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CHAPTER 27

Agency and Power in Young Children's Lives

Five Ways to Advocate for Social Justice as an Early Childhood Educator

Jennifer Keys Adair and Shubhi Sachdeva

Early childhood education is increasingly positioned as an important part of making societies more equitable and prosperous. Strong early childhood systems can be both a safety net and an accelerator for families experiencing poverty and other oppressive forces. However, there are also ways in which early childhood education can perpetuate social injustices through White-centric curriculum, deficit-oriented programs, and intense pressure (even if unintentional) on families of color and/or families experiencing poverty to behave as White, middle-class families to be seen as successful.

Authors' note

The COVID-19 pandemic and the uprisings of 2020 reified both the inequities and ongoing resistance to those inequities. Racial injustices are ongoing, yet much of early childhood education—as a field—has dismissed the calls and experiences of teachers and families of color asking for justice and equity in curriculum, representation, access, and treatment. We are still dealing with the consequences of deficit thinking and racist rationales for some of the practices we do in early childhood—one being the justification of overly controlling young children of color because they are not school-ready or have not proved themselves "worthy" of agency. For teachers and administrators looking for ways to uproot racism and white supremacy from classrooms and schools, we hope this chapter is read through the lens of a society facing the injustices, brutality, and murders that happen when racism and white supremacy are allowed to continue.

In this chapter, we describe how and why social justice education is important for early childhood education. We offer a district and classroom example of how social justice approaches to early childhood education can increase the positive impact of early childhood education in children's lives. Finally, for those administrators, policymakers, and teachers who want to center social justice, we offer five ways to shift thinking and practice in our work with young children.

Our main goal in this chapter is to demonstrate that social justice in early childhood education requires an "interrogation of power" (De Lissovoy 2019, 42) by all of us who work with and make policies for young children. Social justice requires deference to marginalized communities' ways of knowing and learning as well as a willingness to confront institutions and systems that oppress and/or privilege us. We hope that this chapter will add to the growing body of voices calling for the intersecting fields of early childhood education and child development to appreciate the wealth and real lives of families and children as well as to insist that systems and institutions need fixing, rather than children and families.

We begin with two stories of social justice. The first took place in a kindergarten classroom and the second at a district superintendent meeting. Both are meant to illustrate the effort and thinking necessary for social justice work and how our collective effort can begin in small and simple ways.

Welcoming a Child Surviving Homelessness

In a kindergarten classroom in Texas, Gina often arrives at school irritated and tired. She struggles to make friends. She gets angry and hits her classmates when things don't go her way. The teachers have worked hard to create a meaningful and positive relationship with Gina's parents, who they first met when Gina's older brother was a student in their classroom. The teachers know that Gina has been living on relatives' sofas and changing apartments, sometimes in the middle of the night. Therefore, Gina does not get to have a regular schedule for sleeping, eating, or daily hygiene. Instead of blaming the family or calling her behavior problematic, Gina's teachers understand that she needs care and understanding. When she is struggling, the teachers provide her space in the classroom where she can go to regroup, calm down, and sleep if needed. She usually returns to the classroom community feeling calm and ready to engage with her classmates.

The teachers intentionally use effective strategies to build and strengthen positive relationships among the children as well. With guidance from the teachers, the children, without knowing about Gina's specific hardships outside of school, have found ways to support her. They engage Gina in their play and entice her to be calmer and softer by gently reminding her to "Be soft, Gina!" Instead of changing Gina, they welcome her by considering her need for patience and sleep as something that requires support rather than judgment. The children figure out Gina's favorite activities and use them to motivate her. When they see her upset, they offer to "get the animals," the soft pillow like animals in a basket in the reading area. They know her favorite book and encourage her to work with them by bringing the book to the table and calling out, "Look, Gina, we have your book!" Paying attention to her favorite activities, allowing her to sleep, and being patient when she is angry or tired are small but important ways to change the context rather than to blame or speak negatively about the child.

The children also do not hear teachers and other school staff speak negatively about Gina or her family. They only know that Gina does not get enough sleep at home sometimes. The children work to validate her situation through their inclusion efforts, all without specific teacher direction.

