YC Young Children

59
Scaffolding Children's Thinking

74
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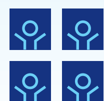
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Vol 76 ▪ No 2 Summer 2021

Nurturing Equity Leaders: Where We Are and Where We Need to Be

4 **Introduction**

6 **Why History? Educating the Early Childhood Workforce for Equity** *Barbara T. Bowman*

12 **Quality Includes Removing Bias from Early Childhood Education Environments** *Felicia L. DeHaney, Carla Thompson Payton, and Alandra Washington*

21 **Being an Equity Leader** *John Nimmo, Debbie LeeKeenan, and Louise Derman-Sparks*

28 **What About the Children? Teachers Cultivating and Nurturing the Voice and Agency of Young Children** *Brian L. Wright*

33 **Learning Stories: Observation, Reflection, and Narrative in Early Childhood Education** *Isauro M. Escamilla*

40 **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*

49 Viewpoint **Creating Anti-Racist Early Childhood Spaces** *Rosemarie Allen, Dorothy L. Shapland, Jen Neitzel, and Iheoma U. Iruka*

6

12

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Visit **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021** to enjoy *Young Children*'s first all-digital issue, dedicated to advancing equity. There, you'll find reference lists, recommended readings, an expanded Member Spotlight, and one staff's reflection on implementing anti-bias education.

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Position Statement
Adopted by the NAEYC National Governing Board April 2019

Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education
National Association for the Education of Young Children

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NAEYC News

55 A Special Column from Our President and Our CEO **Leadership, Equity, and NAEYC: There Are Seats at the Table** *Ann McClain Terrell and Rhian Evans Allvin*

Online Feature
NAEYC Member Spotlight

Feature Articles

59 **What Are You Thinking? Scaffolding Thinking to Promote Learning** *Angela K. Salmon and Maria Ximena Barrera*

64 **Embracing Partnerships with Informal Settings to Enhance Teaching and Learning** *Sara L. Hartman and Jennifer Hines-Bergmeier*

69 **Effective Conversational Strategies: A Preschool Teacher's Approach to Fostering Science Vocabulary** *Karla Winick-Ford*

74 **Preschool Without Walls: Empowering Families Through Outdoor Community Classrooms** *Ann Selmi*

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Index of Advertisers

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Walden University	**1**

Nurturing Equity Leaders

Where We Are and Where We Need to Be

If "all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity" (NAEYC 2019), then how do they fulfill this obligation? What does equitable teaching and learning look and sound like? And how do we recognize the equity leaders we work with?

Publishing the NAEYC position statement on advancing equity in 2019 was a watershed moment: it put into words—and "on the record"—the pressing need and responsibility to promote equity in and through early childhood education. Backed by current research, it is inextricably tied to NAEYC's core values and other central position statements. But efforts cannot stop there.

Alongside other equity initiatives, NAEYC put the power of our publications to work to spur knowledge, reflection, and actions to answer key questions about equity in practice. The book *Advancing Equity and Embracing Diversity in Early Childhood Education*: *Elevating Voices and Actions*, publishing this month, is a compilation of work edited and written by more than 40 leaders in the field. This important resource provokes readers to reflect on themselves and the profession and to consider responsive pedagogical practices in moving the field forward.

The content of this book was the inspiration for *Young Children*'s summer issue. In our first digital-only issue, we have included chapters from the *Advancing Equity* book to showcase critical concepts, historical and current trends and obstacles, and recommendations for equitable practices. With *Young Children* readers in mind, we chose chapters that provided opportunities for us to expand on specific topics through additional content found only in this issue. These *Young Children*-only features include recommended children's books and professional resources about race and anti-bias education, a profile of an administrator and staff deeply involved in equity work, a sample guide for facilitating staff discussions about anti-bias education, and a glossary of key terms to support these readings.

Beginning this cluster, the eminent Barbara T. Bowman sets the stage with her piece, "Why History? Educating the Early Childhood Workforce for Equity." Her article emphasizes respecting the perspectives and experiences of the Black community while also providing opportunities for change. Felicia L. DeHaney, Carla Thompson Payton, and Alandra Washington follow with a detailed description of efforts, past and present, to eradicate racial and ethnic biases in "Quality Includes Removing Bias from Early Childhood Education Environments."

Building on the notion of countering biases, John Nimmo, Debbie LeeKeenan, and Louise Derman-Sparks offer a framework and intentional strategies for "Being an Equity Leader." They include descriptions of how to engage teachers and staff in conversations and actions that lead to sustained change and that enact a social justice mission.

Examining instructional practices more closely, Brian L. Wright reminds us to consider, "What About the Children? Teachers Cultivating and Nurturing the Voice and Agency of Young Children." Through two equity-focused activities, early childhood educators can bolster children's voices and agency in the classroom. Likewise, Isauro M. Escamilla writes from his experiences as a teacher researcher about "Learning Stories: Observation, Reflection, and Narrative in Early Childhood Education." Learning Stories serve as a means to recognize and showcase children's cultural and linguistic identities while simultaneously documenting learning and growth with children and families.

With a look toward the future, Jennifer Keys Adair and Shubhi Sachdeva outline "Agency and Power in Young Children's Lives: Five Ways to Advocate for Social Justice as an Early Childhood Educator." In addition to sharing school-based examples, they specify how to carry out social justice work. This includes rejecting deficit talk and centering children's and communities'

knowledge and ways of being within early childhood education. Finally, in a Viewpoint piece, Rosemarie Allen, Dorothy L. Shapland, Jen Neitzel, and Iheoma U. Iruka differentiate approaches—both successful and unsuccessful, intentional and unintentional—to teach about race, bias, and equity. They encourage readers to identify racism when they see it in classrooms and organizations and to dedicate themselves to becoming anti-racist in these settings.

Leading in equity is neither easy nor straightforward, but it is something each of us can be part of in our own way and through continuous focus and energy. We offer this issue and the simultaneously published *Advancing Equity* book to prompt and assist your own reflections and efforts to advance equity for each child and family and for the field.

Annie Moses
YC Editor in Chief

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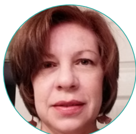

Dana Battaglia
Director, Books

A 4-year-old and his family painted peace rocks to leave around their community.

Is your classroom full of children's artwork? To feature it in *Young Children*, see the link at the bottom of the page or email **editorial@naeyc.org** for details.

We'd love to hear from you!

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Why History? Educating the Early Childhood Workforce for Equity

Barbara T. Bowman

> There is growing awareness of the limitations of child development theories and research based primarily on a normative perspective of White, middle-class children. . . .
>
> [It] requires understanding this broader societal context, the ways that historical and current inequities have shaped the profession, as they have shaped our nation.
>
> —NAEYC, "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education"

Early childhood professionals usually spend little time thinking about the history of identity groups and its role in understanding family dynamics and children's development. Our focus is usually on an individual's direct experience, the here and now. Yet all of us belong to communities whose past experiences play a critical role in how we as individuals think and act. When we fail to consider history, we lose a valuable source of information about why people behave the way they do. This article focuses on people of African descent and speaks to how and why knowing their

history can shed light on their current practices and help us design more responsive programs. Many aspects of this article may also speak to other marginalized groups because understanding the historical context of racism and the Black response is relevant to all communities of color in the United States.

Those of us in the human services recognize how a family's history gives us insight into the present. We see a connection between past stresses and resources and the way people live their lives today. For example, divorce often causes interpersonal tensions that result in ruptured relationships between parents and children. The effects of this change may persist long after the divorce is finalized. However, when we know about the divorce, we can plan interventions specific to the family, such as attention to separation and abandonment issues.

The same process applies to communities. The past continues to influence its members. Cultures, like people, are not static, but the effect of prior experiences lingers as new experiences are viewed through the lens of the community's history.

Some teachers know that Black children and families are different but believe such differences are superficial. For example, they may think whether you eat cornbread or bagels for breakfast or broccoli or collards for supper are meaningless variations easily changed. While many food differences do reflect unimportant personal choices, others are important symbols. They relate to a person's identity and help define who they are. For many Black Americans, cornbread and collards are not just nutrition, they are meaningful aspects of their community and its traditions. Changing recipes is not a minor adjustment, but one that requires changes in taste and enjoyment, which some Black families may resist.

Unfortunately, some teachers think differences in Black children and families are indications of incompetence or deficits. They do not connect the history—the past experiences—of the Black American community to how Black children and families think, feel, and act today. Because a teacher's own culture is so intuitive and natural, they may feel theirs is the only right way to think and behave and anything different is abnormal; they expect everyone to share their truths. This assumption causes them to misunderstand the normalcy of Black children and families.

Differences are not caused by the Black Americans' perversity or stupidity; they are caused by the differences in their experiences, past and present, from those of White Americans. Slavery, Jim Crow (legal segregation), and continuing oppression have had a pervasive influence on Black culture and, therefore, on community and family interactions. For example, some teachers see the discipline of Black American parents as harsh and authoritarian. However, when you understand the long history of White harassment and violence (even against children), the effects of segregation and community disinvestment, and the continuing unjust justice system, it is easy to understand the urgency of their discipline. There is no space for Black children to make a mistake, and Black parents recognize the danger; they believe that early and sharp discipline will help keep their children safe. Therefore, efforts to change the style of discipline in Black families without focusing on the causes are unlikely to be successful.

Teachers also are concerned about the disparities in achievement of children of color who lag behind their White peers. They ask, "Why don't these children learn in school?" Most often, they only look for personal reasons for school failure—genes, family relationships, poor teachers, or curriculum. They don't ask, "What are the structural inequities that affect the quality of Black children's school experience?" When we ask this question, one of the things we find is inequity in the school funding formulas in many

When we fail to consider history, we lose a valuable source of information about why people behave the way they do.

states (EdBuild 2019). These formulas do not resource programs as adequately for students from families with low income (who need it most) as they do for students from families with higher income (who need it less). Children of color are often the poorest, and therefore, suffer the most from regressive fiscal policies (Baker, Di Carlo, & Weber 2019). This is one example of systemic racism that leads to underfunded schools. Similar policy decisions result in white supremacist curricula, Euro-American centric pedagogy, color-blind practices, and disproportional rates of disciplinary action (Howard 2010; Gilliam et al. 2016; Derman-Sparks & Edwards with Goins 2020). These historical racist policies and practices make underachievement for children of color the most likely outcome.

Many cultural patterns cannot be fully understood without knowing their evolution. This article gives two examples that are rooted in slavery and affect ideas and practices today. These examples also illustrate how groups adapt as their experiences change. Finally, I suggest five things that early childhood professionals can do to promote equity using their understanding of community experience, actions that make us part of the solution rather than the problem.

Example 1: African American English Vernacular, Black English, or Ebonics

Many people consider African American English Vernacular (AAEV) to be an incorrect form of Standard English that indicates the ignorance of the speakers. In fact, Black people developed this language in what is now the United States during slavery because they came from different tribes with different languages and had to create a lingua franca to communicate with each other and their slave owners. They designed a language that contained elements of many of their home languages and English but combined them in a logical and linguistically consistent way. Instead of being a misuse of English, AAEV was (and is) an intellectual equivalent language to English (Labov 1970). During its development, AAEV reflected the separation of Black slaves from White owners; its continued use reflects segregation today—in housing, employment, education, religion, and many of the social amenities.

Jim Crow was codified in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and remained in force until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted. During the great migration (1916–1970), Black Americans moved out of the South to northern cities where employment opportunities were greater. One might have expected them to begin speaking Standard English as they gained a foothold in the North; however even there, where segregation was not legally required, it was widespread and pervasive. Black people were almost as rigidly segregated in employment, residence, and schools in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Cleveland as they had been in the South. The community language persevered; Black Americans took the basic structure of AAEV with them. In northern ghettos, you could hear the community's unique use of the verb *to be*: "I's here" and "She be's here." As Black people continued to live segregated lives, they continued to use their language for social interaction (NPR 2017).

Unlike other ethnic groups, many economically advantaged Black Americans live in segregated Black neighborhoods, where the residents are poorer, less well educated, attend schools of lower quality, and use features of AAEV in their speech. What is it about their experiences that accounts for why they live in such communities? Two factors are important. One, Black Americans are likely to feel safer and more valued in Black communities. Most Black Americans regularly receive direct and indirect racial insult at their jobs, in the street, in public facilities, and in the legal system. Generally, Black people have more difficult lives than White people with the same or similar background (Denby 2017). Their physical safety as well as their self-esteem are regularly compromised. Comradery and the support of the community, including via a shared language, become important antidotes for both the depression and rage that this treatment elicits.

Two, racial segregation is determined by White people. It is responsive to the decisions made by banks, real estate agents, insurance companies, city governments, judges, and law enforcement (Nodjimbadem 2017). These decisions, though ostensibly made for economic reasons, are in reality often based on race and have a far-reaching effect on Black Americans. Legally and illegally, Black people are limited in their access to residences, employment, markets, insurance, and social opportunities outside of their own communities.

Today, Black speech is increasingly diverse as more opportunities open up outside of their communities and more Standard English is incorporated. Nevertheless, vestiges of AAEV have been retained in many communities, as red marks on student essays attest. Additional changes are inevitable as new experiences create new challenges (media, computers), but some forms will undoubtedly continue to be used as long as so many communities remain segregated. Interestingly, just as AAEV has changed in the last 50 years as interrace contact has increased, so too has Black slang spread outward to the general public, where it is now part of everyday speech for many Americans.

Example 2: Color and Colorism

We speak of *people of color* in the United States because of their common experiences with European and American prejudice and discrimination. The different meanings of skin color, however, are an illustration of how knowing history provides insight into different attitudes and different assimilation behavior among groups with African heritage.

Differences Within Groups

During slavery, children of mixed-race African slaves often lived in the homes of their White owners, thereby enjoying a more advantaged lifestyle. Skin color operated as a benefit, as the whiter the slave, the greater economic and social opportunity; however, Black people with White-like complexions and hair were still considered Black. The adage "One drop of African blood makes you Black" was originally designed to keep mixed-race people enslaved. Post-slavery, it has meant that no amount of White ancestry could overcome the stigma of African heritage.

With emancipation, the privilege of "house slaves" translated more easily into jobs and further education, so light-skinned Black people enjoyed privileges not always available to darker-skinned peers. Skin color conferred benefits in the White world and became a mark of beauty among Black Americans; "whiter skin" was deemed more attractive and often carried more benefits than darker coloring. After the civil rights era and the recognition that "Black is beautiful," this

preference became less important; however, skin color can still evoke ambivalent feelings within Black American communities.

Differences Between Groups

Color had a different history in Caribbean and Central and South American countries than in the United States. In these areas, just as in the United States, during and after slavery, mixed-race people enjoyed a more privileged lifestyle than their darker peers. However, unlike the United States, there was no legal Jim Crow, and the doctrine of "one drop" was not used as the criterion of who was Black. Unlike in the United States where race was fixed, people from these areas had different ideas about color, interracial mixing, and assimilation. Without anti-miscegenation laws, racial mixing did not have legal consequences, and many of these countries developed multiple racial divisions. The Caribbean nations, for example, were heavily dependent on Black slavery, but emancipation did not elicit legal Jim Crow as it did in the United States, and racial mixing was more prevalent.

The African experience was also different. Although Africans experienced the oppression of colonialism, they come from majority-Black countries, where Blackness is ubiquitous. In most of those countries, freedom from European direct domination is several generations old. In addition, as Ogbu and Simons (1998) point out, immigrants, like those of African and Caribbean descent, have come to the United States voluntarily and are more willing to adopt new customs. All Black groups are likely to face prejudice and discrimination in the United States, yet these seem to be less of a hindrance for Black immigrants. The Pew Foundation reports that on every measure of success—annual income, home ownership, education—African and Caribbean immigrants' achievement exceeds that of native-born Black Americans (Valentine 2012; Anderson 2015). It suggests that voluntary Black immigrants, without the onus of colorism, are more able to cope with American barriers to achievement.

These examples show that history affects communities, but also that communities adapt to different experiences. They also show that if we want different outcomes for our democracy, we must change the experiences of communities as well as those of individuals.

> We must be as active combatting the systemic forces of poverty and racism that imperil the community as we are in treating individuals for their effects.

Intervention: Early Childhood Programs

We are rightly quite pleased that early childhood programs can help alleviate some of the effects of inequitable education practices experienced by communities of color. However, it is essential for early childhood educators to recognize their limits as well. This was brought home to me during a visit to a Head Start center (an anti-poverty program), where the teacher and a grandparent proudly told me that the grandchild was the third generation in the program. A quick review of research on the intergenerational cycle of poverty shows that this was the expected outcome, not an unusual one.

Programs such as Head Start have shown positive educational and social results for poor children and their families (Deming 2009; Barr & Gibbs 2017); however, often those benefits do not persist or foster class mobility. The effects of early childhood programs may be curtailed by the quality of the preschool program or the inadequacy of the K–12 schools that the children subsequently attend. Or alternatively, change may be limited by the racism that members of the community encounter every day, which dooms children's outlook and expectations for the future. This suggests that rather than focusing exclusively on the personal issues common to all families, anti-poverty programs for Black children must look at the broad range of factors that undermine communities, such as unsafe housing, job discrimination, bank and insurance policies, air and water expenditures, and tax allocations.

NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" position statement notes that focusing solely on an individual's direct experiences should not prevent us from examining the sociocultural and historical influences on the Black American community and other marginalized groups. Instead, we must be as active combatting the systemic forces of poverty and racism that imperil the community as we are in treating individuals for their effects.

How Should the Early Childhood Profession Respond?

1. The early childhood system has the obligation to deliver exemplary services in an equitable way. This means advocating for public policies that pay attention to quality and access for all. It also means making sure that current policies and practices consider cultural and linguistic differences as they plan for children and families.

2. Early childhood professionals have an obligation to teach children about each other in a positive and respectful way. This is more than scheduling a food-tasting lunch or reading a book or two about Indigenous peoples. It requires thoughtful attention to communities, families, and materials so that what children learn is authentic and accurate.

3. The early childhood professional should also be prepared to study the cultural patterns and history of the various groups in their programs to learn about their past and current experience. This is particularly important when groups have experienced generations of oppression, with inequalities in resources and justice. Most important, educators must understand the difference between knowing about the cultures of others and stereotyping them.

4. While we focus on helping families deal with the stresses in their lives, we also need to work to change the systems that keep children of color from enjoying the benefits of full citizenship. Early childhood professionals, well versed in child development, have an obligation to advocate for policies and practices that support young children and their families. But educators need to be aware of how current systems continue to undermine competence and agency in Black communities. There are many sources—parents, books, the internet, classes, and knowledgeable community members—that can provide this information.

5. Clearly, history cannot be changed, but cultures are not set in stone. New challenges and opportunities demand changes in beliefs and practices. This means that our responsibility to sponsor equity does not end with quality and access or knowledge of history. It includes the responsibility to take an active role in advocating corrective policy. This means bringing all voices to the table to share public policy debates. It means advocating for equity both as a member of professional organizations and a citizen in our society.

About the Author

Barbara T. Bowman is the Irving B. Harris Professor at Erikson Institute, where she teaches courses and supervises students. She was chief officer for early childhood education at the Chicago Public Schools (2004–2012) and a consultant to the US Department of Education (2009), and she served on the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (2014–2016). Bowman is a member of the Chicago Public Library Board of Directors and is also on the boards of a number of practice and policy organizations.

Go online for more information, further reading suggestions, a glossary of included terms, and the references for this article. Visit **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021.**

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This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Everyone

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

Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Advocate on Behalf of Young Children, Families, and the Early Childhood Profession

Item 1: Speak out against unfair policies or practices and challenge biased perspectives.

Item 2: Look for ways to work collectively with others who are committed to equity.

Quality Includes Removing Bias from Early Childhood Education Environments

Felicia L. DeHaney, Carla Thompson Payton, and Alandra Washington

The year 2019 marked the 65th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education,* the US Supreme Court case which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. *Brown v. Board of Education* was critical in establishing that "equal" access, funding, and quality of resources were not provided to all students, specifically Black children. More than six decades later, efforts toward embracing, advancing, and achieving equity in educational systems continue. As the field of education embraces the change in demographics across the country, it must also acknowledge and understand the systemic institutional practices that are still in place throughout our educational system. These include inequitable levels of educational access and advancement, barriers to resources and funding, and marginal actions toward culturally relevant practices and policies. This article examines efforts made toward removing racial and ethnic biases, addresses our current state as a field, and asserts how the field of early childhood education must be committed to advance equity with the assets of children, families, and communities front and center.

Background

Within the last decade, and for the first time since the public education system was established in the United States, the majority of students are children of color. According to a *Public School Review* article (citing a report published by the Pew Research Center), "in 1997, over 63 percent of 46.1 million US public school students were White. Today, White students comprise 49.7 percent of the 50 million students enrolled" (Chen 2019). In 2018, *Public School Review* reported that 52 percent of public school students were children of color, and 48 percent were White (Chen 2019).

Yet even after a half-century of desegregation, the majority of America's school children still attend racially homogenous schools (EdBuild 2019). Our public education system is legally separate and de facto discriminatory. Recently Gary Orfield, a professor at UCLA and the cofounder of The Civil Rights Project, reported that the average White student attends schools that are 69 percent White; the average Latino/a student attends schools that are 55 percent Latino/a or that have a 66 percent mix of Black and Latino/a students; the average Black student attends schools that are 47 percent Black or that have a 67 percent mix of Black and Latino/a students; and the average Asian American student attends schools that are 24 percent Asian American (Tilghman 2013). These asymmetries reveal how systemic racism and intentional segregation continue to shape public education in America.

