


# Chapter 1

## “How Would You Know? You Don’t Have Kids”: The Taboo of Being Child-Free in Early Childhood Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter delves into challenges faced by a child-free school leader in early childhood education. Through personal narrative and scholarly analysis, it explores how being child-free influenced interactions with families, exposing societal biases that equate womanhood with motherhood. The author examines how gendered assumptions about caregiving affect perceptions of professional expertise in early childhood education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these biases intensified, with families questioning the author’s ability to make informed decisions due to her child-free status. This chapter highlights implications for child-free and marginalized early childhood educators, including people who identify as men and LGBTQIA+. This chapter calls for embracing diverse educators to provide young children with pluralistic visions of how to live a joyful life.*

### **THE TABOO OF BEING CHILD-FREE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

“How would you know? You don’t have kids.” The accusatory question lingered in the air, a stark reminder of the invisible barriers I faced as a child-free woman leading an early childhood center for children aged 2-5. This chapter meditates on

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the underlying skepticism of my professional expertise: *Can a child-free person be an expert in early childhood without the embodied knowledge of a parent?* At the root of this question are deeply entrenched assumptions about womanhood, motherhood, and caregiving. Through a blend of personal narrative and scholarly analysis, this chapter explores how gender norms shape perceptions of expertise and care in early childhood education.

This chapter begins with a discussion of my identity within the current sociopolitical context, setting the stage for understanding the personal lens through which I view these issues. I then delve into gendered assumptions that link early childhood education to mothering. Next, I turn to everyday conversations as examples of the public scrutiny I received while being child-free in early childhood education. In doing so, I peel back the layers of persistent societal biases, not to seek justification for my personal life choices but to expose deep-seated prejudices that challenge the validity of child-free educators' professional expertise. I share my experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to highlight the intensified scrutiny I faced as a child-free educator, illustrating how crises can exacerbate existing biases and bring them to the forefront of professional interactions. By showcasing how traditional views of gender, family, and caregiving promote exclusivity within early childhood settings and threaten efforts to professionalize the workforce, I advocate for systemic changes that embrace diversity and position the field as complex and highly skilled.

I aim for this chapter to spark conversation that will inspire educators, families, and scholars to work towards a more equitable and understanding society. At the heart of this chapter is a belief that people of all gender expressions, identities, and sexual orientations are capable of caring for and educating young children. This chapter is a message of solidarity for educators who are child-free, LGBTQIA+, men, or identify as marginalized within the field. It serves as a call to professionalize and diversify the workforce by creating inclusive workplaces for all educators. I am motivated by a deep yearning to uphold the promise of education for its emancipatory purpose by showing young children that there are infinite ways to live a joyful life (hooks, 1994). This chapter is also for families who embrace the idea that *Love Makes a Family* (Beer, 2018) and strive to expose young children to a plethora of family structures. Additionally, it is for scholars from feminist, family, educational, and organizational studies who aim to understand issues that connect gender, the child-free choice, early childhood, and contemporary workplaces.

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