



The Unchanging World of Early Childhood Education

by Jerry Parr

In the early 1970s, the world was a vastly different place. Technology was just beginning to creep into homes in the form of black-and-white televisions, rotary phones, and typewriters. The workplace was dominated by manual processes, and career readiness meant being equipped with basic literacy, numeracy, and a willingness to follow instructions. Yet even then, early childhood educators were entrusted with the formidable task of preparing young children to be ready for school and, eventually, for careers. The methodologies, tools, and training of early childhood education at the time reflected those simpler demands.

Fast forward 50 years, and the world that was in 1975 is almost unrecognizable. We live in a digital age where artificial intelligence, automation, and global connectivity have transformed every aspect of life, including the workforce. The skills needed for success today—critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, and technological fluency—bear little resemblance to those of the past. However, despite this seismic shift, the landscape of early childhood education has remained astonishingly static.

This article explores the profound gap between the evolving demands placed on children and the unchanging tools and methodologies used by the educators who prepare them.



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leader in the field, Jerry has played a pivotal role in advancing male involvement in early childhood education, organizing international conferences and initiatives. His reflections on the evolution of the field offer both a historical perspective and a call for innovation in meeting the needs of today's children and families.

I argue that this disparity places an unrealistic burden on early childhood educators. I strive to celebrate the efforts of these educators while also offering actionable ideas for transforming ECE to meet the needs of the 21st century. It is a pity, in my view, that the classroom I stepped into in 1975 is so similar to the one I will step into tomorrow.

A Historical Perspective: ECE Then and Now

The Classroom of the 1970s

In the 1970s, early childhood classrooms were characterized by simplicity and consistency. Circle time was a daily ritual where children sat in a circle to sing songs, share stories, and participate in group discussions. Play centers were the heart of learning, offering materials like building blocks, wooden puzzles, and sand tables. The goal was to foster creativity, social interaction, and motor skill development. Teachers relied heavily on printed curriculum guides and observation-based assessments, and most lessons were teacher-directed.

Visually, these classrooms often featured cork-boards filled with children's artwork, shelves stacked with picture books, and colorful posters emphasizing letters, numbers, and basic shapes. Technology had a very different look. We relied heavily on film strip projectors and overhead projectors. We were both thrilled and a bit terrified when headsets and tape recorders began to be introduced. The world seemed much smaller, children's exposure to the world outside their immediate communities was limited. It was a time when most families had one vacation trip a year, usually by car and much of the adventure and most of the memories took place within that car.

Teachers were seen as caregivers and nurturers, a role they fulfilled with professionalism and care, often creating warm, supportive environments with limited resources. Their dedication to their students' well-being was a hallmark of the profession.

My first “official” job in early childhood was as the teacher assistant in an infant-toddler classroom. The center was a parent cooperative that relied heavily on parent volunteers to operate. It was a time of great social unrest that included protests, sit-ins and a recognition that the workplace was changing as women, many of them young mothers, entered the workforce for both financial reasons and as part of the social/cultural changes.

The staff at my workplace were a definite part of those movements. On my third day as a newly minted ECE teacher I found myself, an uncredentialed student at Wheelock College, in charge of the entire center as a consequence of everyone else having been arrested over the weekend at an anti-nuclear demonstration. For a week, with the help of several parents, we kept the center open, children safe, and sang the only two children's songs I knew a million or two times!

The Classroom of Today

Today's classrooms look similar and sound similar, perhaps reflecting the constants of childhood. Circle time persists, albeit with occasional digital enhancements like interactive whiteboards displaying songs or stories. Play centers still exist but are often supplemented with tablets or computers, although these devices are frequently used for rote learning apps rather than creative exploration.

While some classrooms incorporate modern technology like coding toys or virtual reality experiences, these are exceptions rather than the norm. Many classrooms still rely on outdated approaches to literacy and numeracy, focusing on worksheets and flashcards. The visual environment may include some digital screens, but the underlying pedagogical approaches remain tethered to the past.

But even as the look of the classrooms change, slowly, sometimes reluctantly, the schedules, routines, and core activities remain remarkably similar to the classroom I started in 50 years ago.

Despite challenges in resources, training, and public misconceptions of their roles, today's educators understand that they are more than just teachers—they are innovators, counselors, and advocates. Their ability to

adapt and care deeply for their students shines through, even in the face of systemic limitations. Passion and compassion have never been in short supply, sacrifice has been a hallmark of the profession and giving more than receiving has been a constant. My concern is: that is no longer enough. It is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers and will remain a crisis unless the rest of the world better understands who these adults working with children truly are and what they truly do.

Despite these pressures, classroom staff remain steadfast in their commitment to their students. They work tirelessly to create environments where children can thrive, often going above and beyond their formal duties.

