

leadership choices in early care and education

by Stacie G. Goffin and Valora Washington

After more than a century of evolution, early care and education is in transition. No longer is it a narrow endeavor of relative obscurity and of limited interest to leaders from outside of the field. Early care and education has become of interest to K-12 leaders seeking to bolster school reform efforts; to corporate entrepreneurs and stockholders looking to capitalize on the number of mothers in the labor force; and to economists, legislators, and governors striving to implement cost-effective, high-impact policy change. While not limited in impact to the work of center directors, this evolution significantly alters the realities and



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leadership challenges faced by directors of early care and education programs.

New realities

The results of this dramatic increase in size and visibility of the field are many. Two are especially notable.

- Early care and education's dramatic growth has shifted attention from new program development to system building, with the intent of bringing coherence, sustainability, and consistently high performance to a field that has lacked all three.
- The early care and education field, now attracting significant new public and private resources, has become increasingly politicized, and is being linked to education reform mandates such as standards-based curriculum, learning outcomes, and accountability.

The field's attempts to grapple with these momentous shifts have made apparent its lack of consensus about its

work and the disagreement that characterizes our efforts to find common ground.

The time for leadership work is now

The concept of early care and education as a public good and an integral part of our national infrastructure appears to be approaching a threshold of acceptance. Yet becoming fully accepted in this way will require the early care and education field to organize itself so it can fulfill the public's emerging mandate. Not waiting for our answers, policy makers and others who historically have expressed little interest in our work have begun driving the formative system-building efforts that currently are underway in many states. Unknown, however, is the extent to which, as a field, we will significantly inform and influence this decision making.

This is a significant time for early care and education, and it is a defining moment for the field's future. If those of us in early care and education want to

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be more than just observers of this moment in the field's evolution, we need to establish a firm foundation for the field's future and its value as a specialized field of endeavor.

We think it is time to call the question: What defines and bounds early care and education as a field? Providing answers to this question challenges the early care and education field to hold the mirror up to its own behavior and examine the ways in which its responses to change too often are hindering the field's progress and minimizing its effectiveness as agents of change on behalf of young children, families, and the early care and education field.

This is a field-wide leadership issue of paramount importance to us as a field. Having a central role in shaping the field's future is contingent on our being able to provide an answer to this seminal field-defining question of definition and boundaries. That is why, drawing on terminology from parliamentary procedures, we believe it is time to "call the question." The field's indecision has gone on far too long — and too much hangs in the balance.

Consider: We are not even capable of providing a collective response to the question of what to name our work — early care and education, early education and care, early childhood education, early education and child care, early care and learning, educare, early learning, early education — providing concrete evidence of our confusion about the purpose of our work and public evidence of internal divisions.

A new kind of leadership is needed

Despite its many accomplishments, the field has largely been unwilling or unable to develop a coherent definition of itself and its work. The ability to find

consensual answers to central questions about the field's purpose, identity, and responsibility will determine its ability to go forward with a clear articulation of its collective competence and responsibility to children and families — answers essential to creating a coherent early care and education system and responding in a unified way to the many policy discussions presently taking place across the country.

Pre-existing answers do not exist for the field-defining questions we are posing. Consequently, we believe the field's issues are best understood as adaptive challenges and as issues in need of adaptive leadership. Coined by Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), adaptive work is required when:

- a gap exists between one's espoused values and one's practices
- answers to the identified challenge don't pre-exist
- conflicting values co-exist, and the conflict needs to be resolved
- choices have to be made, which often involves loss.

A basic premise undergirds adaptive leadership work: Answers for the critical issues confronting us as a field reside within those of us who own the adaptive challenge. If we are to assume a greater leadership role on behalf of early care and education as a public good, and for the system that delivers it, we cannot rely on others to resolve our issues. This leadership work will have to be our work. As articulated by Linsky and Heifetz in their Foreword to *Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education*:

"But adaptation, and the process of doing adaptive work, is as much about conservation and preservation as it is about loss. The hard work . . . the field has to do is to have the will to identify what of all they have accomplished,

what of all that has gotten the field to where it is today, what of all the values and loyalties that are currently honored, is so much of the essence, the core of the field's DNA, that it needs to be preserved going forward. And then, what is the 10% or 20% of the current DNA that is expendable, and must be left behind in order to go forward and thrive in a new reality" (2007, p. x).

