

The Future of Early Childhood Education

Part One: Strengthening Our Profession

by Valora Washington

Stabilizing to save” the child care industry is the field’s major emphasis right now. Rallying action during this crisis, in September 2020, 125 groups sent a letter to Congress requesting the necessary funding to support child care programs and schools (Letter to Congress, 2020).

It is challenging to think about the future of the early childhood education profession when the coronavirus pandemic weighs so heavily over our daily practice. In every place and in every setting, there are new safety protocols, heightened infection mitigation efforts, fewer children and families being served, and increased expenses (Zero to Three, 2020; CLASP & The National Women’s Law Center, 2020). Although child care centers typically have not been associated with the spread of the coronavirus (Gilliam et al, 2020), the child care industry is clearly near the verge of collapse given

the multiple demands it is currently experiencing.

As we focus on stabilization funding, we: (1) notice our industry’s elevated status as “essential” for adults, rather than for children; (2) honor our colleagues who have shown a great deal of strength under stress; (3) ask how, at the appropriate time, the field might shift its focus from survival toward sustainability; and (4) suggest ways in which we might leverage this moment into a movement for both our profession and the practitioners who work in it.

Elevated Essential Purpose

Although it was already faltering due to multiple systemic concerns, COVID-19 further unhinged the field’s workforce. Many early childhood education professionals were suddenly unemployed, underemployed, worried about employment, or engaged in many new procedures while employed (United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2020; Jessen-Howard & Workman, 2020; Workman, & Jessen-Howard, 2020).

Ironically, the pandemic elevated the purpose of child care as a fundamental facilitator of adult employment

(in contrast to a focus on its role in enhancing the developmental trajectories of children). New terminology sharpened that objective: child care is an “essential” service to our nation, and its staff are “essential workers” for the rest of the nation’s workforce.

Strength Under Stress

Hendrie Weisinger (2015), distinguishing “stress” from “pressure,” defines stress as having too many demands amid too few resources. The field’s stressors are abundant, persistent and intersectional: inadequate resources to deliver quality, lack of affordability for families, weak program financial models, fractures between early childhood education sectors, a poorly compensated workforce, and the tangle of inequities for children, families, and communities result from the interactions of all of these stressors (Goffin & Washington, 2019).



Valora Washington is chief executive officer of the CAYL Institute, which supports professional development and leadership for the ECE workforce. Washington is the author of several books including, “The New Early Childhood Professional” (with Brenda

Gadson and Kate Amel) and “Guiding

Principles for the New Early Childhood Professional” (with Brenda Gadson). More information can be found at www.cayl.org or email her at info@cayl.org

This is the first in a two-part series. The second part will be published in the July/August issue of *Exchange*.

Along with stress (our “normal” chronic condition of being overloaded), COVID-19 added external pressure—the feeling that something at stake is dependent on the outcome of our performance. And most remarkably, the field’s responses to these pressures have been extraordinary and valiant displays of the commitment and strength of many people who work in this field. Virtually overnight, innumerable webinars, Zoom calls, and communities of practice engaged thousands of staff in information-sharing, advocacy, online training, and collaborative support, as people coped with fast-changing policies governing COVID-19 practice. Daily Zoom calls were organized by Strategies for Children in Massachusetts. Ohio AEYC convened “Courageous Conversations.” A foundation sponsored a leadership forum for directors in Washington, D.C.

Clearly, early childhood educators deserve accolades, respect, acknowledgement, and recognition for their actions. Notably much of this effort reflects volunteerism or personal courage amid uncertain risk since despite their “essentialness,” most staff received nominal, if any, additional compensation.

Beyond Survival, Toward Sustainability

Post-COVID-19 projections suggest that many early childhood education programs will not survive, and many staff may leave the field. Those who remain will once again hold the questions that Stacie Goffin and I initially asked in 2007: What is our occupational purpose? What is our identity? For what are we responsible? (Goffin & Washington, 2019). These questions reside in the space between stressful survival and structural sustainability.

“The Janibell M400D is a great product. It works really great and controls diaper odor in our facility just as it claims.”
- The Learning Tree Montessori School




The Commercial Diaper Disposal System Designed for Childcare Centers

- Odor-Free
- Hands-Free
- Economical
- Safe
- Durable
- Large 13 Gal. Capacity

Janibell
janibell.com

Moving forward in a quest for sustainability is a complex challenge that requires the field to grapple with thorny topics such as stable financing, workforce qualifications, facility management, governance systems, program standards, and public expectations (see Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2020). Beyond survival and toward sustainability, we might reflect on the following:

- Early childhood practitioners—the people who work directly with children—must be key actors in setting the parameters for sustainability. What have we learned from the rapid mobilization of people in response to the pandemic that will build our capacity to be more inclusive of who sits at the tables where strategic change is discussed? (Washington, 2020).
- In the COVID-19 era, we rapidly complied with changing rules and

conditions of early childhood education services. How can we leverage our talent for creative flexibility to help us move from complying with or conforming to immediate requirements to transforming our industry?

