

# What Lies Ahead For Our Field

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## ECE's Leadership Choices

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by Stacie G. Goffin and Valora Washington

It has almost become cliché to note that we are living in uncertain and anxiety-provoking times as the coronavirus endangers the financial viability and service capacity of early childhood education programs, imperils the field's programmatic future, and impedes the workforce's employment

prospects. Simultaneously, though, the field's commitment to confronting the damage incurred by COVID-19 is on full display. The field's loyalty to children and families clearly has not diminished, despite the financial and emotional havoc being experienced.

to the present, the field reinforces its status quo and furthers its reputation as a reactive actor. But the field could instead choose to seize the opportunity made available by this moment in time by responding not only to the calamity of the present but also by moving toward a mutually desired future for ECE as a field of practice.



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So what, you might ask, would lead us as authors to write an article that asserts the ECE field should add to its present burden by using this moment in time to rethink the field's developmental trajectory toward improved educator competence, increased consistency in quality across ECE sites, and a more equitable future for children and the ECE workforce?

### ECE's Future Is in Our Hands

We wrote this article because we feel compelled to highlight that the current crisis can be a time of opportunity for imagining a different future for ECE as a field of practice. If viewed through a lens of hope, the current disruption offers openings intrinsic to this moment to ponder how fixes devised for the present can be reshaped, so they simultaneously advance ECE toward a mutually desired future (see for example Stoney, 2020). While certainly not the intent, by focusing on fixes attuned only

### Are We Ready To Tackle The Field's Defining Questions?

It has been over 13 years since we as authors made the case that ECE was in a defining moment (Goffin & Washington, 2007). Now, we would contend the field is approaching a crossroad moment (Goffin & Washington, 2019). In the absence of collectively stepping forward to address deep-seated issues, others increasingly are defining ECE, placing us in the position of reacting to imposed state and federal policies and more (Goffin & Washington, 2007, 2019). And when, as now, the country is in the midst of upheaval, the ECE field can come across as rudderless.

Although tremendous progress has been made during the past several decades, our present actions reflect the field's seemingly intransient fragmentation

**Adaptive work:** working a through a sustained period of disequilibrium during which people identify what cultural DNA to conserve and which to discard, and invent or discover the new cultural DNA that will enable those parts of the system to thrive anew.

Adapted from *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world* (2009). Heifetz, R, Grashow, A. , & Linksky, M. , p. 303. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

in terms of its delivery systems, preparation expectations, practice standards, public image, and practitioner compensation and benefits. The ECE field's lack of consensual answers to its field-defining questions inevitably informs this assessment. Its inability to answer the foundational question of "What binds early care and education as a field of practice?" hovers over the field (Goffin & Washington, 2019; Washington & Gadson, 2017). We are unable to even provide unified answers to foundational questions regarding:

- The field's defining intent/purpose as a field of practice;
- Its identity in regards to its distinguishing character, spirit, and moral fiber as a field of practice; and
- The shared obligations/duties and accountabilities that define ECE as a field of practice.

It matters more now more than ever to answer these questions, and our having not yet answered them has made the field's present challenges even more complex and pronounced. The field's limited movability on this front undermines the field's potential and hampers its ability to broaden its influence in the lives of children, families, and the ECE workforce. Continually making defining choices and decisions without having forged agreement on the field's purpose, identity, and accountabilities is diluting the field's impact.

## Enlarging Our Toolkit to Advance ECE as a Field of Practice

Its systemic challenges oblige us as a field to move beyond fix-it approaches to address our challenges. Our toolkit for effecting change needs to be enlarged—and our bandwidth extended—to incorporate adaptive leadership work, work that is reliant upon a customized approach for effecting change aligned with the nature of the field's challenges.

Internal and external differences in values, beliefs, loyalties and desired outcomes help explain why adaptive challenges lack predetermined solutions (Heifetz, Grashow, Linsky, 2009; Kansas Leadership Center, 2015). This reality leads to the need to mobilize collective work revolving around differences and to being open to not-yet-recognized opportunities for moving toward a different future. In the absence of this mindset, though, it is not surprising that as authors we routinely get asked to answer the questions we are posing. But these "asks" presume an answer is available without doing the adaptive work demanded by the field's defining questions. Apparently hard to fathom is that if we provided answers, we would merely be offering personal points of view.

