The Work
Promoting Equity and Justice in Early Childhood

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In recent years, there has been increased attention on equity within the educational system, particularly related to addressing the long-standing disparities in achievement. Educators have made distinct efforts at addressing cultural and linguistic diversity and providing more inclusive learning experiences for all children; however, the keen focus on these issues actually prevents us from true equity work and allows us to avoid talking about and acknowledging the truths of our country's past that have led to hundreds of years of oppression and subjugation within the educational system. The work of equity will take a concerted effort from system leaders, educators, policymakers, and the larger community to achieve specific goals that will ultimately lead to positive outcomes for all children and families.

Merriam-Webster (n.d. b) defines *work* as something that is produced or accomplished through effort or exertion. True equity work—work that is grounded in dismantling inequitable policies, practices, and structural barriers—will require more than becoming culturally proficient or making environments more inclusive for diverse children and families. Rather, educators, policymakers, administrators, and community members must be challenged to examine the roots of the current disparities, particularly related to discipline, the quality of instruction, and how teachers form relationships with children (Bowman, Comer, & Johns 2018). This work will require a great deal of effort and a move beyond superficial solutions. This chapter will define the concept of second-generation equity work and discuss specific strategies and recommendations for policymakers and system leaders to move the work of systems change forward in the field of early childhood education.

Second-Generation Equity Work

The field of education, including early childhood, is still entrenched within "first-generation" equity work, in which we superficially approach the opportunity and achievement gaps by implementing variations of the same practices rather than focusing on the underlying causes of the inequities that need to be addressed. A "second-generation" approach to equity focuses on identifying and addressing structural barriers and root causes that prevent equitable access and outcomes for children and families of color (Neitzel 2020). The term *second-generation work* is borrowed from a chapter written by Michael J. Guralnick in the early 1990s. In his writing, Guralnick (1993) argued that early intervention was in the midst of a period of rapid change that was marked by a movement away from superficial analyses regarding the effectiveness of services and supports for young children with disabilities into a new era in which researchers and policymakers were being pushed to ask more specific questions and develop a more nuanced understanding about how to meet the needs of young children and their families.

With respect to equity, the field of early childhood education is in a similar period of rapid change; however, we have not yet moved into work that is focused on developing a nuanced understanding of the issues and how to address them. As we move forward in this work, it is imperative that educators and policymakers shift their focus away from what has always been done to a more thoughtful and systematic approach to equity. Moving too quickly or resting our hopes solely on high-quality early childhood education will keep us firmly planted within first-generation equity work.

For generations, we have focused on solving disparities in achievement by implementing highly specific educational practices that are centered on promoting literacy, social-emotional, or math skills, which are grounded in a "blame the victim" ideology. The conscious and unconscious beliefs that drive first-generation equity work assume that children of color are in need of "fixing" because of their culture and language, their families, or their economic status rather than turning the attention back to the system itself—one that expects children of color and their families to fit into early childhood programs that are grounded in White European ideology about how children develop, what social skills are appropriate, and what school readiness looks like (Vaught 2011). This type of mentality allows us to overlook the root causes of the inequities that lay deep within the history of our nation and perpetuate the ongoing disparities.

As a field, we have yet to emerge from a first-generation approach to equity in which we are in a constant cycle of implementing the latest intervention or relying on what we have always done without thinking critically and examining the underlying issues surrounding equity in education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that a fixation on the achievement gap actually prevents educators from examining and addressing the underlying problems and perpetuates a reliance on short-term solutions. Second-generation equity work requires that we shift the way we think about children and families of color and how we approach equitable education. It is the system, not the children, that needs to change.