Superintendent Decision-Making to Address Racial Justice in Early Childhood Education Social Justice

The San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) has been improving standardized test scores and state ratings quickly over the past five years. Between 2016 and 2019, SAISD went from an F rating to a B rating as a district, surpassing both national and state performance standards on national- and state-level assessments. Still, the superintendent, Pedro Martinez, is not satisfied with early childhood education achievement scores on national assessments. Instead of deciding to create intervention programs aimed at family education or mandated pull-out or tutoring services, Superintendent Martinez decides to redesign the district approach and professional development for pre-K–3 classrooms to be more focused on agency and racial justice. This effort leads to the Dynamic Innovation for Young Children (DIFYC) professional development program. In a planning meeting for DIFYC, racial justice is offered as a primary framework for opening up classrooms to support children's agency. Instead of narrowing classroom practices, as is what often happens in schools serving children of color experiencing economic hardships, the goal is to offer equitable learning experiences that value children's stories, cognitive sophistication, inquiry learning, and high-level academics led by children's interests. Superintendent Martinez explains in the meeting that the primary motivation for redesigning early childhood education in the district is because all children deserve these kinds of learning experiences, saying, "Our motivation is justice, as much as it is achievement."

Social Justice Requires Belief and Effort

In both stories, educators valued equity and worked toward it in their own spaces, even when it was not convenient or comfortable. Social justice in early childhood education requires both belief and effort: a belief that everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities and significant effort to transform the institutions and systems that sustain unequal relationships and realities. All of those involved with social justice education—including young children—are learning about how institutional racism and other social injustices impact their lives. Young children are not too young for social justice because "young children can think about fairness and are deeply moved and highly motivated by the recognition of injustice" (Cowhey 2006, 18).

Social justice acknowledges the political nature of teaching and learning and supports children (along with their teachers, administrators, and policymakers) in understanding their own realities as well as the realities of others in the context of justice so they can recognize discrimination and other injustices and have the tools to act against them. Learning for Justice (formerly known as Teaching Tolerance) (2018) offers five outcomes of social justice teaching, all of which can be applied to work with young children:

1. Recognizing stereotypes
2. Recognizing unfairness on individual and institutional levels
3. Understanding how bias and injustice harms us in the past and present
4. Recognizing relationships to power and privilege
5. Identifying diverse examples and ways to work hard for social justice

NAEYC's advancing equity position statement (2019) builds upon this work by specifically outlining ways that young children and their educator-leaders can work hard for social justice.

The underlying importance of recognizing injustice and supporting children in working against those injustices is paramount for all children—those who are at risk of being oppressed and those at risk of oppressing. It could mean teaching White children to recognize racism and providing the tools to take on responsibility for transforming spaces that feed or support racism in subtle or overt ways. This also means helping young children of immigrant families recognize linguistic discrimination so that they can value their parents' attempts to help them speak their native languages and fight against policies, programs, or attitudes that try to make them think less of their languages and/or families. This also means empowering children to recognize ableism and how certain bodies and abilities are privileged so that they can all work toward changing policies and curriculum to be more inclusive. We, as educators, must challenge ourselves to think past our knowledge and backgrounds and seek knowledge from our families, communities, and a range of educational researchers that represent the diversity we serve in early childhood centers and classrooms.

We believe that working for social justice in early childhood education will require at least two major shifts in our field. The first is that instead of trying to fix children and families, we must look collectively at the systems and institutions that continue to create inequitable opportunities, resource allocation, and experiences. That is, we must acknowledge *institutional racism* and *structural inequities*.

The second is that instead of insisting on only biological, normalized versions of child development, we also need to depend on political and cultural understandings of development. We will explain both elements of social justice and then offer examples and practical next steps for educators.

Social Justice Fixes Systems, Not Families

Some educators believe that educational equity is best achieved through fixing individuals, families, or communities. This belief often leads to solutions such as home visiting interventions, parent education classes, English-only and/or biased assessments, family interventions, and individual behavior modification approaches. These types of programs tend to insist that children and/or families improve or change. One example comes from the case of the erroneous and persistent "word gap" argument, in which families, educators, and the larger public are told that if they speak more words to their children they will be able to overcome disparities often faced by children experiencing poverty (Hart & Risley 2003; Hindman, Wasik, & Snell 2016). Rather than blame poverty itself or the historical conditions that continue a racialized class system in the United States, families are asked to change their speaking and interaction patterns to more closely align with those of White, upper-middle-class families to be successful (Adair, Colegrove, & McManus 2017; Martínez 2018). This type of research is problematic because the methodology typically involves White researchers entering homes and schools of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) families and making judgments, observations and assumptions that become interventions, assessments, and additional ways to mark and label BIPOC children. Researchers are not always grounded in respectful understanding and too often apply the White-centered expectations and studies of "foundational" White theorists that intersect most fields associated with child development and early childhood education (Pérez & Saavedra 2017).

