Equity and Early Childhood Education: Reclaiming the Child

A Research Policy Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

IN THIS ISSUE

National Council of Teachers of English

This research policy brief by the Equity and Early Childhood Education Task Force of the National Council of Teachers of English addresses our commitment to equity as it pertains to early childhood education. We define early childhood education as having to do with the teaching of young children, birth through age eight.

Equity can be described as the elimination of privilege, oppression, disparities, and disadvantage that historically have excluded those belonging to particular groups. This is the first and overarching of several research policy briefs around issues of equity. When taken as a whole, these briefs will create a space and open a dialogue around the issues related to fairness, opportunity, and every child's right to participate in equitable early childhood practices. While participating in these practices, young children should be recognized, understood, and appreciated at personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels. This document is hyperlinked to other research briefs that expand upon the following subsections: High Quality Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Teachers, Strength-Based Views of Children and Their Languages, Racial Equity and Anti-Racist Teaching in Early Childhood Education, Children's Right to the Language, Access to Diverse Books, Playful Explorations, and A Shift from Readiness to Learning.

The overwhelming benefits of high-quality early childhood programs for young children cannot be overstated. For years, early childhood educators have recommended universal access as a key equitable practice, arguing that "all children deserve access to early learning opportunities that will increase their chances for success in school and life."[1] It is widely recognized that effective early childhood programs have long-lasting and wide-reaching positive benefits on the educational, social, and emotional development of young children. Children attending such programs show more improvement in cognitive ability, are less likely to be referred for special education, less likely to drop of school, and less likely to repeat a grade in later years. Long-term outcomes include increased high school graduation rates and labor performance rates and a reduction of criminal activity and teen pregnancy. Nobel laureate economist James Heckman estimates a lifelong economic rate of return of 7 to 10 percent per year per dollar invested in quality early childhood programs.[2]

Despite a plethora of research on the positive effects of high-quality early childhood programs on children's learning and development, there remain grave inequities in access as well as outcomes from children who participate in such programs. States vary widely in their expenditures on early childhood programs[3]; such a piecemeal implementation of early childhood education in the United States

is problematic and contributes to inequities. While the strongest evidence suggests that children from low-income communities benefit the most from high-quality early childhood programs, access to such programs is inequitable in part because early childhood education is a "confusing hybrid"[4] of programs and services that lack clarity and coherence.

High-quality early childhood programs include the following characteristics[5]:

- Holistic curriculum that enhances the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional domains of each child's development;
- Small class sizes and favorable teacher-child ratios;[6]
- Caring teachers and administrators who are well-trained in early childhood education and child development;
- Ancillary services (e.g., professional development, curriculum supervision, and assessment and evaluation) that support children's development through curriculum implementation;
- Parents and caregivers working actively as partners with teachers in fostering appropriate child outcomes;
- Programs that address child health, nutrition, and other family needs as part of a comprehensive service network.

High Quality Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Teachers

It has been said that "the single most important determinant of quality and the factor most related to achieving critical outcomes for children is the quality of the faculty who work directly with young children."[7] The following federal guidelines—with some of our own additions—outline the parameters of teacher preparation and certification for provision of quality education to support children's successful entry into public schools:

- Teachers working in publicly funded preschools should have or be working toward a bachelor's degree in child development and/or early childhood education.
- Instructional assistants in publicly funded preschools should have or be working toward an associate's degree in child development or early childhood education.
- Lead teachers in private child care centers should hold a minimum of an associate's degree in child development or early childhood education.
- All teaching assistants in private child care centers should hold at minimum a child development associate (CDA) or a state-issued certificate that meets or exceeds CDA requirements.
- Ongoing professional development should be accessible to all faculty.

To these criteria, we add:

- Teachers should learn about their students' histories, cultures, languages, background knowledge, and experiences.
- Diverse culturally responsive early childhood teachers should be recruited and supported. Individuals with multilingual and multicultural backgrounds can be advocates and provide crucial support for diverse young children and their families.
- All early childhood teachers should know how to effectively work with students from backgrounds unlike their own and have ample opportunities to confront their own biases as well as be well-versed in how to have conversations about bias with young children.