Another characteristic of first-generation equity work is our tendency as a field to focus on buzzwords (e.g., equity, trauma-informed care) without developing an understanding of the issues and how to address them effectively. To understand equity, we also have to understand privilege. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d. a), *privilege* is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people. Conversely, *equity* is the elimination of privilege, oppression, disparities, and disadvantage. Racial equity, in particular, is achieved when one's racial identity no longer predicts access to education or success in life (National Equity Project, n.d.). To get to this place, a significant paradigm shift will need to take place in which we move away from a paternalistic approach to early childhood education (e.g., implementing

trauma-informed interventions that are based on White European norms and values) by viewing all educational policies and practices through an equity lens. That is, we need to work to identify and eliminate policies and practices that privilege one group but oppress another (Neitzel 2020). By doing so, we will be able to engage in a more careful examination of the underlying problems, barriers, and causes of the inequities that currently exist so that we can finally address equity and promote justice in a meaningful way. Only then will the field begin to shift into a second-generation mindset.

Beginning the Work

Working toward equity in early childhood education ensures high outcomes for all children by removing the predictability of success or failure based on race, ethnicity, or language; interrupts inequitable practices; examines biases; and creates inclusive early learning environments (National Equity Project, n.d.). In addition, those working toward educational equity take into account key issues within our current society that prevent culturally and linguistically diverse children from attaining long-term academic success.

Understanding the complexity of the issues and how each of the institutions within our country intertwine to create one big system of oppression is critical to this work (Neitzel 2020). As the field of early childhood begins to focus on second-generation work, several key activities must be put into place to provide a strong foundation:

1. Working across early childhood sectors to align equity-based policies and practices

2. Examining early childhood data to identify where disparities exist and the barriers that sustain them

3. Developing more equitable policies and practices that are focused on children's cultural and linguistic wealth

A Cross-Sector Approach to Equity

Within the field of early childhood education, there is a tendency to work in silos with specific policies and practices that are unique to each. Because of the complex nature of equity and children's development,

there is a growing need to work together to minimize the complex web of services that can be difficult for families to navigate. Effective cross-sector collaboration includes meaningful dialogue and relationship building between Head Start, public pre-K, child care, and early childhood mental health. All sectors that touch the lives of young children and their families should be a part of the collaborative equity work going forward.

In addition, it is essential that families and community members who are directly impacted by the inequitable policies and practices be included in this collaborative work. Any type of cross-sector approach to early childhood equity must include an emphasis on listening to, learning from, and making space for those who are most affected to guide the work and be equal partners in bringing about real change within early childhood programs. The answers to our most pressing questions do not lie within the walls of offices and buildings but within the communities that have consistently faced structural barriers (Neitzel 2020).

Through this collective approach, the various early childhood sectors work together with community members to build a common agenda that allows for alignment and coordination across systems (Kania, Kramer, & Senge 2018). With a clear definition of equity and understanding of the current disparities, key stakeholders can then work toward creating a common vision, mission, goals, and theory of change, which is essentially a roadmap for the work ahead. These activities are fundamental to the success of any systems change efforts because they provide the infrastructure for success and support long-term sustainability.

Examining Data to Identify Disparities and Barriers

An additional task of cross-sector collaboration is to review data to determine current inequities within early childhood sectors (Alyn & Cabbil 2018). Most often, these inequities will be related to discipline and access to resources and services. Understanding where the disparities exist (e.g., in certain programs, for certain populations of children) is critical to disrupting current policies and practices.

A review of the current data also provides a context for drafting a vision, mission, and goals that should guide the work going forward. In particular, this cross-sector work can determine in what ways stakeholders (e.g., families,

children, teachers) are most affected by current policies and practices and how these stakeholders can be meaningfully engaged in shaping solutions and strategies that will address the continuing disparities within each sector (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2018).

Analysis of data trends within sectors and individual programs provides a context for implementing high-quality professional development activities that assist providers in implementing more equitable services for children and families of color. Having a mechanism for monitoring child outcomes, disciplinary exclusions (including being moved from one classroom to another), and access to services ensures that early childhood sectors better meet the needs of all children and provide the necessary resources to address disparities related to discipline, instruction, curricula, and the formation of adult–child relationships (Losen et al. 2015).

Developing More Equitable Policies and Practices

Key to all of this work is the development of more equitable policies and practices. Current policies and practices are one of the biggest barriers within the early childhood system because they generally reflect the views of the dominant White culture and often do not include standards related to inclusivity and equity (Johnson-Staub 2017). This can be seen in the policies related to suspension and expulsion, particularly within the child care sector.