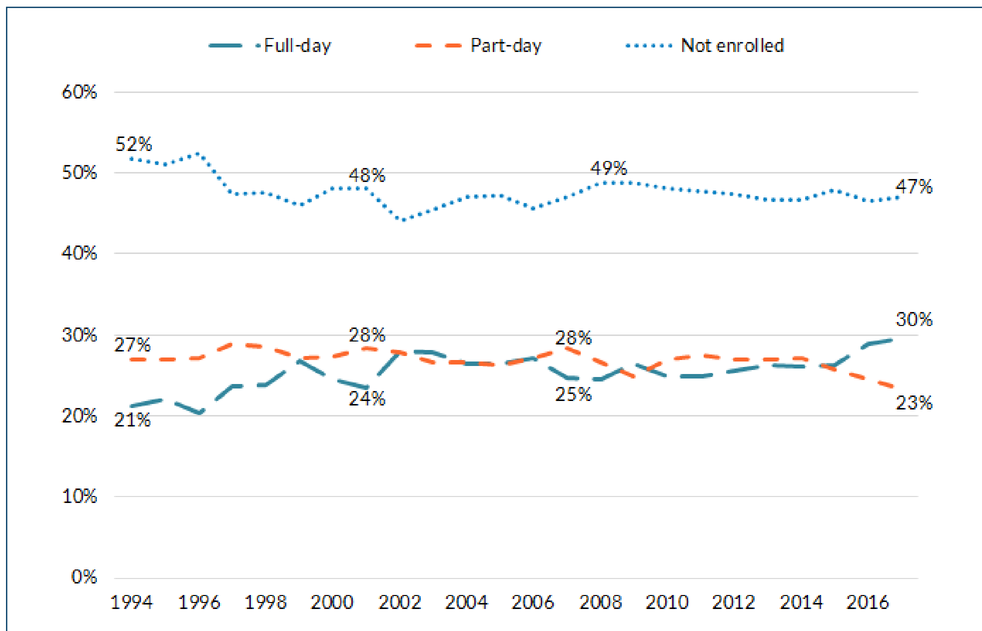
Moreover, research shows that schools that serve predominantly Black and Latino/a children receive fewer dollars than schools that serve predominantly White children. For example, a recent EdBuild report revealed that non-White school districts receive $23 billion less than White school districts, despite serving a similar number of children. Of the 35 states in the country that are racially diverse enough to support an equity-based analysis of their school funding structures, more than half use funding mechanisms that create disparities. More than 10 million students are enrolled in districts that are funded at lower levels than their state counterparts. (EdBuild 2019).

Funding for, and access to, early childhood education has also been shaped by systemic racism and intentional segregation. As such, some view *Abbott v. Burke* as the most significant legal case regarding the rights of poor and minority school children since *Brown v. Board of Education*. In 1985, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the education provided to school children in poor communities in the state was inadequate and unconstitutional, and ordered that state funding in these districts should equal what was spent in the state's wealthiest districts (ELC, n.d.). At the time, the court's mandate in *Abbott v. Burke* broke new ground in school finance and education policy. New Jersey became the first state to mandate early education for children "placed at risk" of entering kindergarten or primary school behind their more advantaged peers, starting at age 3.

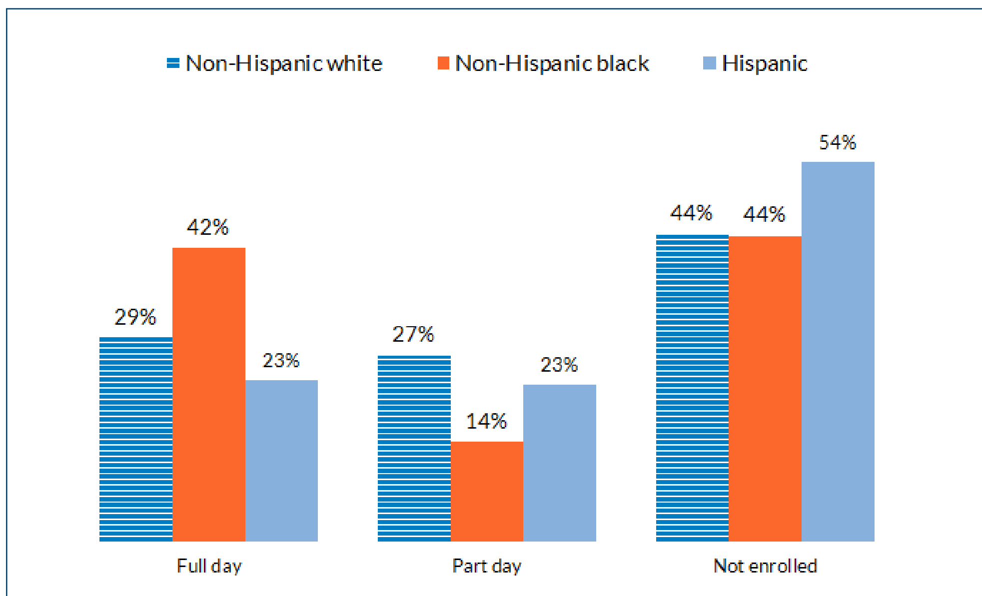
While *Abbott v. Burke*'s legacies are still evolving—much like *Brown v. Board of Education*'s—there is clear and reliable data about nationwide early childhood education enrollment, which mirrors in many ways the changed student population in public schools. In their recent data report, Child Trends Databank (2019) found that "non-Hispanic Black children were more likely to be enrolled in full-day preschool programs (42 percent) than their non-Hispanic White and Hispanic peers (29 and 23 percent, respectively), while non-Hispanic White children were the most likely to be enrolled in a part-day program (27 percent), compared to Hispanic and non-Hispanic black children (23 and 14 percent, respectively)." (See the charts on page 14.)

As we know, high-quality early childhood education supports the rapid development that happens in the first years of a child's life and has long-lasting benefits well into adulthood. Yet barriers to access persist. For example, a recent report from the Education Trust (2019) reveals that of the 26 states in their study, none of the states provides high-quality and high-access state-funded preschool for Black and Latino/a 3- and 4-year-olds. The study reported that only 1 percent of Latino/a children and 4 percent of Black children in 26 states were enrolled in high-quality, state-funded early learning programs (The Education Trust 2019). "Systemic racism causes opportunity gaps for Black and Latino children that begin early—even prenatally, which makes it crucial for these families to have access to high-quality [early childhood education] opportunities as a pathway to success into their K–12 education" (The Education Trust 2019, 3). The report continues to state that of the 26 states analyzed, 13 enrolled fewer than 25 percent of their Latino/a

Percentage of Children Ages 3 to 5 Enrolled in Prekindergarten or Preschool Programs: 1994–2017



Percentage of Children Ages 3 to 5 Enrolled in Full-Day Prekindergarten or Preschool Programs, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2017



Note: The above two charts include children ages 3 to 5 whose parents answered nursery school (prekindergarten or preschool) when asked what grade their children were attending. Parents were then asked to specify whether their children were attending a full-day or part-day program. Because of the way in which the question was phrased, parents may have included a wide variety of childcare options when responding that their child participated in "nursery school." Children ages 3 to 5 who were enrolled in kindergarten or higher grades were excluded from these estimates.

Both charts are reprinted, with permission, from Child Trends' original analysis of data from the Current Population Survey, October Supplement, 1994-2017.)

children in state-funded preschool programs, and 10 enrolled fewer than 25 percent of their Black children (The Education Trust 2019).

The Importance of Racial Equity in Early Childhood Education Settings

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement “Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education” advances the rights of all children to achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society and the necessity of equitable learning opportunities. The organization requires accountability from all stakeholders—including early childhood educators, administrators, and policymakers—to actively acknowledge and address patterns of inequity. NAEYC also asserts that society benefits when children and families from resource-denied and marginalized communities are equitably served (NAEYC 2019).

Indeed, years of research, study, and evaluation provide overwhelming evidence that investing in high-quality early childhood programs sets children on an upward trajectory in school and in life. Conversely, we also see that children who enter kindergarten behind their peers are more likely to remain behind. While some states have made great efforts to ensure that early investments prepare children for kindergarten, depending on the state, zip code, and school zoning area, access to and opportunities for high-quality education are limited. As LaRue Allen, chair of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine Committee on Transforming the Workforce, states

> While high-quality early care and education for children from birth to kindergarten entry is critical to child development and has the potential to generate significant economic returns in the long run, it has been financed in such a way that makes early education available only to a fraction of the families needing and desiring care, and does little to further develop the early care and education workforce. (NASEM 2018)

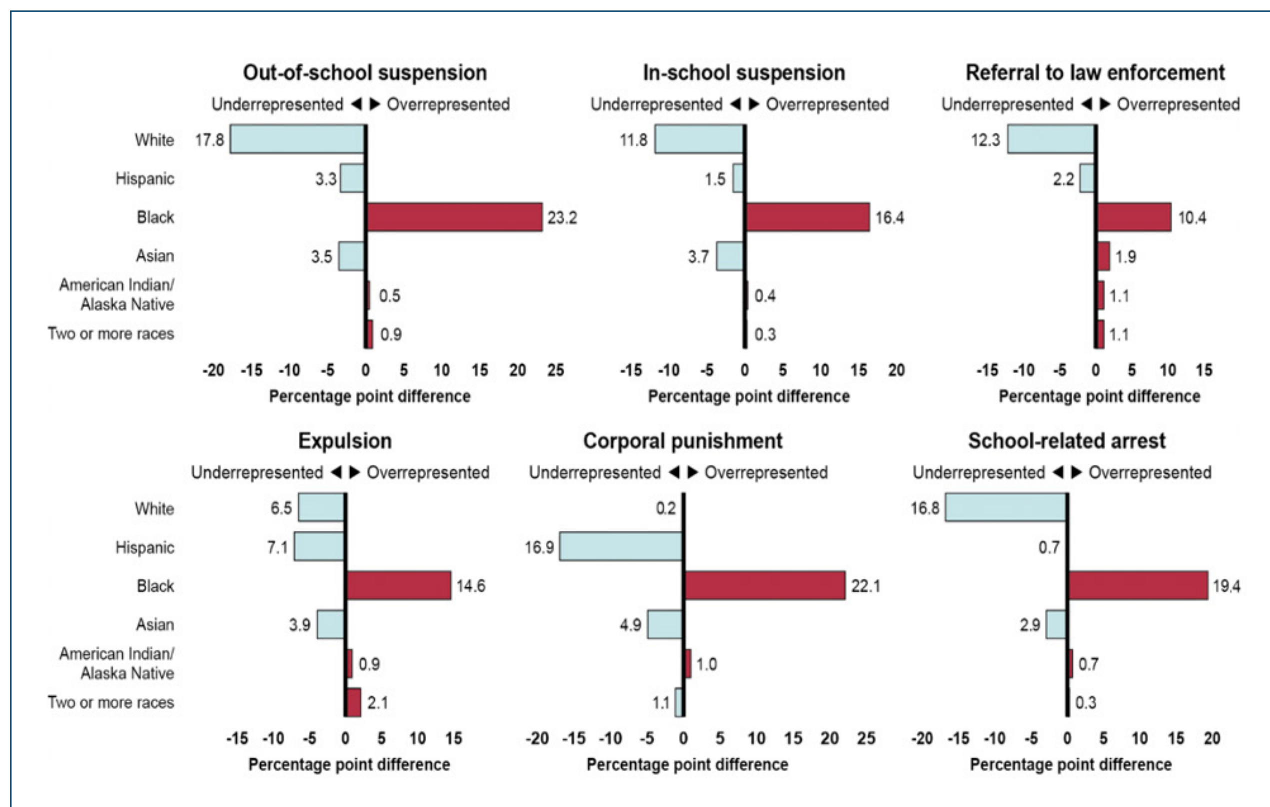
Moreover, there is an underlying racialized, structural barrier that prevents children of color from receiving quality and equitable early childhood education: *implicit bias* (see glossary online in the digital issue). Implicit bias makes it more difficult for young children of color to have healthy, successful starts in life. Evidence for the prevalence and impact of implicit bias may be found in preschool systems across the country, where suspension and expulsion rates have been increasing among children of color. In 2005, a national study of state-funded prekindergarten systems operating in 40 states across the country found that prekindergartners are expelled at a rate that is more than three times that of their older peers in grades K–12: 6.67 per 1,000 preschoolers to 2.09 per 1,000 K–12 students (Gilliam 2005). The study also found that rates were higher for older preschoolers and that Black preschoolers were twice as likely to be expelled as White preschoolers. That trend has continued. The US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights found that while Black preschoolers comprise 18 percent of overall preschool enrollment, they account for 48 percent of the suspension rates (OCR 2014). As a result of increased time spent away from their class and classmates, some researchers link these inequitable disciplinary practices to a reduction of educational opportunities for young Black students (Keane & Calkins 2004; Henneman 2014). Finally, recent research of student discipline records from over 1,800 schools serving more than one million students found that discipline disproportionality is largely attributable to racial disparities (McIntosh et al. 2018).

The Impact of Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is not a new concept. The earliest definitions emerged in the early 1920s; it was suggested that people filtered information through preconceived notions or stereotypes that reflected subjective perceptions (Eberhardt 2019). In their book *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*, psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald (2016) noted that implicit bias occurs when forces we are unaware of guide our impulses and decisions. They defined implicit bias as attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner (Banaji & Greenwald 2016).

Research on human cognitive functioning offers insights into conscious and unconscious cognition and how implicit bias works. *Unconscious cognition*, where most of our cognition occurs, is associated with

Representation of Students Who Received Disciplinary Actions Compared to Overall Student Population, by Student Race or Ethnicity, School Year 2013–2014



Note: This chart shows whether each race or ethnicity was underrepresented or overrepresented among students who received six types of discipline. For example, White students were underrepresented among students suspended by approximately 18 percentage points, as shown in the chart, because they made up about 50% of the overall K-12 student population, but 32% of the students suspended out of school.

Reprinted from US Government Accountability Office (GAO), Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities (Washington, DC: GAO, 2018), 14.

implicit bias (Staats 2016). Unconscious stereotypes drive how people behave, as well as how they make judgments and decisions (Staats 2016). When implicit bias informs how people view identities—including race, language, economic status, gender, ability, and religious affiliation—it creates structural barriers, inequitable outcomes, and disparities. While explicit prejudice has been correlated with deliberate acts of discrimination, implicit bias is predictive of spontaneous, nonverbal behaviors (McConnell & Leibold 2001; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner 2002). It also shows up across our social, cultural, political, and educational system and causes harm without overt intent. While some prejudice is explicit, implicit biases outside of an individual's awareness can be even more complicated and difficult to apprehend.

Yet addressing this issue is even more critical, given the racial differences between the teaching and student population. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that students of color made up 45 percent of the public school population (prekindergarten through high school), but only 17.5 percent of educators in the workforce were faculty of color (Nganga 2015). The vast demographic differences between students and the teaching corps have had devastating impacts. In 2018, the US Government Accountability Office report on the US Department of Education's suspension and expulsion data (GAO 2018) reported that Black students are suspended more than any other racial group, with this trend beginning in preschool. (See the chart above.)

Given what we know about systemic racism and the acute underrepresentation of Black educators in the teaching profession, this upward trend of suspensions and expulsions is likely driven by implicit bias, which in turn, is fed by powerful and widely circulated negative stereotypes associated with Black people. For example, behaviors exhibited by many boys and young men, such as high levels of assertiveness, energy, and physicality, are seen as negative when attributed to Black boys and young men. These negative associations—and resulting experiences of bias and discrimination—lead to behavioral, psychological, and academic trauma (Harper & Associates 2013). (For further reading on this topic, see Barbara T. Bowman's article on page 6, as well as Brian L. Wright's article on page 28.)

Approaches for Countering the Impact of Implicit Bias

Even at very young ages, school-based trauma often leads to negative self-image, the internalization of these labels, and the erosion of the very qualities and characteristics that make these children unique and special. Yet it is possible to positively and effectively address high rates of suspensions and expulsions from preschool programs. Research tells us that there are at least three approaches to counter this alarming trend and significantly reduce the occurrences.

Increase Hiring and Retention of Teachers of Color

Research suggests that hiring and retaining more teachers of color may reduce the influence of implicit bias (Milton-Williams & Bryan 2016). Similarly, hiring bilingual teachers in schools with linguistically diverse children will lead to equitable practices. Bristol (2014) suggests that Black male teachers provide better support to the academic and social needs of Black boys due to their heightened ability to connect, bridge cultural understanding, and increase accountability grounded in realistic expectations.

Currently however, Black men comprise only 1 percent of all teachers in all grade levels. Given this very low rate of representation, investing in programs like Call Me MISTER, an initiative funded by W.K. Kellogg Foundation, is an urgent, essential intervention. Since its inception in 2000, the program has graduated 150 MISTERs (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models), who have been fully certified and secured teaching positions. To date, all program graduates remain teachers, and some have even moved up to principal or program director positions. All MISTERs have met or exceeded their commitment to give back to their public schools and communities.

Build Empathy and Cultural Competence to Reduce Bias in the Classroom

For 90 years, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has been at the forefront of directly addressing racial equity and systemic racism in education systems. Embedded within all we do are commitments to advance racial equity and racial healing, to develop leaders, and to engage communities in solving their own problems. In the education domain—and more specifically, within the field of early childhood education—implicit bias can be a harmful and enduring obstacle to early success and achievement. Because these assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes are held by all individuals, including well-intentioned education professionals and teachers, early childhood educators and leaders must be absolutely committed to creating and maintaining equitable learning environments (Valbrun 2017).

Indeed, increased self-awareness of how bias impacts interactions in educational settings is a prevailing theme in the research (Durden, Escalante, & Blitch 2015). Teachers' expectations and interpretations of student behavior is a function of racial, linguistic, or ethnic match; more specifically, White teachers tend to misinterpret the behavior of children of color across the K–12 spectrum (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera 2010; Bates & Glick 2013). Part of this awareness stems from using reflective practices to create a pattern that allows them to find themselves within each child, and then seeking and finding positive attributes for each child. (Bryan 2017).

NAEYC's position statement on equity (2019) addresses this through the charge to recognize each child's unique strengths and support the inclusion of all children—helping children recognize and support each other as valued members of the community—so that no one feels invisible or unnoticed. The ability to see themselves and the children in their classrooms as unique and with much to offer fundamentally changes in-class interactions and the attributions associated with each interaction. The ability to use cultural

Self-Reflection About Relationships with Families

Your personal experiences of school–family relationships influence your ideas about what your relationship with families should look like and how you should connect with them. Past experiences also affect how comfortable you are interacting with families.

- What did you learn about school and family when you were a child? What did you learn about teacher authority? Were you taught that the teacher is always right? Did you ever talk to your family about problems at school? If so, what was their reaction?
- How do you want children to feel about their family's connection to you and your program?
- What experiences, skills, and personality strengths do you have for connecting and building partnerships with families? What attitudes might stand in your way? What skills do you need to develop further?
- What is your best hope for what teacher–family relationships might look like?

This list of reflection questions is based on text from the book *Anti-Bias for Young Children and Ourselves,* 2nd edition, by Louise Derman-Sparks, Julie Olsen Edwards, and Catherine M. Goins.

differences as connectors, instead of dividers, can help teachers become aware of their biases and false or low expectations, as well as allow for innovative teaching practices that are nuanced and agile.

Teachers should be prepared in culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining teaching practices (e.g., classroom management, family engagement), draw from culturally and linguistically relevant materials, and use their cultural competence and sociopolitical awareness to support the academic success of all children (Ladson-Billings 2009; Milner 2016). These efforts include matching instruction to the learning styles of students, devising curricula that engage students and reflect their daily lives, and using learning resources informed by students' communities and experiences. (For further reading, see Patricia Sullivan's article "Discovering the Brilliance and Beauty in Black" in the September 2020 issue of *Young Children*.)

For instance, a pre- and post-test study of a small teacher education program in a rural state in the Rocky Mountain region, where the population of people of color grew by 17 percent between 2010 and 2013, revealed that the majority of pre-service teachers' responses reflected critical misconceptions about anti-bias curriculum (Nganga 2015). Additionally, research conducted by the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR 2014) found that most schools lacked resources and offered deficient education and training, specifically in self-reflective strategies that may aid in identifying and rectifying potential biases in teacher perceptions and classroom practices.

Findings from the 2019 study "Empathy Intervention to Reduce Implicit Bias in Pre-Service Teachers" indicated that empathy interventions within teacher education training programs may provide a foundation for educators to be more aware of their own implicit bias, and provide strategies for countering it. The results indicate that this type of teacher training holds promise for promoting empathy. Even brief interventions, which incorporated evidence-based effective methods (that is, short story point of view and writing exercises with reflection and point of view) significantly reduced bias (Whitford & Emerson 2019).

This type of professional development provides opportunities for future educators to acquire knowledge and dispositions that will help them meet the needs of all learners (Nganga 2015). These practices are further reinforced as biases are eliminated from all assessments and strengths-based pedagogical approaches are employed. In these ways, we honor the unique contributions each student and family brings to the school setting.

Promote Positive School–Family Interactions and Effective Family Engagement

Schools are often seen as the hubs of communities. Early childhood education programs, in particular, are commonly used as "training grounds," where parents and caregivers come to understand what to expect as children move through their academic experiences. Yet often, parents and caretakers are valuable resources that are overlooked and underappreciated by early childhood programs (Flaugher 2006). When there is a breakdown between staff-designed family engagement activities, based on staff needs, beliefs,

and experiences, rather than those of the families and community, a vicious cycle can be created (Moule 2009). Nonalignment, poor communication between staff and families, and implicit bias create unhealthy learning environments. (For further reading, see "Increasing Family Involvement in School" by Cheryl A. Paul, from the August/September 2020 issue of *Teaching Young Children*, and "Engage Children's Communities with Friends and Family Day!" by Will Parnell, Ellie Justice, and Laurie Pearson Patrick, from the April/May 2020 issue of *Teaching Young Children*.)

NAEYC (2019) challenges us to reexamine the way we interact in our work with families and communities of color. Taking the time to learn about the families with whom we work while establishing reciprocal relationships is critical to authentic and effective family engagement. We must embrace the primary role of families in children's development and learning while upholding every family's right to make decisions for and with their children. Traditional parent engagement models across early childhood education systems—such as parent-teacher associations and volunteer day activities—may seem inflexible to some family members. For example, many family engagement program designs create participation barriers that limit accessibility because of child care difficulties, transportation challenges, and/or work schedule conflicts (Mendez et al. 2009; Berthelsen et al. 2012). Consequently, family members may perceive early childhood education staff as insensitive to their time, financial, or personal limitations.

Effective family engagement is supported by ongoing, reciprocal, strengths-based partnerships between families and their children's teachers and schools (Halgunseth et al. 2009). It is a critical marker of quality within early childhood education programs. It's also essential for enhancing children's learning and families' well-being. The practice of understanding and respecting differences, while seeing the unique skills each child and family brings, can also radically reduce bias in classroom interactions. In 2019, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation released a report, *Cultivating a Community of Champions for Children Through Transformative Family Engagement*, highlighting the findings of their family engagement grant work and presented a few considerations for ways to develop and improve teacher-family-community relationships. The report suggests eight strategies to strengthen ties (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2019):

1. Recognize families as assets, valued partners, and experts about their children.

2. Identify goals and resources in partnership with families.

3. Integrate family and community culture into the early learning system.

4. Develop continuous two-way communication.

5. Commit to co-governance and shared leadership.

6. Institutionalize structures and processes that strengthen families and organization.

Childhood Messages About Your Various Social Identities

- When you were a child, how might you have described a "normal" person? What color skin did they have? Where and how did they live? What about their language, family structure, economic class, and so on?

