

Squandering America's Future

Why ECE Policy Matters for
Equality, Our Economy,
and Our Children

Susan Ochshorn

Foreword by David Kirp



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Prologue

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

The failure of most current economic systems to give real value to caring and caregiving, whether in families or in the larger society, continues to lie behind massive economic inequities and dysfunctions.

—Riane Eisler

One December in the early 21st century, the United States lost its position as the largest economy in the world. Our Gross Domestic Product of \$17.4 trillion was just not good enough. “It doesn’t matter a darn,” proclaimed *Forbes*, “the Capitalist Tool,” ever optimistic about America’s potential. Within a matter of days, China had missed its annual-growth target, hitting a 24-year low. That’s the way the cookie crumbles on the global economic scene.

But we have a big problem here in the land of plenty. America is squandering its human capital, the real wealth of our nation. Our policies give short shrift to children, our budding innovators. They also leave families and educators, venture capitalists for these future wealth producers, in the lurch. The list of our sins is long—and dispiriting. Childrearing has now achieved the status of luxury item. Education is seen as expenditure not investment. We tolerate child-poverty rates that put us to shame on the world’s social-justice index. The hard, essential work of caregiving and nurturing appear nowhere on the ledger sheets for our GDP.

Fortunately, changemakers across America are following the arc of the moral universe, bending it with solutions. A new economic paradigm is emerging. It measures a different kind of capital—social wealth—including human capability and the cost of its nurturance. Social entrepreneurs, among them parents and teachers of young children, are raising their voices,

sounding the alarm in a nation that purports to leave no child behind but that has failed miserably in that noble and necessary endeavor.

POLICY TALES

I'm a writer by training, and I like telling stories. While this book was gestating, I discovered Timothy Wilson, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, who does double duty at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. The author of *Redirect*, a book about how we change our minds and behavior, Wilson once told a *New York Times* interviewer that "stories are more powerful than data, because they allow individuals to identify emotionally with ideas and people they might otherwise see as 'outsiders.'" His observation seems to fly in the face of the conventional wisdom about policymakers. They want "the facts, ma'am," don't they? And they're happy to drown in an ocean of big data.

I thought Wilson was on to something. I was reminded of a visit to Capitol Hill one snowy February, when I met with a young aid to New York Senator Charles Schumer. Here I was, armed with a wonkish briefing on QUALITYstarsNY, the latest initiative to assess, improve, and communicate to parents the quality of early childhood programs. But guess who stole the show: one of my team partners, the director of a child care center in the western reaches of the state. She told the story of children in her program, painting a vivid picture of their hunger in the face of cuts to the Women, Infant, and Children Special Supplemental Nutrition Program. They were missing their snacks, she said. These federal grants to states sustain low-income families with food, health care referrals, and nutrition during pregnancy, postpartum, and the years before children enter kindergarten. And they're perennials on the chopping block.

All short stories are defined by a series of elements: characters, setting, plot, point of view, and theme. Conflict is also an essential ingredient. This book's bold-faced protagonists are parents, teachers, and all their partners in the creation of human capital—eternally under siege. Theorists and researchers, the keepers of early childhood's robust evidence base, also play a role. So do policymakers, toggling back and forth among the groups, their eyes on the bottom line. Politicians struggle to keep their heads above water, dependent on ever-growing quantities of money to assure their future.

All of these people figure in the arduous process of translating research into practice and policy. Sometimes it works, but too often we're caught between the words and the lines, looking for a real solution that

meets the need. Finally, we have the children, whose voices have been silenced. They depend on us. We're supposed to be the adults. But we're constantly letting them down.

The setting for this collection of stories is the national conversation, filled with commentary from all of the above and defined by lots of that requisite conflict. I also throw in some scenes from the early childhood universe across the country, taking you to Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and my home city and state of New York. In towns and neighborhoods, people are making change, in spite of the odds. You'll see profiles of them and their work in each of the chapters. New voices are emerging in our state capitals; in Washington, DC; and in the nation's kindergarten classrooms, where the defenders of children are growing stronger. I'm cheering them on—with every fiber of my being.

