

To Be or Not To Be Degreed: Are We Focusing on the Right Question?

by Stacie G. Goffin



Meet the Author
www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue

Also take the Exchange Instapoll: Rate How Far ECE Has Come as a Profession

With publication of *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*¹ by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the question of whether early childhood teachers should have baccalaureate degrees has once again become a contentious topic of discussion. Since first proposed in 2001 by *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*,² a National Academy of Sciences report that was followed by innumerable policy-oriented papers,³ the early childhood education (ECE) field has wrestled with this question, focusing on the level of education necessary for early educators and debating the pros and cons of degrees, with arguments revolving around whether they contribute to improved practice, barriers created by higher education costs and lack of articulation between higher education institutions, the need for varied pathways to degree attainment, concern for losing the

field's rich diversity, and the knotty issue of commensurate compensation. Add to this list the reality that unevenness in preparation standards and faculty expectations means degrees are not comparable to one another in what they teach and what graduates know or are able to do.

The IOM's new report documents the explosive growth of new knowledge about children's learning and development, as well as the varied and sophisticated pedagogical skills needed by teachers. When placed in the context of achievement gaps among young children, accountabilities associated with rising public funding, and expectations for specified child outcomes, the report may tilt this lengthy debate toward proponents who contend early childhood teachers should have four-year degrees.

The terms 'profession' and 'professional' are loosely used. Sometimes people are deemed professional, for example, when they perform their work at a high level or when they shift from amateur to paid status. Sometimes we presume the presence of a degree confers professional status.

In fact, numerous occupations associated with formal degree expectations are not recognized professions. Think, for example, of individuals working in business or technology, neither of which is a recognized professional field of practice. Although degrees and credentials can convey valued expertise and result in higher compensation, they do not, in and of themselves, mark an occupation as a profession or the degree holder as a professional.

Becoming a Professional Field of Practice

The call for four-year degrees typically is linked to professionalizing ECE as a field of practice. If this is part of our intent, though, we need to become better informed about the requirements associated with official recognition as a profession.

This is because professions differ from other occupations. Their occupational structure is intentionally designed to provide society with specialized expertise and ensure that practitioners are uniformly prepared and competent, regardless of funding stream, program sponsorship, or, in our instance, the children and families being served. While four-year degrees



Stacie Goffin is Principal of the Goffin Strategy Group. The Goffin Strategy Group promotes effective programs and services for young children through leadership, capacity, and systems development. Stacie is the author of several seminal publications, including *Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education* (with Valora Washington); *Early Childhood Education for a New Era: Leading for Our Profession*; and the recently released *Professionalizing Early Childhood Education as a Field of Practice: A Guide to the Next Era* (Redleaf Press, 2015). More information can be found at www.goffinstrategygroup.com.

We Make Picture Day Fun!

Ready for a Change? We Have a Photo Program for Everyone!

- **School Days** - simple and easy with the children photographed in their own clothes.
- **Fashion** - we provide all the outfits and accessories.
- **Graduation** - celebrate their achievements!
- **Outdoor Portraits** - a new favorite!



Ever consider a career in photography? Lil' Angels franchises are available... go to lilangelsfranchise.com

Find Out More at lilangelsphoto.com

have the potential to increase the knowledge and skill of *individual* teachers, especially when informed by the science of child development, knowledge of curriculum, and effective pedagogy, professional fields of practice focus on the *collective* competence of the profession's members. In contrast to ECE's present occupational structure, a profession is an organized field of practice.

To advance ECE as a recognized profession, we will need to rethink our occupational structure and address attributes that define professions — criteria such as prescribed scopes of work and formal preparation as a prerequisite to being licensed to practice. While specialized degrees and certifications are expected of professionals, to be formally recognized as a profession, ECE also will need to move beyond its current fragmentation and reorganize as interlocking systems of preparation, practice, and accountability. Further, these systems must be bound together by a unifying

purpose that distinguishes ECE from other fields of practice in terms of its knowledge, skills, and contributions to young children's learning and development.

The Benefits of Becoming a Professional Field of Practice

The emphasis on degree attainment, therefore — even when coupled with coaching and ongoing learning — underestimates what is required to achieve professional status. It also overlooks the benefits that result from attending to the organizing structures required by professions. Benefits such as:

- unification as a field of practice and a shared professional identity that comes from clarity of purpose, cohesive preparation, and collectively shared responsibilities for the well-being of children and families.

- autonomy of practice that springs from being a self-governed profession.
- competent practitioners who begin their practice from a baseline of uniform preparation standards, regardless of setting.
- increased societal recognition of ECE's contributions to children and families.
- a firm foundation for partnering with policy makers and others to secure supportive public policies, including equitable occupational compensation.

Professions are not without flaws. Still, their organizational structure offers the ECE field an opportunity to evolve to a higher level of development and for its teachers to more consistently use effective practices.

It's Up to Us

Why have steps not been taken to realize these benefits? Advancing ECE as a field of practice has been blocked by our reluctance to grapple with thorny issues and questions that must be confronted if we are to move beyond our present status and earn the recognition accorded to professions. Questions such as:

- What commonalities bind ECE together as a field of practice?
- What should be ECE's defining intent as a professional field of practice?
- What is the specialized knowledge and skills that define ECE as a field of practice?
- What makes our expertise distinctive from other child-serving professions?⁴

Unifying ECE as a field of practice and forming its professional identity depend on answers to these and other probing questions. Exploring questions like these also matter because formal recognition as a profession will necessitate our persuading others that ECE makes a needed and important societal contribution; specialized expertise and a self-governing infrastructure is neces-

sary for the field's contributions to be realized; and demand for our expertise isn't matched by its current availability.

