

Why Do You Want to Be An Early Childhood Educator?

by Carol Garboden Murray

As a director, mentor, or supervisor, do you facilitate others to name the reason why they work with young children? In his book, *Start with Why*, Simon Senek (2011) says that those who know their 'why' are the ones who lead and inspire others. He explains that starting with the why is a way to think from the inside out and let your heart and passion guide your work.

I have always wanted to be an early childhood teacher. I remember my first year at college when my advisor asked, "Why do you want to be an early childhood teacher?" I stammered for an answer. I knew even at the time as I searched for my reason that the words I was saying didn't capture my true desire or deeper reason for choosing this profession. I said something like, "Oh, I've always wanted to be a teacher and I am a big sister and I come from a big family and I just really LOVE little children."

Perhaps my search to name the why started that day when my college advisor turned to me, after I gave him my light and fluffy answer and said, "You don't really want to be an early childhood educator, do you? You know, early childhood education is just another term for glorified babysitting! If you want to be a REAL teacher, you should get a job working with first or second graders." That was the first time I encountered society's misconceptions about early education. His response caused me to feel a little insecure at first, but mostly, it made me a seeker. I wanted to give a better answer, to set him straight. I wanted to justify the value of early childhood teachers. Most importantly, I wanted to be able to name my reason and my purpose, but I didn't have the experience or the words to do those things at that time.

It's hard to articulate why we are drawn to this field when we first start out. Even when we have a strong belief that

working with children is our heart's calling, I honestly don't think we have any idea what we are getting into! After being in the field for nearly 25 years now I've learned that being an early childhood educator is the most misunderstood, dynamic, complicated, and rewarding work imaginable. When we start on this path with a sincere desire to work with young children and an open mind about what we will learn, we find that this profession entails more than spending our days with little children (although that's the best part!). Teaching young children involves:

- an intriguing study of child development.
- building connections with colleagues.
- forming strong teaching teams.
- learning about family systems and stretching ourselves to create partnerships with a wide range of people with varying beliefs and values.

As we do this work, we realize that our classrooms and centers become communities with their own unique cultures and that we work with adults as well as children. Young children puzzle us, surprise us, challenge us, delight us, and teach us more than we dreamed of.

I have worked with many eager college students who are placed in my center to complete childhood observations hours or student teaching requirements. I always ask, "Why do you want to work with young children?" Some talk about wanting to make a difference and do meaningful work — and that's a great start. Usually they say something similar to the reason I first gave so many years ago, something like — "Well, little kids are so much fun. They are just little sponges. And they are so CUTE!" When I hear this response I try hard not to laugh and say, "It's a good thing they are cute because I know a really cute little three-and-a-half-year-old who is going to eat you alive!" This comment also reminds me of one of my favorite early childhood professors at the University of Florida, Dr. Linda Lamme, who handed back our preschool integrated theme units —with titles like "Diggin' for Dinosaurs" and "Teddy Bear's Picnic" — as she exclaimed, "Early Childhood Education is not CUTE!" She



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instructed us to rewrite, to go deeper with our plans, to identify a developmental rationale for teaching the themes, to look for ways to extend ideas and allow room for emergent projects.

I have learned that we really can't articulate the deeper reasons for wanting to work with young children when we first begin our journey. We have to do the work to understand the work. When we do the work, our views of ourselves as early childhood teachers begin to take shape and our answers to the question, "*Why do you want to be an early childhood teacher*" start to form. As we continue to ask ourselves this question, our answers change and deepen with the layers of our understanding.

We need to go deeper than "I just love kids" to name our why and to become thoughtful, growing, artful teachers. Here are some of the questions I pose to myself and to the teachers I supervise:

- What do you love about teaching this age group?
- Where is your favorite place in the classroom?
- What do you pay attention to when you are observing children?
- What captures your imagination when you set up your classroom?

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- Where do you feel like an expert in your field?
- What do you believe every child needs to experience every day?
- What intrigues you about child development?
- What are your passions and talents outside of

work that you can share with children in your care?

- Which child puzzles you?
- What challenges you most right now? What do you complain about?

I've learned that being able to name your *why* can be hard work. My own moment of revelation came years ago when I was the lead toddler teacher. I was helping the toddlers separate and wave goodbye to their parents from the playground. One early morning as I stood outside near our sandbox, I was rocking back and forth with one toddler on my hip and another one holding my hand while he ferociously sucked his binky. In this moment, while comforting children, I got goose bumps. I felt that I was home. I realized in that moment that the actual physical acts of caring for children was one of the things I loved most about teaching this age group: rocking the children to sleep, holding the hands, helping zip up jackets, wiping noses and applying band-aids when needed. It was in these acts of caring that the toddlers learned to trust me and I fell in love with them.

Caring for each other is what makes us human; this important work requires a code of ethics, respect, dignity, and kindness.

Being able to name how important caring for others is to me helped me see myself and my profession in a whole new way. In my mind, it raised these acts of caring for children from custodial to honorable. This reason why I loved my work hadn't been easy to name because it was so natural and so close to me that it was nearly invisible.



Naming your *why* doesn't always come with goose bumps. For several years early in my practice I found my passion and expertise for positive guidance and social coaching only because I was flummoxed by child behavior and I was on a mission to figure out how to manage a classroom. At another point in my career, I was fueled each day by bringing salamanders, frogs, and toads into the classroom. Sharing nature with children became my *why*.

As leaders in the field, we can help others name their *why*. We can tell teachers when we see them working from their heart (from the inside out).

- "Your face really lights up when you are telling stories; that seems to be a special gift you bring to the classroom. Have you ever thought of developing a storytelling curriculum?"
- "I love the way you display the child's art in the classroom. You have an eye for documenting their work. I think you should teach a workshop or do an in-service at one of our staff meetings."
- "You are so good at sharing nature with children. Can you tell me more about this inspiration? Is gardening and being outside something you enjoy in your personal life too?"
- "It's amazing to see you changing diapers: the way you take your time and sing to the children and have such caring conversations. Let's talk about how you came to learn how to demonstrate such gentle respectful care of children."

Too often our staff meetings, professional development courses, and teacher evaluations are filled up with talking about *what* we do and *how* we do it — and the *why* gets left out. When we start to name the *why* we excavate the meaning, purpose, and value of what we do. When we build in time for this type of reflection, we must do so with an appreciation for the process and recognition that reflection is hard work. Naming the *why* is also a way to find common ground. As we build these discussions into our conversations with staff, we can look for shared goals and common themes and develop a collective vision for our centers.

Naming the *why* is powerful because it gives us all a voice: to speak about what we care about most. It brings us closer to ourselves and there is always strength when we speak

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authentically from our center. In these conversations we recognize that the *why* is different for each person because teaching is an intimately personal profession and we all come to it with our own unique perspectives, gifts, and strengths.

Naming the *why* shows respect for the individual and helps each teacher align their work with their heart's calling. It's the natural antidote to burnout.

Reference

Senek, S. (2011). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. New York: Portfolio Trade.

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