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Guiding Change

Let's Talk!

This book articulates the Guiding Principles that we recommend to govern change and changemakers—early childhood educators asking themselves an essential question of conscience: *Are we doing the right thing?* We offer a focus on Respect, Competence, Strengths, and Equity as Guiding Principles to support the strategic advancement of both our profession and the people who work in it.

These Principles emerge from our work with the CAYL Institute which, since 2004, continuously has offered a forum for early childhood educators to ask questions and to seek answers. A basic CAYL (pronounced “kale”) Institute premise is that during this dynamic era of interest in early learning, early childhood educators must be better organized, equipped, and empowered to lead change for both children and early childhood educators. In 2015, *The New Early Childhood Professional*¹ was published as a four-path framework for change based on the challenges and concerns, as well as the stories and strategies, of early childhood educators who had participated in CAYL initiatives (see Figure I.1).

These Guiding Principles for change also are informed by Valora Washington’s leadership since 2011 of the Council for Professional Recognition and its signature credentialing system, the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential™. With its focus on the education of children aged birth to 5 years, the Council is the premier national credentialing organization in the early childhood education field in the United States. Between 1985 and 2016, over 420,000 credentials (120,000 during Valora Washington’s tenure) have been awarded to early childhood educators who work in infant/toddler, preschool, family child-care, and home visitor settings. The CDA credentials and the Council directly impact the careers of more early childhood educators than any other early childhood organization in the United States.

Today’s thought leaders are abuzz with conversation about “professionalizing” and “defining” the field of early childhood education: What roles constitute the field? Who’s in and who’s out? What do staff in various roles need to know and be able to do? This is good news—and a clear signal that conversations about change are accelerating in directions that the field leaders have

encouraged for decades. The question raised by Valora and Stacie Goffin in their 2007 book *Ready or Not* remains relevant: Are we *ready or not*?

While we are engaged and encouraged by all the buzz, we realize that the field has started down these pathways of change many times before. Any change effort inevitably will surface the field's deep issues, challenge our values, generate disruption, and spawn gigantic misunderstandings. Equipping all of us to be more strategic leaders is a prime purpose of our 2015 "step-by-step guide to overcoming Goliath" ("Goliath" represents all the persistent and daunting challenges that our field and our workforce face—challenges that the Guiding Principles of Respect, Competence, Strengths, and Equity help us to overcome).

Figure I.1. Eleven Interconnected Steps Toward Becoming an Architect of Change

ANALYZE!—Think and Reflect

Step 1: Reality—Face It! We must be honest and contemplative about the challenges and capacities that represent the contest that lies before us.

Step 2: Respect Our Knowledge. We know more than we think we do! We have yet to bring the full power of our knowledge to bear in our work.

ADVANCE!—Plan and Prepare

Step 3: Recognize Symptoms of Asymmetrical Conflict. We need to recognize the factors of isolation, intimidation, and negation when they occur.

Step 4: Reassess Your Willingness to Face Goliath. Now comes the critical decision: advance or retreat?

Step 5: Revelation—Know Your Vision and Identity. To realize our vision, we must affiliate, belong, and connect to one another and to our profession.

ACT!—Be Brave and Bold

Step 6: Join a Confidential Community and Share Leadership. As we strive for personal mastery, each of us must share strategies and encourage one another.

Step 7: Begin with Your Everyday Challenges. Think about the issues that you face every day. This is the place where you begin your work.

Step 8: Align What We Know with What We Do. We must use what we know every day, in every situation, in every interaction with a child, parent, peer, or administrator.

ACCELERATE!—Believe and Achieve

Step 9: Focus on What You Do Want, Not What You Don't Want. Too often we worry away our hours and days thinking about the negative, and focus on what we don't want to happen.

Step 10: Don't Walk Alone—Gather Your Allies. It is simply unwise to walk up to Goliath and face him down without colleagues, friends, and supervisors.

Step 11: Get the Word Out—Document and Communicate Impact. Just as the story of David and Goliath is part of our shared mythology and heritage, our stories as early educators must be recorded for future generations.

THE URGENT QUEST TO PROFESSIONALIZE

At no time in history has the imperative to professionalize the early childhood education workforce been greater. A resounding sense of urgency emerges from an incontrovertible body of evidence and insight about the critical period of birth to age 5 for both child development and learning. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Research Council (NRC)² summarize this evidence as follows:

- the neuroscience of brain development
- research demonstrating the profound long-term effects of high-quality early learning
- economic analysis on the societal benefits of investing in young children
- greater clarity about the impact of teacher behavior on child outcomes

One result of this new knowledge is the rapid growth of the field of early childhood education—the workforce is large, comprising about 1 million persons working in center-based programs, and another 1 million paid home-based workers.³ Another result is that the gap between what we know and what we do for young children is becoming more visible: Early childhood education is not as well developed in the United States as in some other countries; the United States ranks about 28th in the percentage of 4-year-olds in early childhood education, with a 69% enrollment rate.⁴ And there is a clear need to increase the quality of early childhood education for all children, since high quality is still too rare.⁵ Consequently, the field is in the midst of a major historical shift from a relatively low public profile to a policy focus that demands increased accountability and high-quality results for young children.

But professionalizing the field is a complex challenge complicated by the field's lack of clarity about its purpose, identity, and responsibilities. To professionalize, the field—and the society in which it is embedded—must grapple with thorny topics such as stable financing, workforce qualifications, facility management, governance systems, program standards, and public expectations. Progress in any of these topics has the potential to stimulate breakthroughs in decades of deadlock about how, and by whom, children under age 5 should be cared for and educated.