Blaming people for their own oppression is destructive and ineffective. Flores (2018) challenges us to imagine fixing unjust systems rather than marginalized communities.

> What if instead of creating programs that seek to fix low-income students of color, we created programs that would support teachers in building on their linguistic resources in the classroom? . . . I reject the expectation that communities of color undo their own oppression by modifying their cultural and linguistic practices.

Most educators committed to social justice are looking for systemic solutions—ones that fix systems rather than blame or fix individuals, families, or communities. This orientation leads to solutions such as:

- Student and parent agency
- BIPOC teacher recruitment
- Increased multilingual programs and teachers
- Restorative justice discipline approaches
- Programs for teachers to learn from families
- Increased academic rigor and sophistication
- Curriculum that responds to children's real lives, interests, and social issues (such as ecological destruction, immigration raids, or police brutality)
- Inclusionary materials and curriculum
- Asset-based views of families and communities
- Programs that work to change institutions and the minds of those who are powerful within those institutions (administrators, police, policymakers, researchers, teacher educators, and teachers)

NAEYC's position statement on advancing equity (2019) engages educators and policymakers at all levels to see inequity as a systemic problem rather than as one that fixes individuals.

Social Justice Makes Space for Cultural and Political Views of Development

Narrow versions of how children learn and strict adherence to "ages and stages" views of young children can dismiss cultural variation in the actual development of children, as well as cultural and contextual variation in what makes sense to young children and needs to be learned for success in a variety of communities (Rogoff 2003). Singular ideas are often derived from the dominant group and/or borrowed from research conducted on White, middle-class children and then imposed onto other groups (Saavedra & Pérez 2018). Singular ideas about development are often hidden within the language and interpretations of developmentally appropriate practice (Gupta 2013; Nxumalo 2019). For example, the American Indian College Fund's (AICF) For the Wisdom of the Children initiative is an effort to increase the connection between developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and indigenous ideas of how and what children should learn. Instead of forcing teachers, children, and communities to adopt White ways of being, learning, and teaching with young children, AICF is working to shift DAP and the larger early childhood teaching and assessment system to center on indigenous knowledge because "centering indigenous knowledge is paramount to the sustainability of the systems of care needed for the holistic development and well-being of children" (AICF, n.d.). In similar work, Kaomea, Alvarez, and Pittman (2019) have worked with Hawaiian indigenous and Samoan teacher communities, respectively, to challenge ideas that DAP is natural or culturally relevant to everyone.

5 Ways We Can All Work Toward Social Justice in Early Childhood Settings

1. Reject Deficit Talk

Rejecting deficit talk in early childhood education means speaking positively about families and focusing on their assets, strengths, and everyday realities that go into their decision-making and way of seeing the world. It means speaking up when deficit talk is a part of the curriculum, teacher planning, or policies at the school, district, or state levels. Rejecting deficit talk means asking parents and communities what they think about curriculum and pedagogical practices and not speaking negatively about families. This doesn't mean that educators have to agree with everything parents and families do. Instead, social justice educators seek to understand and include parents and families in addressing the underlying inequities that are responsible for so much trauma and suffering in peoples' lives. And social justice educators work to find their role in perpetuating such inequities. Social justice educators operate under the assumption that everyone has a logic and rationale for the way they live, parent, and engage with the world. Just as there is danger in behaving as though there is only one best way of teaching children, there is also danger in believing that there is one way to parent or engage with one's family or larger community.

There is no space for negative assumptions or stereotypes in social justice teaching and learning. Deficit thinking justifies inequity. Deficit thinking normalizes oppression. Deficit approaches dismiss and devalue practices that are meaningful and important to communities other than White, upper- middle-class groups (Valencia 1997). Deficit thinking and approaches to teaching and learning view "the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome in learning the demanded and legitimized dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of schooling" (Paris 2012, 93). Schools, classrooms, assessment companies, and community organizations can state upfront that deficit language will not be used to describe children or families. Educators who use deficit language should not ever be involved in assessing or teaching young children.

