



Introduction

Cristina Gillanders

All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity and diversity.

—NAEYC’s forthcoming position statement on equity and diversity

Every young child brings to the classroom a wealth of unique and complex knowledge, skills, and experiences. As children interact with their families and communities in everyday contexts, they begin to understand how the world works and how to respond to the expectations of their families and their communities. As they raise children, adults create these contexts by following traditions and routines they learned from previous generations and considering their children’s abilities and characteristics. They also create learning opportunities for children in response to what they perceive to be the expectations of the contexts of their community. Consequently, children’s learning and development follow culture-specific pathways and can only be fully understood and effectively supported by taking into consideration the cultural beliefs and practices of their communities (Rogoff 2003; Rogoff, Dahl, & Callanan 2018).

NAEYC's Forthcoming Position Statement on Equity & Diversity

By NAEYC

Anti-bias education has long guided NAEYC's work to promote high-quality early learning for all young children. With the forthcoming release of its position statement on equity and diversity, NAEYC is highlighting its commitment to leading early childhood educators in recognizing, overcoming, and eliminating the personal biases and structural and institutional inequities that prevent children from marginalized groups from experiencing the same learning opportunities and advantages as their peers.

This position statement as well as some of the articles in this volume call attention to the emerging research base on implicit bias, which reveals that teachers' implicit bias can impact their perceptions of children's learning and development. For example, research indicates that teachers often view the play of children of color—particularly African American boys—differently than that of other children. Self-reflection is one way teachers can develop an awareness of, recognize, and mediate bias and barriers in all areas of teaching to ensure that all children experience needed cognitive, social, and linguistic advantages that prepare them for future success in school. Each of the articles in this volume includes a set of reflection questions to guide educators in their journey. In fact, the first two articles in this volume (see “The Gifts of the Stranger: Learning from Others' Differences” on page 5 and “Moving Beyond Anti-Bias Activities: Supporting the Development of Anti-Bias Practices” on page 17) focus on self-reflection themselves, an important first step in the journey of supporting the development and learning of all children.

There is far more to be explored regarding this issue than any one resource can achieve. Just as the equity and diversity position statement acts as a starting point with broad-stroke guidance that individual educators must build upon, this volume of *Spotlight on Young Children* has been compiled within the limitations of a publication with finite space. This book is only the beginning of resources from NAEYC centered on equity and diversity.

Often, schools and educators do not value the learning experiences that emerge from children's everyday contexts if those experiences are not compatible with school culture and the expectations schools have for children. As such, children from historically underserved populations are often considered to have a deficit and, consequently, are thought to be at risk for not succeeding in school. This notion of *deficit* comes both from a lack of recognition of the value of children's background knowledge and administrators' and teachers' limited understanding of how the cultural knowledge learned at home and in the community relates to the knowledge and skills learned in school. These deficit views can deprive children of color of learning experiences in school reserved for those who come from more privileged or advantaged populations.

Given this, how do early childhood teachers create experiences that build on what children already know and understand? The first step is to identify children's experiences or background knowledge so that they can effectively bridge it to what is necessary to learn in school (see “Capitalizing on Culture: Engaging Young Learners in Diverse Classrooms” on page 31). A strong sense of curiosity about children's lives and desire to support their well-being will motivate teachers to learn about children and their families through observations and conversations about their culture, traditions, practices, and beliefs (see “Voices of Immigrant Families in Early Childhood Settings” on page 57).

Teachers must also examine their own racial, socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, able-bodied, and gender privilege, recognizing and reflecting on how their personal identity and implicit or explicit biases inform a deficit approach to differences. Only then can they approach children and their families from a stance of respect and curiosity (see “Supporting Gay and Lesbian Families in the Early Childhood Classroom” on page 97). This attitude allows teachers to establish positive relationships with families and to create learning environments that support and value children's racial, ethnic, and gender identities; abilities; and funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992). At the same time, it enables children to feel confident about who they and their families are and the unique strengths—the knowledge, skills, and experiences—that they bring to the classroom.

The articles in this volume provide examples that illustrate how teachers can build on families' cultural beliefs and practices to create culturally sustaining pedagogies. Culturally sustaining pedagogy goes beyond merely being responsive to the children's and families' experiences—it promotes and sustains children's

skills and knowledge learned in their community contexts *and* gives children opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in school (Paris 2012). When children learn to value themselves as well as others, they feel safe to explore issues of social justice that are close to them (see “Becoming Upended: Teaching and Learning About Race and Racism with Young Children and Their Families” on page 85). Ultimately, as educators we hope that the children we teach will one day become agents of social change for a better world.

