

A Lens That **REFLECTS**



The opening words to “Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education,” a position statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, encapsulate what the early childhood education system must do to ensure the rights of all children to learn and thrive:

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

Advancing equity can seem overwhelming, but there are several ways for principals to make significant impact. What being an equity leader means to you depends on your knowledge and the specific needs of your community.

Begin by reflecting on where you are on your equity journey. Ask yourself the following:

- Why are you engaged in early childhood education work?
- What do you see as the outcome for children?
- How do you define equity? What are its markers?
- Are equity and instruction connected? How?
- Are there particular data, incidents, or experiences that made you focus on the issue of equity?
- What privileges do you have, and how do they play out in your work and daily experiences?
- What, if anything, do you do to strengthen equity?
- Where does anti-bias/anti-racism fit in your work?
- Are there tools, strategies, workshops, or readings that you have found helpful?

FOUR WAYS TO BE AN EQUITY LEADER

Anti-bias thought leaders John Nimmo, Debbie Lee Keenan, and Louise Derman Sparks outline a range of ideas on what it means to be an equity leader. Here are four that seem particularly apropos for early learning:

- 1. Engage teachers, staff, and yourself in reflection and education.** Effecting change in equity relies on people being reflective about their attitudes, knowledge, and practices, and continuing to expand their own understanding of equity issues. Create the time, space, and support so everyone can take steps in their equity and diversity journey.
- 2. 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, the institutional dynamics of

Advancing equity in early childhood classrooms: Strength- based approaches emphasize materials that mirror diverse cultural experiences

BY SUSAN FRIEDMAN



oppression, and an anti-bias curriculum. Bring an equity lens to all aspects of early childhood education. For instance, a program leader might explore how the curriculum can reflect families' diverse cultural contributions as part of staff professional development in STEM subjects.

- 3. Provide curricular resources.** Proactively and intentionally ensure that teachers have classroom materials in the languages they need to support anti-bias activities with young children (e.g., persona dolls, books, block accessories, labels, and puzzles representative of families in the program and the larger community).
- 4. Reach out to families.** Take the initiative to engage families, especially those from traditionally marginalized groups. Ensure that your program's environment, including the hallways, offices, and classrooms, reflect cultural and linguistic diversity. Welcome and encourage families to visit in their native language. Meet with families in the community and in their homes, learning from and with them about the equity issues they confront every day.

RESPONSIVE, EQUITABLE PRACTICES

Working toward equity in early childhood education ensures improved outcomes for all children by removing the predictability of success or failure based on race, ethnicity, or language, the National Equity Project says.

Here are four areas on which principals can focus to create inclusive early learning environments:

- 1. Effective cross-sector collaboration.** Principals don't have to act alone—they are part of a wider community of educators. They can create meaningful dialogue and build relationships with Head Start, public pre-K programs, child care providers, and early childhood mental health professionals. All sectors that touch the lives of young children and their families should be a part of collaborative equity work going forward.
- 2. Examining data to identify disparities and barriers.** One important task of cross-sector collaboration is to review data to determine current inequities in early childhood sectors, say Jodi Alyn and Lila Cabbil in a 2018 article, "Silence Is Violence, and Inaction Gives Traction to White Supremacy." Principals can look at data within their own schools, as well.

Most often, inequities will be related to discipline and access to resources and services. Data shows that Black children are 3.5 times as likely to be suspended as their white counterparts, for example, despite the fact that they make up less than 20 percent of the population. Understanding where such disparities exist is critical to disrupting inequitable policies and practices.

- 3. Developing more equitable policies and practices.** Most current practices for managing young children's behaviors are grounded in exclusionary discipline, which is ineffective at best and counterproductive for helping children exposed to trauma acquire key self-regulation and social-emotional skills. Suspensions and expulsions are a Band-Aid to a larger problem, and they don't address larger issues in early childhood programs, such as ineffective behavior management practices, implicit bias, and unresolved trauma.

Place the emphasis on helping teachers acquire key knowledge related to child development and behavior, how culture shapes behavior, and culturally and linguistically responsive anti-bias strategies. These can help teachers implement effective instructional practices, develop meaningful relationships with children, and manage behavior in a developmentally appropriate manner.