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The Increasing Burden on Educators

Today's early childhood educators are expected to:

- Foster social-emotional learning (SEL) in increasingly diverse and complex environments.
- Lay the groundwork for 21st-century skills such as problem-solving, digital literacy, and global awareness.

These expectations are compounded by rising demands for inclusivity, trauma-informed practices, and complex social and political realities. Educators are asked to juggle these roles while working in underfunded systems, often with large class sizes and limited access to professional development.

Why Has ECE Not Changed?

Resistance to Change

As I travel to ECE programs around the world, I notice that many practitioners still view children through a lens that resembles the one I used 50 years ago. This makes me question whether we are fully acknowledging that even the most fundamental needs of children today may have shifted.

For instance, while children still require safety, nourishment, and emotional support, the contexts in which these needs arise have changed dramatically. Fifty years ago, providing a child with a stable home, regular meals, and a structured daily routine was often enough to meet their basic needs. Today, however, stability is more complex. Many children experience unpredictability not just in their home lives but also in their digital worlds—where exposure to social media, 24-hour news cycles, and online interactions shape their perceptions of safety and belonging in ways that were unimaginable decades ago.

Likewise, social-emotional development has taken on new dimensions. A generation ago, children's primary relationships were formed in physical spaces—family homes, classrooms, playgrounds. Now, children as young as preschool age are navigating friendships in hybrid spaces, balancing in-person interactions with digital communication. Are our teaching approaches evolving to equip them with the skills they need to interpret and manage emotions in both realms?

Even play—once the universal language of childhood—has changed. Open-ended, outdoor play was a given in many communities 50 years ago. Today, children's time and space for unstructured play are often limited by increased academic pressures, parental concerns about safety, and the lure of digital entertainment.

Do our programs truly reflect the way children engage with the world now, or are we still operating under assumptions that no longer hold?

If we continue viewing children through an outdated lens, we risk missing critical opportunities to support their development in ways that are relevant to their lived realities. Recognizing these shifts isn't about abandoning foundational ECE principles—it's about adapting them to a world that has changed.

One glaring example of this resistance is the lack of progress in diversifying the North American ECE workforce. Today, fewer than 4 percent of early childhood educators are male, a figure that has remained virtually unchanged for decades. This imbalance does not reflect the communities these programs serve and perpetuates outdated notions about who should work in ECE. In a

time of widespread staffing shortages, it is rare to see recruitment efforts that specifically target men, despite the potential to both bring different perspectives and address gaps in the workforce.

Structural Barriers

Although there is a wide funding disparity among ECE programs, there is a relative consistency in finding ways to ensure high quality. Private ECE systems are chronically underfunded, making it more difficult to implement widespread changes. But whether private, federal or public, classroom materials, technology, and professional development opportunities often fall victim to budget cuts. Teachers are frequently left to innovate on their own without institutional support.

Lack of Effective Advocacy

Unlike other educational sectors, ECE lacks a unified voice advocating for systemic reform. Of course there

are, sometimes enormous, groups that programs can subscribe to that advocate on their behalf. It is not always clear that the various groups champion the same causes nor is it clear that they leverage their power to make change through joining forces. While the importance of early childhood education is increasingly recognized, the need for transforma-

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tive change often goes unaddressed. As a result, funding and policy decisions rarely prioritize innovation in ECE. Community leaders, politicians, economists, and policy makers are increasingly recognizing the vital role that ECE programs play in making the world operate smoothly. Agendas more and more frequently include topics favoring increased teacher compensation, better working conditions, providing additional professional development opportunities. All great things followed by... nothing... A long history of not recognizing the value of ECE and failure to understand or respect the role of ECE classroom staff will never overcome the most common misconceptions until we try something new to catalyze that change.

Unfunded mandates and 50 years of saying the same thing, often only to each other, should not be the hope we are clinging to.

Are Change-makers Hearing the Story of: What If ECE Disappeared Tomorrow?

Imagine a world where early childhood education programs ceased to exist overnight. The immediate and long-term consequences would ripple across society, affecting every facet of life. Here's a glimpse of what might happen:

Economic Collapse of Workforce Participation

Without reliable child care and foundational education programs, millions of parents, particularly mothers, would be forced to leave the workforce. Businesses would face significant labor shortages, reducing productivity and innovation. Industries reliant on skilled labor would struggle to find employees who are adequately prepared, exacerbating economic instability.

Increased Social Inequity

ECE, when grounded in high quality systems, policies and practices are community responsive, provide professional support and are agile enough to respond to societal shifts, serving as an equalizer, providing children from disadvantaged backgrounds with critical early learning opportunities. Without these programs, the achievement gap would widen, deepening cycles of poverty and reducing social mobility.

