

Redirecting Early Childhood Education’s Developmental Trajectory — Becoming A Recognized Profession

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Why should ECE redirect its trajectory & become a recognized professional field of practice?

- The ECE system’s weaknesses result in uneven, inconsistent, and oftentimes ineffective practices. These weaknesses diminish children’s chances to fulfill their potential, deny ECE the opportunity to be recognized as having specialized expertise, and open the field to being defined and regulated by others.
- ECE’s developmental trajectory should be redirected so:
 - » ECE can become a unified, and respected professional field of practice.
 - » Children and their families can be ensured that early childhood educators and other roles in the profession are consistently prepared to support each and every child’s learning and development prior to entering into the practice of early childhood education.
 - » Early childhood educators are uniformly committed to fulfilling the promise of early childhood education and are prepared to be accountable for their practices and their consequences for children’s learning and development.

1. What is a field of practice?

- A *field of practice* refers to a loosely connected cluster of occupations and professions — separately and collectively — whose work revolves around related interests, activities, and purposes.
- Both occupations and professions do important and valued work. Professions are differently structured than other occupations because they shoulder a unique obligation to the public and those who are recipients of their practice.

2. What is a professional field of practice?

- *Professions* are cohesive, self-governing systems of practice (versus externally regulated) organized around a self-defined purpose in service to a “noble public intention.”
- Professions command a set of specialized knowledge and skills that are essential to society’s well-being and not reliably available without the systemic structure that defines professions:
 - » Assurances that individuals are adequately prepared prior to becoming recognized members of their professions. Program quality matters, too. But in contrast to focusing on individual competencies, program quality efforts focus on creating conditions that support the use of effective professional practices.
 - » Assurances that recipients of professional practices are provided with competent care based on the profession’s standards of practice, regardless of setting and/or method of payment.
 - » Field-wide leadership responsible for orchestrating the profession’s subsystems; advancing the profession’s capabilities; and promoting conditions essential to fulfilling its noble intention(s).
- A profession’s standards of practice must be mastered *before* “permission” to practice is granted by states. Individuals who demonstrate the knowledge and skills required by their

professions receive approval to practice by states' professional boards (versus state agencies such as departments of education or health and human services).

- Members of professions are prepared for specific roles with defined expectations/scopes of practice for what they need to know and be able to do. Scopes of practice ensure professionals' practices do not exceed their expertise.
- As part of their commitment to those they serve, members of professions are ethically and legally accountable for providing consistently competent practice based on their profession's core values and standards of practice.

3. ECE presently is structured as an occupation. How do occupations differ from professions?

- Roles not part of recognized professions are identified as occupational positions. Individuals participating in an occupational workforce function independently of a tightly woven system of practice. They do not have to commit to an articulated, shared purpose, be prepared to meet an evidence-based set of practice standards, or be ethically and legally accountable to those they serve.
- Occupations and demand for their services are market driven. Employers and consumers are not restrained in whom they may hire to perform a task and can assign responsibilities regardless of the hire's preparation for the task being contracted.
- Individuals in occupations often earn degrees and certificates to increase their competitive advantage in the market place. Occupations sometimes are externally regulated to protect the health and/or safety of users of their services — for example hairdressers, contractors, and electricians. Degrees, certifications, and external regulation do not, by themselves, convey professional status or ensure public accountability.

4. How do unions differ from professions?

- Unions are an organization of workers formed to protect the rights and interests of its members (Merriam Webster).
- Professions are organized systems structured to ensure its members are consistently prepared and ethically and legally accountable to those who access their specialized knowledge and expertise.

5. Conversations with intent are the starting place for redirecting ECE's developmental trajectory. What are conversations with intent?

- Conversations with intent are structured conversations used to propel deliberative action in support of advancing ECE as a profession. Their format engage us in personal and collective reflection. They invite thinking together about how an alternative future for ECE can be created and mobilize new ways of envisioning and redirecting ECE as a field of practice.

Resources For Further Reading

1. Goffin, S. G. (2015). *Professionalizing early childhood education as a field of practice: A guide to the next era*. Minneapolis: Redleaf Press. [A 2015 NAEYC comprehensive member benefit]
2. Goffin, S. G. (2013). *Early childhood education for a new era: Leading for our profession*. NY: Teachers College Press.
3. Bornfreund, L. & Goffin, S. G. (2016). [You Can't Have Professionals Without a Profession \[Blog\]](#)
4. [Goffin, Stacie - Early Childhood Webinars](#)