

Leadership Choices Await Early Care and Education Practitioners

by Stacie G. Goffin and Valora Washington

Twelve years ago, “Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education” (Goffin & Washington, 2007) asked the question, “What defines and bounds early care and education as a field?” It’s evident to us that the question’s three prongs—the field’s purpose, identity, and responsibility to itself, children, and families—remain unanswered. And it shows.

Too many children continue to be denied opportunities to realize their potential

(Institute of Medicine [IOM] & National Research Council [NRC], 2015), and the same can be said for early childhood educators (Washington & Gadson, 2017; Whitebook, McLean, Austin, & Edwards, 2018). ECE continues to lack a sense of collective urgency regarding the developmental implication of its challenges.

We wish this reality were otherwise, but now, 12 years later, we think we have a better understanding of why the work needed to redirect ECE’s developmental trajectory hasn’t taken place. For too long, practitioners have been positioned as reactors to other’s decisions on the field’s behalf—be they by policymakers, the field’s established “influentials,” or prominent decision-makers in philanthropy and other public and private realms. This no longer is a viable decision-making approach, though—if ever it was. And in fact, we’re observing a schism emerging between those positioned to exercise authority on the field’s behalf and those who are recipients of their decision-making on behalf of the field’s present and future.

Determining ECE’s future as a field of practice and the routes for its accomplishment no longer can be the terrain of a privileged few. Practitioners have to be acknowledged as co-creators of ECE’s developmental trajectory as a field

of practice. If the field is to successfully respond to its field-defining questions, those who directly interact with children, plus infrastructure colleagues who support the capable execution of their roles and responsibilities, can’t continue to be discounted as part of the field’s leadership infrastructure.

DEFINITIONS

The *ECE field* describes the range of programs, services, and occupations that reside within ECE’s infrastructure.

The term *ECE as a field of practice* indicates roles that directly focus on the learning and development of young children, which indicates that the *competent practice* of early childhood educators—and its accessibility—is the field’s main objective.

Early childhood educator refers to those individuals directly interacting with young children with the explicit intent of fostering their early learning and development.

The term *practitioner* refers to both early childhood educators and those individuals participating in the field’s infrastructure.

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The field's *infrastructure* is composed of the people and structures established to support early childhood education. The *field's infrastructure* also supports the families that ECE programs are designed to serve. Together, early childhood educators and those who populate ECE's infrastructure comprise the ECE field.

Adaptive work requires engaging in a sustained period during which people identify what cultural DNA to conserve and discard, and invent or discover the new cultural DNA that will enable them to thrive anew; i.e. the learning process through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation. (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 303)

"A *system* is a set of things (people, cells, molecules, or whatever), interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time" (Meadows, 2008, p.2). Systems are dynamic and based on interactions among their elements, they generate their own patterns of behavior. It is these complex, dynamic patterns that systemic change efforts seek to re-form.

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Advancing ECE as a Field of Practice

Collectively, early childhood educators and their infrastructure colleagues comprise the ECE field. We call these individuals ECE's denizens (inhabitants or occupants of a particular place) to elevate and distinguish their roles from others who are engaged with the broader world of early childhood, e.g., health care and social services. We believe these

denizens' missing ownership of ECE's change agenda exacerbates ECE's adaptive and systemic challenges. We also believe that their absence helps explain why the field's improvement efforts have been uneven and inconsistent. This is why established ECE organizations need to be open to recognizing ECE's denizens as co-creators. These beliefs are corroborated by the gaps observed between the field's values and its capacity to realize those values in its work.

Consequently, whether those of you reading this article are home- or center-based administrators, educators, or performing other essential roles in ECE's infrastructure, your energy, insights, and follow-through are essential to devising a unifying vision for ECE's future—a future that mirrors the field's commitment to children and their families; displays its specialized expertise; takes responsibility for helping remedy issues of race and class; and formulates a purpose-driven, functional structure capable of increasing ECE's systemic coherence, competence, and collective accountability.

Twelve Years Later: The Impact of ECE's Realities

ECE has become an increasingly complex field during the past 12 years, making the work of responding to the question of what defines and bounds us as a field of practice more daunting than it was previously. Seemingly having tired of the field's fractures and its apparent inability to "up its game" and provide more consistently high-quality programs, for example, philanthropists, business leaders, executives from national organizations, and city, state, and federal governments have increasingly positioned themselves as change agents on the field's behalf, especially for children in need of the cognitive and social-emotional boost that good ECE

programs provide. These groups and individuals have inserted themselves into the realms of ECE higher education, standard setting, performance expectations, and child outcomes. As a result, ECE's ability to define itself as a field of practice is waning, and early childhood educators' sense of empowerment on the field's behalf is succumbing to ongoing external interventions.

This and other realities are not new in terms of providing a context for ECE's change efforts. Yet, despite similarities between now and 12 years ago, ECE's current realities are decidedly different. Twelve years later, they reflect the extent to which ECE's once emergent realities—kindergarten readiness assessments being one for instance—have materialized and are influencing ECE as a field of practice. Now more pronounced and complex, the field's realities are exerting more pressure. The consequence is a field of practice progressively defined by external agents in ways that often conflict with its values.