Strain on Public Systems

The absence of ECE would put additional pressure on public education systems, as schools would need to fill the gaps left by missing early learning. Health and social services would also face increased demand, as families struggle to cope without the support provided by ECE programs.

I so vividly recall a not well received conversation I had with a Kindergarten teacher upset about the “lack of readiness” of one of my former preschoolers. My response was that I had handed over to her care, a child we had received four years earlier who had been born to a single, addicted, homeless mom with no job and no viable prospects for a bright and successful future. The child I have transitioned to you is happy, thriving, and loves to learn. Her mother has received a degree, is securely housed, employed, and sober. I will not apologize that I did not have a chance to teach color words and shapes.

To have and maintain a strong educational foundation, across the birth to adult continuum, outcomes, while critical to measure, must be understood in the context of each child and each family. Public schools, so deeply rooted in institutional histories, must be partners to the changes through a willingness to hold themselves partially responsible for a reluctance to accept change.

Decline in Community Stability

ECE centers often serve as community hubs, connecting families to resources, support networks, and each other. Their disappearance would weaken community cohesion, increasing isolation and reducing access to essential services.

Why ECE Matters for Everything

High-quality ECE is the linchpin of a thriving society. Its benefits extend far beyond the classroom.

- **Economic Growth:** By enabling parents to work and preparing children for future careers, ECE drives workforce participation and productivity.
- **Social Equity:** ECE helps level the playing field, giving all children a fair start in life regardless of their background.
- **Public Health:** Early interventions in nutrition, mental health, and physical activity set the stage for healthier lives, reducing the burden on healthcare systems.
- **Community Development:** ECE strengthens neighborhoods by fostering connections, supporting families, and cultivating the next generation of engaged citizens.

Investing in ECE is not just about helping children; it is about creating a foundation for a prosperous and equitable future and yet...here we still are.

What Can We Do?

The path forward requires collaboration, innovation, and a commitment to supporting educators. Here are strategies that can drive meaningful change.

Reimagine Teacher Training

Teacher preparation programs must be overhauled to include:

- **Training in digital tools and technology integration:** Educators need hands-on experience with tools like coding robots, interactive whiteboards, and adaptive learning software. This training ensures they feel confident and capable in using these resources effectively in the classroom.
- **Emphasis on fostering creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration:** Professional development should focus on strategies that nurture these skills in young learners through inquiry-based learning and open-ended exploration. I recall, way back at the beginning of my career, trying to explain to a group of parents that I felt my role was not to teach children what to learn but to teach them how to learn. If I was right back then, I do not think we are there yet.

- Exposure to global perspectives and cultural competence: Educators should be equipped to create inclusive environments that reflect the diversity of their classrooms, incorporating lessons that celebrate multiple cultures and perspectives.

Modernize Classrooms

ECE classrooms should reflect the world children are growing up in. This includes:

- Incorporating technology in meaningful ways: Examples include using augmented reality to explore the solar system or interactive apps that teach coding fundamentals. Technology should enhance, not replace, hands-on learning.
- Creating flexible learning spaces: Replace static furniture with flexible collaborative stations to encourage active learning and adaptability to different teaching methods. Watch traffic flows to measure interest and adapt accordingly.
- Integrating real-world contexts: Bring in STEM activities, such as simple engineering challenges or hands-on science experiments, to make learning relevant and engaging. Projects like planting a garden or building simple structures can teach a range of skills.

Acknowledge and Build on Progress

Many programs have already taken significant steps toward addressing equity, engaging families, and prioritizing mental health. These efforts should be celebrated and expanded:

Programs implementing trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning curricula have laid the groundwork for addressing children's mental health needs.

Efforts to bridge resource gaps in underserved areas, including technology access and subsidies for low-income families, demonstrate a commitment to equity.

Matching parent communications, training, and resource-sharing to the way parents actually communicate... texts and social media platforms can be more impactful than meetings and workshops that do not match lifestyles, schedules, or attention spans.

Advocate for Policy Changes

Policy makers must prioritize ECE by:

- Increasing funding for teacher salaries, training, and classroom resources: Competitive pay and better resources can attract and retain talented educators. These investments acknowledge the critical role of teachers in shaping future generations. Many programs I consult are required by their funding agency to conduct wage comparability

studies. Almost inevitably these programs compare their wages to other early childhood programs and sometimes public-school salaries. That is not who is luring our staff away with the financial incentives to leave their passions behind. We need to compare our wages to every industry that is attracting our staff. Otherwise change will not happen soon enough and fast enough.