- What is your earliest memory of realizing that some people were different from you and/or your family (for example, in racial identity, ability, family structure, religion, economics)? How did you feel about yourself in relationship to the people who were different from you? How did you feel about them?

- What did your family say about people whose social identities were different from your family's? Did their behavior match their words?

- What did you see or not see about people who were like you in books, videos, movies, TV, and advertisements? What messages did this give you about your social identities?

- Did you know, or know about, anyone who didn't behave in the ways expected according to stereotypes about their social identities? What did you think about those people?

This list of reflection questions is based on text from the book *Anti-Bias for Young Children and Ourselves*, 2nd edition, by Louise Derman-Sparks, Julie Olsen Edwards, and Catherine M. Goins.

7. Build strong networks among families and communities.

8. Support families to develop and assert their role as leaders and agents of change.

Children, their families, and communities have the potential to reveal and share the unique perspectives each family brings and co-create opportunities that increase programmatic change and academic advancement by focusing on changing negative narratives and establishing practices that share leadership and responsibility. (For further reading, see "Valuing Diversity: Developing a Deeper Understanding of All Young Children's Behavior" by Barbara Kaiser and Judy Sklar Rasminsky, from the December 2019/January 2020 issue of *Teaching Young Children*.)

While there are not many studies assessing strategies that mitigate implicit bias in early childhood education settings, some research advances specific strategies ranging across different areas, including school policy setting, teacher professional development, and school discipline.

Conclusion

At the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, we know that children are part of families and do not show up to schools independent of their family and community context. We approach equity toward school readiness and school success as a collective effort.

Culturally and linguistically relevant strategies must be developed with an equity lens to transform outcomes for children. Educators are influential partners in this collective effort. They must embrace a commitment to examining their own biases and cultural beliefs, as well as the practices they use with the children and families they serve.

Early childhood educators must also be fairly compensated toward these efforts. Early childhood educators and early care and education programs must focus on high-quality standards and competencies and implement effective strategies to support equitable access to high-quality school readiness and early school success.

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Go online for more information, further reading suggestions, a glossary of included terms, and the references for this article. Visit **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021.**

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This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Everyone

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

Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Advocate on Behalf of Young Children, Families, and the Early Childhood Profession

Item 1: Uphold the unique value and dignity of each child and family.

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

Item 1: Provide high-quality early learning services that demonstrate a commitment to equitable outcomes for all children.

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

Being an Equity Leader

John Nimmo, Debbie LeeKeenan, and Louise Derman-Sparks

> When the best leaders' work is done,
> the people say, "We did it ourselves."
>
> —Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Integrating an equity approach to diversity into early childhood education (ECE) programs calls for both *visionary* and *strategic* leadership. It requires critical assessment and change in all parts of an ECE program and engagement of the various members of the program—teachers, staff, families, and children. While the ideals of equity may feel right and good, changing the way things are to the way they ought to be in relation to equity and diversity brings challenges as well as rewards. In this article, we describe the key concepts and strategies for leading change toward equity and diversity in ECE programs. We use the term *leader* to name the role of directing or administering ECE programs.

A Framework for Change

Critical Awareness

Building a program that reflects equity principles requires leaders who seek out a critical awareness of their own history and identities, develop an understanding of the dynamics of institutional oppression within schools and society, and have a clear commitment to social justice (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis 2016; Khalifa 2018). This learning occurs simultaneously with leaders taking action in the daily life of the program. As both advocate and activist, an equity leader is willing to take risks when faced with obstacles and resistance (Long, Souto-Manning, & Vasquez 2015). The leader's knowledge of how inequities are both perpetuated and challenged, along with a clear understanding of the context of their program, forms the basis for supporting teacher professional development. As with all learning curves, leaders deepen their knowledge and skills over time from experience in their programs, critical self-reflection on these experiences, and study.

Intentional, Facilitative, and Strategic Leadership

Every decision an equity program leader makes needs to keep the long-term social justice vision and mission in the foreground while managing the day-to-day immediate issues. Program leaders plan and implement a long-term strategy for shifting the culture of the school to one that reflects the values and principles of NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" position statement (2019).

They make decisions about both short- and long-term goals, set priorities, determine the most effective route to meet goals, muster resources, and manage the speed at which to proceed to ensure sustainability. Through observation, listening, and focused conversations with staff, families, and community members, equity leaders gather and analyze information about the context, history, culture, stakeholders, and resources in their programs. They also identify the challenges, strengths, allies, and gatekeepers that shape the opportunities and obstacles facing their work. This data gathering informs the leader's priorities, goals, and the road map of strategies needed for the shift toward greater equity (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015).

Facilitative leadership involves all the stakeholders sharing in the power and responsibility to meet an organization's goals (Forester 2013). The leader develops collaborative partnerships with staff and families so that there is a collective voice in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of the equity mission. However, when sharing power, there are decisions that are ultimately the administrator's responsibility, such as budget and staffing. Before making such decisions, effective leaders authentically gather input from staff and families (LeeKeenan & Ponte 2018).

Creating a Culture for Creativity, Risk Taking, and Colearning

Building programs where diversity and equity can live, and that effectively solve the challenges this process involves, rests on a school culture that nurtures creativity, risk taking, and colearning. The goal is to create a space where everyone feels they can offer their perspectives, take risks, make mistakes, and contribute at their own pace. This requires everyone learning from and with each other.

Equity leaders make it possible for staff and families to develop connections and build trusting relationships with each other. They encourage the various stakeholders to expand their perspective beyond a focus on their own interests to being able to empathize with and see other points of view and the big picture of how one's actions intersect with those of others. The leader proposes ground rules for safe and courageous conversations and encourages a healthy embrace of dissonance and disagreement (Nicholsona et al. 2018).

Managing Conflict and Finding the Third Space

Conflict, disequilibrium, and tension are inevitable in the journey of equity and anti-bias efforts. Many conflicts come from dissonance between staff and families' cultural beliefs, practices, and histories. Others are rooted in differing beliefs about diversity that reflect learned stereotypes and prejudices. The leader has the authority and big-picture perspective to play a proactive role in seeking out a *third space*—an intellectual and emotional place where people in conflict move beyond either/or viewpoints

and embrace a spectrum of possibilities (Barrera, Kramer, & Macpherson 2012). The objectives of third space conversations are to inform and understand each other, build on each other's ideas, and propose solutions that work for everyone. In seeking a third space, conflicts become opportunities for building collaborative relations and inclusion. One approach to finding a more inclusive third space is the following three-step process:

1. **Acknowledge.** Listen deeply and name the difference in opinions, beliefs, or values that need to be addressed and analyzed.
2. **Ask.** Gather information from all parties to develop a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of the underlying issues. This step involves clarifying the priorities and being receptive to learning about others.
3. **Adapt.** Create alternatives for adapting policies and practices that are inclusive and reflect equity principles.

Third-space solutions are new ways of looking at the issues, not simply a compromise. In a discussion of solutions, leaders identify non-negotiable practices and policies aligned with the equity mission (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015).

Every decision an equity program leader makes needs to keep the long-term social justice vision and mission in the foreground while managing the day-to-day immediate issues.

Strategies for Change

While the long-term goal is to distribute leadership broadly across program stakeholders, leaders with responsibility for policy, budgeting, supervision, and staff development can act immediately and decisively. They can use their power in ways that are both structural and wide-reaching to encourage and support a range of equity initiatives from teachers and families. These strategies are informed by NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" position statement (2019), which implores leaders to listen to diverse voices, foster learning communities with adults, and engage in reciprocal partnerships with families.

Program Leader Tasks

The following are suggestions of tasks a program leader can undertake to advance equity:

- **Engage teachers, staff, and yourself in reflection and education.** Effective change toward equity rests on people being reflective about their attitudes, knowledge, and practices, and continuing to expand their understanding of equity issues. Create the time, space, and support so everyone can take steps in their own equity and diversity journey.
- **Form an equity inclusion team.** Develop a team that oversees equity initiatives and that ensures commitment, accountability, and coordination with equity activities. The team should include stakeholder representatives (for example, staff, families, an advisory board, and others who have direct involvement in the program) who are committed to the equity mission and can act as conduits for these efforts into their various constituencies. Ensure that your team does not become diverted into "diversity" activities (e.g., multicultural dinners) that may be helpful community-builders but do not address the underlying inequities in the system (Gorski 2018).
- **Cultivate commitment through a mission statement.** Make your equity commitment transparent by explicitly making it a part of your program's mission statement. Engage program staff, teachers, and families in developing and regularly reviewing the mission statement to ensure shared accountability. Seek feedback from others directly invested in your program.

- **Budget for equity work.** Equity work must be an explicit priority in budget lines for materials, professional development, and recruitment. Identify specific fundraising projects related to your equity strategic plan; for example, ensuring that your children's book collection reflects all the backgrounds and languages spoken by the families within the community your program serves.
- **Create equitable policies in staff and family handbooks.** Policies and procedures will communicate the values and goals of your program; they should explicitly reflect your equity commitment. For example, program leaders can address the inequitable impact of disciplinary and exclusionary practices that affect children of color, particularly boys, by requiring positive alternatives and ongoing assessment of teachers' disciplinary and exclusionary practices.
- **Assess progress.** Ongoing program assessment includes progress toward explicit annual equity goals. Observation, documentation, surveys, and focus groups with staff, families, and other stakeholders reflect and influence your strategic planning.
- **Diversify.** Be intentional in your outreach to recruit teachers and staff who reflect the languages and communities of the children and families you serve and to increase diversity. Mentor leadership development to build diversity in administrative roles. Lead with your mission and values in arguing why having a diverse population is a key element of your program.
- **Be present in the community.** Leaders have a vantage point from which to learn about and be an active participant in the community surrounding their program (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis 2016). Specifically, include outreach to community elders and advocacy organizations representing groups traditionally marginalized in our society and schools. Community engagement enables program leaders to leverage resources to support the equity mission. In turn, school leaders can join in community efforts for social justice and be a role model to families and staff.

Engaging Teachers and Staff

Even the most talented, committed teachers and staff require the active support of their program leaders to be effective in their equity efforts in and outside the classroom. This involves recruitment, retention, and professional development.

- **Recruit and retain staff committed to anti-bias education**. Make your commitment to equity work visible in all your recruiting and public relations materials (e.g., websites, flyers, position descriptions). Be strategic in advertising and doing outreach, whether formally or by word of mouth. Include questions about equity and anti-bias education in interview protocols when hiring. Implement retention strategies that ensure all staff feel included, visible, and engaged in decision-making.
- **Facilitate collaboration.** Arrange staff work schedules to facilitate relationship building and collaboration, through curriculum planning, team teaching, and common professional development experiences.
- **Engage staff in critical thinking.** Facilitate courageous conversations among teachers and staff about their social identities and about planning, implementation, and assessment of anti-bias materials, environments, and curricula experiences. These activities would include
  - discussing an anti-bias article
  - reviewing children's books for anti-bias issues using a tool such as Social Justice Books
  - sharing teachers' documentation of current anti-bias dilemmas in their classrooms

Use protocols to help facilitate the conversation among colleagues, such as can be found through the School Reform Initiative.

- **Integrate anti-bias education into staff meetings and professional development.** This includes focused experiences, such as exploring the linguistic and social identity development of children, institutional dynamics of oppression, and anti-bias curriculum. Professional development

for equity also includes bringing an equity lens to all aspects of early childhood education. For instance, the program leader ensures that a staff professional development on STEM education includes exploring how the science curriculum can reflect families' diverse cultural contributions.

- **Provide curricula resources.** Proactively and intentionally, ensure that teachers have the classroom materials in the languages they need to support anti-bias activities with children (e.g., persona dolls, books, block accessories, labels, and puzzles that represent families in the program as well as give visibility to diversity in the children's larger community).
- **Supervise and coach staff in anti-bias work**. As part of their annual individual professional development goals, teachers and staff should identify specific anti-bias education goals and be accountable for meeting equity expectations. Use a tool like a self-study guide to help staff identify their strengths and challenges (Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser 2009). Equity leaders aim to hire and develop staff who are committed to equity principles and want to contribute and expand their skills. At the same time, creating equity is a required competency in the work of staff, just like developing children's literacy or supporting social-emotional development. Leaders should have supervision strategies for working with staff who are not showing improvement or are resistant to the equity mission.
- **Distribute leadership.** Empower emerging equity leaders within the staff and families to take on responsibility for developing and implementing specific social justice projects. For example, taking the lead in creating an anti-bias library for the school or developing a professional development experience.

Including Families

While classroom teachers typically have the most direct and intense relationships with families, the program leader has important responsibilities in ensuring the inclusion of all families in a program's equity mission and implementation.

- **Set the program climate.** Provide opportunities for families (and staff) to socialize, dialogue, and learn together, in ways that give everyone a voice. Be sensitive and responsive to negotiating and adapting the differences among families around time, money, transportation, preferred communication, and language. Through your everyday interactions with families, model a *funds of knowledge* approach in which you learn from families about the strengths, knowledge, and expertise children bring to school from their families and communities (González, Moll, & Amanti 2005).
- **Communicate explicitly about anti-bias goals.** Provide opportunities for teachers and families to learn together about anti-bias education, such as teachers and families sharing their identity stories, favorite childhood memories, and creating an FAQ document for the family handbook about anti-bias education. Let families know about your program's anti-bias education with children, such as conversations with children, new children's books, activities happening in the classrooms, and ongoing professional development efforts (Derman-Sparks & Edwards with Goins 2020).
- **Reach out to families.** Take the initiative in reaching out to families, especially those who have traditionally been marginalized by school environments. Ensure that your program's environment, including hallways and offices as well as classrooms, reflect cultural and linguistic diversity. Explicitly welcome and encourage families to visit in their native language. Take the time to meet with families in their communities and in their homes, learning from and with them about the equity issues they confront each day and what program policies and practices need changing (Long, Souto-Manning, & Vasquez 2015).

Conclusion

Ultimately, leading change toward equity and diversity means firmly holding to the vision and mission, while inspiring, facilitating, and supporting step-by-step strategic action. This work takes time—change is a process, not an event or two. Developing a network of supportive colleagues with whom to learn, doing critical assessment, and celebrating small changes makes the complex job of equity leaders doable.

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An Outline for Facilitating Anti-Bias Education (ABE) Discussions at Staff Meetings (Total time: *60 min*)

This guide was created by John Nimmo and Debbie LeeKeenan.

1. Connections/Ice breaker: Share one thing important to you about your identity. (*5 min*)
2. Review meeting agreements: Anti-bias education requires community commitments that help create a safe place to have honest and brave conversations. These commitments can be collaboratively developed by the group or provided by the facilitator. (*5 min*)

   Examples of community commitments include

   - listen openly and actively
   - be mindful of impact, not just intention
   - seek awareness of how our identities shape our stories and perspectives
   - respect confidentiality

3. Choose ONE of these activities for the staff meeting: (*45 min*)
   - Have classroom teams each take turns sharing documentation about an anti-bias strategy, curriculum idea, or dilemma that occurred in their classrooms. This may require giving teams advanced notice to prepare materials for the activity.
   - Analyze children's books for anti-bias issues.
     - Use the "Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books" to help make your selection
   - Read an anti-bias/equity article together and discuss using the following framework:
     - **Connect:** How do the ideas presented connect to what you know about ABE?
     - **Extend:** What new ideas did you gain that extended or broadened your thinking?
     - **Challenge:** What challenges or questions have come to mind?
   - See School Reform Initiative or Making Learning Visible for protocols and reflection prompts.
   - View the film *Reflecting on Anti-Bias Education in Action: The Early Years* (*48 min*)
   - Provide anti-bias questions for small group discussions. Divide the whole group into small groups of 3–4 staff members, which encourages more personal conversations. Choose ONE of the following questions per meeting:
     - **Anti-bias goals:** What are four anti-bias goals, and how do I implement them?
     - **Raising self-awareness:** What moments have come up in my work with children and families that triggered my own social identity, history, bias?
     - **Physical environments:** What is in my physical environment that reflects anti-bias goals and values?
     - **Pedagogy:** How do I actively encourage children's critical thinking about differences and stereotypes?
     - **Families:** How do I involve families in anti-bias work? How do I respond to families' requests respectfully and fairly when there is conflict about beliefs and goals?

4. Closure: Share in dyads something you learned today and can apply tomorrow. (*5 min*)

This handout is meant to be cut out, photocopied, and used as a resource.

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About the Authors

John Nimmo, EdD, is associate professor of early childhood education at Portland State University in Oregon. He is coauthor of three books: *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change*; *Loris Malaguzzi and the Teachers: Dialogues on Collaboration and Conflict Among Children, Reggio Emilia 1990*; and *Emergent Curriculum*. John is also coproducer of the international film *The Voices of Children* and is collaborating with Debbie LeeKeenan on an anti-bias education professional development video.

Debbie LeeKeenan, MEd, is an early childhood consultant and lecturer (www. antibiasleadersece.com) in Seattle, Washington. From 1996 to 2013, she was director and lecturer at the Eliot-Pearson Children's School, the laboratory school affiliated with the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development at Tufts University. She is coauthor of *From Survive to Thrive: A Director's Guide for Leading an Early Childhood Program* and *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change.*

Louise Derman-Sparks, MS, has worked in early childhood care and education for over 50 years as a preschool and college teacher, director, author, consultant, and social justice activist. The author and coauthor of several books and articles, Louise's first book, *Anti-Bias Curriculum* (NAEYC 1989), developed with the ABC Task Force, brought the concepts and goals of the anti-bias approach into early childhood education discourse and practice. A Pacific Oaks College faculty emeritus, Louise continues her social justice activism.

Working Toward Equity

Despite being considered one of the worst single incidents of racial violence in our nation's history, the Tulsa Race Massacre has until recently been unknown to most US citizens. It has rarely been taught, even in Tulsa's schools. Yet the community trauma of the event has lasted for a century.

As the city and community approach the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre, many organizations are recognizing this event, including early child care centers. As director of Tulsa Educare MacArthur, Chris Amirault decided to dig into the work of advancing equity and guide his staff toward a greater understanding of systemic racism and inequity in Tulsa . . . and beyond. He designed and led a training for a racially diverse team of six facilitators in which they learned about the history and systems of racial injustice in the United States, developed facilitation and conflict resolution skills, and did the hard work of establishing a shared mindset of rigor, tolerance, honesty, and brave confrontation.

You can read about the journey Chris and his colleagues took in a special online feature, "Journeying Together: How Our Program Addresses Race and Anti-Bias Education," at **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021**.

Go online for more information, further reading suggestions, a glossary of included terms, and the references for this article. Visit **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021.**

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This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Everyone

Item 5: View your commitment to cultural responsiveness as an ongoing process.

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

Item 2: Take proactive steps with measurable goals to recruit and retain educators and leaders who reflect the diversity of children and families served and who meet professional expectations.

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

What About the Children?

Teachers Cultivating and Nurturing the Voice and Agency of Young Children

Brian L. Wright

> What about the children?
>
> To ignore is so easy
>
> —Yolanda Adams, "What About the Children?"

This lyric from the chorus of gospel singer Yolanda Adams's "What About the Children?" captures the critical need for early childhood educators to listen to the insights of and pay close attention to the experiences, perspectives, and realities of *all* children. This need is conveyed further by the phrase "to ignore is so easy," especially given the reality that childhoods are unequal along lines of race, class, gender, language, ability, and disability. Therefore, children from marginalized groups often receive an education that does not recognize their worth, agency, potential, and brilliance (Wright with Counsell 2018).

Guided by this reality, the critical need for early childhood educators to be culturally competent in recognizing what children learn in their homes and communities as relevant to in-school learning is the focus of this article. Teachers' knowledge and understanding of the links between race, culture, and learning are vital to effectively cultivating and nurturing voice and agency in young children. Understanding how race and culture matter for learning manifests in bold and honest conversations

and the delivery of creative lessons and activities in which teachers encourage children to explore their racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. Encouraging young children to share their perspectives, experiences, and realities based on their cultural worlds of home, school, and community provides opportunities to cultivate and nurture their voices and agency toward advancing equity in early childhood education. In the sections that follow, there is a discussion of the impact of inequitable schooling on children of color in general and Black children, particularly Black boys. Then, the focus is on children's awareness of racial differences and why the silence about these matters allows children to draw their own often misguided conclusions. The article concludes with an explanation of why it is necessary to cultivate and nurture voice and agency in young children through meaningful activities and authentic multicultural children's books.

Schools as Sites of Inequality

Inequitable schooling contributes in substantive ways to missed essential opportunities to cultivate and nurture the ideas, interests, strengths, and abilities of children from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. An example of inequitable schooling is the way in which Black boys—as early as preschool—are frequently viewed by White educators as older and less innocent than their White peers, a practice called *adultification*. Additionally, their play is perceived as more dangerous, violent, and not developmentally appropriate (Wright with Counsell 2018; Wright 2019).

According to a 2014 report from the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Black children make up 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but they represent 48 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (OCR 2014). In comparison, White children represent 41 percent of preschool enrollment but only 28 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. These data are telling and are a clarion call for positive changes in schools and classrooms related to race, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The lack of familiarity by educators to recognize the diverse ways that children organize their experiences and express meaning undermines children's sense of belonging, becoming, and being. This, in turn, places the self-identity, voice, and agency of Black boys and other marginalized children in jeopardy. Further, these deficit approaches create a clash between children of color and their languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being as deficiencies to be overcome in learning and, by extension, legitimize dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of schooling as the sole gatekeepers to school success. Such a belief not only raises the question *What about the children?,* but, more specifically, *What about the languages and other cultural practices that children of color bring to the early childhood education classroom?* Moreover, these questions are a reminder of why early childhood educators must be culturally competent about matters of race, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Teachers' knowledge and understanding of the links between race, culture, and learning are vital to effectively cultivating and nurturing voice and agency in young children.

They're Not Too Young to Talk About Race

It is a mistake to assume that young children are unaware of racial differences and that they do not discriminate based on race, class, and gender. It is well documented (Souto-Manning 2013; Ramsey 2015; Kuh et al. 2016) that children quickly learn from their environment to attach beliefs, attitudes, and values to differences and to mimic dominant society's discriminatory practices unless such biases and behaviors are challenged using anti-bias and anti-racist teachings (Kendi 2019; Derman-Sparks & Edwards with Goins 2020). Comments and interactions that children notice as well as their curiosity about racial and cultural differences cannot be ignored. Children want to know more about the world in which they live.