Most of them are women, whom Horace Mann, the first secretary of education in Massachusetts, thought were endowed with heavenly virtue. That may be so, but virtue rarely prevails. Those who nurture the wealth of our nation have long been clustered in the “pink ghetto,” a bastion of the disenfranchised. The old guard—many of them, male—persists, stuck on antiquated ideas about intervention in the earliest years, waving the flag of family values, rugged individualism, and self-sufficiency. That's what I say in polite company. Among friends, family, and colleagues who know my bent, I've been known to refer to them as Neanderthals. Or dinosaurs—soon, I hope, to be extinct.

Historically, policymaking has been an incremental process. It still is. But increasingly, how the message gets out is critical for rising above the daily assault of information. The medium is the message, said Marshall McLuhan, who some have called a prophet of the digital age. The stewards of human capital must be consummate “spinmeisters.” The drone of the conversation is relentless; the competition, fierce. The process has become faster and more dynamic—people with opinions of all stripes hawking positions on Twitter, Google+, TED talks, and a dizzying array of emerging platforms. The same applies to making social change, a slog fueled by inexhaustible energy and moral outrage at the abysmal status quo.

Today, these arenas demand more complex skills and knowledge. The good news is that the latest research on children and incursions against their healthy development has infiltrated the mainstream. Public opinion is coming around. Men are also staking their claim, declaring time and engagement with children and family a top priority. Notions of community, interdependence, and the role of government are all up in the air, with historically marginalized groups emboldened. In a nation where the poverty rate for children under age 6 hovers at 25 percent, and the best

interests of the child are perpetually at risk, this sea change could not be more welcome.

Above all, the producers of the nation's real wealth need to claim their seat at the table—to “lean in,” as Sheryl Sandberg urged America's women. A billionaire who crashed through the glass ceiling, she couldn't be more removed from the low-wage mothers juggling offspring and jobs, not to mention early childhood teachers. But the spirit is right, and the alternative is not acceptable. Otherwise, those who know little about children, and are woefully inadequate to the task, end up making big decisions with dangerous repercussions.

URIE BRONFENBRENNER AND HIS RUSSIAN DOLLS

Urie Bronfenbrenner, born in Moscow in 1917 amid revolutionary turmoil, is one of my heroes. After emigrating to the United States as a six-year-old, he went on to a distinguished career as a child psychologist. He makes a cameo appearance in a number of the chapters, his influence casting a long shadow. Cornell University, where Bronfenbrenner taught for more than half a century, has named a center for translational research in his honor. Here, his legacy lives on.

Bronfenbrenner well understood the need for interdependence. But he wasn't interested in the individual psyches of little ones—although he got right to the heart of the matter in his belief that all children, first and foremost, need someone who is crazy about them. He envisioned a human ecosystem, which he likened to a set of nested structures, one inside the next like a set of Russian dolls, with children in the innermost sanctum.

Children, Bronfenbrenner proposed, don't develop in isolation. Nor do their parents. They blossom in relation to the institutions and values in which they're embedded: home, school, community, workplace, and the larger society. His elegant bioecological theory undergirds America's bare-bones social policy, including Community Schools, Promise Neighborhoods, and Head Start, the nation's early childhood program for low-income children, which he helped to design. It's also the foundation for the work of the book's changemakers and systems architects, all of whom look at the child in context.

This wise scientist saw children whole, not as a collection of spare parts. Their intellectual, emotional, and social selves could not be separated. He understood that what happened out there—in the larger Russian dolls—had everything to do with a healthy developmental trajectory. He also knew that how parents fared at home, and in their relationships

across society, had a profound impact on their youngsters' chances of making it in the world. We ignore his wisdom at our peril. We continue to leave the shepherds of children's early development and education high and dry, starving the human ecosystem.

MY OWN NARRATIVE

This story begins, as all do, with an infant's primal wail. The leap to parenthood is unfathomable, a journey from one planet to another, if not across galaxies. When my son was born—in the year *A Nation at Risk* was released—my perspective shifted 180 degrees. Suddenly his needs trumped everything on my to-do list. Concern for his well-being reordered my priorities like nothing before had managed to do, the life that I had known upended.

