

Early Childhood Education for a New Era

Leading for Our Profession

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*Foreword by Mary Jean Schumann,
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Foreword

Some books primarily inform; this one does much more. *Early Childhood Education for a New Era: Leading for Our Profession* shares the history of early childhood education (ECE) and makes the case for organizing the field as a profession. Along the way it surfaces a moral imperative: ECE's responsibility to children. After reading the book I concluded early childhood educators are letting society down by not advancing the field's collective competence to serve all children well.

I have been a master's prepared pediatric nurse for nearly 40 years, a board certified pediatric nurse practitioner for 30 of them, and for 20 of these years a national nurse leader. Even so, when I was a family child care provider early in my career, I grappled with how to meet children's developmental and emotional needs. Parents, regardless of economic and educational status, depend on others to focus daily attention on their child's developmental needs and achievements, which is why I'm pleased to write this foreword on behalf of professionalizing ECE.

Many parallels exist between the profession of nursing and ECE. Core to both are societal obligations to protect the public's welfare. Nurses improve and promote health and well-being; they ease pain, suffering, and loss. ECE protects, supports, and educates children and by extension, engages and supports parents, modeling ways to protect and encourage children's development.

Nursing came together as a field of practice not only to meet the needs of individuals receiving care, but also to establish consistent standards that would elevate our social standing and protect society from those who were incompetent or ill-intentioned. In the nearly 120 years since nursing sought professional recognition, we have steadfastly resisted intrusion by other disciplines or policymakers attempting to dictate or regulate nursing standards or scopes of practice, even as we have collaborated with medicine and other disciplines to increase the knowledge base of our professionals.

Nursing has assumed accountability for its practice and for addressing issues that threaten its capacity to carry out its mission. Its contract with society demands that we meet societal gaps in care, provide increasingly more educated and competent practitioners, and protect society from imposters. Nursing's evolution, not only as a profession but also as

a driver for change within and outside of the profession, offers ECE four lessons as it addresses its moral imperative.

1. Identify a unique body of knowledge that is known and practiced by every member of the profession. Critical to establishing and surviving as a profession is basing one's practice on a specialized body of knowledge that is not "known" by everyone. Because others less well educated and parents and family members believe they perform work similar to early childhood educators, the discipline must chart the whole breadth and depth of its core knowledge so its domain of specialized expertise is well articulated. Otherwise detractors can discount its societal value and importance. Nursing is familiar with this challenge. It repeatedly experiences medicine's attempts to control nursing's "domain" and short-sell nursing by offering cheaper substitutes such as medical assistants.

Based on the history shared in *ECE for a New Era*, identification of the field's domain-specific knowledge is largely being driven by policymakers and external funders, rather than by the ECE field. Drawing from nursing's experiences, ECE needs to step up and take charge of defining and determining education and performance expectations for its practitioners so children can be beneficiaries of its expertise.

2. Identify and stay focused on the field's core work. While advocacy is a critical component at every level of nursing practice, nurses are expected to demonstrate competence through application of the profession's core knowledge, that is, provide high-quality, safe care that returns individuals to health and maintains or improves the health of individuals and populations. Even while advocating for the needs of children, ECE leadership's first priority has to be the core work of promoting each child's greatest potential in terms of growth and development. To move forward as a recognized profession, ECE's core "business" must be identified and supported through an inclusive consensus building process, even if it means every stakeholder organization must give up something for the goal to be achieved.

3. Champion fieldwide leadership by identifying or creating an overarching umbrella organization that facilitates inclusive consensus building. When someone has asked who decides how ECE moves forward as a field of practice, the answer has been, "I don't know" (this volume). Fragmentation poses challenges for nursing, too. We have over

a hundred national organizations representing various specialties and ethnically diverse groups of nurses. Still, large or small, all operate, noisily and imperfectly at times, under the larger umbrella of nursing.

Despite its diversity and because of its ethical obligations to serve, nursing uses large scale consensus processes under the aegis of one or more of its professional associations to define scopes and standards of practice for the registered nurse (RN) as well as for advanced practice nurses and a host of specialty practice areas. Such consensus, ever dynamic, provides the foundation for accreditation of education programs, individual licensure, and practice recognition such as certification.

4. Prepare every new and existing member of the profession to lead. Leadership and professionalism is the obligation of every member of a profession. Every student as well as every direct care nurse, supervisor, manager, nurse educator, and nurse executive have a role as a professional leader. Nursing has found that consistently focusing on leadership skills is critical to the profession's advancement on behalf of those it serves.

One of the missteps nursing made 40 years ago was evolving to include three entry routes into the profession as registered nurses. RNs can gain entry and licensure through an associate degree, baccalaureate degree, or even as a non-degreed nurse through a few dozen remaining diploma programs. Each route provides eligibility to take the same licensure exam. This has created decades of confusion for consumers and colleagues about the level of knowledge and skills RNs possess. Many non-baccalaureate programs place more emphasis on technical skills and less emphasis on critical thinking, nursing leadership, and professional behavior. Politicians and others gain an avenue for addressing nursing shortages through shortsighted quick fixes such as expansion of associate degree programs that limit professional advancement and dilute the pool of leadership talent.

After more than 40 years, nursing recently committed to attaining by 2020 the minimum of baccalaureate nursing education for 80% of its RN work force. The lesson here is to avoid compromising ECE academic educational preparation and progression once the field's core knowledge is determined and to teach and reinforce professional leadership at every step.