Racial Equity and Anti-Racist Teaching in Early Childhood Education

A useful definition of racial equity, from the Center of Assessment and Policy Development, is that racial equity is the condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares. Racial equity should include an examination of root causes of inequities, not just their manifestation. This includes elimination of policies, practices, atti-

tudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them. In early childhood education, one example of a practice that is inequitable is the disproportionate numbers of boys of color referred for disciplinary action. Teachers' and administrators' underlying racial bias toward children of color can lead to subtle, automatic everyday exchanges coined microaggressions[9] that can lead to discriminatory behavior. Thus, we believe that an examination of racial bias is a foundational first step to interrupting racist practices and creating more equitable treatment for young children.

Research shows that even very young children can adopt, enact, and interrupt racism and other forms of institutionalized discrimination. Young children are capable of examining and confronting racist ideologies and should have opportunities to do so. Cultivating these racial literacies from very early on in a child's life is a responsibility we all have to our nation's youngest children. When young children are not able to consider social problems from points of view other than their own, status quo practices and beliefs are perpetuated and conversations about race and racism are silenced. In age-appropriate ways, young children should learn the narratives of colonization from multiple perspectives, connect racialized laws and policies of the past to present-day racial inequities, and become skilled in naming and interrupting practices that oppress some and privilege others based on raced identities. Thus, equity in early childhood means capitalizing on the age when children are attuned to fairness by teaching them the history and psychology of racism and encouraging critical conversations around these issues.

Strengths-Based Views of Children and Their Languages

We believe that equity in early childhood programs begins with a strengths-based view of children that acknowledges the following:

- Children are capable learners who come to school with knowledge and skills gained prior to schooling.
- Children's learning is a complex and ongoing process of development.
- All children have the capacity to learn.
- Each child's language should be valued for the contribution it makes to their learning and that of others.

We reject the notion that children come to school with inherent deficiencies or pathologies that must be remediated. We also reject philosophies that hold the language of dominant groups as the norm upon which other groups should be measured. We support a positive perspective that focuses on what the child can do as well as the internal strengths each child brings to any learning challenge.

Children's Right to Their Own Language

Equitable early childhood practices support multilingual skill building as an integral part of children's learning and play. Regardless of early childhood teachers' proficiencies in children's home languages, programs should make every effort to create classroom environments that reflect children's languages and language varieties and use them for children's instruction and play. By doing so, teachers help children make connections between home and school languages—awareness that will later support children's multilingual development and academic success in English-dominant settings.

We advocate for an expansive view of language in the early childhood classroom. By communicating across languages, or translanguaging, children are able to exercise their linguistic resources purposefully and authentically. Research suggests that young children's and teachers' translanguaging practices in the classroom are generative for both academic and social development. Therefore, we recommend that early childhood educators develop equitable learning contexts that not only reflect and honor, but also leverage the linguistic diversity in the classroom as a resource for simultaneously learning English and preserving students' language histories. This includes integrating children, family, and community members as linguistic models in the classroom for instruction, and teaching with culturally and linguistically diverse literature.

Access to Diverse Books

We believe all young children should have access to literature that respectfully reflects their own and others' lives, languages, literacies, and histories. Teachers should select high-quality literature based on cultural, historical, and linguistic authenticity that neither reinforces inequities nor marginalizes groups characterized in the text through the promotion of stereotypes. The texts chosen should not erase histories of people, but instead provide insight into both the universal and unique experiences and knowing shared by a particular community. The literature collection must also provide global perspectives as young children begin to form ideas and understandings of the world from a very early age.

We call for collections of literature that are inclusive of the diverse abilities and identities of families, including LGBTQ+ community knowledges and practices. We also recommend varied formats and genres of literature that reflect experiences or characters living within the intersection of diverse sociocultural resources such as social, economic, religious, gender, or linguistic difference. Finally, we suggest that high-quality early childhood libraries must include literature that promotes social justice. Such texts can elicit discussions that make for a better world and can help young children identify themselves as change makers.

Power of Play

We take a strong stance that eliminating play from early childhood programs perpetuates inequities. This includes the exclusion of children's play with imagination, languages, multimodal literacies, and diverse literature. Play is the way children explore and learn about the environment, their bodies, and their place in the world. When children engage in collaborative and dramatic (or pretend) play, they actively draw on the social, cultural, and emotional roles and structures they observe and live daily. Dramatic play in particular opens shared spaces for young children to perform roles from their own perspectives, while also negotiating the lives and perspectives of others—an essential practice for developing empathy.