As change efforts move forward, these Guiding Principles are both a recognition of a major opportunity for constructive change and a caution of potential obstacles to change: How can we demonstrate respect for the people who actually work with children and families every day? To what extent will practicing early childhood educators be represented in the important conversations about change? How can we identify aspects of the field's culture that should be preserved? Will we—and how *can* we—minimize the unintended consequences of change? The change agent—the new early childhood professional—must never fail to ask: Are we doing the right thing? And, are we doing the right thing for *all children*?

We continually ask this question because, with decades of experience working in this field, we are deeply invested in it. We recognize in our colleagues deep and unwavering wells of passion, good will, courage, and commitment to social justice for both children and their families.

Moreover, the ideals of inclusion and innovation are evergreen for us. And we, as the authors, have benefited from our hands-on direct experiences with the careers of thousands of practitioners. We are compelled to give back by sharing lessons learned from their dreams, hopes, and fears about change. These Guiding Principles reflect what we have learned through the privilege of these relationships.

The critical message is this: The effectiveness of the field's change strategies *requires* each of us to elevate the voices of the early childhood education practitioner. "Power to our profession" *demand*s leadership from the rank and file as well as from national and state thought leaders. Ensuring a better future for young children and their families cannot happen without *active consent* of the forces within the nursery, the home-based business, the classroom, and the school. And, as we focus on change, we must identify and build on our core strengths, not just "fix" what is wrong.

We encourage you to read these Guiding Principles with an open mind, understanding that the experiences of some early childhood education professionals from the practice floor or the policy landscape sometimes might seem odd, confusing, painful, and even false to other professionals. To become an architect of change is also to become a perceiver of multiple truths, knowing that our focus must be, and must always remain, first and foremost, on serving *people*, not proving them wrong. Building our capacity to listen and learn builds trust and ultimately creates a source of power for our profession.

So, let's talk as we welcome, embrace, and pursue change!

TRUTHS, DILEMMAS, AND CONTRADICTIONS

Stacie Goffin and Valora Washington identified three defining issues believed to be central to the field's leadership work:

1. What is the field's defining intent or *purpose*?
2. For what is the field willing to be responsible?
3. What is the field's *identity* or distinctive contribution and competence as a collective entity?

At the core, these remain the salient questions that many contemporary change efforts seek to address. This is often what is meant by efforts to “define” the field and who should be a member of it.

Let's start with a fundamental question: *What defines an early childhood educator?*

We offer the following definition of the early childhood educator, only partly tongue-in-cheek, because we believe our definition illustrates the need for Guiding Principles as practitioners, advocates, and thought leaders grapple with “who's in and who's out” of the field:

Early childhood educator (noun): Person whose profession is highly valued, of deferred value, and undervalued all at once!

By this definition, multiple peculiar truths, dilemmas, and contradictions are immediately evident.

- It is true that *early childhood educators are people whose profession is highly valued for its capacity to build human capital*. The public, we believe, now understands that the early years are critical learning years that have long-lasting social and economic impacts on children, their families, and society as a whole.
- This truth unmasks a dilemma—a situation in which a difficult undesirable choice is made: The vigor with which public actors *celebrate* the science of early learning does not yet equal the vigor with which public actors *invest* in the people who bring that science to life. Consequently, *early childhood educators are also people whose profession requires them to offer themselves as a source of*

DEFINITIONS

We acknowledge that the field of early childhood education (ECE) is defined as birth through age 8. In this book, however, references to the workforce focus primarily on those who serve children prior to kindergarten. Workforce issues for school-aged children typically have different norms, working conditions, compensation structures, and contexts.

public support while the nation defers decisions about appropriate levels of public investment. The “deferral” gap between public acclaim and public investment is reflected in the compensation and working conditions of many practitioners.

- The deferral gap also supports a pervasive contradiction—a combination of ideas, or features of a situation, that are opposed to one another. Despite the science,⁶ the economics,⁷ and the educational “power”⁸ that the field of early childhood education can deliver for children, families, and our nation, the undeniable fact remains that early childhood educators themselves continually are maligned by misconceptions that this career requires minimal knowledge, competencies, and skills. *Early childhood educators are people who work in a profession so undervalued and undermined that it is often wrongly considered to be a synonym of a role called “babysitting.”* We discourage language that equates early childhood education with babysitting. Similarly, we discourage the use of the term “day care,” which conjures images of babysitting rather than structured and enriching early learning programs. Early childhood educators care for children, not days.

It is astonishing that these three highly unharmonious definitions of the early childhood professional could exist simultaneously—but they do! These are head-spinning, peculiar truths, dilemmas, and contradictions. This situation explains why *The New Early Childhood Professional* uses the analogy of David and Goliath⁹ to express the isolation, negation, and intimidation early childhood educators often feel because they are confronted with seemingly insurmountable stereotypes.

These varied and simultaneously held views about early childhood educators are not benign; they pose a triple threat. They threaten our:

- ability to serve young children fully and well
- capacity to advance as a profession
- nation’s economic future

Yet, in the midst of these circumstances, by any definition of the field, generations of early childhood educators have continued to advance the field with passion, persistence, and grit; they do so by demonstrating love, eliciting trust from families, and expressing a commitment to change. As difficult choices about the field’s identity are grappled with, conversations about “who’s in and who’s out” should be influenced by the Guiding Principle of demonstrating respect for the people whose life’s work sustains the existence of our field.