Teachers, therefore, must be culturally competent and astute in their observations of young children to understand and accurately interpret their sense-making practices to cultivate, nurture, and recognize each child's individuality and humanity in ways that develop their voice and agency. This is especially true for teachers working with children marginalized by systems of inequality (Blackburn 2014).

In the remainder of this article, I describe two activities that teachers can use to facilitate the development of voice and agency in all children. These activities build on children's strengths and interests and go beyond the contributions level (surface-level topics) of food, fun, fashion, and folklore (Banks 1994, 2014; Ford et al. 2017). These activities are grounded in the following:

1. Children notice and think about racial differences, and they engage (perhaps unwittingly) in discriminatory practices based on race, class, gender, and other characteristics.
2. When adults allow children to draw their own conclusions based on what they see, hear, and read without critical and courageous conversations, racism and discrimination are reinforced.
3. Early childhood educators play an important role in helping children develop positive attitudes, individual voice, and personal agency to promote a more just future.

An Activity to Cultivate and Nurture Voice

One activity to cultivate and nurture voice in young children is centered around a poem by George Ella Lyon, "Where I'm From." To engage children in this activity, the teacher reads aloud the poem as the children read silently. The teacher draws attention to the author of the poem's inclusion of specific details representing culture and ethnicity (e.g., food, family names, location). Children are given several options to represent their version of the poem to capture their cultural and personal identities. This poem invites children and their families' experiences and histories into the early childhood classroom. The poem follows a repeating pattern ("I am from . . .") that recalls details, evokes memories, and has the potential to encourage some excellent poetry writing by young children (Christensen 1997/1998). The power of this poem is its ability to bring together the individual and collective voices within the classroom.

As children work on their poems, teachers should encourage them to include aspects related to their cultural wealth, such as their home country or native language, the history of their name or names of family members (e.g., aunts, uncles, cousins), favorite dishes served during family gatherings, special places they go with their family, and more. As mentioned above, teachers should provide children with different options to choose from to represent their personal "Where I'm From" poems. For example, children can create a Me Poster that includes, but is not limited to, family photos, pictures from old magazines, and other cultural artifacts that represent and reflect the child's cultural and personal identity, family, and community. Or, children might create a diorama using a shoebox to represent different aspects of their cultural identity, family, and community. Children can also create a skit to dramatize an element of their culture or an illustrated poem that shows the beauty of their culture through color. Additionally, teachers should encourage bilingual children to choose the language(s) in which they wish to compose their poem. Teachers can invite children to share with their peers in either large or small group settings.

An Activity to Cultivate and Nurture Agency

Agency answers the questions *What actions can I take?* and *Will my actions make a difference?* Agency is children's ability to construct and co-construct their environment by negotiating different courses of action. For example, when children choose among different learning center activities or negotiate sharing props during dramatic play, they exercise agency by problem solving to satisfy both individual and group needs (Wright, Counsell & Tate 2015; Wright with Counsell 2018).

Cultivating agency in young children requires the delivery of curriculum and instruction that encourages children to be actively involved in their own learning by asking questions, sharing insights, and providing opinions. Fostering agency in young children provides opportunities to build a child-centered and child-driven learning environment where multiple and

opposing points of view, empowerment, equity, and social justice are at the center of recognizing each child's strengths and talents.

Authentic multicultural children's books serve as a developmentally appropriate way to cultivate and nurture agency in young children. They can introduce children to a variety of topics such as cultural pride, self-identity, gender expression, friendships, families, and much more. All children, but especially children of color, need what Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) calls "mirror" books—that is, books that reflect themselves, their families, and their communities in positive ways. Currently there are far more "window" books—books that give a glimpse into the lives of other people (mainly in the White world)—than mirror books showing children of color their own communities. These mirror books highlight cultural histories, music, the arts, language varieties, fashion, cuisine, and other culturally rich experiences found in communities of color but not always found in school curricula.

Here is a list of picture books featuring topics that children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds might see in their everyday lives and ways teachers can use them to cultivate and nurture children's agency and voice:

- *Hats of Faith,* by Medeia Cohan, exposes children to people around the world who share in the practice of covering their heads for similar and different reasons. Moreover, this book helps educate and prepare young children for a culturally diverse world in which they take a stand for inclusivity. Teachers can invite children to investigate the concrete, behavioral, and symbolic purposes of the head coverings that most interest them.
- *Hey Black Child*, by Useni Eugene Perkins, uses words and visuals to introduce readers to important people and events from Black American history. It encourages Black children to pursue their dreams and, by extension, all children to take pride in their cultural backgrounds.
- *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale,* by Duncan Tonatiuh, uses an allegorical tale to discuss the hardships faced by thousands of families who illegally cross the border to make a better life for themselves and their children.

Authentic multicultural children's books serve as a developmentally appropriate way to cultivate and nurture agency in young children.

- *Pink Is for Boys,* by Robb Pearlman, challenges the gender stereotype that pink and purple are feminine colors. The author invites children to celebrate all the colors of the rainbow. Teachers can design their own celebration of the colors of the world and encourage each child to share how these colors enrich the world.
- *René Has Two Last Names/Rene tiene dos apellidos,* by René Colato-Laínez, is a bilingual book that describes a young boy's cultural pride when he uses the last names of both his mother's and father's families—an important Latino/a tradition.

When early childhood educators provide children with books that are mirrors and windows (Bishop 1990), children develop pride in their cultural and linguistic identity. They notice similarities and differences. These observations become conversation starters for rich dialogue based on children's insights, questions, and experiences.

Conclusion

It is a mistake to assume that young children are too young to utilize their voice and agency to develop deeper and richer learning experiences as well as take a stand for equity and social justice. Giving rise to children's voices in this way reaches far beyond their individual experiences and instead empowers them through agency to think about the experiences of others. When early childhood educators recognize that all children have a right to freedom of expression and the right to be heard, then questions about the children are not so easily ignored.

Brian L. Wright has been bringing his expertise to the NAEYC community both as a writer and a consulting editor since 2015. The following is a list of his NAEYC contributions:

- “We’re Many Members, but One Body: Fostering a Healthy Self-Identity and Agency in African American Boys,” in *Young Children* Vol. 70, No. 3 (2015)
- “Black Boys Matter: Cultivating Their Identity, Agency, and Voice,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019)
- “Black Boys Matter: Strategies for a Culturally Responsive Classroom,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 12, No. 4 (2019)
- *Each and Every Child: Teaching Preschool with an Equity Lens,* Chapters 12 and 13 (2020)
- “Tell Families, ‘We See You and We Value Your Contribution,’” on the NAEYC Blog (2020)
- “Understanding the Sociocultural Context of Families is More Important Than Ever,” on the NAEYC Blog (2020)
- “Supporting Teachers Through Change,” in *Young Children* Vol. 75, No. 4 (2020)
- “Message in a Backpack™ Helping Your Child through Change,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 14, No. 1 (2020)
- “Now Read This! Books that Promote Race, Identity, Agency, and Voice: Part 1,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 14, No. 1 (2020)
- “Now Read This! Books that Promote Race, Identity, Agency, and Voice: Part 2,” in *Teaching Young Children* Vol. 14, No. 2 (2021)
- *Advancing Equity and Embracing Diversity in Early Childhood Education: Elevating Voices and Actions*, Chapter 9 (coming this summer)
- *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8,* 4th ed. NAEYC. (Forthcoming)

About the Author

Brian L. Wright, PhD, is associate professor and coordinator of the early childhood education program as well as coordinator of the middle school cohort of the African American Male Academy at the University of Memphis. He is author of *The Brilliance of Black Boys: Cultivating School Success in the Early Grades*, with contributions by Shelly L. Counsell, which won the National Association for Multicultural Education’s 2018 Phillip C. Chinn Book Award.

References for this article can be found online at **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021**.

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This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Create a Caring, Equitable Community of Engaged Learners

Item 1: Uphold the unique value and dignity of each child and family.

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

Item 6: Actively promote children’s agency.

Learning Stories

Observation, Reflection, and Narrative in Early Childhood Education

Isauro M. Escamilla

When I think of children, the image that comes to mind is that of competent human beings: resourceful, creative, and able to collaborate with peers and adults. Young children are today's citizens of the world, with their own ideas, theories, inquiries, strong preferences, and stories. As citizens, they have needs, but also rights—one of which is to be seen as contributors to their own education. Their interests, questions, and thoughts should influence what they do and learn at school.

I am an early childhood educator. I am also an immigrant and an American citizen by naturalization. I began teaching and learning from young children in San Francisco, California, when I began volunteering in a multilingual early childhood program. Because I lacked the knowledge of child development and curriculum planning required to do this work most effectively, I enrolled in classes at City College and took as many child development classes as I could. I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational

Leadership Program at San Francisco State University, where I have been a lecturer for the past five years. I teach undergraduate courses on children's language development in multilingual early childhood education settings, classroom observation and children's evaluation, and more recently, a graduate course on narrative inquiry in ECE and elementary school.

I am also a preschool teacher: I have taught preschool for 18 years—the past 10 at Las Americas Early Education School in San Francisco's Mission District. As an early childhood educator committed to equity of voice, I believe that educational activities with preschool children should be based on daily observations of children at play both in the classroom and outdoors. These observations should include teachers' reflections and, as much as possible, families' opinions and perspectives on their children's learning, curiosity, talents, agency, hopes, and dreams. As a preschool teacher in a multi-language setting, I am required to conduct classroom observations to assess children's learning. This has led me to the following questions:

› How can early childhood educators support and make visible children's emergent cultural and linguistic identities?

› How can teachers embed story and narrative to document children's growth and strengthen families' participation in their children's education?

This article examines the use of an observational approach in the form of Learning Stories, a narrative-based formative assessment created by New Zealand early childhood education leaders. By encouraging teachers to recognize children as competent explorers and learners at any given moment, Learning Stories provide a way to document children's strengths and improve instruction based on the interests, talents, and expertise of children and their families (Carr & Lee 2012, 2019).

The Role of Documentation

Teachers' documentation of children is essential to identifying strengths and assessing development (NAEYC 2019, 8). The teachers at our school are required to administer several district- and state-mandated assessments multiple times during the year and to collect work and play samples from all the children on a regular basis. Each month, my colleagues and I attend inquiry meetings as part of the Las Americas Inquiry Group that are cofacilitated by a college professor (Escamilla & Meier 2018). A key aspect of this group is to keep track of the activities my colleagues and I do with our children through visual and written narratives that tell a story in which the children are the main characters. Photographs, written observations, samples of children's artwork, and emergent writing are organized and displayed in different forms to share with children, families, and other teachers.

My concept of documentation has evolved over the years and will likely continue evolving as I gain new insights about its relevance in the early childhood classroom. My views have been influenced by the Reggio Emilio approach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998, 2012); the inquiry work carried out at the former Prospect School (Himley & Carini 2000; Carini 2001) in North Bennington, Vermont; and New Zealand's Learning Stories (Carr & Lee 2012, 2019). Each of these approaches emphasizes teachers observing, writing, reflecting, and documenting classroom life as a way to better understand and teach children.

The Reggio Emilia early childhood schools of Northern Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998, 2012; Turner & Wilson 2010) use the term "documentation" to refer to the process of observing and recording children's learning experiences through different media (Helm & Katz 2001). Their curricular framework is an approach "based on adults listening rather than speaking, where doubts and amazement are welcome factors along with scientific inquiry and the deductive method of the detective" (Rinaldi 1998, 115). Systematic and meaningful observations of children's learning are routine classroom practices that guide the curriculum.

Likewise, in the Prospect School's approach to schooling, general theories of education take second place to teacher reflection. Teachers reflect on their teaching practices through a collaborative analysis known as "descriptive review," or the deep analysis of one particular child, one piece of work, one classroom, or one issue that stimulates new kinds of thinking about children, curriculum, and larger educational challenges (Himley & Carini 2000; Carini 2001). While in operation, Prospect teachers documented children's daily activities through richly detailed observations

and descriptions that became narrative accounts over time. They focused on children's interests and strengths to understand the intricacy of their thinking and to see children and their learning contexts in all of their complexities.

In New Zealand, educators use the Learning Stories approach to assess children's progress. This narrative tool is a record of a child's life in the classroom and school community based on teachers' observations of the child at play and work. It tells a story written *to* the child that is meant to be shared *with* the family. Learning Stories serve as a meaningful pedagogical tool to assess children's strengths and help educators reflect on their roles in the complex processes of teaching and learning (Carr & Lee 2012, 2019). As formative assessments, they offer the possibility of reimagining all children as competent, inquisitive learners and all educators as critical thinkers and creative writers, genuinely invested in their children's work.

Documentation in Marginalized Communities

Learning Stories break away from the more traditional methods of teaching, learning, and assessment that often view children and families from a deficit perspective, highlighting what they cannot do. By contrast, Learning Stories offer an opportunity to reimagine children as curious, knowledgeable, playful learners and teachers as critical thinkers, creative writers, and advocates of play. Learning Stories are based on individual or family narratives, and they recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge. For native, Indigenous, and marginalized communities, the telling of stories or historical memoirs may be conceived as something deeply personal and even part of a "sacred whole" (Benham 2007). When we engage in writing and reading classroom stories—knowing how they are told, to whom, and why—we uncover who we are as communities and, perhaps, develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of other people's stories.

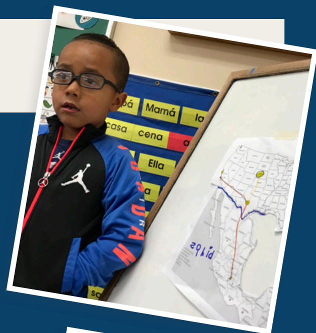
My preschool is part of the San Francisco Unified School District's Early Education Department. Our school reflects the ethnic, economic, cultural, and linguistic mosaic of the school's immediate neighborhood, which consists primarily of first- and second-generation immigrant families from Mexico, Central America, and Asia. When children enter our program, only about 10 percent feel comfortable speaking English. The others prefer to speak their home languages, meaning Spanish, Cantonese, and Mandarin are the most common languages in our school.

Most of my students receive subsidized services, and their families primarily work in the hospitality, child care, or construction industries, or are in training for new employment. The school has three preschool-age classrooms: one Spanish-English dual language classroom with 24 children; one Cantonese-English dual language classroom with 24 children; and one classroom of children with special needs, which has 12 children. Each of our preschool classrooms is composed of one lead teacher and two assistant teachers, and each classroom has been assigned a district instructional coach.

Our preschool's academic framework is based on the project approach, which embraces children's interests and the immediate environment for engaging in in-depth studies of specific topics from multiple perspectives (Helm & Katz 2016). Investigations are undertaken by a whole class, a small group of children within a class, or by an individual child. Each project focuses on finding answers to questions about a topic posed by the children, the teachers, or the teachers and children together. Classroom investigations may last from a few days to several months and are carefully documented by teachers and children. Photographs, recorded conversations, short videos, children's artwork and dictations, classroom-made booklets, and teachers' reflections and interpretations are all part of what eventually becomes a child's Learning Story and our teachers' rich observation, reflection, and assessment tools.

For instance, during a class investigation on families, my 5-year-old student Juanito shared why his family did not live together in San Francisco. He described in graphic detail how his grandfather had been shot to death several years before while crossing a river in El Salvador. He also shared how his dad and mom had come to San Francisco, leaving behind their two older daughters, his sisters. Juanito's sense of family was marked by a sense of longing for a foreign country he had never visited and two siblings he had only seen in photographs.

Waiting for Dad on this Side of the Border



May 2017

What happened? What's the story?

Zahid, I admire your initiative to tell us the tale of the travels your dad has undertaken to reunite with you and your family in California. On a map you showed us Mexico City where you say your dad started his journey to the North. You spoke about the border (*la frontera*), and you asked us to help you find Nebraska and Texas on our map, because that's where you say your dad was detained. We asked you, "What is the border?" and you answered: "It is a place where they arrest you because you are an immigrant. My dad was detained because he wanted to go to California to be with me."

What is the significance of this story?

Zahid, through this story where you narrate the failed attempt of your dad to get reunited with you and your family, you reveal an understanding that goes well beyond your 5.4 years. In the beginning you referred to the map as a planet, but perhaps that's how you understand your world: a planet with lines that divide cities, states, and countries. A particular area that called your attention was the line between Mexico and the United States, which you retraced in blue ink to highlight the place where you say your dad crossed the border. It is indeed admirable to see you standing self-assured in front of the class ready to explain to your classmates your feelings and ideas so eloquently.

What activities could we plan to support you in exploring this topic that you are so interested in?

Zahid, we could invite you to share with your classmates the tale of your dad's travels and invite your friends to share the stories of their families too. We could take dictations of what it means for you to be waiting for Dad on this side of the border. We could support you to put into practice your interest in writing so that you could write a letter or message to your dad. Perhaps you would be interested in making a painting on a canvas representing your ideas and feelings with paint strokes and acrylic colors.

What's the family's perspective?

Zahid is not very fond of writing, but he talks a lot and also understands quite a lot. He doesn't like drawing but maybe with your support here at school he could find enjoyment in drawing or painting. —Mom

Juanito used drawings to express his feelings. In them, he depicted El Salvador as both beautiful and dangerous: a place that offered warmth (because his two young adult sisters lived there) but also a place with gangs who made people live in fear. "El Salvador is very pretty and has a big soccer field where one can play *fútbol* [football soccer]," he told us, his teachers. "My sister is a soccer player, like me. And I know there are gangs that go around killing people. My Daddy told me, and I've seen it on the TV."

In my reflective role as Juanito's preschool teacher, I began to understand his behavior much better as I watched and talked to him and assembled his Learning Story. As a result, I greatly improved my communication with him and my relationship with his parents. Juanito's mom and dad have been very open about their family history and the story behind their decision to leave El Salvador and come to the United States. Their search for that envisioned future has brought a lot of stress to a family living in two countries—especially for little Juanito, who is developing his own identity as an American citizen with strong emotional ties to El Salvador.

During another class investigation—this one on our children's cultural heritage—we read *A Movie in my Pillow / Una Película en mi Almohada*, by Salvadorean writer Jorge Argueta (2007). The children enjoyed this collection of poems in which the main character, young Jorgito, lives in the Mission District but has not forgotten his native El Salvador. Just like Jorgito, we discovered that many of the children in our classroom had "memories" from where their parents had emigrated. Argueta's poems opened the door to children's creativity and imagination, which teachers could document, reflect on, write about, and assess.

My student Zahid revealed his story-telling skills by sharing the story of his father's attempt to cross the border between Mexico and the United States. (See "Waiting for Dad on this Side of the Border," this page, and "Under the Same Sun" on page 37.) The resulting Learning Story provided a structure for documenting Zahid's developmental progression over time and for collecting data on his language use, funds of knowledge, evolving creative talents, and curiosity for what takes place in his world—all of this in his attempt to make sense of events impacting his family and his community.

Under the Same Sun

May 2017

What happened? What's the story?

Zahid, of the several options we proposed to you to continue exploring the topic of the journey of your dad from Mexico to the United States, you chose a canvas, skinny paint brushes, and acrylic colors to represent the word *frontera.* Until now, you had hardly showed any interest in using painting tools, the process of writing, or making graphic representations of your ideas. Your preferred mode of expression was to communicate orally, and you have been doing it quite well! The fact you chose paintbrushes and acrylic paints reveals that every child should have the right to be an active participant when it comes to making decisions about their individual learning.

What is the significance of this story?

Zahid, I'm very pleased to see your determination to make a graphic representation of the word *frontera.* After so many sessions singing the initial sounds corresponding to each letter of the alphabet in Spanish, I thought you would be inclined to sound out the word *frontera* phoneme by phoneme and spell it out to write it on paper, but that was not the case. Instead, you decided to undertake something more complex, and you chose a paint brush and acrylic colors to represent (write) *la frontera* the way you perceive it based on the experiences you have lived with your family and, especially, with your dad.

What possibilities emerge?

Zahid, you could perhaps share with your classmates and your family your creative process. Throughout the entire process of sketching and painting you demonstrated remarkable patience since you had to wait at least 24 hours for the first layer of paint to dry before applying the next one. You chose the color brown to paint the wall that divides Mexico and the United States because that's what you saw in the photos that popped out in the computer screen when we looked for images of the word *"frontera."* You insisted on painting a yellow sun on this side of the wall because according to you, that's what your dad would see on his arrival to California, along with colorful, very tall buildings with multiple windows. I hope one day you and your dad can play together under the same sun.

What's the family's perspective?

I think it is good for my son to have support from his teachers at school and that he can express what he feels or thinks. Although sometimes I wonder if it's better to avoid the topic altogether. These months have been very difficult for everyone in the family but especially for him because he is the eldest. He says that he misses his dad even though he hasn't seen him in a long time. And he says that he wants to go to Mexico when he's older to be with Dad. —Mom

Developing a Learning Story

Educators can use Learning Stories to identify developmental milestones with links to specific assessment measures; however, the purpose is not to test a hypothesis or to evaluate. At the root of any Learning Story is a genuine interest in understanding children's lived experiences and the meaning teachers, families, and children themselves make of those experiences to augment their learning. As Southcott (2015, 37) reminds us, "Teachers choose a significant classroom moment to enlarge in a Learning Story in order to explore children's thinking more closely."

Although no two Learning Stories will be alike, a few core principles underlie them all. The foundational components include the following (Carter 2010, 2017; Carr & Lee 2012, 2019):

- an observation with accompanying photographs or short videos
- an analysis of the observation
- a plan to extend a child's learning
- the family's perspective on their child's learning experience
- links to specific evaluation tools

Suggested Format of a Learning Story

The writing of Learning Stories encourages teachers to recognize children as competent explorers and learners in familiar settings at any given moment during the school day. The following format is a helpful guide for observing, documenting, and understanding children's learning processes. It also may help teachers organize fleeting ideas into a coherent narrative to make sense of classroom observations or specific children's experiences.

- **Title:** Any great story begins with a good title that captures the essence of the tale being told. Margie Carter (2010) suggests that the act of giving a title to a story be saved for the end, after the teacher has written, reflected on, and analyzed the significance of what has been observed, photographed and/or video recorded.
- **Observation:** The teacher begins the story with their own interest in what the child has taken the initiative to do, describing what the child does and says. When teachers talk and write the story in the first person, they give a "voice" to the storyteller or narrator within. In their multiple roles as observers, documenters, and writers, teachers bring a personal perspective that is essential to the story. They write directly to the child, describing the scene in detail and narrating what they noticed, observed, or heard. Accompanying photographs, screenshots, or still frames of a video clip of the child in action serve as evidence of the child's resourcefulness, skills, dispositions, and talents.
- **What Does It Mean? (or What Learning Do I See Happening?):** These are questions teachers can use to reflect, interpret, and write about the significance of what they observed. This meaning-making is best done in dialogue with other teachers. Multiple perspectives can certainly be included here; indeed, objectivity is more likely to be reached when the Learning Story includes a variety of voices or perspectives (Carr & Lee 2012, 2019). Ask your coteachers or colleagues to collaborate to offer their pedagogical, professional, and personal opinions to the interpretation of the events.