We advocate for young children's access to multimodal resources for their play. Multimodal resources include an array of visual, spoken, gestural, written, three-dimensional, digital, and other modes of communication. A growing body of research concludes that multimodal resources affect young children's play interactions in different ways. Because play varies significantly across social groups and cultures, children's access to a range of multimodal resources remains essential to nurture an equitable context for play. Research also suggests benefits from creative and playful activity among young children in both online and offline spaces.[10] We support families' and young children's creative and authentic uses of multimodal practices as resources for play in the classroom.

A Shift from Readiness Assessments to Learning

All children are *already learning* when they enter kindergarten. However, communities across the country increasingly organize early childhood initiatives toward "kindergarten readiness" outcomes, as measured with standardized instruments (sometimes called screeners) and funded with federal dollars. A readiness approach suggests that some children need to be *made ready to learn* in five domains: physical well-being, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. Children's varied performances on readiness tests erroneously increase perceptions of gaps between cultural, racial, economic, and linguistic groups—the very definition of inequity stated above. As a result, groups (families, neighborhoods, racial/ethnic communities) can be blamed for lack of educational progress beginning long before children enter school. Families are accordingly defined as in need of education about good parenting practices, commonly including changes in home language use, which directly suggests that existing parenting and language practices are deficient.

The overemphasis on "readiness" rather than "learning" misrepresents who children are and what they know. It leads to misguided and developmentally inappropriate teaching designed around the isolated skills and domains that are assessed, i.e., "teaching to the test." We believe in guarding the integrity of effective, developmentally appropriate assessment for young children

that documents their knowledge and learning and does not pressure families and teachers to prematurely accelerate young children's focus on skills in isolation. Shifting assessment attention away from readiness and toward equity will require that many early childhood teachers learn how to recognize, document, and value young children's development and communicate progress and needs to families and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Equity in early childhood education is largely interpreted as access to high-quality early education that promotes similar outcomes across economic groups to level the playing field of education for young children across America. Yet equity cannot be considered without attention to the Eurocentric, middle-class norms upon which children's success is measured. Furthermore, economic disparities cannot be understood in isolation from racism, linguistic bias, and other forms of institutionalized discrimination toward particular groups of people. We believe that equitable early childhood education is achieved when strength-based views of children are foundational, when local and family knowledge is revered, when children are assessed in authentic ways and in fair amounts, and when differences among children's racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, class, sexual orientation, family structure, physical/mental ability, etc. are recognized, understood, and leveraged. Additionally, we believe that equitable early childhood education is achieved when young children are taught to notice, name, and interrupt unfair practices around race, ethnicity, language, class, ability, sexual orientation, etc. We can achieve this goal by honoring young children's voices in conversations around fairness, hope, and reconciliatory practices.

Inspired by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we recognize that children have universal rights. Thus, we conclude by summarizing our beliefs and making particular charges of those who work with young children:

1. Children are members of cultures and social groups with a range of knowledge and experience that they bring to the early childhood setting. It is the responsibility of early childhood educators to ensure quality of programming that addresses issues of equity and social justice.

2. Children are capable of sharing their knowledge and experience with their peers, family, and early childhood educators. It is the responsibility of early childhood educators to embed practices in early childhood programs that promote equity and foster open communication with and between families in the early childhood setting.

3. Children benefit from inclusive practices in which collaborative learning is fostered. It is the responsibility of early childhood educators to provide programming in which children can participate in decisions that affect them.

Our hope is that educators and policymakers will use these core beliefs, and the accompanying research briefs written by the Equity and Early Childhood Education Task Force of the National Council of Teachers of English, to bolster work that addresses these aims.

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2. http://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/10yranniversary_Heckmanhandout.pdf
3. http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2007/10/31/taking-stock-assessing-and-improving-early-childhood-learning-and-program-quality
4. http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/9833_EquityMatters_Kagan_Final.pdf
5. http://families.naeyc.org/accredited-article/10-naeyc-program-standards
6. http://preschool.unlv.edu/documents/NAEYC%20RATIOS.pdf
7. http://www.epi.org/publication/books_teacher_quality_execsum_intro/
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