No sooner had I emerged from my postlabor fever than I jumped into this terra incognita. Just as Sam completed his 13th week on the earth, I returned to my magazine editor's job from a maternity leave cobbled together with temporary disability insurance and my own sweat equity. I was the beneficiary of the largesse of an enlightened corporation—although I did have to place a frantic phone call to the CEO just before I resumed work. He had been thinking of kicking me out of my office, barrel cactus and all.

The transition was tough. Each day, I left my newborn at home in the loving care of his child care provider. But I was miserable. And those breast-feeding sessions with a handheld pump astride a toilet in the company restroom didn't help. Working nine to five, often later, in midtown Manhattan, I rushed home each night on the subway to take back what I felt had been stolen. Most of all, I craved time. I wanted to be there, first, with my curious, babbling, and fascinating infant and then with my toddler, whose world was opening up, his words rushing like a stream, new discoveries coming every minute.

I felt so deprived that I quit to freelance when Sam was 19 months old, hoping to find that elusive work-family balance. Soon after, his father and I enrolled him at Purple Circle Day Care Center, becoming part of the village it takes to raise a child. Who were these amazing people, our new lifeline in this daunting task of rearing the next generation? I was awed by what they knew and their dedication—for which they received little respect and recognition, some of them paid on par with embalmers and parking attendants.

The epic challenges of parenthood had sent me back to the rich, progressive soil of my childhood, tilled by my own mother and father. Something was beginning to stir in me—and it wasn't another baby. My own two

offspring were thriving. But I knew they were lucky. They'd been born to upward mobility—now off-limits to millions of children in a country with deep income inequality. I was lucky too. I struggled in the aftermath of a difficult divorce from their father, my dreams for further education saved by the loving support of my next of kin.

Still, I've never forgotten those days when my checking account showed a negative balance. How terrified I was to be on the brink—where so many single mothers today find themselves. Of course I had a safety net, an anomaly in modern America. Soon, I looked up and out, setting my sights beyond our own reconfigured nuclear family to other people's children in a nation that seemed to have left them behind.

A SNEAK PREVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the chapters that follow, the themes emerge, the plot thickens, and the conflicts intensify. Here, you'll find my adventures in the confounding world of public policy, where early childhood has unwittingly ascended to the top of the agenda. Some are fighting this development tooth and nail. They're defenders of the sacred realm of the family, proponents of lean, mean government. But I have to keep on reminding myself that they're also interlocutors in our national conversation, a mainstay of our vibrant, messy democracy. My private, less generous fantasies about their fate remain hidden—most of the time.

This is where the author's "point of view" comes in. Someone has to be the grown-up around here. These naysayers just don't have their priorities straight. They're clinging to antiquated ideas about gender roles. Worst of all, their proposed methods of nurturing the young are mad—and destructive. Many would say (and I do) that they verge on child abuse. See that five-year-old boy over there filling in the bubbles of a test? Or the six-year-old who—heaven forbid—is not yet reading fluently? He feels like a failure before he's even hit first grade. And what about play, the primary engine of human development? It's vanishing—along with recess and those smooth, solid blocks of all shapes and sizes in the corner.

In the opening chapter, I take a look at the period from conception to age 3, when babies' hundred billion neurons are in play. Today, we know more than ever about our origins and the earliest years. Researchers are pushing boundaries, exploring the physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and moral lives of little humans. Yet we're stunting them from the get-go. Toxic stress and violence are proliferating along with the growing number of homeless and hungry children. The nation's food banks can barely keep up

with demand, using something called “hungry calculus” to determine the level of incidence.

Nor can we get over our bad habit of demonizing the poor. They’re still on the margins, most of them women. Never mind that we condemn their children to the bottom rungs of the ladder, to a cycle of intergenerational dysfunction. We think nothing of spending billions on fleets of fighter jets, while we hack away at the children’s tiny share of the budget pie with impunity. And then we blame the parents, sticking them with the bill for child care, which costs more than tuition for college in some states.