- 4. Responsive, developmentally appropriate instruction.** Research from the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council supports the need for early childhood teachers to have an expansive body of knowledge to produce quality outcomes for young children. Principals should examine what supports the teachers and curriculum specialists serving children 8 and under might need.

QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS

- What are the opportunities in your school district or community for cross-sector collaboration?
- What do you know about data related to suspensions and expulsions of preschoolers in your school?
- As you visit pre-K–3 classrooms, what do you notice about opportunity for children's choice and expression? Does curriculum planning and instruction encourage children to be actively involved in their own learning by asking questions, sharing insights, and offering opinions?
- Look at the children's books in classrooms and in the library. Do you see books that offer mirrors and windows?
- What kinds of changes do you want to make? What steps and supports might be needed across the community or within your school?

Through an asset-based approach, principals and other educators can use NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" and "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs" position statements and other resources to put practices into place to encourage equitable, joyful learning.

CAPITALIZING ON CULTURE

There are a range of ways educators can leverage and capitalize on children's cultural and linguistic wealth as they design and facilitate instruction. Developmentally appropriate practice includes the need for teachers to consider a child's age,

development, and sociocultural background when developing responsive education.

Putting developmentally appropriate methods into action requires school administrators and staff to develop their professional knowledge and use of:

- Integrated approaches to curriculum planning across content areas;
- Lessons steeped in an understanding of children's developmental domains;
- Families' funds of knowledge;
- Culturally responsive environments, materials, and approaches; and
- Hands-on, playful learning environments.

All of these will promote equitable, engaged, and joyful learning for young children.

AN EQUITABLE EXAMPLE

Here's one example of developmentally appropriate teaching: Ms. Encinas reads *I Love Saturdays y Domingos* by Alma Flor Ada to children in her first-grade classroom. She points to the illustration and asks, "Grandmother calls her girl sweetheart and darling. What special names does someone call you?" Kamila says, "Abuelita calls me *cariño*." "My auntie calls me sugar," Luis says, laughing. Ms. Encinas nods and says, "I understand. My auntie calls me sweet pea." The children giggle.

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 more. All children, and especially children of color, need what the Ohio State University professor Rudine Sims Bishop called "mirror" books—that is, books that reflect themselves, their families, and their communities in positive ways.

There are currently far more "window" books—books that offer a glimpse into the lives of other (mostly white) people. Mirror books highlight histories, music, the arts, languages, fashion, cuisine, and other culturally rich experiences found in communities of color but not always in school curricula. A knowledge-rich curriculum contains both mirrors and windows. Do your classrooms have books and materials that mirror children's homes, lives, and experiences, as well as windows that help them discover new places, people, and ideas?

Leading change toward equity and diversity means firmly holding to a vision and mission, while inspiring, facilitating, and supporting step-by-step strategic action. This takes time—change is a process, not an event or two. Develop a network of supportive colleagues with whom you can learn, perform critical assessment, and celebrate

Core Concepts: Equity

- **Being an equity leader depends on one's own knowledge and the needs of the community. Reflect on your equity journey to take the next steps.**
- **Principals can focus on cross-sector collaboration and look at the data to identify barriers and develop policies that deliver discipline more equitably.**
- **Educators must capitalize on children's cultural wealth to design and facilitate instruction that offers mirrors and windows on the human experience.**

small victories, and the complex job of being an equity leader will become more manageable. ●

Susan Friedman is senior director of Publishing & Content Development for the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Adapted and excerpted from NAEYC's book, Advancing Equity and Embracing Diversity in Early Childhood Education: Elevating Voices and Actions, with specific excerpts from the chapters "Being an Equity Leader" by John Nimmo, Debbie LeeKeenan, and Louise Derman-Sparks; "The Work: Promoting Equity and Justice in Early Childhood" by Jen Neitzel; and "What About the Children? Teachers Cultivating and Nurturing the Voice and Agency of Young Children" by Brian L. Wright. Additional material is drawn from NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs, Fourth Edition, with specific experts from the chapters "Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners" by Brian L. Wright and "Teaching to Enhance Each Child's Development and Learning" by Marie Masterson. Learn more at naeyc.org.

Copyright © 2022 National Association for the Education of Young Children. All rights reserved.



Mirror, Mirror

For a list of recommended diverse and inclusive books for children birth through age 5, visit Reach Out & Read at bit.ly/3G6gyPm.