Exasperating our circumstances is the field's historic hesitation to step forward and create the future *it* wants for ECE. Spurred by the field's inaction, ECE's supporters — from business, government, and philanthropy, for example — have stepped in to fill the void. Unfortunately, decisions on our behalf often disregard our beliefs and knowledge about how best to support children's learning and development.

Partnering with our allies will be essential to achieving the learning and development results we all want for children. Yet at this juncture in ECE's evolution as a field of practice, the time has arrived for the ECE field to step forward and change from the inside out — to recalibrate its reliance on policy makers and others for effecting change and become the principal change agent for ECE as a field of practice.⁵

We, the ECE field, need to claim our voice and assume responsibility for our practices and their results. We need to become accountable as a field of practice. And we need to be the change agent who defines what this means.

This is a daring proposal. It asks us to mobilize collectively to:

- take charge of reforming ECE.
- become a self-governing, clearly delineated field of practice bound together by common purpose and destiny.
- replace our field's fragmented configuration with an occupational structure consistent with professions so capacity exists to maximize children's learning and development.⁶

Whether to Change is Not an Option

This article's title question has its answer: "To be or not to be degreed?" is not the right question to be asking. By itself, it's too one-dimensional; degrees alone won't take us to where we as a field aspire.

Transforming ECE so it becomes a recognized profession will be a complex undertaking and require collective resolve, imagination, stamina, and courage. The time is now, though, for us to step forward to fulfill ECE's promise, and our starting place should be *conversations with intent*. These purposeful conversations will engage us in personal and collective reflections that invite thinking — and ultimately acting — together to create an alternative future for ECE as a field of practice. While eyes may roll at the thought of still more 'talking' about ECE and next steps, when skillfully executed, conversations with intent offer the means for getting to sustained and transformative action.⁷ As Juanita Brown reminds us, "Conversation is the core process by which we humans think and coordinate our actions together... *Conversation is our human way of creating and sustaining — or transforming — the realities in which we live.*"⁸



Photograph by Tori Hogan

This journey has to begin with field-wide conversations that allow us to see and think differently about ECE as a field of practice. While not solely responsible for ECE's present circumstances, each of us is nonetheless helping create and sustain the systems that require change. We need to identify and move beyond the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are blocking us from imagining new possibilities.

Admittedly, restructuring ECE as a field of practice will entail uncertainty and conflict. This may make some of us feel uneasy about stepping forward. In addition to being challenging, though, the journey will be energizing and fulfilling. Throughout the field's history, ECE's aspirations to maximize each and every child's early learning opportunities have inspired our predecessors and colleagues to step forward on the field's behalf. Surely the call to become a professional field of practice can arouse similar dedication and commitment.

If we so choose, our aspirations for children and our yearning to be recognized for our contributions to their learning and development can be achieved. By becoming a profession, ECE can realize *its* potential.

This means, though, that there *is* a question in need of an answer: Do we have the courage and resolve to lead for ECE's future so it achieves its promise as a field of practice?

Endnotes

1 Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC). (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

2 Bowman, B. T., Donovan, M. S., & Burns, M. S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to learn:*

GET Organized and STAY Organized

WITH EZCARE CHILDCARE CENTER SOFTWARE

- ✓ Eliminates your administrative hassles
- ✓ Manages your paperwork
- ✓ Simplifies recordkeeping
- ✓ Makes managing enrollments easy
- ✓ Saves you hours of work processing payments



EZ-CARE

“The most helpful software support I have ever had.”

★★★★★
-Amy Robinson
University United Methodist Church

FOR A FREE TRIAL AND PRODUCT DEMO
CALL TOLL FREE 267-555-5555
OR GO TO WWW.EZCARE2.COM/GETORGANIZED

Educating our preschoolers. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

3 For example, Early, D. M., Bryant, D. M., Pianta, R. C., Clifford, R. M., Burchinal, M. R., Ritchie, S., & Barbarin, O. (2006). Are teachers' education, major, and credential related to classroom quality and children's academic gains in prekindergarten? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, 174-195; Pianta, R. C. (2011). A degree is not enough: Teachers need stronger and more individualized professional development supports to be effective in the classroom. In E. Zigler, W. S. Gilliam, & W. S. Barnett (Eds.). *The pre-k debates: Current controversies and issues* (pp. 64-68). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes; Whitebook, M. (2003). *Early education quality: Higher teacher qualifications for better learning environments: A review of the literature*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California at Berkeley; Washington, V. (2015,

January/February). Degree programs: Progress and pitfalls for ECE. *Exchange*, 221, 8-12.

4 Goffin, S. G. (2015). *Professionalizing early childhood education as a field of practice: A guide to the next era*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

5 Goffin, S. G. (2013). *Early childhood education for a new era: Leading for our profession*. New York: Teachers College Press.

6 Goffin, S. G. (2015). *Professionalizing early childhood education as a field of practice: A guide to the next era* (p. 5). St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

7 Goffin, S. G. (2015). *Professionalizing early childhood education as a field of practice: A guide to the next era*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

8 Brown, J. (Ed.) (2005). *The world café: Shaping our futures through conversations that matter*, p. 19 (italics in original). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.