The United States pales by comparison with Europe—especially Scandinavia, which offers all kinds of goodies to new parents. For starters, there’s the well-stocked Finnish baby box, with onesies and pads for mother’s leaky milk ducts. In America, a threadbare quilt of cash assistance and modest tax credits is the extent of our natal offering—unless you count the free tee-shirts given to babies just lucky enough to be born near a big football school looking for future fans. And then, how about those generous paid-leave policies in civilized social democracies? Millennials are dying of envy, living in a nation cited by Human Rights Watch for failing its families.

Equity is a leitmotif across the book’s stories. In Chapter 2, I’ll uncover the connections between poverty and academic outcomes, zeroing in on deep inequality in the United States, what Linda Darling-Hammond, one of our foremost equity analysts—not *that* kind—called the Achilles’ heel of American education. Persistent achievement gaps have driven education reform since the National Assessment of Educational Progress issued its first report card in 1969. We know that less segregated communities with lower levels of income inequality, better schools, greater social capital, and more-stable families are fertile ground for dream weaving.

But our children’s sleep is troubled. The same holds true for their parents, who live in a time when the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness butts up against a gap in income on par with that of El Salvador. Our child poverty levels—soaring beyond the 50-percent mark in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina—place us in an ignominious position in rankings across the globe. The progressive mayor of New York City, where social critic Jonathan Kozol documented savage inequalities in the South Bronx decades ago, has taken a stab at changing the odds, making universal prekindergarten the foundation of a crusade to fight inequality.

The bandwidth of social change is broader than ever. Still, activism has a different cast these days, energized but also trivialized by social media, where advocates promote causes in tweets of 140 characters. The universe of need is expanding exponentially, families morphing into different forms,

colors, and identities. The majority of babies born in the United States are now ethnic and racial minorities. By 2018, the majority of the U.S. workforce will be people of color, and by midcentury—if not sooner—no single racial group will dominate the population. I'll explore the confluence of these societal trends and how innovative people are coping, offering solutions to the urgent challenges at hand.

As debates about teacher effectiveness have reached a crescendo, America's early childhood practitioners are adrift, navigating uncharted seas. In Chapter 3, I tell the story of their journey, starting with Catherine Beecher, the 19th-century normal school pioneer, who saw home and school, the feminine realms, as inextricably linked. Women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony also weighs in. A teacher at Canajoharie Academy in Palatine Bridge, New York, she wrote a letter to her mother, giving vent to her frustration about a salary raise denied.

We then fast-forward two and a half centuries to the Worthy Wage campaign led by second-wave feminist Marcy Whitebook. Dan Rather covered one of the movement's days of protest on the CBS Evening News. "Why did the child care worker cross the road?" he asked, riffing on the well-worn riddle. "To get to her second job." At last count, the median hourly wage of teachers working within child care had inched up to a paltry \$10.60. Millennial "child care workers"—exiled to the Siberia of a personal service category in the Bureau of Labor Statistics—earn less than animal trainers and barely a hair above preparers of fast food.

As important as they are, wages are only part of the story. Teacher preparation is in major flux. The professional identity of early childhood educators is still unformed. The rest of society sees them as babysitters—a perception that's hard to shake. Besides, the work they do has no value in the marketplace, where our eyes are on Wall Street and the Gross Domestic Product. Economist Nancy Folbre has bluntly warned us of the consequences for our future. A society that puts such a premium on individual success to the exclusion of nurturing the next generation is doomed.

America is a can-do nation. We pride ourselves on our creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial moxie. Yet, we hold out ideas, often radically different, about what it takes to produce that potent mix. In Chapter 4, I'll explore the promise and pitfalls of the union between early childhood and the K-12 system. I'll take a look at the yin and the yang of education reform in this rambunctious blended family—a process that education historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban likened to "tinkering toward utopia."