- **Opportunities and Possibilities (or How Can We Support You in Your Learning?):** In this section, teachers describe what they can tentatively do in the immediate or distant future to scaffold and extend the child's learning. How can they cocreate with children learning activities that stem from individual or collective interests? This section might also reveal teachers' active processes in planning meaningful classroom activities while respecting children's sense of agency.
- **Questions to the Family:** This is an invitation for a child's family to offer their opinions on how they perceive their child as a competent learner. It is not uncommon for a child's family to respond with messages addressed to the teacher. However, when teachers kindly request parents to reply directly to their child, they write beautiful messages to their children. Sometimes, the family might suggest ideas and activities to support their child's learning both at home and school. They might even provide materials to enhance and extend the learning experience for all the children in the class.
- **Observed Milestones or Learning Dispositions:** Here, teachers can link the content of a child's Learning Story to specific evaluative measures required by a program, school district, or state. They also can focus on the learning dispositions reflected in the story: a child's curiosity, persistence, creativity, and empathy. The learning dispositions highlighted in a Learning Story reflect the emerging values of children and the values and beliefs of teachers, families, schools, and even the larger community.

Making Time for Documentation

A Learning Story recognizes a child's everyday efforts as milestones in their continuous growth. It is a beautiful personal and pedagogical gift to a child and family based on what teachers observe, analyze, and interpret. Yes, documenting and making children's learning visible through detailed observations, photographs, and reflections require time, intention, and incentives. But as Carini reminds us, children are more than a sum of unchanging traits, and it takes time and patience to paint a fuller picture of how they are evolving (Himley & Carini 2000).

When beginning the Learning Story process, remember that there is a storyteller in everyone. Creating a short Learning Story as a record of a child's learning, playfulness, resourcefulness, experimentation, and drive can turn documentation into something enjoyable. Write just a few lines of what was observed, identify its possible meaning, then plan for a tentative activity to support the child's interest. Add a photograph or series of photographs as illustrations, then share the Learning Story with a coteacher or other colleague to get feedback on composition, language, and narrative. Think of the Learning Story as another way of making a child and family feel special, and remember that families are always appreciative when teachers take note of their children's accomplishments. Invite the family to add a few lines to the story by sharing what they have noticed their child doing at home related to the topic.

Conclusion

The Learning Stories framework honors multiple perspectives to create a more complete image of each learner. These include the voice of the teacher as narrator and documenter; the voice, actions, and behaviors of children as active participants in the learning process; and the voices of families who offer—either orally or in writing—their perspectives as the most important teachers in their children's lives.

Teachers in different types of early childhood education settings can use this framework to observe, document, preserve, and share precious moments of learning and transformation in young children's school journeys with specific examples of their questions, puzzles, discoveries, and growth (Knauf 2020; Nyland & Alfayez 2021). Through these child-centered stories, teachers engage minds, touch hearts, and enhance their pedagogical and intellectual work. They humanize the early childhood profession, paving the way toward innovative modes of observing, analyzing, and understanding the complexities of children's learning and behaviors. Children's active participation in classroom life and curriculum planning supports a sense of inclusiveness, agency, and belonging when they see themselves as the protagonists of their own stories in a school environment that celebrates their voices, experiences, and talents.

About the Author

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This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Create a Caring, Equitable Community of Engaged Learners

Item 1: Uphold the unique value and dignity of each child and family.

Observe, Document, and Assess Children's Learning and Development

Item 2: Use authentic assessments that seek to identify children's strengths and provide a well-rounded picture of development.

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. (For further reading, see "Creating Anti-Racist Early Childhood Spaces," by Rosemarie Allen and colleagues on page 49.)

Authors' Note

The COVID-19 pandemic and the uprisings of 2020 have 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 their agency. For teachers and administrators looking for ways to uproot racism and white supremacy from classrooms and schools, we hope this article 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 article, 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 article 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 article 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 preschool 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 Head Start classroom in San Antonio, Texas, 4-year-old Luis often arrives at school tired and grumpy. He quickly ends up getting irritated and hitting his classmates. The teachers have a strong and meaningful relationship with his mother, and they know that his family has lost their home. Because they are sharing a motel room with other relatives, they do not have a regular schedule for eating and sleeping. Instead of blaming the family or calling his behavior problematic, Luis's teachers understand that he needs care and understanding. The teachers give him a bed to sleep in for a few minutes in the morning, and that is enough to transform his day. He wakes up happy and ready to learn. When the principal learns about Luis's need for sleep and the teachers' response to it, she makes an official school policy that each teacher should look out for children who could be in a similar situation and need extra care.

The children engage in welcoming Luis by considering his need as something that requires accommodation rather than judgment. Instead of changing Luis, the children in the class begin to build train tracks or construct buildings with blocks or pathways for their cars around where Luis sleeps. They play next to Luis while being conscious of where he is laying and sleeping. Providing a bed for a quick nap or including Luis in play even while he is sleeping are both small but important ways to change the context rather than to blame or speak negatively about the child.

The children do not hear teachers and other school staff speak negatively about Luis or his family. They only know that Luis does not have a home sometimes. The children work to validate his 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). (For further reading, see "Never Too Young to Support a Cause: Supporting Positive Identity Development Through Social Justice Curriculum in Preschool," by Veronica Benavides, Roxanne Ledda, and Maimuna Mohammed in the December 2020 issue of *Young Children*.)

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

Social justice in early childhood education requires both belief and effort.

NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" 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.

Blaming people for their own oppression is destructive and ineffective.

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). (For more information on this topic, see "What About the Children? Teachers Cultivating and Nurturing the Voice and Agency of Young Children," by Brian L. Wright on page 28.)

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 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 in Early Childhood" 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 Luis 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.

About the Authors

Jennifer Keys Adair, PhD, is associate professor of early childhood education and director of the Agency and Young Children Research Collective at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work centers on the impact of racism on children's agency. Her forthcoming book, *Segregation by Experience: Agency, Racism, and Early Learning*, with Dr. Kiyomi Sanchéz-Suzuki Colegrove, will be published by University of Chicago Press in early 2021. More information can be found at www.jenniferkeysadair.com.

Shubhi Sachdeva is a doctoral candidate in the department of curriculum and instruction, specializing in early childhood education, at the University of Texas at Austin. Her experience in early education spans three countries: India, Taiwan, and the United States. Her research interests include global perspectives on childhood, socio-cultural processes in early education, and equity and social justice issues in early education.

This article is an excerpt of the chapter by Jennifer Keys Adair and Shubhi Sachdeva in the forthcoming book on advancing equity, published by NAEYC in summer 2021. For more information, further reading suggestions, a glossary of included terms, and the references for this article, go online to **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021**.

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This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Advocate on Behalf of Young Children, Families, and the Early Childhood Profession

Item 1: Speak out against unfair policies or practices and challenge biased perspectives.

Item 2: Look for ways to work collectively with others who are committed to equity.

Creating Anti-Racist Early Childhood Spaces

Rosemarie Allen, Dorothy L. Shapland, Jen Neitzel, and Iheoma U. Iruka

The focus on racial equity following the murder of George Floyd has resulted in conversations about racism that were unheard of less than a year ago. A critical examination of race, bias, racial inequity, and racism is taking place at every level in our society, and researchers, educators, and advocates have proposed anti-racism strategies for a variety of settings, including in early childhood spaces. To enact and sustain an anti-racist approach, early childhood educators need to understand the racial history of early childhood programs and the racism in current early childhood programs. In this article, we outline the past and present along with strategies for creating anti-racist early childhood spaces.

Racial History of Early Childhood Programs

The history of early childhood education is vast and varied, and the Perry Preschool Project (part 1 and part 2) stands out as a seminal program and longitudinal study in its history. Many early childhood advocates, supporters, and professionals tout the benefits of the Perry Preschool Program as an investment in the future of America, noting a 13 percent return on investment for every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood programs (Heckman 2006; Heckman & Karapakula 2019). The program also provides a key example of the racial history of early childhood programs, as it was designed to increase the IQ test scores of children from disadvantaged families (Derman-Sparks & Moore 2016).

In essence, the goal of the Perry Preschool Project was to address what were considered Black children's inherent deficits and to create better Americans. Initiated in the 1960s in a climate rife with civil unrest and overt racism, Black children were viewed as culturally, socially, and economically "deprived" and living in a culture of poverty. The term *disadvantaged*—and a viewpoint now identified as a *deficit perspective*—emerged around the time of the Perry Preschool Project, and it was code for being poor and Black. More specifically, Black preschoolers were identified as a population that could be fixed, whose deficits could be corrected, and whose future lives could be improved (Jackson 2014). Black families, especially Black single mothers, were viewed as pathological, inept, and incapable of providing an optimal environment for their children (Moynihan 1969; Jensen 1984). It was believed that Black families needed to be taught how to parent their children by the White teachers in the program (Derman-Sparks 2016). The fear of unruly, uneducated, and socially deviant children led to the implementation of preschool curricula focused on improving IQ scores, learning socially "appropriate behaviors," and responding positively to those in authority.

In addition, the focus on psychopathologic outcomes such as criminalization and teen pregnancy contributed to this deficit lens of Black children and communities. Weikart (1971) described the Perry Preschool Project as an experiment to enable culturally deprived children and children testing in the range of "educable mentally retarded" to enter into a regular classroom. From the onset, the Perry Preschool Project and other programs of this time—coupled with the War on Poverty—sought to fix children from families with low income rather than address the structural racism that led to the disproportionate numbers of Black children living in poverty and being labeled as "deprived."

Noticing Racism in Your Program

Some of the ways in which racism is evident in early childhood organizations include when

- most of those in leadership positions are White, and people of color are not invited to serve on committees, boards, or to take on higher level duties (Austin et al. 2019)
- most of the teaching staff are Black or Brown and are rarely promoted within the organization (Austin et al. 2019)
- employees of color experience closer, more intense examination of their work and behavior; are more frequently reprimanded, especially Black staff members; may have their hairstyles banned in dress codes; and may be discouraged from speaking their home language at work (Griffin 2019)
- mispronouncing, making fun of, or shortening names that are not traditionally "White" names are accepted practices (Marrun 2018)
- Black men are expected to be the disciplinarians, and White teachers send Black children to Black teachers for discipline because "they know how to handle them" (Brockenbrough 2015)
- people of color are excluded from outside-of-work activities attended by White staff
- no equity-focused discussion, strategy, or focus area exists

While the Perry Preschool Project (and similar studies, such as the Carolina Abecedarian Study) did not significantly improve scores on measures of intelligence, children who participated in the program were more likely to graduate high school and have greater earning capacity as adults (Campbell et al. 2002; Schweinhart et al. 2005). They were also less likely to become teen parents and become involved in the justice system.

Although the Perry Preschool Project resulted in positive outcomes for children, such as increased parent engagement over time, employment stability, positive multigenerational effects, and positive adult health outcomes, its effects must be considered in light of its limitations too (Heckman & Karapakula 2019). A key limitation was that researchers failed to interview the teachers or gather a range of information from the families and children who were involved in the program and study. They did not investigate the attitudes of the teachers toward the children, nor the relationships between the home and school (Derman-Sparks 2016). As Derman-Sparks and Moore (2016) wrote: "Most Perry Preschool teachers—including the two of us—held the empowerment perspective, while administrators mostly took the cultural deprivation perspective. The teachers' empowerment beliefs shaped actual practice with the children and families, although publications about the program reflected the administrators' cultural deprivation thinking" (85). Such qualitative information could have informed and improved the practices not only of the Perry Preschool program, but of many early childhood education programs that came after.

Racism in Current Early Childhood Education Programs

More often than not, early childhood educators and programs think or teach about race, bias, and equity from one of two approaches: "the color-blind approach" or the "celebration of differences approach" (Doucet & Adair 2013). These stem from beliefs that if educators teach love, kindness, and fairness only, then they do not need to point out or discuss racial bias or inequities with our young learners.

These more common approaches fail to acknowledge that everyone has lived their lives in a system that is racist; that we all come with and act on biases, especially when unchecked or monitored; and that we

are inundated with images and messages that influence how we think about and respond to one another. This has resulted in racist perceptions and beliefs that are embedded within the very fabric of our existence (Staats 2014). The system is designed for some to rise at the expense of others, and loving all children equally is not enough. Frankly, it is not the reality in our early childhood classrooms.

Statistics consistently show disparities in young Black children's experiences in early learning settings and in how teachers perceive and respond to children's behaviors based on race. For example, in one study, educators were asked to be on the lookout for challenging behaviors in a video clip. The video clip showed two Black children (one male, one female) and two White children (one male, one female). Researchers found that participants watched the Black boy more than any other child. Forty-two percent of the participants reported that he required more of their attention, despite the fact that no challenging behaviors were demonstrated in the video and that all children were involved in the same level of play (Gilliam et al. 2016).

Research also shows that teachers tend to perceive Black children as older, less innocent, more culpable, and more criminal than other children (Goff et al. 2014). This *adultification* may contribute to the bias teachers hold, expecting negative behavior from Black children more than others (Gilliam et al. 2016).

National data find the following regarding disproportionate rates of preschool suspension and expulsion:

› Preschool children are expelled more than three times as often as children in all of K–12 combined (Gilliam 2005).

› Black children are three-and-a-half times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts, despite the fact that they make up less than 20 percent of the population (OCR 2016).

› Black girls account for only 20 percent of the female preschool population, yet they comprise 54 percent of preschool girls who are suspended (OCR 2016).

These facts are significant indicators of the ways that early childhood classrooms contribute to societal racism and anti-Blackness, or the belief that "Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained" (Dumas & Ross 2016, 417). Indeed, if teachers are not actively working toward an anti-racist early childhood space, then they may be teaching children to be racist by their own behaviors and words in the classroom.

Children in the preschool years are inquirers by nature. They are constantly observing, collecting information, analyzing, and trying to make sense of what they see and hear. For instance, they know who it is that teachers look at when something goes wrong, who is being held more accountable, who is granted second chances, and who is reprimanded most often in their

Noticing Racism in Your Classroom

Racial bias and inequity show up in various ways. Here are some examples of how racism might show up in early childhood settings:

› mispronouncing, making fun of, or shortening children's names that are not traditionally "White" names

› assuming a Spanish-speaking Latino/a child is undocumented

› assuming children eat only foods that are stereotypically assigned to a specific culture or ethnicity

› favoring one group of children over other groups, such as calling on some children while ignoring others based on race, gender, language, class, etc.

› treating a child differently because of their hair style, language, style of clothing, or other cultural ways of being

› assigning roles based on gender or race, such as boys and White children being assigned leadership roles and girls and Black and Brown children being relegated to subservient roles

› stereotyping Black girls as too loud, too angry, or too sassy and assuming big Black boys are aggressive

› misinterpreting or inaccurately labeling children's actions and ways of being as defiant

› assuming families of color don't care about their children (Iruka et al. 2020)

Fundamentally, to create anti-racist early childhood spaces, early childhood educators must embrace the concepts of anti-racism.

classrooms. They notice the actions of teachers. They detect the implicit biases and unconscious prejudices, which come through in displays of favoritism and privileging of some children over others based on gender, race, and culture (Allen 2016). What children tend to observe, from early ages, is that boys get into trouble more than girls, that the darker-skinned children are more likely to be held accountable than the lighter-skinned children, and that White children are given the opportunity and time to share about themselves and their lives more often than darker-skinned children. In addition, the quality of interactions differs too: the more Black and Latino/a children there are in a classroom, the more teachers talk *at* them and not *with* them (Early et al. 2010). In current early childhood spaces, children seek and gain an internalized sense of how things are in school and in the world. In many early childhood spaces, racism exists as part of the early childhood experience.

Creating Anti-Racist Early Childhood Environments

In order to learn about race, children need the time, space, curriculum, and supports to talk about and make sense of what they are seeing and noticing. It requires teachers to embrace the conversation, even if they experience uncertainty or discomfort while doing so. (See "Taking Steps Toward Anti-Racism" on page 53.) Teachers must talk about race every day because race exists every day. Children deserve mirrors that reflect themselves and windows to peer into other people's experiences (Wright with Counsell 2018). They deserve the opportunity to ask the questions that form in their minds about differences and similarities as they learn to categorize the world around them.

Unlike the more common approaches taken, being anti-racist is more than loving all children the same or teaching children more generally about kindness and fairness. It is more than celebrating diversity during special events and then moving on with the curriculum. Anti-racist teachers teach about racism throughout the day and the curriculum. They point it out and acknowledge it, and they invite children to discuss race, racism, and inequity when they see it. When teachers invite the conversation about how everyone is learning about race and that racism is all around us, we give children the space to name it and to become anti-racists themselves.

Committing to Become Anti-Racist

The journey toward becoming anti-racist is not a check-the-box activity. (See "Journeying Together: How My Program Addresses Race and Anti-Bias" at NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021.) Many organizations include diversity, inclusion, and equity in their mission statements. *Diversity* is the effort to increase the number of people of color, and *inclusion* (in this context) is the effort to incorporate the input of people of color. *Equity* is the relentless focus on eliminating racial inequities and increasing success for all groups (Nelson & Brooks 2015). To evaluate whether an organization's reality is aligned with its written statements, an equity audit should be conducted on a regular basis. It can reveal if equity is indeed valued in early childhood classrooms, administrations, and organizations.

Fundamentally, to create anti-racist early childhood spaces, early childhood educators must embrace the concepts of anti-racism. They must take direct and intentional action against racist behaviors, practices, policies, and beliefs to dismantle and interrupt racism. (See "Noticing Racism in Your Program" on page 50 and "Noticing Racism in Your Classroom" on page 51.) Anti-racism posits there is no middle ground. There is no such thing as "not a racist." One is either anti-racist and fighting against racism, or they are racist by default. Racism is not defined by who you are but by your actions. It is what one does or fails to do that makes a person racist (Kendi 2019).

VIEWPOINT

Taking Steps Toward Anti-Racism

Becoming anti-racist is an ongoing, continual commitment that is grounded in education, listening, self-reflection, and healing from the trauma of slavery and racism. Given our history and the present, how can people begin their journey toward becoming anti-racists? Here are specific actions that teachers, administrators, and others can take as daily practice.

1. **Educate yourself through intentionally selected materials.** Read books on racism and the true history of our country. A few include:

   - *The 1619 Project,* by Nikole Hannah-Jones (2019)
   - *Between the World and Me,* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015)
   - *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent,* by Isabel Wilkerson (2020)
   - *How to Be an Antiracist,* by Ibram X. Kendi (2019)
   - *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption,* by Bryan Stevenson (2015)
   - *Stamped from the Beginning,* by Ibram X. Kendi (2016)
   - *Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race,* by Debby Irving (2014)
   - *White Fragility,* by Robin DiAngelo (2018)
   - *White Rage,* by Carol Anderson and Pamela Gibson (2017)

Consider the perspective of the authors. If you are beginning this journey as a White person, reading White authors may be helpful, but don't stop there. Read authors who bring a different perspective and experience to the work. There are Black authors who write for White audiences, and Black authors who write for Black audiences. These approaches present different entry points depending on where you are in your journey and include readers who want to continue being agitated in their complacency. Watch documentaries, such as *13th, When They See Us*, and *American Son* with Kerry Washington. Seek out presentations, webinars, and other multimedia materials.

2. **Follow Black men and women on social media, particularly Twitter.** Bree Newsome Bass, Bakari Sellers, Jamil Smith, Clint Smith, Yamiche Alcindor, Zerlina Maxwell, Karine Jean-Pierre, Goldie, Joy Reid, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Ice-T, Soledad O'Brien, BrooklynDad_Defiant, BeAKing, Roxane Gay, Brittany Packnett-Cunningham, and Jonathan Capeheart are a few examples.

3. **Reflect.** Take time to journal your own experiences growing up within our racist society and how this has influenced how you operate in the world—where you live, where you send your children to school, and with whom you socialize. Do you self-isolate, and if so, is it out of fear or comfort? How have your experiences and your worldview contributed to how you understand what it means to be part of a high-quality early childhood program? Self-reflection and a thorough understanding of our history ensure that we begin to see how White dominance is the norm and racism is endemic within early childhood education.

4. **Commit to undoing your color-blindness.** We often say some version of, "I choose to see the content of your character, not the color of your skin." This may be true; however, color-blind ideology is harmful and counterproductive to the cause. If you do not see your color, you also do not see the reality of others' experiences as different from the White experience. This leads to normalizing the White experience as a definition of "acceptable," "normal," or "typical." Gaining a better understanding of Black existence and the existence of other historically marginalized groups is critical to committing to being an ally in the cause of social justice.

5. **Stand beside, behind, but never in front of Black people**. An essential step toward equity is to actively listen, learn, and let Black people lead the way forward. Rather than look for solutions at this time, White educators, administrators, researchers, and policymakers should strive to be an ally to their Black peers. Be ready to give up privilege in the service of anti-racism so that others who have experienced more oppression than you can lead you.

In early childhood classrooms are future doctors, police officers, government officials, and teachers who will live in a racial society. Creating an anti-racist early childhood program is essential for their survival and will ensure that today's young children are not tomorrow's protestors, demanding justice and chanting "Black Lives Matter."

Now is the time to make this commitment. True equity work cannot begin until we are grounded in a common understanding about the unique realities and brutalities in our history and present, particularly the structures that have been put in place over time to benefit White people and to simultaneously oppress others. We must all be involved in the cause; however, educators need to take these steps toward anti-racism before that can happen.

References for this article can be found online at **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021**.

About the Authors

Rosemarie Allen, EdD, is associate professor in the School of Education at Metropolitan State University of Denver, Colorado. She is also the founder, president, and CEO of the Institute for Racial Equity and Excellence.

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Jen Neitzel, PhD, is executive director of the Educational Equity Institute, which is focused on eliminating the educational and opportunity gaps within communities through systems-level change. She also is the author of the book *Achieving Equity and Justice in Education Through the Work of Systems Change*.

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This article supports recommendations from the NAEYC position statement:

Recommendations for Everyone

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.

Observe, Document, and Assess Children's Learning and Development

Item 3: Focus on strengths.

