

## Calling Authentic Leaders

### Promoting Equity and Anti-Bias Curriculum for All Young Children and Their Families

**Conclusion to a Special Issue  
of *Issues in Teacher Education***

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#### Introduction

Leadership in inclusive early childhood education and care is complex due to competing priorities, requirements, funding, and collaboration across related fields. There is a shared responsibility among professionals, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and state and federal bodies in prioritizing and promoting high quality early childhood education for *all* young children, regardless of race, ethnicity, native language, gender, and other characteristics (American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees et al., 2020). Yet, many children continue to be excluded from inclusive settings including

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those with disabilities and other marginalized backgrounds (Connor et al., 2015; Harper, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021).

*Authentic leaders* in early childhood can create more equitable systems that support the learning and development of young children and their families. Authentic leaders strive to elevate shared goals, build and nurture relationships with stakeholders, engage in lifelong learning, and embody behavior they wish others to exhibit (LaRocco & Bruns, 2013). Professionals seeking authentic leadership elevate their contributions to the field when they work intentionally to build relationships, capacity, and partnerships (Mitsch et al., 2022). Authentic leadership is demonstrated in different ways and therefore action must be taken across all levels of leadership within the early education system to achieve more equitable outcomes and overall well-being for *all* young children and families.

The articles in the special edition of *Issues in Teacher Education: Advancing Equity and Inclusion in Early Childhood Education* address the importance of engaging in critical consciousness on social identities (Urbani et al., 2022), as well as deconstructing power and privilege. Leaning into difficult conversations includes developing a deeper awareness of more equitable practices as seen in antiracist text selection (Spencer, 2022), as does utilizing BlackCrit in teacher preparation programs (Morris et al., 2022) in order to promote acceptance and inclusion for young children. Meaningfully partnering with families (Chiappe et al., 2022), reflecting on pedagogy and discourse, and utilizing more inclusive curriculum and instruction are shared for readers to consider their role in enacting change. Last, advocacy for regulation changes at the policy-level are needed to support inclusive practices for all young children (McKee et al., 2022). We can build from this work and commitment as authentic leaders.

As an extension to the articles in this special issue, we raise awareness to the topics of ableism and intersectionality as a way to better understand social identities and strengthen how we support children and families. In addition, we briefly share how adopting an anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020) and DisCrit frameworks (Annamma et al., 2013, 2018) within the early childhood workforce can help to develop inclusive early childhood learning environments and elevate authentic leaders. These frameworks allow space for meaningful discourse and application in areas of early childhood workforce development, such as personnel preparation training, professional development, curriculum development, research, evaluation, consultation, policy, and advocacy. The discussion below provides an overview and perhaps a starting point for readers to check in and consider what their role is when embodying

what *authentic leadership* means to them in their work, and how they can continue to push the field forward to a more equitable, inclusive, and anti-bias system.

### **Ableism**

As we envision early learning systems to promote acceptance and valuing of all social identities, we must also acknowledge the pervasiveness of ableism in our education systems that challenge these values. Ableism is defined as, “the negative or prejudicial beliefs about disability that arise from, and result in, the systemic oppression of people with disabilities” (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020, p. 1). At the root of ableism is the belief of what is normal and valued in terms of abilities; if one does not exhibit these abilities they are viewed as less than. In the context of education, systemic oppression of people with disabilities may include policy, environments, pedagogy, and attitudes (Goodly, 2014). Ableism is rooted in special education as it excludes students with disabilities by placing them in separate learning environments, segregating them from the general education system that favors able-bodied individuals. This creates a negative view or ableist perception of disability. In personnel preparation programs, IHEs must work to “disrupt structural ableism and reimagine disability” (Keefe, 2022, p. 115). Others in the early childhood ecosystem must reflect on their unconscious beliefs and seek to break down barriers so that all individuals are included.

