
Walking a Tightrope and Making the Case for Professionalizing Early Educators

BLOG POST



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Nov. 27, 2018

<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/walking-tightrope-and-making-case-professionalizing-early-educators/>

To facilitate interaction among ideas presented in ***Moving Beyond False Choices for Early Childhood Educators***, Series Editor Stacie G. Goffin offers opening comments. For readers new to the Series, her **introduction** explains the series' intent.

Center director Anna Mercer-McLean brings to our series the perspective of an administrator who must daily confront the operational challenges of ECE's **thorny knot**. Despite comparing her role to that of walking a tightrope whose brass bound ties are becoming unhinged, she argues for the importance of degreed early childhood educators and offers a rationale for this perspective that reinforces the importance of including the voices of those "on the ground" in ECE.

As a child care director, I often feel as if early childhood administrators walk a tightrope, starting at one end and staying continually alert to losing their footing before reaching the goals located at the rope's other end. Early childhood education's (ECE's) aspirations regarding the relationship among **preparation and education, compensation and status, and diversity and inclusion** represent the brass bound ties holding the tightrope in place. Because the competition between and among these three strands is increasing, though, the field's tightrope is becoming even more difficult to cross.

I believe my ability to navigate ECE's tightrope as a child care administrator is possible because of my commitment to having a well-prepared teaching staff. While I have appreciated the views of the **series' authors** who have preferred options other than four-year degrees for early educators, I am an advocate of **the Institute of Medicine's recommendation** promoting four-year degrees for lead teachers, and along with **Sue Russell** and **Albert Wat**, think this should be the standard set for early educators.

My program is always staffed by at least 75% Bachelors' degreed teachers who have both preparation and experience in ECE. Contrary to **Amy Rothchild's** and **Fabienne Doucet's** views regarding our taken-for-granted assumptions about the meaning of BA degrees or **Sherri Killins Stewart's** observation that early childhood educators in Massachusetts reported little connection between their newly minted degrees and their daily work, my BA degreed lead teachers report notable differences in their practice.

These amazing early educators understand the importance of quality care and education. They rely on developmentally appropriate practices so children's individual needs are continuously being met. They've become more observant of children's developmental progression, teach with greater intentionality, and better support children's social emotional learning. Their own cultural and educational values inspire them to want more for our children.

Yet as noted by **Amy Rothschild**, **Sally Holloway**, and **Laura Bornfreund**, problems of inconsistency, relevance, and access exist in teacher preparation programs. **Sally Holloway's** contention that higher education faculty should assume more responsibility for early educators' preparation by helping remove access barriers, if implemented, could help make ECE's tightrope more navigable, making it easier for early childhood educators and administrators to walk the tightrope because enrollment, ongoing student support, and consultation would be available to those choosing to earn 2- and/or 4-year degrees.

My program also benefits from having degreed early educators in a way too often overlooked. Because I no longer have to constantly work in orientation mode with my staff, I have a more secure tightrope and can re-direct my attention to ensuring classrooms are well-resourced and offer professional development opportunities to increase and/or fine-tune educators' competencies, skills, and knowledge.

Nonetheless, as a Master's degree child care administrator with a well-respected program, similar to **Tracy Ehler's** experience, my pedigree hasn't made me immune to comments, such as one from my own brother, that stereotypes my work as babysitting. Those of us who are part of ECE routinely find ourselves having to defend our status. Consequently, I found **Sara Mead's insight** in this regard thought provoking, especially when the question of "What would it mean for ECE to be viewed as a professional field?" was posed, because she underscored the importance of values, beliefs, and assumptions in addition to credentials. I was particularly taken by her view that a fundamental expectation of professions is that those who work in the same profession *see* themselves as professionals and share a similar identity, including shared values and thinking.

Marica Cox Mitchell's five non-negotiables for moving ECE beyond its rhetoric, therefore, will be essential for next step decision-making regarding ECE's professionalism and will encourage early educators to risk moving further out on the field's tightrope. I believe ECE's professionalism will only be recognized when early educators gain mastery of the field's practice competencies by developing the necessary skills and knowledge acquired through formal education accompanied by direct classroom experience and by advocating for competitive compensation commensurate with their education.

ECE needs a unified framework if it wishes to be recognized as a profession. Without formal education and, yes, competitive compensation for early educators, child care administrators will be stuck with navigating ECE's tightrope with uncertainty and having to negotiate the consequences that accompany a tightrope whose brass bound ties are under increasing stress.

Too often, though, the voices of early educators and administrators are omitted from these field-defining conversations. Our experiences and insights bring perspectives too often overlooked or possibly not even known. Further, our views are essential for understanding potential accomplishments, as well as adversities, inherent to ECE's movement toward degreed early childhood educators. The movement is accelerating because of the field's need for better-educated practitioners who are regarded as professionals as indicated by their competence and societal status, including level of compensation. Following years of complacency, do we allow ECE's tightrope to become increasingly challenging to cross or do we strive to achieve the full potential of our ECE profession by setting higher educational standards and demanding competitive compensation?

Anna Mercer-McLean is Director of Community School for People Under Six in Carrboro, NC. In her words, Community School for People under Six, a 5-star NC licensed child care center currently has a Bachelor's degree lead teacher in all open classrooms. Several staff were funded through the TEACH Scholarships to receive Associates and Bachelor's degrees. We believe a Bachelor's should be the standard; and support higher education and better compensation for teachers commensurate with their education and experience.