A SPECIAL COLUMN FROM OUR PRESIDENT AND OUR CEO

Leadership, Equity, and NAEYC: There Are Seats at the Table

Ann McClain Terrell and Rhian Evans Allvin

Throughout its history, NAEYC has been at the forefront of leadership in the field of early childhood education. Distinguished as well as emerging leaders have helped create and implement a mission and values that represent and shape this field. More recently, NAEYC has sharpened its commitment to advancing equity—both within the organization and the early childhood field.

Eighteen months ago, NAEYC launched our first-ever position statement dedicated to equity in early childhood education. Its launch was a result of more than 18 months of deliberations, input, and discussions with thousands of early childhood educators from across the country as well as direct involvement from NAEYC's Affiliates and Interest Forums. The intent of "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" is to be an all-in effort, where practitioners, system leaders, administrators, and advocates can share a common vision for the decisive obligation the field has to

> 1. **provide high-quality early learning programs that build on each child's unique individual and family strengths, cultural background, language(s), abilities, and experiences and**
> 2. **eliminate differences in educational outcomes as a result of who children are, where they live, and what resources their families have. (4)**

This is what our field is called upon to do. The statement also calls upon NAEYC, as the field's professional association, to act in dismantling internal structural barriers for full inclusion.

> **NAEYC presents this statement after significant reflection and with humility and awareness of our own history and limitations, in keeping with our core belief in continuous quality improvement. In this statement, we share our commitment to becoming a more diverse, high-performing, and inclusive organization serving a more diverse, high performing, and inclusive profession . . . We commit—both individually and collectively—to continuous learning based on personally reflecting on how our beliefs and actions have been shaped by our experiences of the systems of privilege and oppression in which we operate and based on respectfully listening to others' perspectives. (4)**

For us, this isn't just one of many initiatives. Advancing equity demands our attention—every day, in all we do. From how we recruit, hire, and retain staff to our vendor selection processes and with whom we invest our funds. From our authors and conference session presenters to the voices who lead our advocacy efforts as they tell their stories to powerful politicians. From our nominations process at the national governing board to our affiliates' work in building and retaining their boards and taking on local initiatives. This is the commitment we hold to our membership to reflect the diversity of the field and to ensure NAEYC-accredited programs are in more than white, suburban neighborhoods. We began this work two summers ago, during the Leading and Working Toward Equity Leadership Summit. While we are humbled by the progress we've made, we are deeply aware of and committed to the work yet to be done.

Embedded in this work is the explicit and implicit expectation to create opportunities for emerging leaders—individuals early in their careers who have a passion for the early childhood education profession and a desire to elevate their perspectives by serving in leadership roles.

There are many efforts underway. For example, in 2015, NAEYC amended its bylaws to add a student member to the national governing board. With four students now having served in this role, we can say unequivocally it has been a success. Some of the students have represented NAEYC on national panels, become NAEYC authors and consulting editors, and have joined NAEYC's staff. Simultaneously, we launched the Young Professionals Advisory Committee (YPAC), which has gone on to become its own Interest Forum. The Black Caucus, one of NAEYC's Interest Forums, received philanthropic support to launch the Black Caucus Mentoring Project, designed to develop and support the next generation of African American early childhood educational leaders who are committed to significantly reducing the achievement and opportunity gaps for children of color.

And we are excited to share more information about our most recent efforts. In early December 2020, NAEYC's Governing Board President Ann McClain Terrell launched the President's Emerging Leaders Circle and invited

NAEYC members to apply. We were thrilled with the way in which this announcement was received. NAEYC received 230 applications from members across the country to become part of this cohort of emerging leaders. These applications reflected the diversity of NAEYC members in race and ethnicity, age, geography, and role in the field.

The purpose of the President's Emerging Leaders Circle is to create a diverse community of early childhood educators early in their careers who, with Ann's support and guidance, will explore various topics in leadership. The vision is to create the space for emerging leaders to make deeper connections with NAEYC, their professional association, and to explore opportunities to engage in leadership roles both with NAEYC and throughout the field.

With a focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion, sessions will explore various topics in leadership such as

- identifying a professional vision
- self-reflection and awareness of emotions
- facing adversity
- decision-making
- conflict resolution
- building courage and resolve
- career advancement

We worked with a small team of reviewers to review applications and selected 17 individuals to participate in the first cohort (see "NAEYC Recognizes Emerging Leaders" on this page). This cohort of emerging leaders will meet for one day every other month over a span of one year. There may also be various special event opportunities as our journey together unfolds.

Across Ann's life's work, one of her passions has always been developing leaders. Together we will be working alongside several invited early childhood education luminaries to support the leadership, knowledge, and confidence-building in early childhood educators who are beginning their professional journeys.

On behalf of all of NAEYC—our governing board, staff, affiliates, and Interest Forums—there is a seat at the table for you. If you are an emerging leader yourself, join us at the table. If you know an emerging leader, encourage them to join us. And there are always opportunities to create new tables.

Watch our e-newsletter, get in touch with an Interest Forum cochair or an affiliate staff member, follow us on social media—we are constantly posting opportunities to engage. Each of you is what makes NAEYC the professional association members cannot live without.

Best,

Ann and Rhian

NAEYC Recognizes Emerging Leaders

NAEYC congratulates the 17 members selected to participate in the President's Emerging Leaders Circle. Over the course of the next year, they will join NAEYC President Ann McClain Terrell and other luminaries in the early childhood education field to build leadership skills, knowledge, and networks to advance their professional journeys.

The President's Emerging Leaders Circle

- LaStarsha Michelle Edwards
- Valentina I. Kloosterman
- Lorena Mancilla
- Rahshita Lowe-Watson
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El liderazgo, la equidad y NAEYC. Hay lugares en la mesa

Ann McClain Terrell y Rhian Evans Allvin

Durante toda su historia, NAEYC ha llevado la delantera en el liderazgo del ámbito de la educación infantil. Líderes distinguidos además de los emergentes han ayudado a crear e implementar una misión y valores que representa e informan este campo. Más recientemente, NAEYC ha intensificado su compromiso con avanzar la equidad, tanto dentro de la organización como en el ámbito de la primera infancia.

Hace 18 meses que NAEYC editó la primera declaración de posición focalizada en la equidad en la educación infantil. Su publicación fue el resultado de más de un año y medio de mantener debates, recibir consejos y conversar con miles de educadores de niños pequeños en todo el país además de la participación directa de las Afiliadas de NAEYC y los Foros de Intereses. La intención de "Promover la Equidad en la Educación Infantil" es que todos participen en el esfuerzo; que los profesionales, líderes de sistemas, administradores y defensores compartan una visión común. En esta obligación, el campo debe hacer lo siguiente:

1. **ofrecer programas de educación infantil de alta calidad que ayuden a desarrollar las fortalezas individuales y familiares singulares, el contexto cultural, idioma(s), capacidades y experiencias de cada niño y**

2. **eliminar las diferencias en los resultados educativos a causa de quiénes son los niños, dónde viven y qué recursos poseen sus familias. (4)**

Estas son las acciones requeridas y esperadas de nuestro campo profesional. La declaración también pide que NAEYC, siendo la asociación profesional del campo, tome acciones con el fin de desmantelar las barreras estructurales internas a la inclusión plena:

> **NAEYC presenta esta declaración después de realizar una reflexión importante, con la humildad y la conciencia de nuestras propias limitaciones y nuestra historia, y en consonancia con nuestra creencia fundamental en la mejora continua de la calidad. En esta declaración, compartimos nuestro compromiso de convertirnos en una organización más diversa, inclusiva y de alto desempeño, dedicada a una profesión más diversa, inclusiva y de alto desempeño. Nuestro objetivo es promover una generación más diversa e inclusiva de niños pequeños que progresen gracias a las experiencias de oportunidades educativas equitativas recibidas en los programas de educación infantil. Nos comprometemos, tanto a nivel individual como colectivo, con el aprendizaje continuo, fundado en la reflexión personal de como nuestras creencias y acciones han sido influenciadas por nuestras experiencias con los sistemas de privilegios y opresión en los que nos desenvolvemos, y fundado en la escucha respetuosa de los puntos de vista del otro. (4)**

Para nosotros, esto no se trata de solamente una iniciativa más entre muchos otros. Avanzar la equidad exige que le prestemos atención, cada día, en todo lo que hacemos. Desde nuestro modo de reclutar, contratar y retener al personal hasta nuestros procesos de selección de vendedores y con quiénes invertimos nuestros fondos. Desde nuestros autores y presentadores en sesiones de congresos hasta las voces que lideran nuestros esfuerzos de abogacía mientras narran sus historias a políticos poderosos. Desde nuestro proceso de nominaciones en la junta directiva nacional hasta el trabajo de nuestras entidades afiliadas al formar y retener sus comités directivos y emprender iniciativas locales. Este es el compromiso que hemos formado con nuestra membrecía para que reflejemos la diversidad del campo y lograr que los programas con acreditación de NAEYC se hallen en más lugares aparte de las comunidades suburbanas caucásicas. Emprendimos esta obra hace dos semanas, durante la cumbre Leading and Working Toward Equity Leadership Summit (Cumbre del liderazgo sobre liderar y trabajar para alcanzar la equidad; página en inglés). Nos sentimos humildes ante los progresos que hemos logrado, no obstante estamos muy conscientes de y comprometidos con el trabajo que queda por hacer.

En este trabajo, se encuentra entretejida la expectación tanto declarada como implícita de crear oportunidades para líderes emergentes; individuos que, a principios de sus carreras profesionales, manifiestan una pasión por la profesión de la educación infantil y desean elevar sus perspectivas al servir en papeles de liderazgo.

Ya se han emprendido muchos esfuerzos. Por ejemplo, en 2015 NAEYC cambió sus estatutos para incorporar a la junta directiva nacional un puesto de membrecía para un estudiante. Como cuatro estudiantes ya han servido en este papel, podemos decir inequívocamente que han sido exitosos. Algunos de los estudiantes han representado NAEYC en comités nacionales, se han hecho autores y editores consultativos de NAEYC y se han integrado al personal de nuestra organización. Iniciamos simultáneamente Young Professionals Advisory Committee (YPAC, o Comité Consejero de Profesionales Jóvenes), lo cual se ha convertido en su propio Foro de Intereses. El Black Caucus, uno de los Foros de Intereses de NAEYC, recibió apoyo filantrópico para lanzar Black Caucus Mentoring Project (Proyecto de mentores del comité de afroamericanos; enlace en inglés), diseñado para desarrollar y respaldar la siguiente generación de líderes africano-americanos en la primera infancia que se comprometen con reducir considerablemente las brechas de logro y de oportunidad para niños de color.

Además, nos emociona transmitirles más información sobre nuestros esfuerzos más recientes. A principios de diciembre de 2020, Ann McClain Terrell, Presidenta de la Junta Directiva de NAEYC lanzó el grupo President's Emerging Leaders Circle (Grupo de la Presidenta de líderes emergentes) e invitó a los miembros de NAEYC a que solicitaran integrarse al grupo. Nos emocionó mucho ver la reacción entre la membrecía a este anuncio. NAEYC recibió de miembros en todas partes del país 230 solicitudes de inclusión para incorporar este grupo de líderes futuros. Dichas solicitudes reflejaban la diversidad de los miembros de nuestra organización en cuanto a sus razas y etnias, edades, regiones geográficas y papeles profesionales.

El propósito de President's Emerging Leaders Circle es crear una comunidad diversa de educadores de la primera infancia en los inicios de sus carreras profesionales quienes, con el apoyo y la guía de Ann, explorarán diversos temas relacionados con el liderazgo. La visión es crear el espacio en donde los líderes emergentes harán conexiones más profundas con NAEYC, su asociación profesional, y explorarán oportunidades de participar en papeles de liderazgo tanto en NAEYC como con muchos más componentes del ámbito profesional.

Con un enfoque en la equidad, la diversidad y la inclusión, las sesiones analizarán varios temas vinculados al liderazgo, como las siguientes:

- identificar una visión profesional
- la auto-reflexión y la consciencia de los propios sentimientos
- maneras de hacer frente a la adversidad
- la toma de decisiones
- a resolución de conflictos
- como desarrollar el valor y la resolución
- el adelantamiento en la carrera profesional

Al colaborar con un equipo pequeño de reseñadores, revisamos las solicitudes y escogimos a 17 individuos para que participaran en el primer grupo. Estos líderes emergentes se reunirán un día cada par de meses durante un año. Es posible que también se realicen varias oportunidades de eventos especiales mientras nuestro viaje compartido se desarrolle.

Durante toda la carrera profesional de Ann, una de sus pasiones siempre ha sido el desarrollo de líderes. Colaboraremos estrechamente con varias lumbreras en el campo de la primera infancia, que serán invitadas para apoyar el liderazgo, los conocimientos y el desarrollo de la confianza en educadores de la primera infancia que están por comenzar sus viajes en la profesión.

De parte de toda la entidad de NAEYC—nuestra junta directiva, el personal, las afiliadas y los Foros de Intereses—hay un lugar en la mesa para todos ustedes. Si usted mismo es un líder emergente, únase a nosotros en la conversación. Si conoce a un posible líder futuro, invítelo a unirse a nuestra conversación. Y siempre hay oportunidades de crear conversaciones nuevas. Vea nuestro boletín de noticias, contacte al copresidente de un Foro de Intereses o al personal de una entidad afiliada, síganos en las redes sociales; siempre vamos publicando oportunidades de relacionarse con nosotros. Cada uno de ustedes hace de NAEYC la asociación profesional esencial para sus miembros.

Les deseamos todo lo mejor de lo mejor,

Ann y Rhian

What Are You Thinking?

Scaffolding Thinking to Promote Learning

Angela K. Salmon and Maria Ximena Barrera

Lisi, a teacher of 4-year-olds at Learning Steps Learning Center in Miami, Florida, puts a manual orange squeezer in a box. Carefully, she cuts a hole in the box's side so her children can reach in and touch the juicer without seeing it. "We are going to follow three simple steps," she says as she introduces the activity. "First, you are going to put your hand through this hole and feel what's inside. Second, once you touch what's in here, your mind is going to *think* and *make connections*. Then, you're going to go to the table and draw what you think you felt. Together, we'll share our *hypotheses.*"

The children eagerly take turns inserting their hands into the box and touching the object. Lisi gives them time to make their predictions, then asks them to sit down and draw their hypotheses. Once they finish their drawings, they share and listen to each other's ideas.

"My hypothesis is that I think it is a bus," says Lily, holding up her drawing.

"Can you describe with details why you have that hypothesis?" Lisi asks. "What did you *connect* to when you touched the object inside the box?"

"When I was little, my dad had a workshop for buses," Lily says. "So when I touched it, the bus was clean, and wheels were yellow. So I touched the wheels and they moved."

Clara is next. She shows her drawing and says, "My hypothesis is a rainbow."

"What makes you think it's a rainbow?" Lisi asks.

"Because I touched it."

"But how did you connect a rainbow to what you touched in that box?"

"I was thinking," Clara says.

"Have you ever touched a rainbow before?" Lisi asks. "How does a rainbow feel?"

Clara thinks for a moment. "Like a slide."

What inspires children's curiosity? What drives active and engaged thinking in children, as illustrated in the opening vignette? Philosophers, researchers, and educators have long grappled with these questions. Historically, early childhood classrooms were built around the idea that children needed teacher-directed instructions and guidance to reach predetermined outcomes. But more recent research shows the importance of supporting children's innate intellectual dispositions and capacities as active learners (Katz 2015). When teachers value the thinking of early learners, they intentionally design scenarios in which children are cognitively engaged. This makes the act of thinking visible to children and invites them to reflect on it.

Teachers can create and carry out a classroom culture that either fosters or discourages engaged and active thinkers. Classrooms that rely heavily on teacher-directed experiences tend to provide a set of instructions to generate predetermined answers or actions, which can hinder children's thinking. Classrooms that incorporate child-directed experiences offer many opportunities for children to uncover their ideas, to generate questions, and to construct their own knowledge (NAEYC 2020). In our work with teachers, we implement the Visible Thinking approach to help early childhood educators intentionally plan and implement a culture of active thinking. Developed by Harvard University's Project Zero, Visible Thinking gives teachers the tools to cognitively engage children. This article is a testimony to those teachers' experiences and the shifts in their approaches as they focus on children's ideas and imaginations.

Making Thinking Visible

Young children naturally produce a great deal of thinking both in and out of school. Because learning is a consequence of thinking (Ritchhart & Perkins 2008), teachers face the challenge of engaging children and seeking to draw out and understand their inner thoughts. Our research shows that when adults help children identify their thinking processes, children are likely to be more curious, more aware and reflective about their own thinking, and more likely to develop "thinking dispositions" (tendencies that guide intellectual behavior) as they encounter problems and try to solve them (Salmon 2016). Equally important, when teachers know what and how children think, they can better scaffold their learning (Ritchhart & Church 2020).

Young children are ready for and deserve rich and cognitively engaging early learning experiences (Salmon 2010, 2016). Yet, as Ritchhart and Perkins (2008) say, one problem with thinking is that it's invisible. Effective thinkers externalize their thoughts through speaking, writing, and drawing. The Visible Thinking approach invites teachers to establish a classroom culture where children's thinking is valued, promoted, and made visible with the use of documentation. Ron Ritchhart, a researcher at Project Zero, posits that a culture of thinking takes place when both collective and individual thinking are treated in this way and actively promoted as part of the regular daily classroom experience (2015). Through intentionally planning and teaching this kind of culture, we can engage children cognitively and involve them as co-constructors of knowledge.

In his research, Ritchhart identifies eight forces that shape a culture of thinking and that teachers can use to spark curiosity in their youngest learners. We will use Lisi's story to illustrate these forces:

- **Expectations:** It is important to set high expectations for thinking and learning. Teachers' expectations are crucial when providing opportunities for students to think and express their thoughts. In Lisi's class, she exposes children to higher-order thinking processes such as imagining, connecting, hypothesizing, and building explanations.
- **Opportunities:** With high expectations, teachers create opportunities for thinking and learning. Lisi designs a learning experience using an artifact (the box and hidden object) to spark children's curiosity and engage them in deep thinking.
- **Routines:** These are goal-centered strategies designed to promote, scaffold, and provide patterns of thinking. Lisi creates a routine (touch-think and connect-hypothesize) to regularly engage her students in the process of thinking. Through the routine, Lisi's children use their senses to explore, imagine, make connections, hypothesize, and share ideas.

- **Language:** By using a language of thinking, teachers offer students a vocabulary to describe and reflect on thinking. Lisi introduces a new language of thinking with words and phrases such as *hypothesizing* and *making connections*.
- **Time:** Allowing time for thinking and reflecting is essential. Lisi gives children time to process their ideas, express them, and share them with their peers.
- **Modeling:** Teachers must model thinking and learning. Modeling who we are as thinkers and learners encourages us to discuss, share, and make the process of our thinking visible. Lisi introduces her classroom activity by modeling the process and type of thinking her students will use.
- **Interactions:** Teachers promote and encourage others to respect children's contributions. Showing respect for and valuing each other's contributions of ideas in a spirit of ongoing, collaborative inquiry are important. In Lisi's class, children listen to each other, ask questions, and learn to value the different ideas that emerge from the activity.
- **Environment:** Arranging the classroom space to facilitate thoughtful interactions ensures that the learning environment displays representations of children's thinking. Lisi exhibits her children's hypotheses drawings on her classroom walls. She uses this documentation to build on the next activity.

Transforming Expectations and Questions to Attain a Culture of Thinking

To promote a deep-thinking classroom culture, teachers must learn how to ask strategic questions. Questions set the stage for and guide thinking. They deepen learning, build a growth mindset, and help students become more aware of their own thinking processes (Costa & Kallick 2015). However, they need to be the right kinds of questions.

Most classroom questions fall into one of five typologies (Ritchhart 2015):

- **Review:** recalling and reviewing knowledge and information
- **Procedural:** directing the work of the class, going over directions and assignments
- **Generative:** exploring the topic, asking authentic questions
- **Constructive:** building new understanding, extending and interpreting, connecting and linking, focusing on big ideas, and evaluating
- **Facilitative:** promoting learners' own thinking and understanding, elaborating, reasoning, and justifying

Questions to Foster a Thinking Culture

Review and Procedural (hinders thinking)	**Generative, Constructive, and Facilitative** (promotes thinking)
Do you remember that we went on a field trip? (Review and recall) What did we bring with us? (Procedural)	What things did you see when we went on our field trip? (Generative) What do you think about them? (Facilitative) What do you wonder? (Constructive)
Did we go in a train or a bus? (Review and recall) Did you bring your consent forms to ride the bus? (Procedural)	What did you like about traveling in the bus with your friends? (Generative) How was it similar and how was it different from traveling with your family? (Constructive)
Do you know what a light is? (Review and recall) When do you see green, red, and yellow? (Review and recall)	How do we travel safely on the road when going to different places? (Facilitative) What makes you say that? (Facilitative)

When teachers center their questions on review and procedural, children can quickly lose interest. Teachers who ask children simply to review what they know or to parrot back directions miss out on rich opportunities to cognitively engage and challenge their students to think beyond the obvious. Neither the teacher nor the children build upon each other's contributions. To transform these types of questions into a more productive dialogue, teachers should think about the effect their questions will have on children's responses: how can they formulate questions that will make children's thinking visible? Good questions emerge from listening carefully to children, building from their ideas and interests, and moving forward. (See "Questions to Foster a Thinking Culture," page 61.) As Duckworth says, having wonderful ideas "implies generating or owning ideas, and ownership stands in contrast to being told what you ought to understand" (Meek 1991, 30).

Renata teaches 3-year-olds at a South Florida preschool. She has grappled with ways to engage her children and promote their curiosity and ideas. A recent discussion about a field trip devolved into fidgeting, boredom, and disengagement. Upon reflection, she realizes her expectations were too low. She was asking children to recall and recite basic facts of the field trip rather than challenging them to build new understandings, elaborate on their thoughts, and make connections with their own and each other's ideas.

After careful reflection, Renata gathers her 3-year-olds and begins discussing the field trip again. Only this time, she focuses on asking authentic questions designed to engage the children in her class. "Karla," she says, "on our trip, you saw a dark cloud that made you think it was going to rain. What else did you see?"

"I saw a plant," Karla says, recalling the field trip.

"What makes you say that it was a plant?" Renata asks, jotting down the child's comments.

Olivia pipes up. "Because you can't take them off when you pull their hair."

"The plant's hair?" Renata asks, picking up a plant to show the children. "What is the part of the plant that is the hair? If I show you this plant, what is its hair?"

