

Is Early Childhood Education a Profession?

BY TERI TALAN

This may seem like a no-brainer but, in reality, this seemingly innocuous question forces practitioners to answer tougher questions first. What does it mean to be a profession? Are those who currently self-identify as early childhood practitioners willing to accept and promote the professional necessity of narrowing the scope of practice of early childhood educators?

Early childhood education is inherently inclusive so that any definition that creates boundaries where some colleagues are in the profession and some colleagues are out of the profession creates discomfort. This discomfort can lead to resistance. Many of us were raised on the story of The Sneetches and received our first lesson in social justice by learning of a society that privileged those born with stars on their bellies and excluded those without.

My first reaction to the NAEYC initiative, [Power to the Profession](#), was one of wholehearted support. I considered myself an early childhood professional and wanted those not in my field of practice to respect, value, and compensate early childhood professionals commensurate with our competencies. But, as it has been pointed out to me, before I can be a professional, there needs to be a profession.

All recognized professions are built on a common purpose and identity, with agreement on the unique roles, responsibilities, and attributes of their members. Power to the Profession, an NAEYC initiative led by a 15-member taskforce (comprised of national associations) and guided by a 30-member stakeholders' group (comprised of national organizations) has taken on the challenge of establishing early childhood education as a profession:

Members of the Early Childhood Education Profession are responsible and accountable for:

1. Planning and implementing intentional, developmentally appropriate learning experiences that advance the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of children
2. Establishing and maintaining a safe and healthy learning environment
3. Developing reciprocal relationships with families and communities
4. Advocating for the needs of children and their families
5. Advancing and advocating for the early childhood education profession

These responsibilities and accountability are consistent across early education settings including elementary schools, centers, and home-based businesses.

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I say Yes! I am responsible and accountable for all of the above. But not so fast. I work in higher education, providing leadership development opportunities to program administrators and other program leaders. Do the above responsibilities really apply to me? What about the program leaders themselves—are they truly accountable for all of the above? Suddenly, I am a Sneetch without a star on my belly and it feels lonely.

But my story, like that of the Sneetches, has a happy ending. I thought long and hard about the development of other professions such as nursing and social work. Each of these caring professions has taken ownership of its work. Nurses and social workers are accountable for their practice; they are also respected and compensated commensurate with their level of competency. There is another important consideration—these professions are closely allied with other professions to best serve the needs of their clients. Nurses work collaboratively with doctors. Social workers partner with psychiatrists. I have come to realize that early childhood program administrators and college faculty that prepare teachers and leaders in early childhood education are allies to early childhood educators. I am not lonely anymore; I am comfortable being an allied professional playing a critical role supporting the early childhood education profession.

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