

Introduction

Iliana Alanís, Theoma U. Iruka, and Susan Friedman

All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Thus, all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity. They can do this best when they are effectively supported by the early learning settings in which they work and when they and their wider communities embrace diversity and full inclusion as strengths, uphold fundamental principles of fairness and justice, and work to eliminate structural inequities that limit equitable learning opportunities.

—NAEYC, “Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education”

These opening words to NAEYC’s “Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education” position statement encapsulate what the early childhood education system must do to ensure the rights of all children to learn and thrive. The primary purpose of this book is to bring this position statement to life by showing how teachers, administrators, researchers, faculty, and the broader community can enact equity practices in daily life by addressing racial inequalities and social injustices that are systemic in every aspect of education (children’s development and learning). To achieve this, we, the early childhood education community, must also understand our role within the bigger context of what social justice and equity means for everyone.

Advocating for Social Justice for All

Social justice is defined as the active promotion of a just society by challenging systemic and institutional racism, inequality, and oppression. In recent decades, the United States has experienced a major shift in the racial and ethnic makeup of the population of young children. In particular, US Census Bureau figures show a dramatic increase in the population of children of color (Ortman & Guarneri 2009). The US Census Bureau estimates now indicate that more than half of the children born in the United States are non-White and that young racially, ethnically, and linguistically minoritized children continue to rise in number. These estimates predict that by 2050 children from various racial and ethnic groups will no longer be the minority population. Projections indicate that

the Latino/a population will more than double by 2050, while the Asian population is projected to increase by 79 percent (Ortman & Guarneri 2009). It is important to note that even in the absence of immigration, the size of the Latino/a population is expected to increase substantially. We have also seen fluctuations in the rates of children living in poverty. After a decline in child poverty rates to a low of 17 percent in 2000, we have seen a rapid rise in poverty following the recession and the loss of housing values (and wealth accumulation), especially for families of color.

During this recent history, much attention has been given to disparities in academic outcomes and measures of well-being of children in the population. In spite of the attention, little progress has been made in reducing the disparities for children of color, children from immigrant backgrounds, and children living in households and communities with low resources. The United States’ ability to improve the outcomes and productivity of almost 50 percent of its future workforce (i.e., young children of color) is inextricably tied to its addressing institutional racism, oppression, and historical and contemporary trauma.

These changes in demographics coupled with the historical legacy of racism and discrimination still continue to impact Black, Native American, Latino/a, and Asian communities, revealing the urgency for early childhood teachers and administrators to analyze their ideologies, values, and motivations that enlighten their role as educators as well as the sociocultural politics they promote in the classroom. Through critical reflection, teachers recognize the power of their own agency in order to act upon such questions as

1. What notions of authority should structure teaching and learning?
2. Who should early education settings and schools serve?
3. How and why does race and ethnicity manifest in the classroom and teaching?

These questions compel educators to engage in a process of self-critique while simultaneously highlighting the central role they play in any viable attempt to develop equitable schooling. Through this process, educators gain the consciousness to interpret and address inequitable schooling events with ideological purpose and intentionality.

Advancing equity in early childhood education requires understanding the broader societal contexts and biases, and the ways in which historical and current inequities have shaped our education systems in the United States, as they have shaped our nation. Children, families, communities, and educators experience an uneven distribution of privilege and power that affects every aspect of their work and interactions with others. It is important for educators to understand that the schooling experiences of children may be qualitatively different depending on their culture, race, home language, ability, gender expression, or other aspects of identity. These differences can propel them down a path of insecurity and have a negative effect on their future accomplishments.

Vast research indicates that children benefit from qualified and reflective teachers who provide developmentally and linguistically appropriate, culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining experiences and interactions in curricula and instruction (IOM & NRC 2015; NASEM 2017). Educators who have a strong understanding of the developmental nature of children’s learning as well as the sociocultural and political aspects of learning are equipped to create effective and affirming environments, instructional activities, and assessments.

NAEYC’s “Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education” position statement challenges us to think critically about the care and education of young children in this country.

We come back to these words from the position statement that unequivocally state the responsibility we share in creating a society where equity is more than a lofty goal but a key aspect of the profession: “All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities. . . . All early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity” (NAEYC 2019, 1).

About the Book

This compilation of work brings the voices of early childhood scholars and professionals to the forefront as we highlight their experiences and expertise to advance the movement toward more equitable early childhood education, systems, and practices. The information presented by the authors of these chapters expands on one or more recommendations from the position statement, recognizing that many recommendations are related and interconnected and align with NAEYC’s revised “Developmentally Appropriate Practice” position statement and the revised “Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators.”

Collectively, the chapters in this text shed light on various pedagogical practices and policies that influence the educational experiences of generations of young children and their teachers. We have purposefully included pieces to extend the conversations related to equitable learning and teaching by emphasizing the past, present, and future of early childhood education. We include work from various scholars and educators across the United States, who advance equity on a daily basis in their work with children and families, preservice teachers, policymakers, and other key stakeholders. Grounded in theoretical frameworks and current research, the authors focus on the need to address historical ills and bias framing and negotiate paradigm shifts as we develop strategies and implement recommendations for equitable schooling. We value, respect, and affirm the diversity and intersectionality of children, families, and the educators who care for and teach them, and recognize that this book is unable to address all of the diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in early childhood. Rather, readers should see the chapters in this volume as the beginning, and not the end, of how the education field can implement the recommendations from the equity statement.

How the Book Is Organized

The book is organized in three parts.

Part 1: Reflections on Equity. This part is divided into two sections, “Section 1: Reflections on Ourselves” and “Section 2: Reflections on Our Profession.” Section 1 is a compilation of personal responses to a questionnaire on equity from leaders in early childhood education (ECE), including NAEYC affiliate leaders and NAEYC Governing Board members. Section 2 is a collection of chapters that discuss past and current practices in ECE within equitable educational and professional contexts.

Part 2: Responsive Pedagogical Practices. The chapters included in this part focus on exemplary developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive pedagogical practices within diverse early childhood contexts.

Part 3: Moving Forward as a Profession. This part includes chapters that reveal and discuss shortcomings of a traditional monolithic professional knowledge base, opening a space for personal reflection and offering recommendations for administrators to support early childhood educators in this process, including recommendations for faculty within teacher preparation programs. Lastly, it provides a call to action for each of us to advocate for equitable policies that support the ECE system as a whole.

Each part begins with an introduction that gives an overview of the purpose of its collection of chapters. These introductions include broad reflection questions to promote a deeper connection to the work at an individual level.

Taking Up the Call

The focus on early childhood education across the United States, as well as globally, provides us with many opportunities to shape the future as we consider how educators are prepared with pedagogies that are anti-bias, culturally and linguistically responsive, and sustaining. Early childhood educators, administrators, faculty at institutes of higher education, researchers,

and policymakers all play an important role in creating equitable spaces and systems for the future. Systemic changes are not possible without committed educators who understand the process of learning and the ramifications of inequitable schooling for young learners, their families, and the educators that serve them. The best teachers are those who are committed to continuing to learn about their academic areas, their students, and the world, and incorporate it in their practices and pedagogical approaches. Individual reflection and a willingness to learn are key to becoming an educator who effectively supports all children and families.

Note: Please see “Appendix: A Note on Terminology Used in this Book” for a list of key terms and explanations.

Reflection Questions

As you read the introduction and begin this book, we encourage you to reflect on the following questions:

1. How do you define *equity*?
2. What does it mean to ensure equitable learning opportunities for children?
3. What are the barriers to equitable learning opportunities?
4. What control, power, and privilege do you have to ensure that children are provided with equitable learning opportunities?

References

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