This conversation illustrates how Renata is building on Karla's ideas and theories. Her questions are more generative and constructive. She values her students' contributions and ideas, and she shows respect for Karla's description of the plant. When Renata reflected on this interaction, she said: "I learned that as children share their ideas and exchange viewpoints, they develop different modes of thinking. By empowering children, the interactions change, the conversation evolves from children's ideas, and the teacher's expectations change when children make visible what they know and think about the world."

Offering Opportunities to Think

Too often, activities in early childhood settings are characterized by a teacher-centered approach: teachers design step-by-step activities and expect similar outcomes from all children. By contrast, developmentally appropriate practice encourages teachers to build on each child's multiple assets and to create opportunities for each child to exercise choice and agency within the context of a planned environment (NAEYC 2020). In such a setting, educators recognize that children are active constructors of their own understanding of the world around them. They understand that children benefit from initiating and regulating their own learning activities. An appropriate curriculum for young children is one that includes a focus on supporting children's inherent intellectual dispositions (Katz 2015). Teachers who see the potential of cognitively engaging children empower them to become more creative, autonomous, and intentional.

Lisi, the teacher from the opening vignette, has witnessed this progression in her own teaching. When she began at Learning Steps, she focused her efforts on introducing numbers and letters and using the calendar as a recall activity. When challenged to incorporate activities that would nurture and advance children's thinking, she initially viewed them as a time constraint and "just another activity." However, once she began giving her students the chance and encouragement to think and verbalize their thoughts, she witnessed how readily they engaged in higher-order thinking skills: They made connections and formed hypotheses; they connected their imaginations to experiences; they used physical objects to represent imagery. When challenged with probing, supportive, meaningful questions, their thinking went beyond the parameters that adults often set for young children. As Duckworth says, "To teach is understanding someone else's understanding" (Meek 1991, 32).

Taking Time to Observe and Reflect

To have a meaningful conversation with a child, adults need to know what the child thinks. Forman and Hall (2005) stress the importance of observing and documenting children with written notes and recordings or observing and analyzing children's own work. This helps teachers learn about each child's interests, skills, and thinking. Children are competent learners, the researchers write, but teachers must slow down, carefully observe, and study their documented observations. (For more about documenting observation, see "Learning Stories: Observation, Reflection, and Narrative in Early Childhood Education," by Isauro M. Escamilla on page 33.) By revisiting an experience with a child and putting that experience into words, adults begin to understand the theories that influence a child's actions or interests. Lisi, for example, designed an activity to introduce two thinking concepts: connections and hypotheses. The children's drawings uncovered their hypotheses, and when they shared the thoughts behind their drawings, Lisi learned about the connections her children made to their personal experiences. Similarly, Renata's documentation helped her understand her children's theories about plants. Both observations were valuable for the teachers to scaffold their children's understanding.

When teachers have high expectations of their students as thinkers, children receive the message that their thinking is valued. Moreover, teachers gain ownership and power to make intentional decisions to nurture children's thinking dispositions. To ensure that this happens, reflection is necessary. Ritchhart's (2015) typology of classroom questions is a great resource for teachers to use to analyze their interactions with children. Additionally, they can ask themselves the following questions:

- What type of thinking is my question generating?
- How can I formulate questions that cognitively engage children?
- How can I listen to children and understand their thinking?
- How does documentation inform me about children's thinking?
- How can I dig into children's minds to discover their prior knowledge, interests, and theories?

Teachers' interactions with children are deeply connected to their goals for teaching. They also are tied to their own expectations about children as thinkers and learners. When teachers understand children's thinking, they can spur them to think in new and innovative ways.

About the Authors

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References for this article can be found online at **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021**.

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Embracing Partnerships with Informal Settings to Enhance Teaching and Learning

Sara L. Hartman and Jennifer Hines-Bergmeier

Authors' Note

We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to create challenges for accessing and implementing informal learning opportunities for educators and learners. This article provides useful suggestions for engaging with informal learning settings both as the pandemic continues and for when more typical life and educating returns.

On a bright spring morning, Brittanie Moquin, a rural southeastern Ohio preschool teacher, leads her class of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children into the Ohio Valley Museum of Discovery in Athens, Ohio. As she helps them hang up their jackets, she excitedly looks around the museum's interdisciplinary exhibit space. While at the museum, children will learn about historical and modern-day treasure hunting and will engage in interdisciplinary activities to help them understand treasure hunting at sea.

Because of distance and a lack of funding, learning experiences outside her formal classroom can be hard to arrange. She reflects, "Unless the school arranges them, our children often do not get STEM experiences like this." It is challenging for them because of their rural location and limited budget. Ms. Moquin acknowledges that children need experiences that allow them to get involved in ways that promote talking and movement.

Despite the obstacles, Ms. Moquin actively seeks accessible opportunities that offer interdisciplinary learning by involving STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), the arts, and more in a real-world context. Thanks to her recognition of the value of these sites and to her school's commitment to providing these experiences, Ms. Moquin is able to create meaningful out-of-school learning that connects to in-class learning. In fact, when Ms. Moquin approached her principal about the possibility of taking preschoolers to this museum, the principal was immediately supportive of finding funding and arranging busing. The benefits of doing so are clearly recognized by both of them. She heads into the museum with excitement about what they will do there and what she can use in her classroom afterward.

With a commitment to informal learning opportunities like those at the Ohio Valley Museum of Discovery, children in Ms. Moquin's class typically have several out-of-school learning experiences each year. Informal settings for learning are places that encourage free-choice activities, are inherently play-based, and emphasize experiential

learning. In addition to museums, these places include parks, planetariums, botanical gardens, libraries, theaters, makerspaces, and community organizations and businesses. Visits can occur in person or virtually. Although informal learning experiences are often referred to as field trips, the term *field trip* does not fully capture the amount of learning that informal learning settings provide.

The challenges of accessing informal learning settings, coupled with decreased funding for such experiences, likely resonate with early childhood educators around the country. This article will provide research-driven, practical advice for how early childhood educators can partner with community-based organizations to utilize an integrated and developmentally appropriate approach to teaching and learning.

What Is the Value of Informal Settings?

The playful experiences young children have in informal settings can help them develop an understanding of STEM-related concepts while also inspiring questions to explore in the formal setting of the classroom. Additionally, the arts and humanities have always been an important part of the early childhood curriculum, making an interdisciplinary approach a natural and meaningful way for early childhood teachers to incorporate activities on a variety of subjects into their teaching. Identifying informal learning organizations that embrace this integrated approach can help to make seamless interdisciplinary connections.

When thinking about STEM-related content, for example, over the course of a person's lifetime, as much as 95 percent of science learning may actually occur in informal settings (Falk & Dierking 2010). Concerningly, early childhood educators often report feeling unprepared to teach in the STEM content areas, which leads to decreased time dedicated to STEM topics in early childhood classrooms (Nesmith & Cooper 2019; Tao 2019). Informal settings have the potential to deepen teaching and learning in all content areas during the early childhood years. Yet for many educators, accessing informal learning experiences can be difficult. This is especially true for those in rural settings (Hartman, Hines-Bergmeier, & Klein 2017). Because children's thinking and learning are enriched when they have engaging and content-rich experiences in the early years (Moomaw 2012), these barriers are troubling.

One challenge for both teachers and the staff who provide informal learning experiences is bridging the gap between classroom learning and the informal learning at places such as museums, libraries, and parks (Fallik, Rosenfeld, & Eylon 2013; Russell, Knutson, & Crowley 2013). Even though their frequency may vary, informal learning experiences can be designed to support curricular goals and objectives in more formal settings (Bell et al. 2009; Erdman 2016). To truly achieve effective cross-contextual learning, collaborative partnerships between school and community entities are essential (Bell et al. 2009; Russell, Knutson, & Crowley 2013; Goble, Wright, & Parton 2015).

When Ms. Moquin receives an email describing a new exhibit at the Ohio Valley Museum of Discovery, she immediately recognizes the value that the experience could provide to her children. She reaches out to the museum for more information, and from there, a conversation ensues to share more about her children, her curriculum, and what they might learn at this museum. Ms. Moquin thinks about the fact that they live about an hour from the state's capital, which is where most of the big museums are. When she finds an opportunity that is 20 minutes from her school, she knows she wants to take her class. She spends some time talking with the museum's education director about the activities that are planned because she wants to be sure they will be a good fit for the children in her classroom and their curriculum. She also wants to be able to talk with her children about the content before and after they attend.

Accessing Informal Learning Settings

As highlighted earlier, significant barriers like funding and distance make accessing informal learning sites challenging for educators of young children (Hartman & Hines-Bergmeier 2015). Several practices can help mitigate these obstacles.

Research Opportunities Near Your Setting

At first glance, some places, such as an environmental agency, may not seem appropriate for young children. However, with a phone call or email, teachers may discover that the organization offers educational programming for young children or that a scientist on staff is willing to show the children some of the agency's work and answer questions. Taking time to inquire about nontraditional, informal learning sites is worth the payout in the potential learning returns. For example, Ms. Moquin regularly invites community organizations to partner with her. As she has shared, "We have a few local resources that have been wonderful. It's amazing how many community members are willing to come to our school if I just ask them."

Ask for Help with Costs

Informal learning sites may have grant funding to help pay for transportation and admission costs. If an educator or administrator inquires, these sites may be able to find funding for children to attend their programs. Additionally, early childhood educators may find funding through local nonprofits (like Kiwanis and Rotary clubs) and businesses that enjoy providing monetary support for the education of young children in their region. Importantly, places like parks, libraries, local businesses, and government agencies (like courthouses) typically have no costs associated with visiting them. If transportation can be arranged (by bus or by foot), these sites offer very affordable and meaningful experiences.

Bring Informal Learning to Early Childhood Settings

Many informal learning organizations are happy to "go on the road" to bring experiences to early childhood settings. If taking children to a science museum for an interactive insect exhibit is not possible, ask an entomologist to visit your school or program to take the children on a walk to learn about the insects they find. Growing plants is a common activity in many early childhood classrooms but visiting a greenhouse may not be possible. Instead, educators can invite a master gardener to talk to children (in person or virtually) about planting seeds, composting, and harvesting plants to eat. These kinds of activities provide rich content that teachers can build upon. Although there may still be a cost associated with these experiences, they are typically more affordable than an onsite visit.

In addition, more and more virtual options have become available. During the COVID-19 pandemic, outside visitors were prohibited in most schools and, at the same time, field trips were suspended. In response, many informal learning organizations worked overtime to continue providing educational programming. Visit informal organizations' websites and social media pages for information about upcoming events and activities. Accessing virtual informal learning experiences has never been easier, and the content has never been better!

For example, the Ohio Valley Museum of Discovery partnered with another local organization, Community Food Initiatives, to create "STEAM Packs for Students" that could be delivered to schools or delivered to homes for children doing virtual learning. Other informal learning organizations created virtual experiences such as library read alouds or "Meet the Author" events. These have been essential during the pandemic, and they also provide an accessible and sustainable delivery model during non-pandemic times.

Evaluating Developmental Appropriateness

Careful planning is essential to be sure that the experience is positive for all stakeholders (Tunks & Allison 2020). Important questions to ask include

- How long will children be expected to sit and listen? Will there be opportunities for active engagement?
- What activities are planned? What materials will children use during activities? Are there specific gross or fine motor skill expectations or potential hazards (including allergens)?
- Is the facility accessible for children with disabilities?

Keys to Effective Partnerships

Informal learning practitioners work hard to design and deliver positive learning experiences for young children, and they are eager to collaborate with teachers (Russell, Knutson, & Crowley 2013; Erdman 2016). Several practices may assist in developing and sustaining effective partnerships.

Communication

Teachers should communicate clear curricular needs. Informal learning practitioners are intent to make connections to classroom content, but they need to know ahead of time what a teacher's goals and needs are. A planning conversation also provides an opportunity to explore approaches that effectively interweave multiple content areas for an interdisciplinary experience.

For example, the exhibit visited by Ms. Moquin's class was themed around treasure hunting (from historical treasure hunting to modern-day cache-seeking). In preparation for the visit, museum staff and Ms. Moquin discussed possible activities to accompany the exhibit's components. She shared that all children love the idea of searching for treasure, and she wanted them to use their imaginations while also incorporating science content. In response to this, the museum staff designed a saltwater activity so that children could mix and taste their own "ocean" water and then use it to explore buoyancy. Then, after witnessing children's engagement during the activity, Ms. Moquin decided to continue the learning by setting up a sink-or-float experiment with a variety of materials in her classroom. With planning and collaborative discussions, educators at the informal learning site and in the early childhood program can effectively create cross-contextual learning experiences.

Teacher Involvement

Teachers should be ready to get involved while they are at an informal event. Active engagement with the informal learning content will encourage children's full participation and will help teachers recognize cross-contextual learning opportunities. For example, the Ohio Valley Museum of Discovery regularly makes singing part of its educational programming. If a teacher joins in singing songs with museum staff, not only are children likely to be thrilled to see their teacher singing along, but the teacher is more likely to be able to sing the songs in the future.

Further Reading

Check out these articles for more information about informal learning for young children.

- "Museum Babies: Linking Families, Culture, and Community," by Carla B. Goble, Sarah Wright, & Dawn Parton, featured in *Young Children*, July 2015
- "Creating Meaningful Partnerships with Museums," by Sarah Erdman, featured in *Young Children*, March 2016
- "'There's a Hole in the Tree!': Kindergartners Learning in an Urban Park," by Melissa Fine, featured in *Young Children*, November 2018
- "Our Trip Down to the Bay: A Model of Experiential Learning," by Karyn W. Tunks & Elizabeth Allison, featured in *Young Children*, September 2020

Establish Shared Goals

Effective partnerships function best when involved parties hold similar goals about the nature of their work together. To develop shared goals with an informal learning educator, consider collaborating with the same learning setting several times over the year, and visits can be a mix of occurring at the early childhood setting, at the informal learning site, and virtually.

For example, visiting the same park multiple times could encourage a park naturalist to develop programming related to bird behaviors. In the fall, children could discuss reasons for migration and migratory bird patterns; winter offers the opportunity to create bird feeders to allow for observation of bird identification and behaviors; and spring may prompt an exploration of nest making techniques and caring for nestlings. Many of these activities offer opportunities for cross-contextual activities, such as creating bird feeders for observation at the early childhood setting. If partners commit to working together for multiple events and have developed a shared purpose, effective collaboration is more likely to occur.

References for this article can be found online at **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021**.

Persistence and Perseverance

Persistence in the face of challenges is often necessary, and successful collaboration is unlikely without persistence. Early childhood educators may feel bogged down by curricular expectations, which can leave them questioning if they can sacrifice precious instructional time for an informal learning experience. Yet, if teachers view informal learning experiences as opportunities to support children's learning, they are likely to find it worth their time and effort to plan and find funding for these experiences. Persevering in overcoming these types of obstacles often results in rich and productive collaborative partnerships that benefit children's learning.

By lunchtime, Ms. Moquin and her children are on the bus heading from the Ohio Valley Museum of Discovery to a local park for the afternoon. As they ride, she can hear children chattering about their time at the museum. Reflecting on their treasure hunting experiences, she thinks about cross-contextual activities she can do in her classroom that will connect to what they just learned. She plans to experiment more with mixtures at the sensory table, read books that connect to what they learned at the museum, and incorporate cardboard boxes to create a giant ship in the dramatic play center.

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Effective Conversational Strategies

A Preschool Teacher's Approach to Fostering Science Vocabulary

Karla Winick-Ford

In my state-funded, Michigan preschool classroom of 16 4-year-old children, building children's vocabulary and world knowledge is a top priority. Indeed, each day, I am helping them learn new words and concepts to better understand their world. Vocabulary helps develop children's academic and social skills; it is essential for listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and effective communication of ideas (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan 2013; Neuman & Wright 2014). Because some children may arrive at preschool with much larger vocabularies than others, I see the emphasis on vocabulary knowledge as critical for advancing equity (Parkinson & Rowan 2008; Margulis & Neuman 2009; Neuman & Dwyer 2011; Golinkoff et al. 2019).

This may be particularly true for science. Children need to learn about our world—including the names and meanings of objects, events, and concepts within that world—to understand it. The more words we introduce to and use with them, the easier it is for learners to construct knowledge in specific content areas. I am fortunate to have almost a decade of experience teaching science to students in grades 3–8. Knowing the state standards and science content for the elementary- and middle-school grades are what drove my interest in science education and its connections to vocabulary development for our youngest learners. I want to be the spark that ignites children's imaginations, creativity, and critical thinking through building deeper content knowledge and engaging them in challenging activities and dialogues.

Building children's vocabulary and science knowledge starts with fostering a sense of wonder. Teachers can invite children to be active learners with open-ended questions such as, "I wonder what would happen if . . ." or "What might be different if . . . " As children express their interests, I have found that I (as the teacher) can build upon their sense of wonder by prompting authentic conversations that inspire questions and investigations. (For more about effective questioning, see "What Are You Thinking? Scaffolding Thinking to Promote Learning" by Angela K. Salmon and Maria X. Barrera on page 59.) These are higher-level skills, and they need to be cultivated through exposure and experience.

Research studies support what I have observed: rich and sustained conversations in the classroom provide opportunities to learn about and practice using new vocabulary, to grapple with new ideas, and to contribute to longer-term knowledge and skills (Dickinson & Tabors 2001; Dickinson & Tabors 2002; Cabell et al. 2015). In this article, I will share examples of some of my classroom conversations and how I build upon them to sustain children's curiosity, to encourage them to explore and investigate, and ultimately to help build their science vocabulary knowledge.

Rainbows, Storms, and Other Weather

Along with engaging children, effective conversation strategies give teachers insight into children's interests and current knowledge. Once I know these things, I can plan and carry out learning explorations rich with new science vocabulary and concepts. Consider a recent dialogue in my classroom between 4-year-old Daniel and myself. This conversation emerged from an activity in the art area, where the children were discussing our cold winter and waiting for the thaw so they could play outside again.

Daniel: Ms. Ford, why don't we see rainbows in the wintertime?

Me: You've been watching the sky. I wonder why you haven't seen a rainbow in a while. Do you remember the last time you saw one?

Daniel: Yes, it was a long time ago. There was a lot of rain, and the loud noise came on.

Me: So you remember seeing a rainbow after a storm?

Daniel: Yes. The sun came out. My mom pointed to the sky, and we saw a rainbow.

In this instance, I opened up the discussion to the entire class to see what Daniel and his classmates knew about storms and weather patterns. We created a K-W-L chart, listing what the children *knew*, what they *wanted* to learn about, and eventually what they *learned* after our activities. Only a few children remembered seeing rainbows, but most talked about rain and snowstorms. Based on our conversations and guided by the children's interests, we started charting weather and rainbow occurrences to determine the amount of rainfall, wind direction, and temperature (having weather equipment was helpful to name and describe, such as a *rain gauge*, a *windsock,* and a *thermometer*, and to use outside to record information). We aimed to learn under which weather conditions rainbows occur. In addition, children's writing was developed when they constructed books from their ideas about rainbows. They created illustrations, and I scaffolded their emergent writing as they used invented spelling to document the new words they learned along the way. One of the most interesting illustrations was a child's drawing of the *mist* of rain by a rainbow.

We also launched into a variety of other activities designed to encourage children to generate predictions and inferences. (I should note that I do not designate a weekly theme, or set aside daily science time, but rather plan for experiences to emerge based on opportunity and children's interest. This investigation took place

Building on Weather Wonderings

Theme	Learning outcome	New vocabulary	Featured book	Follow-up activities
Colors in the rainbow	Children will demonstrate an awareness that rainbows follow a specific color pattern	*pattern, prism, droplets*	*Elmer and the Rainbow,* by David McKee	Make rainbows with plastic prisms and flashlights, or using plastic glasses of water, mist spray bottles, and a light source. Prompt children to generate ideas and experiment to help them observe that light must pass through water in the air (which does not regularly occur in winter months in some areas).
Wild winter weather	Children will explain different winter weather outcomes	*blizzard, igloo, melt*	*Blizzard*, by John Rocco	Set up a sensory table to explore snow and ice. One day, make "snow" from conditioner and baking soda. Another day, bring in fresh snow and ice cubes for children to investigate. Encourage children to build structures, like *igloos,* or examine what happens when introducing new substances to the snow, like water using droppers and salt.

over approximately two months, although we did not talk about rainbows every day.) Science-related children's books are invaluable for this practice: Teachers can develop vocabulary during read alouds and follow-up activities (Leung 2008); they can encourage children to predict what will happen next (Pentmonti, Gerde, & Pikus 2020); they can use books to create meaningful writing opportunities. (See "Building on Weather Wonderings," on page 70.)

When teachers engage their students in effective conversations, they discover the questions children have. Teachers can then create opportunities for children to become active researchers or inquirers to answer those questions (Dugan 2012).

Castles, Blueprints, and Engineering

Teachers who recognize children's interests and wonder then use that to develop scientific vocabulary will deepen the meaning of and learning from classroom conversations. Over the course of my career, I have become a teacher who looks out for, reflects on, and builds learning opportunities stemming from student interest and prior knowledge.

Similar to their curiosity and questions about rainbows, storms, and other weather, I began to notice children's deep and ongoing enjoyment while using materials in the block area. Day after day, without my direction, I observed children creating tall towers, which they sometimes called "castles." Their engagement in this area led to other structures being built and offered many opportunities for the children and me to discuss the careers of *architects* and *engineers*. Builders enthusiastically left the block area for the writing center, where they created plans, or *blueprints*, and asked to look at pictures of various structures, such as *pyramids*, *obelisks*, *museums,* and more. They spoke of *bricks*, *wood*, *steel*, and other building materials. Their play moved to tables where they could expand on their manipulation of building materials. They used eggs (uncooked and with clean-up materials nearby) as a foundation for block structures, leading to an investigation of *weight* and *strength*. The project was extensive in terms of time, focus, and learning. As it became connected to the children's interests, we discovered more and more.

Even with the excitement and involvement of most of the class, I noticed a few children stayed away from this exploratory play. When the towers fell, it seemed to scare them. One child recalled seeing on television

Building on Block Wonderings

Themes	Learning outcomes	New vocabulary	Featured book	Follow-up activities
Block building	Develop new structures	*engineer, construction, skyscraper, Empire State Building*	*When I Build with Blocks*, by Niki Alling	Children construct familiar and new structures and identify the types of structures they have created. They can take pictures with iPads and dictate or add in invented spelling captions to share with families.
Designing	Develop a plan before building by writing	*architect, blueprint, Eiffel Tower*	*Iggy Pek Architect*, by Andrea Beaty	Create on paper or on a tablet a blueprint for future constructions. Then, move to the block area to build, following this design plan.
Transportation	Use materials around the room to construct a new vehicle	*chassis, driveshaft, transmission*	*If I Built a Car*, by Chris Van Dusen	Children draw pictures of vehicles with unique features and develop a text about their creations using dictation or invented spelling.