Achieving professional recognition required decades of effort by nurses who labored to establish the field's standards and scopes of practice, identified the profession's unique body of knowledge and then built upon it, and assumed accountability for its members' competence. As

a profession nursing has and will continue to struggle with policymakers and other disciplines over what constitutes nursing practice. But as a result of decades of work, there is never doubt that we will advocate proactively for improvements in quality based on our specialized knowledge base. From society's perspective, ECE should begin forming itself as a profession so it can do the same.

–Mary Jean Schumann, DNP, MBA, RN, CPNP, FAAN

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Preface

“Where is early childhood education going?” As I thought about what to say to this question, a whole lot more questions popped up. For example:

1. Where are we now?
2. And where have we been?
3. And where are we going if we continue to do what we are doing now?
4. And what should we be doing if we want to go somewhere else?
5. Where else would that be?
6. And where do we want early childhood education to go?
7. And where do we hope it is not going? (Katz, 2007)

Given the upheavals early childhood education (ECE) has experienced during 200 plus years of history, field-altering change is not an anomaly. *Early Childhood Education for a New Era: Leading for Our Profession* voices this refrain yet one more time by identifying the present as a *defining* moment in ECE’s evolution as a field of practice. It offers a framework for responding to Katz’s challenging questions and urges ECE as a field of practice to assume responsibility for the answers. In contrast to those whose solutions routinely target state and federal policy, it points to ECE as the agent for change.

Writing *Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education* (Goffin & Washington, 2007) coalesced my thinking on core leadership and development challenges facing ECE: defining the field’s core purpose, forming its social identity, and committing to shared obligations to children and families. I still wrestled, though, with why, after the auspicious onset of ECE during the mid-1800s to early 1900s, it remains a field still divided by its multi-rooted history.

DEFINING TERMS

In searching for an answer, *Early Childhood Education for a New Era: Leading for Our Profession (ECE for a New Era)* goes beyond formative ideas presented in *Ready or Not*. It examines the field’s history to understand

why ECE remains divided as a *field of practice* and presses the urgency of creating an alternative trajectory for the future. This includes basics such as uniting around the field's name and identifying what is encompassed by the term *early childhood education*.

As a writer, knowing what term to use is always challenging given the array of options and their political nuances. I've chosen *early childhood education*. Previously, I have relied on *early care and education*, viewing it as a term fostering cohesion among the field's many subdivisions. In writing *ECE for a New Era*, however, I came to value a term capable of succinctly stating the field's purpose. *Early childhood education* fulfills this objective, encompassing the field's multiple sectors and commitments to early learning, responsive and caring relationships, and early development.

In terms of the field's chronological span, answers most often are associated with early learning systems (which establish a border for ECE as a system of programs, services, and policies) serving children birth through age 8, birth to age 5, or birth to the start of Kindergarten. *ECE for a New Era* aligns with the border definitions offered by Kagan and Kauerz (2012). They define an *early care and education system* as one including programs explicitly addressing the early care and education needs of young children from birth to age 5, encompassing the full range of ECE settings that children encounter prior to Kindergarten.

A broader term, *early learning system*, includes the programs and services of an early care and education system plus Kindergarten through 3rd grade, thereby inclusively addressing children's education from birth through age 8. While acknowledging the importance of comprehensive services such as health and mental health, these two definitions place these services outside the early care and education and early learning systems (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012, p. 9).

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

ECE for a New Era argues for organizing ECE as a professional field of practice, which, to be achieved, will require leadership from all of us. "To lead," according to Kahane (2010), means "to step forward, to exceed one's authority, to try to change the status quo, to exercise power [meaning drive to achieve one's purpose], and such action is by definition disruptive" (p. 116).

This book presses the field to step forward, risk being disruptive, and engage with the emotionally and intellectually challenging work of re-forming ECE as a field of practice. Chapter 1 begins by reminding readers why the time has come to call the question of “What defines and bounds ECE as a field of practice?” (Goffin & Washington, 2007), and makes a case for unifying ECE as a professional field of practice. Building on this foundation, Chapter 2 offers a new lens for understanding the field’s present status and assesses current field-unifying strategies. Chapters 3 and 4 examine issues associated with forming ECE as an organized field of practice. The final chapter offers next steps, focusing on what’s needed to step forward: altering our individual frames of reference so openness exists for moving forward together as field of practice; recognizing systemic attitudes and behaviors; convening a microcosm of the field to explore next steps; and building capacity through individual and fieldwide leadership. Each chapter builds on the ones that precede it. The book concludes with three individually authored Next Steps Commentaries suggesting concrete steps for transforming ECE into a professional field of practice.

ECE for a New Era is written for those who want to improve ECE’s collective competence as a field of practice. It should be of particular interest to those of us ready to come together to rethink the field’s present trajectory. Many others will be needed to inform and support ECE’s development as a profession, but it starts with us.

While allied with the field’s historic self-designation as a profession, a structure for ECE as a 21st-century profession is left open-ended. Two intertwined rationales justify this tactic: First, the field’s issues defy easy or pre-conceived answers. A plan for forming ECE as a 21st-century profession must rest on fieldwide dialogue and purposeful decision making. Second, and of equal importance, the work ahead has the highest probability of implementation and sustainability if those of us contributing to, as well as being defined by, the field’s unfulfilled potential join together to transform ECE as a field of practice.

Yet since *Ready or Not* was published in 2007, it has become evident that additional scaffolding is needed to advance a fieldwide conversation. *ECE for a New Era* attempts to propel forward movement by identifying habits of mind thwarting ECE’s unification as a competent field of practice and drawing attention to the unifying potential of ECE as a professional field of practice.