

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

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

- The ECE system’s present weaknesses too often result in uneven, inconsistent, and 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 by others.
- Redirecting ECE’s developmental trajectory would:
 - » Enable ECE to become a unified and respected professional field of practice.
 - » Increase families’ and society’s confidence 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.
 - » Foster early childhood educators’ commitment to fulfilling the promise of early childhood education and prepare them 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(s).

2. What is a professional field of practice?

- *Professions* are cohesive, self-determining systems of practice (versus externally controlled) organized around a self-defined purpose in service to a “noble public intention.”
- Professions command a set of specialized knowledge and skills deemed 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 nurturing 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 and education 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 occupation function independently of a tightly woven system of practice. They don’t 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 primarily 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 best starting place for redirecting ECE’s developmental trajectory. What are conversations with intent?

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

Resources For Further Reading

1. Goffin, S. G. (2013). *Early childhood education for a new era: Leading for our profession*. NY: Teachers College Press.
2. 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]
3. Goffin, S. G. (2018). [Are we ready?](#) [Blog]