Engaging in adaptive work will not be easy, though. The field's adaptive work will likely evoke difficult debate, painful decisions and choices, and the loss of some of the field's historically cherished positions.

The field's adaptive challenges

Earlier, we posed as a central uncertainty, "What defines and bounds early care and education as a field?" This uncertainty emerges from what we have defined as the field's two adaptive challenges:

A performance gap that calls for closing the distance between an expressed commitment to children's high quality early care and education and the field's uneven collective competence.

A credibility gap that calls for closing the distance between the desire to be recognized as leaders on behalf of early care and education and the field's self-protective behaviors.

As adaptive challenges, known answers for addressing these gaps do not exist. We believe that finding answers should become central to the field's leadership work and should focus on three defining issues: purpose, identity, and responsibility. As a field, we need to be able to respond to questions regarding the primary intent of our work (is it, for example, school readiness? social-emotional development? social justice?);

the chronological scope of early care and education (is it, for example, birth to 5? birth to age 8? 3 years to 3rd grade? birth to age 14 and inclusive of school age care?); what one needs to know and be able to do to claim 'membership' in the field; and what we accept as our mutual responsibility to children, families, and society.

The unavailability of consistent answers to these field-defining questions present barriers to system design efforts, to the delivery of consistent high-quality early care and education, and to a shared identity as early educators. It reflects our internal ambiguity regarding who we are as an organized field of practice.

Change is not optional

Ultimately, our sense of urgency about the need for responding to the leadership challenge of articulating what defines and bounds the early care and education field comes from the following:

- Despite the dedicated efforts of early care and education leaders, far too many children are in early care and education programs of mediocre quality (Early, et al., 2005; Helburn, 1995).
- Too few policy makers fully understand the barriers that must be bridged if this empirical fact is to be changed.
- Too few practitioners are prepared for their responsibilities (for example, see Gilliam & Marchesseault, 2005; Hambre & Pianta, 2007; Marshall, Dennehy, Johnson-Staub, & Robeson, 2005).

At the same time, knowledge about the importance of childhood development and about children's learning capacities has become more robust and available to the public. As a result, public expectations have risen regarding the educational contributions of early care

and education, accompanied by increased public and private investments. In response, decisions of policy and practice are being made on the field's behalf.

The early care and education field is being redefined. The fact of this transformation no longer is in question. Rather, the question is the extent to which early educators will have the opportunity to be part of — and influential in — this crucial work.

If, as a field, we rebuff the challenge of deliberating and responding to the defining choices around purpose, identity, and responsibility, others will feel empowered to make these choices for us. If, as a field, we avoid responsibility for doing adaptive work, we limit our present and future capacity to lead on behalf of early care and education. By failing to mobilize ourselves to do this leadership work at this time, we reduce our chances to shape the early care and education field so it can most benefit young children, and we lessen our prospects for being recognized as legitimate spokespersons for the focus and design of an early care and education system.

It's a matter of integrity

We, as authors, recognize that by invoking the need for adaptive leadership work we are entering into uncharted territory. We recognize that by questioning the field's performance, we are challenging its current conceptualization of its leaders and practitioners. Nonetheless, we believe that significant breakthroughs require the collective and reflective self-examination characteristic of adaptive work.

We have reluctantly concluded that the field's unbending adherence to long-standing positions no longer is productive. It is time to take a stance on

how, as a field, we will effectively deliver on our mission and make a difference. Despite the rhetoric and expressed convictions, field-based research and experience make abundantly clear that all too often:

- Those of us in the field resist doing what our knowledge base says is necessary for achieving good results for children.
- We are willing to tolerate poor performance by our colleagues.
- We hesitate to improve ourselves and our programs if doing so involves too much effort or cost.
- We postpone change and thus defer its benefits to future generations.

We acknowledge the many issues confronting early care and education. Yet addressing the disparity between our promises and our practice is essential if the early care and education field is to have integrity, defined by Carter (1996) as "the courage of our convictions [and] the willingness to speak and act on behalf of what we know is right" (p. 7).

This is our work. Clearly, it is time for those of us who identify with the early care and education field to resolve enduring ambivalences about our work and make decisions about moving forward. Without it, the field's integrity is at stake. With it, the field's adaptive challenges offer an exciting and timely opportunity to engage with one another to advance the field on behalf of children.

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