The United States has always believed deeply in education as a way of perfecting the future and improving the young—a silver bullet for the ravages of poverty. We also see it as the tried-and-true route to preeminence

on the world stage. To that end, America's leading the way among advanced economies, applying the dubious process of disruptive innovation, a popular business strategy, to human development, learning, and teaching. Nothing is off limits in our pursuit of cognitive complexity. That includes the subconscious. A patent-pending product called Sleep'n Sync promises a multifaceted brain lift for children after they've drifted off to dreamland.

As a symptom of our very own obsessive compulsive disorder, we're measuring children's progress every step of the way. Are they prepared for school? Can they count up to 20? Are they reading *The Sorcerer's Stone*? Watch out for those third-grade benchmarks. We keep pushing them along—ignoring the pesky emotions that get in the way of regulation and executive function. Lately, the guardians of childhood have declared they've had enough. They're putting their feet down, opting out of the growing number of standardized tests that are casting a blight on the "gardens of delight" envisioned by Johann Comenius, a 17th-century Moravian bishop disturbed by the violence of the Thirty Years' War.

Designing a system to ensure children get what they need is not for the faint of heart. In Chapter 5, I've taken a page from John F. Kennedy's classic, *Profiles in Courage*, highlighting the architects on this master project. Before you build, you need a blueprint to determine the extent of the work. Early childhood has had to start from the ground, up—a process requiring great leaps of imagination, faith, and lots of pluck. System building isn't sexy. Just think about the terms of art: infrastructure, linkages, coordination, alignment. And the process couldn't be more fraught. It's not easy wrestling with the field's big issues—equity, sustainability, and accountability—day to day over time.

Then there's the long and winding road to quality, another of our national obsessions. We haven't yet produced a universally accepted definition—this, in spite of all we know about children and the conditions that support their development and academic skill formation. Some of today's senior architects identify with Sisyphus, pushing his heavy boulder up the mountain. A newer, more energetic crop, weaned on unprecedented support for their work at the highest levels of policymaking, is more sanguine; they see a glass half full.

Wherever they sit, the architects navigate a polarized and dysfunctional political system. Internecine squabbling is rife. The budget pie is miniscule, and priorities constantly shift. Most politicians couldn't care less about the long-term outcomes. How anyone moves the needle is a wonder. Still, they believe—as all converts do—that early childhood is the most powerful leverage point for changing the trajectory of children. All are alchemists, their own early experiences transmuted into the drive for reform.

The book's final chapter started out as an elegiac meditation on the impact of technology on young children in their most tender years. But I ended up embracing this brave, new world—with reservations. How could I scorn iChat, which helps children without speech communicate? Electronic media use in the United States is exploding, our preschoolers and babies swiping their sweet, little fingers across a plethora of magnetizing screens. I chronicle the movement from analog to digital—a transformation, some say, on par with the huge leaps from oral to written language and onward to the printing press. What would life be without the World Wide Web, which was born in the same year as my daughter? Victoria Rideout has been reporting from the front, at Common Sense Media, suffering from battle fatigue.

For parents, technology is just one more thing on a long list of things that they need to perfectly navigate. Researchers in child development, working on academia's pokey time line, can barely keep up with their questions. Is that video frying or firing the synapses of my child's brain? Will the green room in *Goodnight Moon* lose its magic on an electronic reader? Can little Olivia master, much less understand, fractions via a math app online? The answers emerge slowly, but they're inadequate to the task of assuaging parents' anxieties.

In the classrooms of the nation's early educators, this profound paradigm shift is well underway, shaking the foundations of the field. Whatever happened to Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky? Those legendary theorists believed that young children learn best through their senses, exploring their world with adults and their peers. Technology's virtual toys seem a poor substitute for the real thing. A new breed of professional-development specialist is bringing them along—including Erin Klein, a "Tweet loving, technology integrating mom of two with a passion for classroom design." A pioneer into the digital Wild West, she's leading the way.

This contentious, uniquely American conversation continues, the protagonists changing with the seasons. But children's needs remain fixed. And we must do a better job of meeting them. The future of our civilization is at risk.