As discombobulated as it may make our questioners feel, adaptive work is in part founded on accepting that one

person's answer, or even "answers" handed down from task forces and commissions, represent individual and/or a convened group's point of view, even if open to the field's input. These prescribed viewpoints on the field's behalf may or may not align with those the ECE field would generate after coming together to unpack assumptions, work through differences (see for example Goffin & Bornfreund, 2020), and develop new ways of thinking about ECE as a field of practice.

This tendency to approach challenges as technical problems that others have the expertise to answer undermines the field's ability to create a different mindset. "Expert" answers currently are being sought from program administrators, state and national organizations, and state and federal elected officials. Yet each of us is learning in very concrete and personal ways that neat and quick-fix answers are not available.

## Gearing Up to the Challenge

As authors, we want to reiterate our earlier acknowledgement that we are in the midst of a pandemic that is irrevocably affecting the ECE field. We feel obliged, though, to also acknowledge that inevitably there will be "before and after" markers for COVID-19, and that ECE's defining challenges transcend these markers.

The longevity of ECE's enduring issues adds credence to our call for adaptive work and for leadership with the courage to think and act differently. In the absence of pre-existing answers to its challenges, those of us who associate with the ECE field are essential to the process of discovering answers.

If we were asked about the ECE field's readiness to make noteworthy progress during or after the pandemic in terms of advancing toward becoming a more respected, competent and appropriately

compensated field of practice, we would have to answer that the field needs to “ready itself” for the adaptive work essential to moving forward.

To become ready and make noteworthy progress toward its aspirations, the field’s dominant mindset has to change. As a field, we have to accept that our systemic challenges lack predetermined answers. We have to learn to distinguish between technical problems and adaptive challenges (Goffin & Washington, 2019; Goffin and Regenstein, 2020) and be willing to adopt an experimental mindset, a mindset driven by a willingness to expand the field’s toolkit beyond a “fix the problem” orientation to one that accepts that when pre-existing answers are not available, a mindset of continual learning is paramount, as is accepting that developmental journeys inevitably include personal and collective ups and downs.

## The Benefits of Readiness

A fundamentally changed mindset will orient us toward remembering that choices made in the present also are setting ECE’s future direction as a field of practice, underscoring the importance of realizing that decisions made to fix the present should also be attending to the ideals we are hoping will be realized tomorrow (Stroh, 2015).

A fundamentally changed mindset can help us as a field to at long last answer ECE’s field-defining questions. If the ECE field chooses to do the work of developing its readiness, we project that it would embrace a developmental trajectory increasingly capable of:

- Clearly stating the field’s core work as a field of practice;
- Defining field-wide competence when executing effective evidence-based

practices across roles, regardless of setting;

- Creating field-wide capacity to offer a dependable level of program quality across settings and funding streams; and
- Establishing a social contract with the public that builds upon agreed upon accountability for practice results and ethical obligations.

## Moving Forward

To be clear: we are not questioning whether the field has what it takes to reset ECE’s developmental trajectory for the future. The field’s behavior during the pandemic presents innumerable examples of perseverance, commitment and imaginative problem solving. In question is the field’s collective will to move beyond the status quo and take risks to move into the unknown. In the absence of resolving ECE’s field-defining questions, it is not possible to anchor the field’s long-view to a mutually agreed upon intention for ECE’s future.

ECE is approaching a crossroad. Will we as a field embrace adaptive work? Will we choose leadership options that make it possible to develop the needed capacity to become cohesive and accountable as a field of practice? Will we step forward as primary change agents on the field’s behalf? Or, will we remain attached to the status quo?

If, as a field, we respond negatively to the last question, we will be bravely choosing courage over fear of the unknown. We will be choosing to embrace change and continuous learning. We will be choosing to assume responsibility for ECE’s future. For the sake of children, families, and the workforce, what will we choose to do to ignite the adaptive work needed to respond to ECE’s field-defining questions?

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