Deficit talk can include "at-risk" language ("We have a lot of at-risk children at our school, so we have behavior issues"); quick references to race and poverty without context ("Children don't get enough attention at home because their parents are urban poor"); assumptions about communities ("Immigrant parents don't care enough

to learn English"); rationales for low expectations ("The children at our school cannot handle that curriculum"); or justifications for harsh discipline ("Children need to prove they are ready for more freedom"). See Brown (2016) for more examples.

Children cannot be described as at risk in the same way they can be described as *smart* or *young* or *capable*. *At risk* is not a label or an adjective, and it typically ignores the reality of children's lives. Young children are put at risk by larger, unjust societal systems that fail them and their families. Immigrant parents *do* care about their children, even if they show it in ways that White teachers or teachers from different backgrounds don't understand because they expect or want something different. Young children deserve to explore, talk, move around, and connect regardless of circumstance. It is the environment that must shift to accommodate and make such experiences possible when children are dealing with the ongoing impact of historic injustices. Strengths-based observations and assumptions position young children, families, and communities as knowledgeable and capable.

2. De-Privilege White-Centric, Western Philosophies and Approaches

Social justice necessitates that we think deeply about the role our background, experience, beliefs, and training play in interpreting children and families and approaching teaching and learning. Gutiérrez and Johnson (2017) call for us to check the lenses (e.g., curriculum, research, pedagogy models, materials, classroom management approaches) we look through and ask

> How can one see dignity in people's everyday lives when the operant analytical lens (e.g., urban, poor, English Learner, "gritless") has already defined the nature of possibility of people and their practices? (249)

If most of what guides our practice comes from White, upper-middle-class researchers and educators, our knowledge base will be too narrow. Knowledge and learning need to be constantly redefined to be more representative of the voices that are silenced, erased, or unheard, rather than it being a prerogative of a few privileged ones. We can broaden the authors we read, the educators we consult for help, and the scientific ideas that come from various racial, linguistic, ethnic, LGBTQIA+, geographic, discipline, and cultural communities. In classrooms, teachers can provide materials, books, decorations, and conversation that privilege marginalized communities, including books focused on normalizing racial, cultural, linguistic, gender, economic, religious, and LGBTQIA+ diversity through everyday stories of empowered or nuanced characters told by anticolonial authors and illustrators. Experiencing the normalization of diversity without colonizing deficit thinking serves young children from privileged and marginalized communities (Beneke, Park, & Taitingfong 2019).

There are often important skills and knowledge normalized within marginalized communities that go unrecognized or are devalued in larger institutions of schooling. Social justice means looking at the cultural variance in how young children learn and valuing a broad range of learning experiences and dispositions beyond following directions.

3. Prioritize Children's Agency Every Day

Creating socially just early childhood education classrooms and systems is as much (if not more) about how to teach than what is taught. Children need opportunities to use their agency every day to see themselves as leaders—those who can advocate, plan for, and make change for themselves and their communities.

Children being able to use their agency at school is critical to social justice in early childhood education and long-term social justice movements. Agency is the ability to influence or make decisions about what and how something is learned to expand capabilities (Adair, Colegrove, & McManus 2017; NAEYC 2019). Agency is a core recommendation in NAEYC's advancing equity position statement because agency is a mechanism to the development of the content as well as a means to expand the range of capabilities. Using their agency, children investigate ideas, relationships, or things around them that are meaningful to them. Being able to influence and make decisions about learning expands children's capabilities in broad and deep ways. Agency allows for

leadership and meaningful development of ownership over one's life and learning along with education content. Multiple studies have shown that when young children can use their agency, they use it to help others and work together (Colegrove & Adair 2014). A collective sense of effort and understanding is key to fighting social injustice.

Children using their agency looks different across communities, so there are many ways to support agency. Children can choose the topics to study or be free to roam the room to help friends, observe others' learning activities, or get materials to build, experiment, or explain something to a classmate. Children can write books on their own topics or family stories with materials they determine from inside and outside of the classroom. Children can have agency to handle conflict or make an experiment or share stories from home without constant adult control or disruption. Children can create shared learning materials such as calendars, word walls, or letter and number posters that are often purchased at teacher-supply stores. Children can move and talk in all areas of the school and classroom, instead of walking in prison-like lines with bubbles in their mouths. Children can alter lessons, schedules, and plans when they have a rigorous idea to study. Children's families can share knowledge in class and suggest ideas for study or ways of teaching and learning. Children can move outside as well as engage with and care for the natural world in ways that expand their relationships and capabilities.

