

NAEYC Interest Forums

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Diversity and Equity Interest Forum facilitator Louise Derman-Sparks wrote this column with Coordinating Committee members Chris Amihault, Sandy Baba, Natalie Seer, and Stacy Thompson.



Children—Socioeconomic Class and Equity

ISSUES RELATED TO SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS

affect all aspects of early childhood education work. This column (adapted from “Learning about Economic Class and Fairness,” from the forthcoming NAEYC book, *Anti-Bias Education: Tools for Empowering Children and Ourselves*, by Louise Derman-Sparks, Julie Olsen Edwards, and the ABC Task Force) seeks to increase the visibility of equity issues and to encourage discussion of this important aspect of families’ and children’s lives. It also offers some concrete suggestions for your classroom.

We use the terms *socioeconomic class* and *socioeconomic status* to mean the economic and social conditions under which people live, which can determine their access to financial security and to social institutions. However, in the United States, the lines between classes are fuzzy, as people’s socioeconomic circumstances change over time, and mixed-class experiences are very common.

The economic resources of a family do not determine how much they love their children or whether they are skilled at childrearing. However, we know that families’ access to quality food, nontoxic housing and neighborhoods, optimal preventive health care, effective treatment of childhood illnesses, and quality education affect children’s development. In addition, even very young children learn value-based, biased messages about socioeconomic

NAEYC’s Diversity and Equity Interest Forum is for early childhood education practitioners committed to preparing and supporting adults to bring about diversity and equity education with children, families, and teachers. It provides an environment in which to come together for mutual education, self-reflection, networking, and strategic planning. For further information, contact Natalie Seer at nseer@wested.org.

class both directly (for example, comments from family members or educators) and indirectly (for example, media invisibility or bias). These influence their ideas and feelings about where and how they live, what they own or do not own, how they speak and

behave, and what they eat and wear.

Explore your own beliefs and attitudes about socioeconomic class

Our personal experiences regarding class influence our ideas and work. Think and talk with colleagues about the following self-reflection questions:

- When you were a child, what did you think and feel about your family’s socioeconomic status? What messages about class did you get from home, school, media, and peers?
- What is your earliest memory of realizing that some people had more money and others had less? How did you feel about that?

Even very young children learn value-based, biased messages about socioeconomic class.

- What and from whom did you learn about the comparative value of blue-collar work (for example, farmwork, trucking, carpentry), pink-collar work (for example, beautician, secretary, server), and white-collar work?

- Have you or your family ever received public assistance (welfare)? What was that like? What did you learn about people who receive assistance? Have your thoughts and feelings changed? How?

- Which socioeconomic class of families is easiest for you to work with? Which is hardest? Why?

In addition, consider the following questions about your work. Do you

- Demonstrate respect for all families' efforts to build caring, healthy, economically viable lives?

- Teach that all people are valuable, regardless of material possessions?

- Make visible and appreciate the many kinds of work that families do, paid and unpaid, in the home and in the wider world?

- Teach children to care for the things in their environment and skills for conserving and recycling those materials?

- Help children recognize and discuss biased messages regarding socioeconomic status?

- Teach advocacy for self and others when teasing or rejection occurs?

Provide accurate and balanced images, information, and activities about all kinds of work and life patterns

Without your attention, materials and curricula may teach and reinforce value-laden and biased images and ideas about socioeconomic class. Do you

- Make sure that your books, videos, toys, and lessons provide an equitable balance of information about the life of all socioeconomic classes in the United States? For example, children's books and posters often show fami-

lies going to private doctors' offices (instead of to clinics); shopping in malls (but hardly ever at thrift stores or garage sales); traveling in shiny cars (but forgetting about buses or walking); living in detached houses with trimmed lawns (but rarely in apartments, community housing, or older buildings); and as one family to a home (rather than as an extended family in shared quarters). Materials and activities must honor the many aspects of life.

- Make visible all the jobs that support a community's survival, not only the work of doctors, nurses, firefighters, and police officers but also the work of people in food service, on farms, in stores and offices, and so on?

- Teach about the unpaid work at home that keeps families going (and is done by both women and men—with the help of children)?

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- Make it equally possible for all children to enjoy classroom activities? For example, have smocks or thrift store shirts available for children during messy activities and ensure that paints are truly washable. Find sensory materials that are *not* food. For example, use sand or birdseed rather than cornmeal at a sifting table.

Support the value and contributions of all families to the community and children's lives

- Read aloud books about the contributions of people in many jobs and roles and throughout your local area and the international community. Invite family members to tell the children about their work by visiting the program or by other means if families cannot take time off from work (lend a digital camera or provide a journal for telling their story). Support family members' visiting by writing letters to their employers, explaining why you would appreciate their allowing people time off. Make a large wall chart



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Invite children to share information about experiences they have with their families rather than show-and-tell about objects their families buy.

about ways your families contribute to the community.