- Establishing national standards that emphasize modern skill development: Align standards with the realities of today's workforce and society, including digital literacy and socio-emotional skills.
- Supporting research and innovation in early childhood education practices: Fund pilot programs that test and refine new teaching methodologies, ensuring evidence-based practices are widely adopted.

Shift Societal Perceptions

Society must recognize the vital role of early childhood educators and the challenges they face. Public awareness campaigns can highlight the importance of ECE and the heroic efforts of its teachers. Encouraging families to view ECE as foundational to lifelong success is critical.

The path forward requires collaboration, innovation, and a commitment to supporting educators. We need to examine what worked and why. During my career one of the most significant shifts across all disciplines and communities was the recognition of how important the first years are to brain development. That was not new to most ECE professionals. What became new was the message and the messenger. When Rob Reiner became such a vocal advocate for a greater focus on the early years, he reached, with tremendous impact, a new audience and without any question, change happened. Are we out there looking for our next Rob Reiner? Our next message?

Here are strategies that can drive meaningful change:

Build Collaborative Support Networks

Schools, families, and communities should work together to support ECE. This includes:

- Intergenerational Mentorship Programs: Pair retired professionals from various fields with educators to bring real-world expertise into the classroom. For example, a retired engineer could guide STEM activities, enriching learning for both children and teachers.
- Community Resource Hubs: Establish centralized locations where families can access child care, healthcare, financial planning, and job training. These hubs would serve as one-stop support centers, integrating ECE with broader community needs.

- **Global Classroom Partnerships:** Use virtual tools to connect classrooms with peers around the world, fostering cross-cultural understanding and global collaboration.
- **Innovative Public-Private Partnerships:** Engage businesses to co-fund school projects, provide apprenticeships for teachers, and offer real-world problem-solving projects for students, linking education directly to career pathways.

Increase Our Efforts to Engage Families as Partners

Families are essential allies in ECE. Strengthening family-teacher partnerships can include:

- **Parent-Led Curriculum Contributions:** Allow families to co-design portions of the curriculum by integrating cultural traditions, family stories, and community knowledge into classroom activities.
- **Interactive Family-Learning Platforms:** Develop apps or platforms where families can engage in real-time with classroom activities, access resources for home-based learning, and track their child's progress in innovative ways.
- **Family Learning Labs:** Create spaces within schools where parents and children can learn together through workshops, science experiments, and shared projects.
- **Extended Parent Education Programs:** Offer multi-year parenting courses focused on child development, financial literacy, and advocacy skills, creating long-term partnerships between schools and families.

Address Equity in ECE

Bridging gaps in access and resources is crucial. Strategies include:

- **Universal ECE Access Models:** Advocate for free, high-quality early education for all children, funded through public-private partnerships.
- **Mobile Learning Units:** Deploy state-of-the-art buses equipped with classrooms and technology to bring education directly to underserved neighborhoods.
- **Digital Inclusion Programs:** Provide free Wi-Fi, devices, and tech support to families in low-income areas, ensuring every child can benefit from modern learning tools.
- **Regional Equity Audits:** Conduct assessments to identify resource disparities and establish task forces to target gaps in funding, teacher training, and family support.

Prioritize Mental Health and SEL

Educators need resources to address the mental health and emotional well-being of young learners. This includes:

- **Child Wellness Coaches:** Introduce specialized roles in schools to focus on early intervention for behavioral and emotional challenges.
- **Mindfulness Studios:** Transform underused school spaces into areas for relaxation and emotional regulation, complete with sensory tools, calming visuals, and trained facilitators.
- **Universal Mental Health Screenings:** Implement annual emotional and social assessments for all children, with follow-up resources for families and educators.
- **SEL-Focused Summer Camps:** Design camps that immerse children in social-emotional learning through art, drama, and outdoor activities, with trained mental health professionals on-site.

Learn from Global Best Practices

Other countries have successfully integrated modern approaches into their ECE systems. Learning from these models can inspire:

- **Outdoor Learning Mandates:** Require a minimum number of outdoor hours per week, integrating nature as a foundational element of early learning.
- **Teacher Sabbaticals for Innovation:** Provide funded opportunities for educators to travel and study innovative practices globally, bringing fresh ideas back to their classrooms.
- **Student-Led Learning Models:** Encourage approaches where children design their learning paths with teacher guidance, fostering autonomy and lifelong learning skills.
- **National Early Education Fellowships:** Establish fellowships for cross-country collaboration, allowing educators to test innovative teaching methods in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

The disconnect between the unchanging nature of early childhood education and the rapidly evolving world around us is unsustainable. Expecting educators to prepare children for 21st-century careers with 1970s tools is not only unrealistic but unfair. By embracing change, investing in educators, and reimagining the ECE landscape, we can lighten the burden on teachers and ensure that children are truly prepared for the future.