in teacher wages in our state. Teachers and family child care providers completed postcards that were delivered to decision-makers in our community and our state legislature.

I'd like to add a final thought. In a recent gathering in our community where teachers met with college students to tell them about their low-wage work, I got a glimpse of another issue — the stigma of being poor. At first the teachers focused their comments on how rewarding the work is and said little about the wages. One teacher finally said, "I don't really want people to know I am poor. There is such a stigma attached to that." A sense of pride in their work keeps some teachers from wanting to get involved in grassroots work to address compensation. Teachers who have transformed a stigma into righteous indignation are showing all of us where to take this work.

Photograph by Margie Carter

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Photo by Bonnie Neugebauer