By way of just one example of ECE's fading values—and more could be offered—ECE has unceasingly believed that children have inherent value. Because the field has attracted the attention of economists and entrepreneurs, however, children are increasingly positioned as consumers, and ECE is promoted as an investment commodity. As a result, children and ECE as a field of practice are steadily being commercialized (see, for example, Linn, 2004; Ochshorn, 2017; Williams, 2013), and the public's perception of early childhood educators' specialized knowledge and practice expertise is being diluted.

More than ever, we believe a pressing need exists for ECE's denizens, in partnership with allies, to step forward on their and children's behalf to define the field's purpose, clarify its identity, and articulate its responsibilities as a field of practice. Collectively responding to these

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defining issues is essential to rectifying ECE's fragmentation and role confusion, inconsistent performance across program settings, and disrespect accorded to the work of early childhood educators. It's also central to advancing ECE as a profession, an aspiration many are now expressing.

Transitioning From “Ready or Not” to “We’re Ready!”

Mobilizing to answer the question of what defines and bounds ECE as a field of practice will only be activated when, as a field of practice, we possess a shared belief that ECE's status quo is no longer productive: It's no longer effective for children; it's no longer constructive for their families, and it's definitely not considerate of ECE's workforce.

Too much time has been allowed to pass without our achieving meaningful changes as a field of practice. Twelve years later, too much of ECE's character as a field of practice remains unchanged.

If we're to be ready as a field to at last resolve ECE's developmental impediments, we need to evolve individually and collectively so capacity exists *within ECE* to tackle and sustain the demanding work that lies ahead. The field especially needs to become adept with adaptive and systemic change, which provides knowledge and skills essential for grappling with ECE's complexity as a field of practice.

We need to realize that answers to ECE's complex challenges aren't just “out there” awaiting our use. Rather than fruitlessly searching for a solution awaiting our discovery, ECE needs to acknowledge that its culture and unexamined behaviors are hindering the field's developmental progression more than currently is recognized. The consequence is an amplification of ECE's adaptive challenges and systemic inadequacies.

Leading By Changing Ourselves First

Next steps hinge on *believing in our personal and collective capacity to effect change*, upholding the contribution of ECE's specialized knowledge, and mobilizing ourselves to address the pressing need to unify ECE and elevate its competence as a field of practice.

We're assuming most will agree that the ECE system's present behaviors are not well-serving children, families, or early childhood educators. To secure sustainable, field-wide change, each of us needs to depart from our predictable responses and engage with deeper levels of learning essential to resolving internal contradictions, make use of what is learned to navigate the complexities of adaptive and systemic change, and attend to developing the field-wide capacity necessary for reforming ECE's systems so their behaviors coincide with desired systemic outcomes.

It's imperative to realize that ignoring the work being called for is not a neutral decision. It's a choice, a choice that if sidestepped pushes the stakes higher for children and for ECE as a field of practice. Anticipating that the latter option will not be your choice, though, we've identified three next steps:

Step #1:

Ground your choices in foundational values and principles. This necessitates acknowledging the implications of the field's specialized knowledge and acting on ethical convictions regarding what best fosters children's early learning and development.

Step #2:

Recognize that each of us owns some of the responsibility for what we dislike about ECE's current status and how it functions. Each of us needs to acknowledge that our thinking and actions are contributing to ECE's current

status as a field of practice. Instead of presuming that others are to blame, we need to be willing to consider how we might be contributing to the problem and to change our thinking, attitudes, and behaviors—individually and collectively. This isn't easy; but this step is essential to evolving ECE as a field of practice.

Step #3:

Make the conscious choice to embrace change and become active learners. We have much to learn from one another—and also from people outside of the ECE field—about how to work together effectively, how to create the changes we want to bring to fruition, and how to develop our field-wide capacity to do so.

Evolving ECE as a field of practice will be both demanding and exhilarating. It will require perseverance, too. So drawing from the adaptive leadership and system change literature, it's helpful to know:

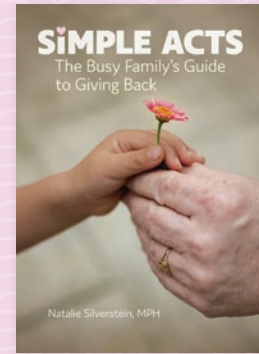
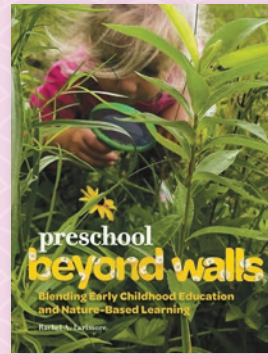
- No single right answer exists for how best to fulfill the aspirations people have for ECE.
- Answers to every question about the future can't be known at the start.
- The journey will involve learning to live with uncertainties and conflict—and how to benefit from them.

ECE's development trajectory is at a turning point. Choices made today will affect our field's future. By resolving the defining questions of purpose, identity, and responsibilities, the ECE field can revive its sense of empowerment, imagine new possibilities for organizing ECE as a field of practice, and attend to actualizing ECE's potential as a field of practice. Now more than ever, it's time to answer the question: What defines and bounds early care and education as a field of practice?

All: the ball is in our court.

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This article draws from the authors' newly released book "Ready or Not: Early Care and Education's Leadership Choices — 12 Years Later."

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