Suspension, expulsion, and other exclusionary policies are particularly troublesome because they create a direct link between the educational system and the criminal justice system (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams 2014). Current practices for managing behaviors are grounded in first-generation equity work. These types of exclusionary practices are wholly ineffective for all children and are counterproductive in helping children who are exposed to trauma heal and acquire key self-regulation and social-emotional skills. The use of suspensions and expulsions serves as a Band-Aid to a larger problem and does not address much larger issues within early childhood programs, such as ineffective behavior management practices, implicit bias, and unresolved trauma.

More emphasis should be placed on helping teachers acquire key knowledge related to child development (including what is truly a challenging behavior),

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how culture shapes behavior, and specific culturally and linguistically responsive anti-bias strategies that help teachers implement effective instructional practices, develop meaningful relationships with children, and manage behavior in a developmentally appropriate manner.

To truly address equitable policies and practices, early childhood educators will have to place a primary emphasis on mental health—not just the social and emotional well-being of children, but also teachers, families, and other staff. This mindset shift is significant because it is counter to the current educational culture of academic achievement. Focusing on the mental health of the entire early childhood community is a key piece of the puzzle that has yet to be addressed in a real and meaningful way. When we place a priority on helping children acquire key social-emotional skills, they will be better equipped to interact with others, develop relationships, and learn. When teachers are emotionally supported and have key competencies, they will be more effective in their work with children in early learning programs (Neitzel 2020). All of these efforts will require significant and critical changes to both policy and practice.

Putting It All Together

At the surface, the work of equity can seem like a daunting task. As we gain a deeper understanding of the history of our country and the hold that racism and oppression has on all aspects of society, including early childhood education, we come to realize that addressing the deep disparities will not be a quick and easy fix. The work of equity will take time, perseverance, and a commitment to peeling back the layers of inequity to effectively eliminate barriers and structures within the early childhood system.

If we are to make the choice to work toward equity, this also will require a significant amount of self-reflection, active listening, and acquiescence of power on the part of those in leadership positions. As individuals, we will need to acknowledge our role in the continuing disparities. Many people remain complicit simply because they accept their experiences as the norm. That is the product of living

and operating within a racist society. If we are to achieve equity, teachers, policymakers, and administrators also will need to pause their tendency to provide immediate solutions without reflection. It is also time for those in leadership positions to relinquish a great deal of control. If we are to have equity, we must allow those who have experienced the reality of inequitable early childhood policies and practices lead the way in devising meaningful solutions.

Policymakers, administrators, and educators do not, and should not, have all the answers. We must clear the path so that those who are most affected can lead us forward. Their lived experiences and knowledge are needed when developing more equitable policies and practices. A community-wide cross-sector team that includes leadership from each sector as well as members of traditionally marginalized neighborhoods will guide this larger work going forward. A cohesive framework that includes key strategies for pursuing equity creates a context in which long-term change can occur so that all young children and their families have the same access to resources, supports, and services. This is the second-generation work of equity and justice in early childhood education.

Key Points

> There is a great need to move beyond the current Band-Aid approach to equity that is focused on implementing isolated interventions and curricula that do not address the root cause of the disparities between Black and White children.

> A cross-sector approach is needed within the field of early childhood so that policymakers, system leaders, and educators have a shared language and common understanding of the issues, which will lead to a collective effort to create more equitable policies and practices.

> Listening to the voices of families and other community members who are most affected by the inequitable policies and practices will guide our work.

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This chapter supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Everyone

Item 4: Acknowledge and seek to understand structural inequities and their impact over time.

Item 6: Recognize that the professional knowledge base is changing.

Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Create a Caring, Equitable Community of Engaged Learners

Item 4: Consider the developmental, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness of the learning environment and your teaching practices for each child.

Recommendations for Administrators of Schools, Centers, Family Child Care Homes, and Other Early Childhood Education Settings

Item 9: Create meaningful, ongoing opportunities for multiple voices with diverse perspectives to engage in leadership and decision making.