Advancing Equity and Inclusion in Early Childhood Education

Introduction to a Special Issue

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Early childhood educators have the opportunity to create learning communities that nurture children's development while acknowledging and valuing the diverse and intertwined social identities they hold, including race, language, abilities, gender, socioeconomic status, and more (Division of Early Childhood [DEC] & National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009; 2019). The long-term value of high-quality early childhood education on a child's education outcomes, lifelong health, and a family's economic stability are well documented (McCoy et al., 2018; Center on the Developing Child, 2010). This includes the opportunity within these settings to foster children's positive self-awareness, comfort, and joy with human diversity, recognition of injustices, and empowerment to speak up in the face of injustice (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019).

Despite this recognition, there are persistent and systemic societal inequities that disproportionately impact some children's access and

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inclusion in early learning environments (Blanchard, et al., 2021; Lawrence, et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021). For example, common barriers to early childhood education including affordability, ability to access, lack of supply in communities, and quality of care are often more complex, acute, and steeped in bias and discrimination for children and their families who come from traditionally marginalized backgrounds (Johnson-Staub, 2017). Further, many young children with disabilities continue to be segregated from their nondisabled peers for some or all of their early learning experiences (Lawrence et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has in many cases exacerbated the inequities around access and inclusion to early education systems (Warner-Richter & Lloyd, 2020).

We are at an important moment in which we can advance equity and inclusion as universal access to early childhood learning environments has become an important focus in the current administration. In addition to national-level initiatives such as Power to the Profession (American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees et al., 2020) and National Early Childhood Inclusion Indicators Initiative (Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center and the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2022), many state-level actions have further reflected the desire for greater access and investment in its workforce. For example, California has committed $2.7 billion towards an universal Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program that will be made available to all 4-year-olds in the state by 2025-26, effectively serving as the state's version of preschool for all (D'Souza, 2021). Further, the existing teacher credential focused on early childhood special education is expanding its age range in 2022-23 (birth through kindergarten) and there is strong advocacy for the reinstatement of the existing early childhood education credential (birth through eight) within the state (Alcala et al., 2020; Jacobson & Keeler, 2022). These policies have, or will have, a direct-impact on early childhood personnel preparation programs as well as the need for enhanced leadership and in-service teacher development in the field. Moreover, effective leadership in early childhood entails upholding and promoting ethical standards and policies while continuously self-reflecting and seeking professional development opportunities (Bruder et al., 2019; Nicholson et al., 2020).

The goal of this special issue of *Issues in Teacher Education* is to provide space to consider ways in which early childhood education can advance equitable access and inclusion for all young children and their families. The number of manuscripts submitted for consideration spoke to the awareness of the importance of this topic and the dedication to

work towards greater equity and inclusion. In the process of curtailing this special issue, we, as a special editor team, sought to engage in continuous reflective practices (Heffron & Murch, 2010). Central to this was acknowledging that our work would undoubtedly be informed by the identities and experiences that we each hold. Of upmost priority was the responsibility to listen, learn, and advocate. We are grateful for the expertise and engagement of the different author teams we had the honor to collaborate with in this work. As described in the following paragraphs, the resulting five original manuscripts forming this edition undoubtedly promote reflection, discussion, and further action.

In an important research contribution titled *Using Children's Literature to Advance Antiracist Early Childhood Teaching and Learning*, Spencer (2022) examines the need for early childhood educators and families to develop a deeper awareness of antiracist text selection. Enacting a year-long action research study, the article details the process and subsequent discoveries that emerged from eight teachers who gathered within a Critical Children's Literature Group (CCLG) to reflect and question a collection of inclusive children's literature. Findings suggest that participation in the CCLG provided an important space to intentionally deepen an understanding of their identities as educators committed to social justice.

In an article titled, "Examining California's Title 22 Community Care Licensing Regulations: The Impact on Inclusive Preschool Settings," McKee and colleagues (2022) consider the role of state regulations in guiding inclusion for children with identified disabilities with their nondisabled peers in preschool settings. A document analysis of state licensing, pertaining to preschool programs, resulted in three ways in which these requirements may support and also hinder inclusion: the role of the language used, the requirements for training/ education/ experience of educators, as well as ratio expectations. The implications stress the importance of advocating for policy and regulation change in supporting inclusive practices for all young children.

In a needed examination, Morris and colleagues (2022) authored an article titled, "Addressing Antiblackness in Early Childhood Educator Preparation: Implications for Young Black Children and their Families." The paper examines how personnel preparation in early childhood routinely offers curriculum and instruction that centers on the White normative perspective and hinders Black family engagement. There is recognition of the need to integrate culturally sustaining pedagogies within teacher preparation. The authors detailed BlackCrit as a critical framework that can provide a means to dismantle *anti*blackness through critical consciousness around

race. Recommendations for teacher preparation programs seeking to dismantle *anti*blackness provide a way for readers to apply this framework to their own work.

In the article titled "Building the On-Ramp to Inclusion: Developing Critical Consciousness in Future Early Childhood Educators," Urbani and colleagues (2022) address the need to examine implicit biases of early childhood educators through the development of critical consciousness. While it is acknowledged that early childhood education can be a contributor to improved opportunities and learning for children, it is also recognized that it can be a conduit to segregation and inequity for children of Color and/or those with disabilities. The authors emphasize the ethical responsibilities that early childhood educators must have to address racial bias, have difficult conversations and engage in continuous reflection. Utilizing their work within their own preparation program, the authors provide examples and specific instructional practices to promote the development of critical consciousness in future early childhood educators.

In a timely submission, Chiappe and colleagues (2022) contributed a manuscript entitled "Family Group Conferencing in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms during Distance Learning." The article details a pilot study that sought to examine the impact of Family Group Conferencing (FGC), an evidence-based approach that seeks to enhance the quantity and quality of teacher-family interactions to support the learning of young children within inclusive early childhood settings. The approach included providing teacher training on building family partnerships during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that this approach can support collaborations, both between teachers and with families, and that providing specific training can support more meaningful family-teacher conferences.

In conclusion to the special issue, we take space as a special editorial team to discuss what we learned from these five manuscripts and consider their context within early childhood education in an article entitled, "Calling Authentic Leaders Promoting Equity and Anti-bias Curriculum for All Young Children and Their Families." We reposition us all as authentic leaders, whether we are educators, family members, administrators, and/or committee members, who must hold responsibility to advocate for equity and inclusion within early childhood settings. With this comes the acknowledgment of the real and present inequities that are currently within our systems of care for many children and families including individuals of color and/ or diagnosed with disabilities. In turn, we continue with persistent

advocacy and action to ensure early childhood settings are accessible, responsive, and inclusive to *all* children.

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