- In an emergency, a clear purpose for the field, such as workforce support, attracts public support. Under what circumstances—and when—might we achieve broader clarity about our nation’s intentions for young children? How will we, on an ongoing basis, continue to rally for systems and structures of early childhood education that are supported by consistent policies and adequate funding?

Leveraging a Moment into a Movement

Here are three ideas about how we can leverage this moment into a movement.

First, we must work hard to close the wide gap between *what we know* and *what we do* in practice. To close this gap, our future work will require more evidence about the impact of accreditation, certification, and specific training programs; compensation parity; and elimination of racial differences in both child outcomes and in occupational opportunity.

Second, we must get clear consensus on the guiding principles of our profession. Guiding principles help direct the decisions we make. We should be very cautious about responding to proposals if we have not articulated in advance what we stand for, our shared intentions, and our vision for where we want to go. Vital and vibrant emergency rallies can be a good foundation to begin, but are not a substitute for the longer-term efforts we need to reach consensus about these shared values. Now is the time to prepare for whatever emergency may emerge in the future—and to tackle the persistent stressors of our field. (Washington & Gadson, 2017).

Third, for a stronger future, we must use our collective voices to do the adaptive work—a process of discarding, preserving, and reinventing our professional cultures—that is required for positive change. Adaptive work would lead us toward clear statements of the field's core work as a field of practice; definitions of competence across roles, regardless of setting; stronger field-wide capacity to offer a dependable level of program quality across settings and funding streams; and an established social contract with the public. (Washington, Gadson, & Amel, 2015).

We Must Be Architects of the Change We Seek

Ours is not a conventional leadership challenge. In the future, we are

challenged to become what Gadson, Amel, and I call “architects for change” and “disruptive innovators,” who demonstrate intentional communication, authenticity, and transparency. We will face “asymmetrical conflicts” and be jolted out of our comfort zones. There are no preexisting answers to any change that we seek. This is the work we must create for our future (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksky, 2009).

We anticipate a journey, a marathon—not an event or a sprint. We know that the path forward does not happen by chance—but by our willingness and strength to learn from our experiences and move forward.

References

CLASP & the National Women's Law Center. (April 27 2020). *Five Reasons Stabilizing Child Care During the Coronavirus Pandemic is Critically Important for Families and the Economy*. Washington, DC: Authors. clasp.org

Gilliam, W.S., Malik, A.A., Shafiq, M., Klotz, M., Reyes, C., Humphries, J.E., Murray, T., Elharake, J.A., Wilkinson, D., and Omer, S.B. (2021). COVID-19 Transmission in US Child Care Programs. *Pediatrics*, 147(1). doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-031971

Goffin, S.G., and Washington, V. (2019). *Early Care and Education's Leadership Choices 12 Years Later. 2nd edition*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., and Linksky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership; Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Jessen-Howard, S., and Workman, S. (April 24, 2020). *Coronavirus Pandemic Could Lead to Permanent Loss of Nearly 4.5 Million Child Care Slots*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. americanprogress.org

Letter to Congress from 125 Organizations (September 16, 2020). naeyc.org

United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (September 2020). *Child care: An essential industry for economic recovery*. uschamberfoundation.org

Washington, V. (2020). *Elephants in the Room: Workforce Respect and Equity in Early Childhood Education*. Washington, DC: New America. newamerica.org

Washington, V., and Gadson, B. (2017). *Guiding Principles for The New Early Childhood Professional*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Washington, V., Gadson, B., and Amel, K. (2015). *The New Early Childhood Professional: A Step-by-Step Guide to Overcoming Goliath*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Weisinger, H., and Pawliw-Fry, J.P. (2015). *Performing Under Pressure: The Science of Doing Your Best When It Matters Most*. New York: Currency/Random House.

Workman, S., and Jessen-Howard, S. (September 3, 2020). *The True Cost of Providing Safe Child Care During the Coronavirus Pandemic*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

Zero to Three. (2020). *How COVID-19 is impacting child care providers*. Washington, DC: Author. zerotothree.org

CONFERENCE-QUALITY™ WEBINARS & ONLINE CONSULTANTS DIRECTORY

WE CONNECT YOU.

YOU + YOUR STAFF + YOUR PROGRAM

FREE
WEBINARS

EARLY
CHILDHOOD
EXPERTS

FREE
DIRECTORY

