



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

# How the World Has Changed in Four Decades

History from the Perspective of the  
Calvin Hill Day Care Center, Inc.  
Kitty Lustman-Findling Kindergarten  
Yale University • New Haven, Connecticut

by Carla M. Horwitz

The world of early childhood has certainly changed since I started working at the Calvin Hill Day Care Center in 1975! In those days, with a masters degree in urban education, experience at the forefront of an exciting educational crusade striving to bring back progressive education through the open classroom movement, and a strong commitment to social justice, I felt I was part of a movement of visionary young teachers who really could change the world. We created curriculum and studied child development together, sought to provide equal access to quality education to the disenfranchised and the poor, made our classrooms laboratories and workshops and studios where children could experiment and play and learn, were partners with parents and as teachers also continued to learn. It was a heady time, one full of promise, very hard work, intellectual challenge, and much joy.

Some of the change that has come since I began in the field is quite positive. While affordable quality child care is still not universally available, parents now have many more options for their children than they did in the 1970s. And public attitudes about the value of child care have turned around dramatically. The great attention that has been

focused on brain research and economic and quality analyses has contributed to increasing the perceived value of child care. In the 1970s day care was relatively new, and for many parents, using out-of-home full-time group care was still controversial. Today these parents absolutely expect high-quality care to be available, and they use it. And, finally, the overall quality of child care provided for many families is much higher — standards have been raised, knowledge of appropriate practice is abundant, and financial supports for achieving quality, while still inadequate, are more available.

However, our field still is faced with some dramatic challenges — challenges that can make it harder and harder for independent high-quality programs, like the Calvin Hill Day Care Center, to survive.

## Where is the Passion?

The Calvin Hill Day Care Center was founded by a group of Yale students who were involved in many of the social protest movements spreading across the United States in the late 1960s. During the controversial New Haven trial of black militant Bobby Seale, there was fear of violence, and the National Guard was

strongly present on the streets. During those turbulent days, Yale's administration worked closely with protesting students. But rather than burning buildings (as happened on other college campuses) what these students did, with the support of the Yale administration, was to open up the doors at Yale and set up child care, soup kitchens, and many other services for people who flooded into New Haven for the protests. From that day, these particular students became strongly committed to developing and providing high-quality, affordable child care at Yale, with a sliding fee scale, aimed specifically at university union employees. Students specifically targeted the needs of Yale union employee children in response to a workers' strike at Yale, where one of the issues was the lack of child care.

Calvin Hill now serves a wide range of Yale-affiliated families from administration and faculty to students and union employees, as well as non-Yale members of the New Haven community. While many changes wrought by national protests were ephemeral, members of this Yale Class of '71 can point to Calvin Hill as their lasting legacy and those students (now in their mid-60s), are still heavily involved in supporting our program.

In the 1960s and 1970s all around the country, young people who were bound and determined to change the world became involved in creating child care programs of all sorts. Many from this generation of leaders are still involved in our field. However, they are slowly but surely retiring, and I am not so sure that they are being replaced by individuals with the same degree of preparation, passion, knowledge, and commitment to making a difference, continuing to learn and advance the field, as those who will soon be gone.

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## The Staffing Crisis

A not so little secret of our field is that it is becoming harder and harder to find great teachers. At Calvin Hill, we are fortunate that we have many wonderful teachers who have been with us for a long time. For example, one of our male teachers who had been teaching here for 41 years just retired last June! And several other teachers have been at Calvin Hill for 10, 20, and more than 30 years, although we do continue to hire new younger staff as

well. However, for most centers, there just is not a large pool of qualified, well-trained teachers to draw on.

Early childhood teachers have to be knowledgeable about child development and curriculum, committed continuous learners, and fiercely dedicated supporters of the intellectual integrity and nurturing relationships that serve families well and help children learn and grow. Fewer and fewer people like this come into the field these days. As a result, our field is becoming bereft of the best and brightest who used to become teachers. Although I am a feminist, I recognize that the far-reaching influence of the Women's Movement has contributed to the fact that the very kinds of people in my cohort who entered the field 40 years ago now have many more professional opportunities open to them. And the shockingly low compensation, demanding physical work, and very little status also have helped to create a staffing crisis that must be reversed if we are to provide the best care and education for our youngest children.

To counter this trend, we at Calvin Hill established and secured funding for a fellowship program through which, over the last 18 years, we have trained young people to be teachers or professionals in other child-related fields. They spend a year as an assistant teacher in one of our classrooms with a highly experienced, supportive mentor teacher, and take several of the courses I teach at Yale in child development, early childhood education, and assessment. Some of these interns have ended up joining the Calvin Hill staff, which was the plan all along.

