

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IS NOT A PROFESSION

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The early childhood education field does not conform to the standards of organized professions nor is it held accountable as such. To pretend otherwise is a disservice to families and their children.

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(Photo: Tim Boyle/Getty Images)

Early childhood education makes a valuable contribution to society by advancing children’s learning and development, enhancing their path toward success in school and beyond. Because of this, and tied to the belief that tangible contributions, both immediate and long-term, will be forthcoming, public investments in early childhood education are rising at federal, state, and local levels. But these results won’t be achieved if we don’t also invest in the preparation of early childhood educators and the field’s development as a recognized profession—a profession that is respected for its contributions; held accountable for providing reliable quality early education; and its professionals appropriately compensated for their specialized knowledge and skills.

At present, this is not the case. As has been highlighted over and over, early childhood educators vary considerably in their preparation. They also lack clear expectations for what they should accomplish in their interactions with children. As Elizabeth Gilbert dramatically expressed it in a recent *Education Week* article: “so many early childhood educators who are trying to educate millions of children are our least educated professionals.”

But this statement is misleading: There is no recognized early childhood education profession. The early childhood education field does not conform to the standards of organized professions nor is it held accountable as such, as reflected in the variability in teachers' knowledge and skills. Consequently, although central to its aspirations, the early childhood education field cannot yet claim status as a profession. To pretend otherwise is a disservice to families and their children.

Early childhood education is a highly fragmented field. Such fractures are put in place not only by diverse program settings and funding sources, but also by disparate views held within the field—as well as externally—regarding early childhood education's purpose and the competencies required for effective practice that, in turn, provide the basis for uniform preparation. The consequences resulting from this state of affairs are well known: high variability in teachers' abilities to promote children's learning and development. If early childhood education is to fulfill its promise, these fractures must be addressed.

It should come as no surprise that our nation's youngest children have such widely different early learning experiences and varying levels of preparation for success in school and beyond.

Professions, by design, are meant to bring uniformity to practice. Nurses, lawyers, architects, physical therapists—each of these professions is held accountable to formal standards and expectations. These are meant to ensure their professionals are consistently prepared with the knowledge and competencies required for fulfilling the collective purpose that unifies the profession as a field of practice. Further, professions are self-governing—an often-overlooked accountability function when attention is focused solely on degree attainment. This self-governance enables professionals to ensure their field's specialized knowledge base and skills are tied to evidence, uniformly taught across institutions of higher education, and appropriately and capably used in practice—but this is only made possible because the professionals themselves have shared understanding of the scope of their practice and the ethical standards for their conduct.

Presently, early childhood education relies primarily on workforce development programs to compensate for its inadequacies. This approach, however, has yet to transform the overall competence of early childhood educators. Given public demands for doing better—not to mention the field's longstanding commitment to optimizing children's learning and development—the time has come to abandon the field's piecemeal approach. To deliver on its promise to children, as well as to society, early childhood education needs a systemic approach; it needs to re-structure as a unified, professional field of practice driven by standards for educators' preparation that will expand and advance children's early learning, individual development, and school success.

The good news is the growing attention being given to developing the collective competence of early childhood educators. In 2015, for example, the National Academies of Science and Institute of Medicine (now the National Academy of Medicine) released *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. The volume identifies strategies for reducing early childhood education's fragmentation by sharing the research on what teachers need to know and be capable of doing to reliably execute strong teaching practices and create consistently effective learning experiences for young children.

This report has spurred several new activities and initiatives, including a collaborative effort led by the National Association for the Education of Young Children to define the early childhood education profession and establish a unified framework of competencies, qualifications, and compensation. Membership groups representing individuals in the field as well as a long list of other organizations will contribute to the effort. The National Academy of Medicine is convening state teams to develop plans for carrying out priority

recommendations customized to their specific needs. Still other states are engaged in efforts to re-think existing systems currently training, supporting, and compensating early childhood teachers and caregivers.

These new and emerging initiatives are important starting points and bode well for the field's future. Becoming a recognized profession, though, will require the field to confront the sources of its intense fragmentation and have the courage to create a different future for early childhood education as a field of practice—and as a profession. Moving beyond the tendency to tinker around the edges, though, will demand system leadership and a process that embraces tough conversations to resolve challenging choices inherent to professions' abilities to fulfill their obligations to those they serve. The most contentious issues will include deciding who is encompassed by the early childhood education profession; determining the qualifications and competencies required for entry; aligning higher education preparation programs with the requisite knowledge and competencies; and ensuring professional parity for early educators in terms of their compensation and benefits. By way of an example, expectations for teacher qualifications vary by state and range from less than a high school diploma to specialized four-year degrees. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that our nation's youngest children have such widely different early learning experiences and varying levels of preparation for success in school and beyond.

Too many children are in early learning settings unable to support their positive learning and development. We know this. Too many adults are being placed in positions for which they are underprepared. We know this too. Moving beyond inconsistent and uninformed practices demands a collectively competent early childhood education workforce. Professions offer a defined pathway for preparing practitioners ready for their responsibilities. Early childhood educators must now assume their responsibility and ensure that early childhood education as a field of practice can fulfill the promises research no longer leaves in doubt. Focusing on the field's own professional development is the only way to construct a different reality for children. This, too, we know.

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