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JUST BECAUSE I'M AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

Qianna's Corner: Just Because I'm an Early Childhood Educator

What Dolly Parton can teach us about refusing to be underestimated

Riddle: What does a proud Black woman from Ohio have in common with a white, female country singer from the sticks of Tennessee?

Answer: More than you would guess.

I've admired Dolly Parton for as long as I can remember. It's never been about the rhinestones, or even the music, much as I love both. It's that Dolly has always known exactly who she is, even in rooms full of people who thought they'd already figured her out.

Our stories aren't the same, and I wouldn't pretend they are. Dolly grew up poor and white in Appalachia, and she built a career in an industry run by men who didn't expect much from her. My path has been shaped by different history and different obstacles. But I recognize the specific feeling she must have had, walking into a room where people had already decided who she was, what she knew and what she was capable of. Early childhood educators walk into that same room every day. What happened to Dolly because of who she was is what happens to us because of what we do.

People underestimated Dolly for years. They saw her hair, her accent, her clothes, her femininity, long before they saw her mind. She was told, more than once, that she'd be taken more seriously if she looked and sounded like someone else.

Where they saw an empty-headed girl singer, they should have seen a songwriter, a businesswoman, a woman who cared deeply, a woman who knew precisely what she was building.

Dolly knew people underestimated her. She just refused to underestimate herself.

In 1968 she released *Just Because I'm a Woman*, and the title track went straight at the double standards women lived under, the different rules for men and for everyone else. Almost sixty years later, that word, “just”, still carries more weight than most of us realize.

Early childhood educators know that word intimately.

I'm “just” a preschool teacher.

I “just” work in child care.

I'm not a real teacher. I'm “just” an early childhood educator.



Early childhood advocate Lisa Murphy has pushed our field to notice what happens the moment we put that word in front of our work. It can sound like humility. Most of the time it isn't. It's shrinking ourselves before anyone else gets the chance to do it for us.

And our field has been made to feel small for a long time. We're asked to prepare children for school while too often being left out of the education family entirely. We're trusted with children during the most formative years of their lives, and our expertise still gets overlooked. We're called “essential”, and that word rarely shows up in our paychecks, our professional standing, or a seat at the tables where the decisions get made.

Eventually, it's easy to start believing it. We start saying “just” before anyone else can question our knowledge or our worth.

There is nothing “just” about this work.

You're not “just” helping a child get through the day. You're building their language, their confidence, their curiosity, their sense that they belong somewhere.

You're not “just” playing with them. You know that play is how a young child tests ideas, works out relationships, and makes sense of the world.

You're not “just” talking to a family at pickup. You're building the partnership with the people who know that child best.

You observe. You plan. You teach. You advocate. You catch developmental concerns other people miss. You build the kind of room where a child can take a risk, make a mistake, and figure out who they are.

Dolly's life offers us one more lesson, maybe the most important one: take what you've lived through and turn it into an opening for someone else.

Her father never learned to read or write. Dolly didn't bury that part of her family's story. She built something out of it. In 1995 she started the Imagination Library, sending free books to young children, and what began in one Tennessee county has grown into a literacy movement that now reaches millions of kids every month.

She understood something early childhood educators understand better than almost anyone: a child's dreams start taking shape long before kindergarten. They start the moment a child feels safe enough to wonder, when an adult actually listens to their questions, when a book cracks open a world they didn't know was there.

Dolly didn't wait for the world to see her differently before she got to work. She knew what she had to offer. She protected her voice. She built something real, and then she used what she'd built to make room for other people's dreams.

That's the part I want us to learn from her.

Be like Dolly.

Know who you are, even when the people around you don't. Take your work seriously, even when the system doesn't. Humility and invisibility are not the same thing, so don't confuse them.

Let people be surprised by your knowledge and your leadership. Never let yourself be surprised by your own strength.

The next time you catch yourself saying I'm "just" an early childhood educator, **stop**. Take out the word that shrinks you, and say it again.

I am an early childhood educator.

I shape the first years. I build the foundation. I belong in the education family.

My knowledge matters. My voice matters. My work matters.

No "just" required.



With Love and Empowerment,

♥ Qianna

P.S. Dolly, we will “always love you”. Thanks for tearing down barriers of all kinds.

P.S.S. Lisa Murphy, thanks for being a rebel who inspires countless people and tirelessly works to erase the “just” in the lives of early childhood educators.