Author's Note about Building Science Vocabulary Knowledge During the Pandemic

Since March 2020, we have faced many changes and some challenges to teaching young children. My classroom has experienced both periods of virtual learning and a hybrid model. I have found that some science explorations work better when children are engaged with their families at home following asynchronous lessons, while others are truly best in the classroom. At times, social distancing has made it difficult for children to investigate together, but feedback from families assured me that learning is happening.

For example, families shared with me that their children explained why they took home a *pipette*. We had explored dropping water onto coins, and I encouraged them to continue their explorations at home. We had a boat construction game with each child having one foil piece, then we counted how many coins it could hold before it sank. Boats were squished in bookbags, but children asked to make them at home and show families what they had learned. The children also inspired me to look into more kitchen chemistry activities for their home learning days. For more ideas on getting children and families involved in science activities from home, read the *Teaching Young Children* Breaking Down STEAM series, a four-part series that offers practical, research-supported ideas for promoting science and other STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, math) areas in preschool.

crisis events and natural disasters during which towers fell, fires damaged homes, and earthquakes destroyed communities. As an active inquirer, my focus moved to using science to comfort students who expressed fear or anxiety. We learned how engineering advances have helped make tall towers safer, and children explored that new idea with mixed materials so their towers could withstand greater force before they fell.

In addition, the firefighter from across the street came to talk to the class. He shared how his fire gear, such as his *helmet* and his *turnout jacket,* was *flame retardant* and how the materials used to construct homes help them burn slower, allowing more time for the arrival of the fire department. Not only did this ease the tension some children experienced during our block building exploration, but it planted seeds for future learning (such as a study of fire safety) by using words like *fire engine*, *station*, *ax*, and *extinguisher*.

Toes, Skeletons, and Excavations

Wonder and inquiry can come from anywhere. For example, when I broke my toe, children noticed the special shoe I had to wear. Zara asked me how I knew my toe was broken, and I found a local doctor who spoke of *X-rays* and showed examples to the class. Steven and Mackenzie asked a few weeks later if everything had bones. To address the children's growing list of questions and to expand on their interest, I asked another expert visitor, a now-retired science teacher, Ms. Cindy, to speak with the class. The visiting teacher explained what a *paleontologist* was and brought in *artifacts,* like cow *jaw bones* and farm animal *femurs*. She planned extended activities too. One activity got the children involved as *excavators*: animal skeletons were buried in a sand-glue mixture from which children used various tools to carefully uncover the unknown bones, similar to how a paleontologist uncovers dinosaur remains.

The repeated exposure to the new vocabulary, from both our class discussions and our day with Ms. Cindy, became part of the natural language emerging in the children's play. I regularly heard children speak of the *femur*, *spine*, and *hip*. Their drawings became more detailed; when they included bones in their drawings, the children asked to research which bone it would be.

Building on Bone Wonderings

Theme	Learning outcomes	New vocabulary	Featured book	Follow-up activities
Dinosaurs	Students learn to use tools to discover hidden treasures	*field museum, paleontologist, archaeologist, extinct*	*When Sue Found Sue*, by Toni Buzzeo	Create the conditions for burying and unburying dinosaur skeleton figures in a sand/glue mixture. Provide children with tools like spoons and toothbrushes to carefully uncover the dinosaurs.
Bones	Students discover fossils that come from animals	*herd, disks, fossil, carnivore, herbivore, omnivore*	*Dinosaur Bones*, by Bob Barner	Make dinosaur or other animal skeletons using Q-tips, cardboard, or pipe cleaners as bones. Ask children about the different bones they include in their creations.
Comparisons	Students compare the sizes of materials, objects, and one another	*skeleton, compare, similarities, differences, measurement*	*Funny Bones*, by Janet and Allan Ahlberg	Use manipulatives or materials in the classroom for size comparison. Children can measure the objects and each another, then record their findings in a comparison chart.

Fostering Science Vocabulary: Lessons Learned

You may wonder if encouraging scientific explorations and building science vocabulary beyond the water table and sink-or-float is developmentally appropriate. My experiences and the research say yes. Inspiring children to imagine beyond their experience, to ask more questions, to try using new words, and to persist in finding answers are key elements of inquiry-based teaching (Llewellyn 2014). That said, when children propose an interest or question they wish to investigate, you may not know all of the answers or even the immediate next steps. One lesson that I learned is that it is both appropriate and often necessary to begin doing research. Do not hide your research from the children—do it with them. Through their research and your own, you can identity the words and concepts to introduce and offer in-depth explorations for them to learn. Working with you to find answers to their questions affirms for children that knowledge needs to be actively sought out. Intentionally planning and implementing experiences framed by children's wonderings make learning more meaningful for all. It also creates natural and ample opportunities to introduce and strengthen children's scientific vocabulary.

Another lesson that I learned is to actively and continually communicate with families about science and vocabulary-rich classroom experiences. Science activities can be easily shared with families by sending photos or short videos. For example, I communicate with my families via social media postings (without showing identifying information), emails, and photos of classroom activities. When families and the community witness how important scientific vocabulary is for young children—and when they know which words and science topics you are engaged in with their children—they are more likely to support your efforts. Getting everyone on board will help young children now and in the future.

About the Author

Karla Winick-Ford is a doctoral student at the University of Michigan, having earned advanced degrees in administration from the University of Michigan and early childhood from Eastern Michigan University. She is the director of the Great Start Readiness Program for Flat Rock Community schools in Flat Rock, Michigan, where she has taught for 15 years.

References for this article can be found online at **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021**.

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Preschool Without Walls

Empowering Families Through Outdoor Community Classrooms

Ann Selmi

All children have the right to attend high-quality early education programs. Those who do not often experience disparities in language, reading, and math as they advance through school. This is particularly true for children from marginalized communities (NAEYC 2009). Ensuring accessible and high-quality programs is of particular focus for children living in poverty or in households facing other significant challenges as the result of systemic inequities. Indeed, "advancing the right to equitable learning opportunities requires recognizing and dismantling the systems of bias that accord privilege to some and are unjust to others" (NAEYC 2019).

Carson, California, is home to California State University, Dominguez Hills. Our surrounding community is primarily Latino/a, Black, and Asian (see "Community Demographics," on page 75), with a per capita income of $31,781 (Census Reporter, n.d.). Twelve percent of children younger than 18 live below the poverty line. Many have not attended preschool. In an effort to support our community and families, the university began to look at how we could engage families as partners in the education of their children and create an early learning environment that families would embrace.

Preschool Without Walls, a community-based, early education program sponsored by the nonprofit Strength-Based Community Change Thrive LA (SBCC), offered us a way to address these issues. For over 40 years, SBCC has provided a full range of innovative, grassroots programs in the South Bay area of Los Angeles. Its programs and services target people with low incomes and seek to build communities in which children and families thrive. SBCC introduced Preschool Without Walls in 2005 as Preschool on Wheels, with one van that regularly traveled to a few community sites. It now operates 13 preschool programs throughout the Los Angeles area.

Preschool Without Walls (PWW) is designed to offer a welcoming environment to families who might be uncomfortable with education and care programs outside of the home. It creates flexible, free, play-based, and intentionally planned experiences at familiar community areas such as parks, libraries, churches, and recreation centers. Besides providing playful learning opportunities and early childhood instruction, the program aims to offer robust, family-engaged community services to traditionally underserved groups. Currently, PWW serves over 400 families.

In the spring of 2014, SBCC contacted California State University, Dominguez Hills and asked if we would sponsor a Preschool Without Walls on our campus. It was an exciting opportunity for two reasons: we could tailor services to our neighboring communities, and we could offer a practicum site for teacher candidates

to learn about and participate in an innovative model designed to meet families' educational needs. At the time, California was opening up transitional kindergarten classes, and our College of Education was interested in enhancing preparation coursework in the pre-K area. Additionally, access to such a program would allow our Early Childhood Special Education Credential students to participate in a unique practicum experience that focused on family, community, and education partnerships. As a professor in that program, I was tapped to work with the dean of the college in exploring the possibility of developing a PWW-university partnership.

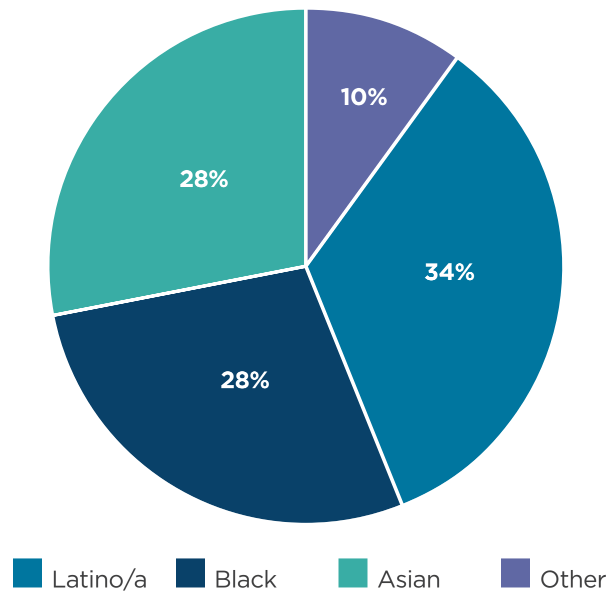
Why Partner with Families?

To be effective, early childhood professionals must view families as capable and essential partners in the care and education of young children (US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education 2016). When community and educational professionals understand the particular strengths and needs of families and then design programs and policies that reflect those assets and challenges, entire communities benefit.

NAEYC has recognized the powerful impact that partnerships among families, schools, and communities have in improving children's learning and development across domains. It is not enough for families to be tangentially involved in their children's education. Rather, they must be truly engaged in setting goals, making decisions, and communicating with their children's teachers (NAEYC 2009, 2020). True engagement—not just the involvement that occurs when a caregiver attends conferences or school events—enhances children's learning, ensures that families' needs are met, and helps professionals maintain a strengths-based perspective. Toward that end, NAEYC has identified six specific family engagement practices that are vital for all early childhood professionals to regularly implement (see "Six Principles of Family Engagement," on page 78).

By understanding each child and their family's story, we can begin to understand what families have accomplished and how we can support their

Community Demographics



continued success. Now in its seventh year, the PWW program at our university hews closely to the six family engagement practices recommended by NAEYC. The following are some of the steps we have taken, lessons we have learned, and ways in which any early childhood education program—traditional or not—can partner with its families and community to foster growth, learning, and reciprocal relationships.

Provide a Welcoming Environment

Jheri is raising her 4 1/2-year-old daughter with help from her mother. Both were skeptical about the benefits of preschool. "Neither of us had thought that we would send my daughter to preschool," she says. "No one in my family had ever gone to preschool when we were children, and I didn't have the money to pay for it. My mom was very hesitant about preschool. She thought that playing was playing and learning was learning, and that the two activities did not have much in common.

> "However, I liked the idea of having my daughter spend one morning a week involved in informal, outdoor activities with children her age and being close to my work. So, we gave it a try. At first, my daughter was shy and just watched the other children. Later, she jumped in. After that, she never wanted to leave and would always ask if it was a school day. It took my mother a little time to warm up to the idea, but through this program, she has realized that play is an essential part of learning."

When creating our PWW affiliate, we wanted an atmosphere that would welcome both children and caregivers. Most of our families—like Jheri—had not participated in a formal program before. We needed an area that communicated love, care, and safety to the families and children. At the same time, we identified and addressed potential obstacles or challenges for family participation, such as transportation.

Our university identified an outside space on campus where the program could meet. We chose a grassy area between two classroom buildings that was near a parking lot, a bus stop, and university food services. It also had two heavy, round, cement tables with benches and umbrellas, which we use for art activities. In addition, we identified a classroom where we could meet on rainy days and a storage area for materials.

Over the years, university construction projects have forced our PWW program to move to different places on campus. To minimize the impact of change and avoid confusion, we have always made sure to stay close to the original site. As the program continued, we noticed that staff and families started staying on campus longer and using the university's dining halls. Selecting the right location and amenities helped us offer a welcoming space.

Commit to Outreach

Community outreach was critical as our university began recruiting families for PWW. We originally envisioned serving around 15 families. However, perhaps because of our community's perception of early childhood programs, we did not meet that benchmark. We began handing out flyers and hanging posters at

local stores, schools, churches, and on the university's campus. The response to these efforts yielded great results: our program's enrollment increased to more than 30 children and their families. Because we aimed for a 10:1 student-teacher ratio, the surge in demand required hiring more staff and increasing our stores of materials. To help us maintain strong family partnerships, the SBCC hired staff who had the linguistic skills and cultural knowledge to serve our community, then supported their training as teachers and aides. Staff and most material expenses were covered by SBCC. Whenever possible, the College of Education contributed to the program by purchasing art supplies and outdoor equipment.

Early on, one of our major outreach concerns involved acquiring the insurance necessary to protect us and program participants from injury or other unforeseen occurrences. We expected that the university's administration would look closely at this issue and have questions. The dean and I met with the university's vice president to explain the benefits of sponsoring a PWW program and to discuss insurance coverage. We stressed how our community families did not have access to preschool options that met their specific needs and how vital early education is for children to succeed academically and socially. As we presented our case, the vice president sat quietly at his desk, rubbing his brow and contemplating the information. After a long silence, he looked up at us and firmly announced,

"We'll do it because it's the right thing for us to do." Over a two-month period, he and his staff resolved all the insurance concerns.

Strive for Authentic Partnerships

Dalilia is a Preschool Without Walls teacher. She believes the most important learning activity on the schedule is the read alouds that occur during group activity time. Here, teachers can model for family members different strategies to use while they read books to their children.

One day, a mother and child bring *It Looked Like Spilled Milk,* by Charles Shaw, to school. The mother asks if she and her son can read the book to the class. Dalilia agrees and asks them to do it during book reading time. The mother begins by reading the book to the families. Then the little boy joins in and reads it to everyone. "It was amazing!" Dalilia says. "I noticed how intent the families were when the mother and child read the book."

Now, parents and their children routinely come to class with books to share with the group. "Of course, we always let them," explains Dalilia. "We had never thought of doing this, nor did we realize how powerful it could be!"

At PWW, families are viewed as integral to the program and as partners in educating their children. Our goal is to promote family competence and strengthen the family-child relationship. Toward that end, we invite parents and other caregivers to participate in "family preschool" one morning a week. During this two-hour block of time, teachers engage children and their families in singing and movement activities, finger plays, art, stories, and free play. When we began PWW, some of our family members would talk with each other while their children interacted during free play. When this happened, we made sure to encourage them to join us and their children in play. After a few weeks, they took the lead and invited new family members to come over and play with their children.

During group time on the lawn, our staff has an opportunity to model developmentally appropriate activities and language for families in an engaging way. But our teachers also learn from our families. For example, one new child found group activities overwhelming when he started attending PWW. His mother suggested to the staff that she would take him for a walk around the campus and that they would return before the session was over. She and her son did this for a few weeks, always decreasing the time they were away. Within a month, the child was participating in the entire group session. From then on, staff offered this strategy to other new families in similar situations.

Integrate Culture and Community

From the start of our program, families have taken the lead in planning and carrying out social and educational events that integrate culture and community. These include holding potluck meals and sharing ethnic recipes, customs, and songs. These events are some of the most valuable ways we have to enhance collaboration among all our partners: university faculty, staff, and administrators often attend these events and interact directly with the PWW staff, parents, and children on the lawn. If the noise gets too loud, university students or instructors pop outside their classrooms, smile or wave at us, and close their classroom doors. No one ever complains. Instead, we hear comments like, "It was fun teaching first-year English with children in the background singing about a slippery fish!"

Interestingly, these events began attracting fathers and other male caregivers. Fathers' involvement in preschool programs is not equal to mothers' for a variety of reasons (Parlakian & Rovaris 2009), so this development excited us. The fathers became familiar with each other and often sat together when working with their children on art projects or participating in large group activities. They frequently could be heard sharing information about jobs, sports, and other events, and inviting families to their homes.

It is important to note that PWW does not offer structured class meetings during the summer. As a way to offer continuous outreach that integrates family and community cultures, PWW plans outings throughout the Los Angeles area and secures reduced or free passes for our families to visit specific locales on certain dates. Every two weeks, families meet at the Metro station with their lunches and travel to one of these sites, which is 30 to 40 minutes from their home. This is some families' first time using the Metro, and other families are always eager to show them how to use it. If needed, PWW assists with Metro fees because of the value these experiences have in strengthening family-to-family relationships.

Six Principles of Family Engagement

- Programs invite families to participate in decision making and goal setting for their child.
- Teachers and programs engage families in two-way communication.
- Programs and teachers engage families in ways that are truly reciprocal.
- Programs provide learning activities for the home and in the community.
- Programs invite families to participate in program-level decisions and wider advocacy efforts.
- Programs implement a comprehensive program-level system.

(NAEYC, Engaging Diverse Families Project)

During these summer outings, families have visited the Los Angeles Main Children's Library, the Kids' Museum, Splash Water Park, and the LA County Museum of Science and Industry.

Share Resources and Referrals with Families

PWW constantly looks for ways to share developmentally appropriate practices with families—particularly pertaining to literacy. During its first year at our university, staff introduced the Bring Me a Book Foundation. Through this program, each preschool family receives a canvas bag that contains age-appropriate children's books, accompanying questions, and activities in the family's home language. Children can check out a book bag, take it home to share with their families, then bring it back to school and get a new bag. Books are loaned to each of the participating families, and home literacy activities are continually suggested and modeled. In addition, our College of Education has secured funding to purchase copies of classic children's books such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle 1969), *Caps for Sale* (Slobodkina 1940), and *Are You My Mother?* (Eastman 1960) in children's home languages.

In addition to literacy-related efforts, SBCC partners with more than 40 health care and mental health organizations throughout the Los Angeles area. Because we are looking to engage with our families on all levels, PWW readily shares information about these organizations. PWW also keeps families abreast of more informal SBCC community support activities such as career and family counseling, well-being activities, and after-school and tutoring sessions. They strongly encourage families to explore other SBCC activities that contribute to adult learning, such as classes in GED preparation, financial understanding, legal and immigration services, and English as a second language.

Assess and Reflect on Learning Goals

To help understand and reflect on learning and engagement, PWW relies on a range of formal and informal assessments. Children are assessed at the beginning and end of each school year. Parents and guardians meet with teachers for individual conferences twice a year to discuss children's progress. Together, they agree upon goals that promote individual family's strengths and support each child's development.

Informally, PWW has a School Picture Day each year that shows how much children change physically. For a minimal fee that covers developing costs, a family volunteer takes and distributes the pictures. Families always enjoy looking at the picture from the previous year and comparing how their child has grown.

Conclusion

Every Halloween, university faculty and staff on campus prepare for visits from PWW trick-or-treaters. As Rubin and Enrique, two fathers, accompany their children down the halls of the College of Education building, Enrique pokes Rubin. "Look!" he says. "We're walking down the hall of a university building. We're in college!"

He then turns to one of the university faculty members who works with PWW. "And one day," he tells her with a big smile, "my boy will be walking down these halls as a college student."

We know that academic achievement and social and emotional well-being are tightly tied to family-school collaboration during the early years. Early education centers cannot work in isolation to meet the needs of families with young children. Similarly, community colleges and universities cannot work in isolation as they prepare high-quality early educators. Instead, a variety of contexts and options for learning must exist. These, in turn, must be responsive to diverse beliefs, desires, and needs related to early care and education. Along with more traditional and formal early learning programs, local education and community agencies can collaborate to design more pathways that support empowerment of and respect for every family.

About the Author

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References for this article and additional information on how to engage families in preschool programs can be found online at **NAEYC.org/yc/summer2021**.

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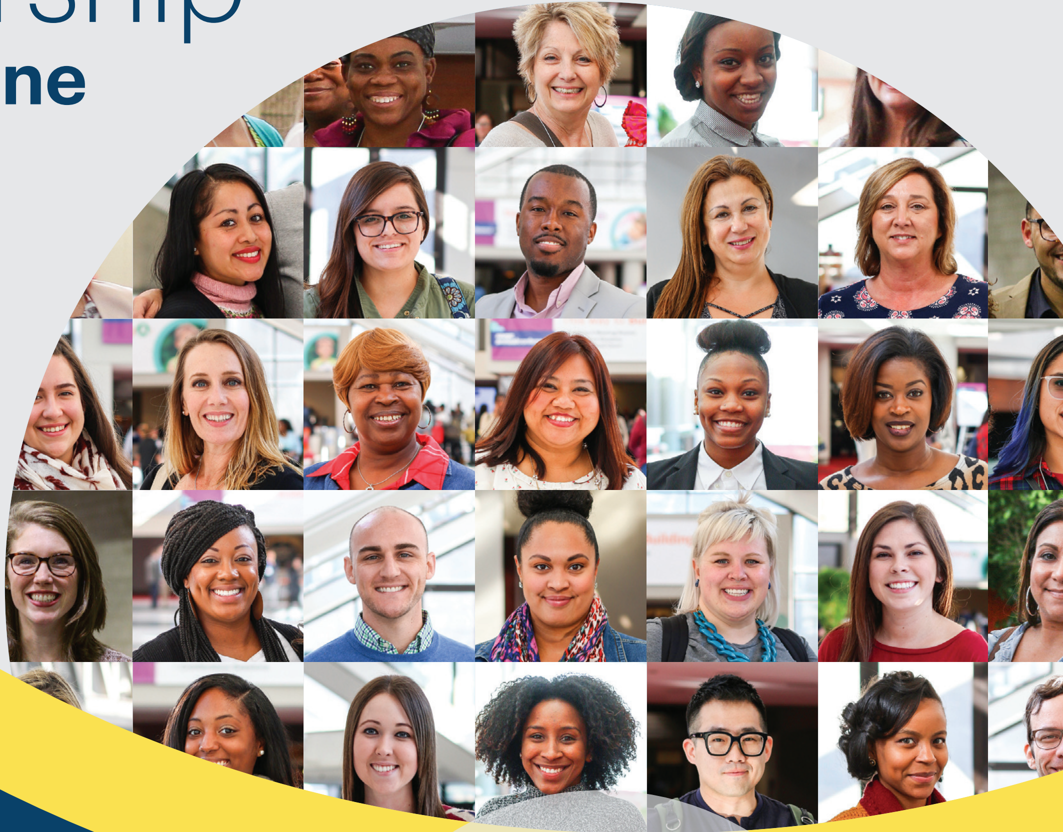

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