If children's everyday learning experiences (seven to 10 hours of which are in school) are primarily following directions, task completion, individual assessments, checking in with behavior models, and being quiet and still, then children will see learning and being a learner as being a result of compliance, stillness, and quiet rather than multimodal knowledge construction, problem solving, agency, collective work, and leadership (McManus 2019). Bang and colleagues (2012) argue that such low expectations, or "settled expectations," are a continuing colonizing idea that some children (those in marginalized groups) cannot handle the sophisticated, agentic learning experiences that others (those in the dominant group) can, or are forced to learn ways that devalue their community knowledge.

A socially just classroom is characterized by teachers and students co-constructing knowledge based on the problems and priorities of the students and their communities as well as children's interests (hooks 2003). While children do not determine state or national standards for content, they and their families should have a significant role in how they learn such content. All children deserve to use their agency at school every day, even if that means sacrificing some adult comfort, efficiency, or control.

4. Make Space for Children's Realities and Community Knowledge

Detangling from singular or White-normative ways of viewing children also means making space for children's stories and real lives as they are being lived. Children need time every day to share, play, and communicate what is going on and what they are thinking about. Social justice education in early childhood education means bringing children's knowledge into curriculum and pedagogical approaches.

Efforts to engage in social justice efforts require a commitment to listening and taking seriously the lives and realities of marginalized families and communities across the early childhood education system. Children are capable of having conversations about difficult subjects such as sexism, racism, and religious exclusion, especially if those conversations incorporate high-quality literature, children's questions, and an already spoken out-loud commitment to being a community that welcomes and values diversity.

Teachers can make space for children's stories through active and ongoing discussions that inform projects while still being cognizant of the academic concerns many parents have for their children. Classrooms that dismiss or ignore community realities and concerns, regardless of any progressive or high-quality teaching and learning practices, are not working toward social justice. Educators can begin by asking children and families to contribute their ideas about what should be studied and then actively creating opportunities for families and children to contribute their knowledge with the classroom and/or curriculum that lead to rich learning opportunities.

5. Creating Healing Spaces

Spaces where young children exist should be comforting and supportive of their well-being. Creating healing classrooms often means veering slightly from the script of lesson plans, schedules, and even protocols to attend to the immediate needs of children. Childhood is often idealized and seen as a worry-free, innocent time. For some, this may be true; however, a significant number of children witness and experience traumatizing events. Trauma can be racial slurs aimed at their parents from someone in line at the grocery store, abuse or neglect at home, experiencing homelessness, media coverage of mass shootings, patterned violence and/or bullying, mistreatment, or intimidation. It is hard to define what could be traumatic for children because trauma is not an event but a response to an event (Anda et al. 2006). What is traumatizing for one child might not be traumatizing for another. Trauma and its effects look different across contexts, ages, and communities and continue across generations. Children's responses to trauma too often get mistaken for "bad behavior" or "learning difficulties" (Wright 2007, 2010, 2017). When teachers have bias or presume to understand children's lives without getting to know them or their families, attempts to discipline are unhelpful or, at worst, retraumatize.

NAEYC's position statement on advancing equity (2019) recommends trauma-informed care to address issues of inequity. It recognizes the role of *historical and multigenerational trauma* (Fast & Collin-Vézina 2010) "inflicted through slavery, genocide, sexual exploitation, segregation, incarceration, exclusion, and forced relocation" (NAEYC 2019, 14), which could often go unaddressed and therefore further inequities by denying access to sources of healing.

Conclusion

Early education spaces can and should be one of the primary spaces where children feel safe and can heal. This healing process is where social justice begins for some children and their families as a way to compensate for, or at least hold off, the personal and structural violence children experience. Teachers can create safe, healing spaces by bravely listening to children's stories and acknowledging and validating the difficult circumstances children are going through. Just as with Gina in the first vignette, teachers who care for their students and their families as human beings worthy of dignity create opportunities for them to feel welcome and safe. They help young children engage in social justice activities by caring for one another through engagement and compassion.

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