In the last decade, the boundaries of the profession have changed rather dramatically for teachers. As we have become a more complex and diverse society, the roles traditionally ascribed to teachers have taken on new meaning and significance. In the case of teachers of young children, their role has expanded to encompass many, heretofore, duties and responsibilities that were once considered to be part of the home.

Young children, for all intents and purposes, have become a social and political commodity. The welfare and education of children have become fair game for those seeking to win votes or sympathy for a particular cause. Consequently, teachers are finding themselves in the midst of a social revolution between forces competing for the hearts and minds of parents and their children. On the one side you have those that advocate for custodial care and on the other those that promote learning. Both sides have caused sufficient upheaval in the profession such that what teachers of young children should know and be able to do has taken on new meaning.

Early childhood educators face insurmountable challenges in meeting their professional obligations. Aside from the traditional roles that teachers have assumed, they are now expected to serve as curriculum specialists, diagnosticians, health care providers, family counselors, adult educators, program managers, child development experts, child advocates, mental health specialists, nutrition specialists, and many others too numerous to list. At the same time, the teaching profession is confronting new notions of pedagogy and more intense scrutiny by professional groups.

Because the early years have now become a cause célèbre for many people and groups, there is no shortage of self-described experts ready to promote their opinions and solutions for the care and education of young children. Unfortunately, such entities often lack the preparation and the grounding in the various bodies of knowledge that comprise the field of early care and education. For example, all too often, the curriculum is misunderstood and looked upon as something that teachers do to children and not as something that teachers do with children. Parents are frequently considered a part of the physical landscape and not as the child’s first teacher or partner in the teaching and learning enterprise. Here teachers are relegated to assembly line roles and pressured to keep to a certain instructional time schedule under the guise of teaching and children learning. This approach to the care and education of young children will surely undermine the current mantra of “no child left behind” so prominently promoted by
certain groups and individuals. In this highly politicized environment of schools and childcare, early educators are faced with the challenge of defining what to teach, when to teach it, and why it is important to teach it, all against enormous barriers.

The challenges are, indeed, daunting. But it is important for us as a profession to be able to assure the public that we know what children should know and when they should know it. As professionals, early educators must take ownership of the challenges and provide the leadership to make it happen. The early childhood profession is not for the faint of heart or the passive individual. We are an active, demanding, and complex profession.

Early educators are the first line of defense in the teaching and learning of young children. The impact we have today will be felt tomorrow and for generations to come. Hence, our legacy will be revealed.

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