­­­Getting Intentional About Supporting ***Each*** Child: The Difference You Can Make

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Recent research in the early childhood field has revealed that, when it comes to quality in early childhood programs, one size does not fit all. The learning and development of each child is influenced by gender, race, ethnicity, language, ability, socio-economic factors, and especially family—factors that comprise each child’s unique culture. Here are a few examples.

* [Preschool] boys are expelled 4.5 times more than girls; and African-Americans are twice as likely to be expelled as Latino and Caucasian children and more than five times as likely as Asian-American children (Gilliam, 2005).
* Under-resourced children score far lower than their more economically advantaged peers on virtually every standardized test, statewide or national, and the dropout rate for low-income students is five times greater than for their high-income counterparts (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2012).
* Dual language learners are heavily over-represented among low-achieving students (within the bottom 5% – 25% of the achievement distribution) and severely under-represented among high achievers (within the top 5% – 25% of the achievement distribution) (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007).
* Children with disabilities and their families continue to face significant barriers to accessing inclusive high-quality early childhood programs and too many preschool children with disabilities are only offered the option of receiving special education services in settings separate from their peers without disabilities. (2013 Part B Child Count and Education Environments Data File)

From the earliest days, “development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts” (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC]a, 2009). To be successful early learners, children “need to feel safe and secure in their many identities, feel pride in their families, and feel at home in their early childhood programs” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). To achieve their full potential, each child needs support from comfortable, confident, capable leaders and educators who recognize and capitalize in positive and effective ways on both their sameness and their differences.

Early childhood leaders are in the unique position of developing programs that embody a current and important trend – the shift from supporting ***all*** children to supporting ***each*** child. More than a word substitution, this switch acknowledges that each child benefits from administrators, teachers, and programs that intentionally and explicitly support both who they are and how they learn. This distinction is so important that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) changed the language of their standards for the preparation of early childhood personnel. Where the standards used to speak to preparing students to work with ***all*** young children, they now require higher education programs to document how they are preparing future early childhood professionals to work with ***each*** child (NAEYC, 2009b).

The importance of getting more explicit about our commitments to supporting each child may be seen in four recent sets of federal guidance that provide early childhood colleagues at state, regional and local levels with explicit guidelines. These include:

1. US Department of Health and Human Services/US Department of Education. (2015, September). *Policy statement on inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs.* [**http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/inclusion/index.html**](http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/inclusion/index.html)
2. US Department of Health and Human Services/US Department of Education. (2016, May). *Policy statement on family engagement: From the early years to the early grades.*

[**http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/policy-statement-on-family-   
 engagement.pdf**](http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/policy-statement-on-family-engagement.pdf)

1. US Department of Health and Human Services/US Department of Education. (2016, June). *Policy statement on supporting the development of children who are dual language learners in early childhood programs*. [**https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/dll\_policy\_statement\_final.pdf**](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/dll_policy_statement_final.pdf)
2. US Department of Health and Human Services/US Department of Education. (2014, December). Policy statement on expulsion ans suspension policies in early childhood settings. [**https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/expulsion\_suspension\_final.pdf**](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/expulsion_suspension_final.pdf)

THE DIFFERENCE INTENTIONALITY CAN MAKE

What difference can this kind of intentionality make? Here are a few examples from recent research studies.

* High-quality, culturally responsive early learning environments are critical to closing the achievement gap between children living in poverty, especially children of color, and their peers (Whitebrook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009).
* An effective teacher can have a stronger influence on student achievement than poverty, language background, class size, and minority status (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Jacob, Lefgren, & Sims, 2008; Kane & Staiger, 2008; Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Rothstein, 2010).

Many programs reveal their commitment to diversity by the photos they hang on the walls. But authentic approaches to supporting ***each*** child and family require intentional decisions about all aspects of a program. Operationalizing the intentional shift from the ***all*** to the ***each*** concept requires knowledge, skill, collaboration with family, community and teaching partners, and, more than anything else, leadership.

Focused attention in five key areas—policies, family engagement, environments and practices, curriculum, and professional development—can provide opportunities to incorporate a more explicit emphasis on, and responsiveness to, the diversity of the children and families served by each program. Interested? Think about the following.

* How recently have you reviewed ***policies*** to see whether they align with your priorities for being reflective of and responsive to cultural, linguistic, and ability diversity? For example, do you have a ***parent*** handbook? Or a ***family*** handbook? Many programs are intentionally shifting to the term *family* to acknowledge the diverse configurations of caring adults in the lives of young children. While this may seem like a simple word replacement, the broader term will embrace and welcome families headed by an aunt, grandmother, guardian, or two dads.
* Recent studies have shown that successful ***family engagement*** can contribute tremendously to success of young children. Children whose families are effectively engaged show higher preschool performance and promotion to next grade and more positive engagement with peers, adults, and learning. Successful ***family engagement*** has even been shown to buffer the negative impact of poverty on academic and behavioral outcomes (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006). But true family engagement requires different approaches than the traditional methods used to support parent involvement. How are you engaging families as partners, decision makers, and experts?
* Do the ***environments*** in which you support young children (inside and out) authentically reflect the children and families you serve? What preventative mechanisms are in place to minimize occurrences of challenging behavior? Do the ***practices*** (everything from greetings and praise to guidance and groupings) employed each day to support each child reflect knowledge of cultural differences, family priorities, and evidence-based practices? With mounting evidence that children benefit from programs that build congruency with the cultural beliefs, values, and priorities of the families served, many programs are looking for ways to incorporate authentic aspects of home into both their spaces and the learning that is facilitated in those spaces.
* Does your ***curriculum*** provide consistent opportunities to individualize for children who learn differently (and what child doesn’t)? For example, incorporating an emphasis on universal design for learning can support learning for children who are dual language learners, children with different learning styles and needs, and children who may not have had prior learning experiences and opportunities.
* ***Professional development*** refers to the many ways in which we support the adults who work with young children to acquire and apply relevant knowledge and skills. High quality programs incorporate opportunities for training, mentoring, coaching, technical assistance, or other forms of professional development on a regular basis. Building intentional programs requires opportunities for all staff to examine their own culture (and biases), learning about the cultures of the children and families, discuss and try out intentional approaches, reflect on how well those changes worked (or didn’t), and adjust accordingly. How intentionally are you incorporating these opportunities into informal (meetings, conversations) and formal (training, supervision) provided for your colleagues?

Bold, committed leaders will view the set of questions above as prompts to do one of four things:

1) reflect on the policies, environments, interactions, curricula, and professional development they have worked hard to put in place to support each and every child and family;

2) examine current structures and consider options for strengthening and enhancing them. This might start with viewing the policy documents mentioned previously, each of which has evidence sources, examples of exemplary practices, and resources.

3) begin the process of identifying opportunities to be more explicit and intentional. A starting point for new conversations may be conversations with diverse family members and community partners about the extent to which they see intentionality reflected in your program; or

4) nothing.

THE DIFFERENCE YOU CAN MAKE

At the end of the day, it will be easy to identify the leaders who use explicit and intentional approaches to support each child and family. They will be the individuals who will be able to say to any family member, “we designed this program with ***your*** child in mind. Let me tell you how.” And they will be able to do just that.

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