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Susan Bernheimer and **Elizabeth Jones** begin this collection of articles with an eye toward self-reflection in “The Gifts of the Stranger: Learning from Others’ Differences.” Through the lens of their experiences in adult learning environments, the authors explore how recognizing diverse life experiences and circumstances is a critical part of creating equitable learning opportunities.

“Moving Beyond Anti-Bias Activities: Supporting the Development of Anti-Bias Practices” asks educators to consider the ways in which anti-bias education can support proactive, responsive curriculum development and interactions with children. **Lisa P. Kuh**, **Debbie LeeKeenan**, **Heidi Given**, and **Margaret R. Beneke** share a framework developed and used by the educators in their program to hold themselves accountable for anti-bias work and apply this framework to real examples from their classrooms.

Our changing ethnic, racial, and cultural landscape is most evident in the nation’s schools. In his article, “Capitalizing on Culture: Engaging Young Learners in Diverse Classrooms,” **Tyrone C. Howard** underscores why it is imperative that early childhood educators acquire the cultural awareness and essential proficiencies that enable them to effectively teach and foster learning across cultural and racial differences.

In today’s climate, it is more urgent than ever to redress the imbalance of resources and opportunities among diverse groups, and the first step is to understand past and present challenges to design more effective early childhood programs. “Addressing the African American Achievement Gap: Three Leading Educators Issue a Call to Action,” by **Barbara T. Bowman**, **James P. Comer**, and **David J. Johns**, discusses the effects of centuries of prejudice, discrimination, and other factors that are at the heart of the achievement gap that exists between African Americans and White Americans.

Immigrant families with young children in early education programs have their own ideas about teaching, learning, and relationships, but when stripped down to their core, there are many commonalities with best practices. **Jennifer Keys Adair** and **Alejandra Barraza** review seven suggestions offered by diverse groups of immigrant families from across the United States in their article, “Voices of Immigrant Families in Early Childhood Settings.”

In “Challenging Gender Stereotypes: A Teacher’s Reflections on Counteracting Gender Biases,” **Nadia Jaboneta**, with **Deb Curtis**, recounts an experience in her classroom that brought to the forefront how social constructs influence children’s perception of gender roles very early. She reflects on what she—and all teachers—can do in her daily interactions and practices with children to intentionally counteract gender biases.

Because reading and writing are interconnected processes, considering both when addressing and assessing children’s literacy skills is critical, especially when children are learning more than one language. In “Reading Books, Writing Books: Reading and Writing Come Together in a Dual Language Classroom,” **Paola Pilonieta**, **Pamela L. Shue**, and **Brian T. Kissel** focus on three children to show how teaching and observing reading and writing together in a bilingual classroom allows for more accurate profiles of children’s reading and writing abilities.

“Becoming Upended: Teaching and Learning About Race and Racism with Young Children and Their Families” is a collaboration between **Kirsten Cole**, a community college professor and public school parent, and **Diandra Verwayne**, a kindergarten teacher working in Brooklyn, New York. The article documents how Diandra worked with families as they responded to her curriculum addressing issues of race and racism and offers strategies for approaching these complicated but critical conversations.

Children who come from families with nontraditional structures are another diverse population for which educators must strive to create safe spaces. “Supporting Gay and Lesbian Families in the Early Childhood Classroom,” by **Anna Paula Peixoto da Silva**, provides practical strategies that teachers can implement to welcome, include, and support gay and lesbian families.

In “Developing Biliteracy with Intentional Support: Using Interactive Word Walls and Paired Learning,” **Iliana Alanís**, **Irasema Salinas-Gonzalez**, and **María G. Arreguín-Anderson** discuss how teachers can create opportunities for young children to hear and use language in meaningful settings—critical for all children but most particularly dual language learners—by integrating partner-based learning and interactive word walls in the classroom.

Stephanie Feeney and **Nancy K. Freeman** describe a situation faced by a teacher when a father objects to his son wearing a pink princess costume in “Don’t Let My Son Dress Up as a Girl!: An Ethical Dilemma.” In their article, they describe how the teacher uses the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct to analyze and resolve the situation. This, and similar cases, challenge educators to think carefully about children’s conceptions of gender.

“Research to Practice: New Research on Helping Young Children Develop Positive Racial Identities” recognizes that race remains central to educational inequity and highlights the importance of supporting children’s development of a positive racial identity. Authors **Ira E. Murray** and **Adam J. Alvarez** review three questions that every early childhood educator should consider as well as offer recommendations for advancing educational equity.

Titus DosRemedios concludes this collection with a call to action for educators and experts across other fields to collaborate and advocate for the resources needed to provide all children with access to high-quality learning opportunities in his article, “Building a More Inclusive Sandbox: Inviting New Collaborators to Support Children, Families, and Early Learning.”

References

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