

Strengths-Based Approach to Equity in Early Childhood

A strengths-based approach to equity in early childhood education focuses on identifying what works for the child instead of focusing on what is “wrong” with the child and on her supposed deficits. In other words, instead of insisting the child “fit” the curriculum, the curriculum is built to respond to the child. Following the Ecological Model of Child Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), children should be placed at the center of education, and a strong network of programs and services should be put in place to support children’s learning and development broadly, thus having greater impact on each child’s learning and development.

Underpinning this approach is the belief that each child is capable and competent, possessing unique strengths and talents. Therefore, a child’s home language(s) and culture(s) should be acknowledged as positive contributors to a child’s development both prior to and throughout a child’s school experience. Early childhood professionals need to recognize bi- and multilingualism as an asset and support children in maintaining their first language while learning English as a second or additional language.

Also underlying this model is the belief that children demonstrate their learning in different ways. Therefore, learning environments need to include opportunities for children to show what they know in multiple ways (i.e., by what they make, write, draw, say, and do). According to Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011), children make meaning through multiple forms of intelligence, and by engaging children in opportunities to use a variety of ways of knowing (e.g., linguistic, special, interpersonal, logical-mathematical, etc.), early childhood professionals can more effectively engage children in meaningful and varied learning experiences.

This strength-based approach requires that early childhood educators engage in a more reflective practice, examining their own values and professional practice and how these may affect each child’s learning and development. By developing a reflective stance towards their practice, early childhood educa-

tors are better positioned to develop the skills, knowledge, and approaches necessary for achieving outcomes most appropriate for each child (McCashen, 2005).

Finally, it is important to recognize that starting with what is presently working for the child should form the basis of any documentation/assessment about a child’s learning progress. Therefore, it is not appropriate for early childhood professionals to describe a child from a deficit-based perspective. Assessment should be based on how the child’s learning may next be best supported. Such an approach involves the consistent sharing of information between early childhood professionals and families.

For Further Reading

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. In *International encyclopedia of education* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, 1643–1647). Atlanta, GA: Elsevier.

Embracing a strength-based perspective and practice in education by resiliency initiatives. (2011). Calgary, AB: Resiliency Initiatives. Retrieved from http://www.mentalhealth-4kids.ca/healthlibrary_docs/Strengths-BasedSchoolCulture-AndPractice.pdf

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Gardner, H., (2011). *Frames of mind*. New York: Basic Books.

McCashen, W. (2005). *The strengths approach: A strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*. Bendigo, Victoria: St. Luke’s Innovative Resources.

Responding to linguistic and cultural diversity: Recommendations for effective early childhood education [Position statement]. (1995). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. Retrieved from <https://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSDIV98.PD>