- Create a class book with photographs of all the support people who keep your program going: the mail carrier, the kitchen staff, the garbage collector, the janitor . . . everyone! Invite each person to talk to the children about their lives and work. After the visit, write thank-you letters together with the children. Figure out ways with the children to help make the work of support staff a little easier, such as by cleaning up at cleanup time and cutting down on waste.
- Support local activists and organizers in their work for families with low incomes and for working people's rights. Invite these advocates to school to share their stories or tell the children about them.

Recognize and nurture children's resilience—their ability to face challenges, accept disappointment and failure, and forge ahead in tough situations

- Make sure that you have the same high expectations for children from families with lower incomes as you do for all others.
- See yourself as a working partner with families, supporting their children's inherent strengths rather than as someone who is "saving" children and helping them make up for their deficits.
- Learn about and acknowledge the resilience of families in your program who are confronting new lives in a new country, in difficult jobs, and with limited resources (Chafel et al. 2007).
- Read books that tell about all working people's efforts to improve

their lives, such as *What to Do about Pollution* (Shelby 1993); *Somewhere Today: A Book of Peace* (Thomas 1998); *Subway Sparrow* (Torres 1997); and *Pearl Moskowitz's Last Stand* (Levine 1993). Encourage your librarians and administrators to identify and purchase more of these books.

Help children learn to resist messages in advertising and marketing that convey the idea that having lots of material things makes you a better person

Materialistic messages invade children's environments through films, CDs and DVDs, videos, television, clothing, online stores, and more.

- Encourage children to value internal, nonmaterial qualities like kindness, empathy, and generosity, and teach them ways to express these qualities.
- Invite children to share information about experiences they have with their families rather than show-and-tell about objects their families buy.
- If you choose to include holiday activities in your curriculum, use them to emphasize gifts of the heart rather than purchased gifts. Create an ongoing class book, "The Best Gift of All," about people being kind to one another.

Establish beautiful, welcoming environments that reflect the lives of families and the community

- Involve families and other community members in projects to improve the community environment and seek support and financial contributions

from neighborhood stores. Projects do not have to be costly.

- Have an open-door policy in your classroom, and plan ways to welcome and include family members when they visit. Be sensitive to their possible discomfort and anxiety about being in a school setting. Provide child care services during parent-night activities at school.
- Get to know the children's neighborhoods (for example, shop locally, visit community centers, attend neighborhood forums or religious services, go to the library). Use these times to collect material for your class, such as photographs to turn into posters, books, and puzzles. Identify stores that are resources (for free materials and possible field trips) and community members to invite to your class.
- Set up a family room/resource center. This might include a coffee or tea pot; a lending library for children (with books, tapes, paper, pencils, games); a learning center/lending library for parents (with typewriter, computer, and tape recorder and audio cassettes on your program's philosophy, goals, activities, and parenting issues to help parents who have reading difficulties). Perhaps include a center where individuals can make things and is a place for workshops (you supply the materials; families make toys for home and the school). Invite families to help create an on-site literacy program for parents.
- Learn what each family needs to help them participate in the classroom, conferences, and meetings and try to meet their requirements. Resources that make involvement in their child's program possible are readily available to families with higher incomes but tend to be less available to families with lower incomes. Most service and blue- and pink-collar employers do not allow employees to take time off during the day, which is possible in many professional and upper managerial positions. Transportation to meetings

for some families may mean taking a bus or two with small children, an enterprise that can add several hours to a family member's demanding work schedule. Some families may not be able to attend because they cannot afford to pay a babysitter.

- Be sensitive about home visits; some families may not want you to come because of their housing situation. Instead, suggest other locations, such as a church, library, community center, or neighborhood coffee shop. Be flexible about times for conferences.
- Compile a list of family support resources in the community. Identify the names of specific people in these agencies. Ask families to let you know which agencies treat them with respect. Share the resource informa-

tion with all families, regardless of need, so everyone learns what is and is not available in their community.

Conclusion

Work toward creating an atmosphere in which you and your colleagues can openly share and discuss issues of class relative to yourselves, the children's families, and the program. Model complete respect for all the types of work staff do. Ensure that all staff members have a voice in decision making. Strive to create equal opportunity access to professional development, including reimbursement of costs (as needed) to attend conferences, take courses, or participate in other professional development activi-

ties. Become active in education and advocacy activities about the real costs of quality early childhood programs and the need to fairly compensate early childhood educators.

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