## Stress on Families

Another change I have seen is in the amount of pressure families are now under. Everything has speeded up for parents; they are working longer hours, and feeling more and more stressed, requiring child care for more hours a day and year. Children and families are paying the price with less time together and more time in care. Some families, of course, have no choice about this at all, and even those who do are often compelled to be at work many more hours than they wish, and then even to take work home. Work life has expanded and family time has compressed. In the 40 years I have been a director, I have seen the toll this takes. I believe this affects all of us, not just the children.

## The Crush of Bureaucracy

With all the attention the field is getting now, there is a whole new array of early learning standards, of accreditation criteria, and assessment requirements. Now I want to be clear that there is nothing wrong with accountability, and there is nothing wrong with setting standards. But the way these requirements are being enacted is creating real problems at the center level.

In the service of accountability, improving quality and closing the achievement gap (all laudable aims), many programs are being asked to plan and document scripted curriculum, often leaving out room for the emergent curriculum that is created within relationships between teachers and children as they construct meaning and classroom community together.

The amount of documentation has become unwieldy — and this puts a tremendous burden on the teachers during days that already do not have enough time in them to get all this writing done. In fact, I have heard it said that sometimes centers hire substitutes



to work with the children so that the teachers can do all the documentation. Surely this is backwards! This is taking away from the time that teachers can be with the children sharing meaningful activities and, quite frankly, it is taking away the joy of teaching. It gets in the way of the thinking and relationship building that we can and must do with children. It takes away the very essence of what working with children is all about — the reason many of us chose this field in the first place. Teachers tell me, “This is not what I signed up to do.” Teachers and children are being lost in the bureaucracy, and it’s another reason for the staffing crisis.

## The Competition of Public Programs

In New Haven, Connecticut, and around the country there are growing numbers of public programs opening up that are free or relatively inexpensive. Of course, I support access for all children to high-quality child care, and I applaud these efforts to include all children in this absolutely crucial educational experience. It is a right that is long overdue. But we must ensure that we provide not just more child care ‘slots,’ but more high-quality slots. This is a serious challenge.

At some point this public expansion will impact those small, private non-profit programs that struggle to maintain high-quality affordable care with shrinking budgets and higher and higher operating costs. Even if parents still want to choose such a program, they surely will be attracted to the public program down the street that is so much cheaper. Sometimes such dramatic disparity in costs draws attention away from other aspects of the choices parents can make for their children. And though Calvin Hill has a sliding tuition scale, many parents struggle to meet even our adjusted tuition fees.

My journey in the field of early childhood over the last 40 years has been an amazing one; it has been exciting, fulfilling, frustrating, and challenging — and it’s not over yet! My wonderful mentors (and there were many) were women who came of age during the progressive era and who showed me the way and nurtured and taught me so much about social responsibility, child development, curriculum, the importance of both the intellectual and nurturing role we play in the lives of children and families, the value of our own continuous learning and, most of all, the centrality of relationships. For these 40 years I also have been privileged to be on the faculty of Yale University and to teach undergraduates, helping them discover the value, complexity, and rewards of early childhood education through course work and practicum placements at Calvin Hill.

I have been at the helm of an incredible child care program — one that serves as a national model of high-quality child care and of the kind of progressive education I have worked so hard to establish throughout my teaching career; one that is truly a community where teachers and parents are partners; one where the social and emotional experiences children have at school are meaningful and their intellectual lives are nurtured with deep, rich, emergent curriculum.

I have had the good fortune to work with gifted and committed teachers who have

helped to shape Calvin Hill into the vibrant, inspiring educational learning community it has become. And I have been blessed to work with a board of directors that has trusted and supported me in each of the many projects I have proposed, whether building a new Reggio-inspired addition, creating a fellowship training program, developing two new classrooms, reconstructing several playgrounds, making sure the teachers who take such good care of children are well taken care of too (with access to retirement and health benefits), and helping to raise the funds to make all this happen. I have been very, very lucky. I have been able to reinvent my job, and yet to stay in the same place over many years. I am aware of just how rare an opportunity I have had. And I truly treasure this experience that has been the work of my life.

At a recent event I ran into a Calvin Hill alumni parent. Her son, now 24, presently works in film and cartooning. “You had all the pedagogy, and our son had a fine and challenging education,” she said. “But you also supported and valued what each individual child brought with them to school, and helped them to express and develop those skills and habits and passions. We credit Calvin Hill with what he has been able to become.”

So that is why I am still at Calvin Hill after all these years. The rewards are countless, though the work is hard, and getting harder. But this parent’s comment demonstrates just one example of the difference I believe I have made. And after all, making a difference is what I started out to do so many years ago.



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