### **Intersectionality**

Early childhood learning environments should honor the unique abilities and identities of each child and family. Intersectionality recognizes how social identities may overlap and impact each other, leading to increased discrimination/marginalization and/or privilege (Crenshaw, 2017). One cannot separate race, class, gender, ability, and other identities from one another; they are intertwined and evolve as one’s identity strengthens and shifts with personal growth. Each individual, including young children and their families, are part of multiple social and cultural groups, contributing to the formation of diverse social identities (DEC/NAEYC, 2009; NAEYC, 2020). These intersections are often complex, impacting the needs, characteristics, and experiences of the individual.

Early learning and teacher preparation programs must better understand and address how intersectionality impacts the workforce. Racism is present in early childhood through white cultural dominance

in education (Matthews & Jordan, 2019). Early childhood professionals, especially those in childcare settings, are more likely to be women, people of color, and work at lower income levels (Whitebook et al., 2018). We must seek to understand and disrupt oppression of not only young children and their families, but also honor the unique diversity of the early childhood workforce. The interconnectedness of one's identities is not complementary to an antiquated education system that has traditionally considered one or two identities when engaging with the early childhood workforce or the young children and families they impact.

### **Anti-Bias Education**

Anti-bias education aims to foster a world where all children can grow and develop to their fullest potentials as valued members of society (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019). Teachers are key leaders in teaching the four core goals of anti-bias framework, including identity, diversity, justice, and activism. This framework seeks to create a safe and supportive learning environment for every child as they navigate environments, adults, peers, routines, schedules, materials, and more. A young child's first exposure to education is within early intervention or early childhood learning environments and therefore, it is important they feel supported and a member of the classroom community (Sreckovic et al., 2018). It is within these learning environments that children can build confidence in their identity without superiority. Moreover, when a learning environment honors the core goals of an anti-bias framework, young children with and without disabilities are supported to be empowered to do what is right when faced with injustice in themselves or others, and honor human diversity (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020).

Across educators, anti-bias education also requires reflection and deep understanding of our own experiences, backgrounds, and values (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019). Reflective practice is defined as:

A way of working that spans disciplines and encourages staff members to a) consider the possible implications of their interventions while in the midst of their work; b) slow down, filter their thoughts, and more wisely choose actions and words; c) deepen their understanding of the contextual forces that affect their work; and d) take time afterward to consider their work and the related experiences in a way that influences their next steps (Heffron & Murch, 2010, p. 6).

When utilized in early childhood, reflective practice allows individuals to examine their own positionality, biases, and experiences, and

consider how this impacts their work within their own unique contexts. Reflective practice is ongoing and may serve as a foundation for any leader, especially teachers, seeking to understand how their actions support anti-bias practice within the greater early childhood ecosystem. Organizational supports must also be in place to support classroom implementation of anti-bias education. Anti-bias programming requires shifting away from dominant culture that permeates program's thinking, organizational structures and practice, and intentionally incorporates other cultural ways of thinking and doing (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). All individuals must do their part to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (NAEYC, 2019). The Division for Early Childhood's [DEC] position statement on Ethical Practice (2022) outlines:

Regardless of their role or discipline, EI/ECSE [early intervention/early childhood special education] professionals must advance equity and inclusion for all young children and their families, particularly those who have been subject to historical and ongoing marginalization; use the best available evidence, including family and professional wisdom; collaborate with young children, their families, and other professionals; understand and adhere to all relevant legislation, policies, and professional guidelines; and engage in ongoing learning and reflection. (p. 13)

Specifically, faculty at IHEs and workforce leaders, such as administrators and program directors, have a responsibility to the early childhood field to uphold and promote ethical standards and policies within their scope of practice while they have a social influence on practices and policies (Nicholson et al., 2020; Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2014; 2015; NAEYC, 2019). Issues of equity and social justice require us to change *what* and *how* we teach future educators.

### **DisCrit**

In alignment with anti-bias education, DisCrit is a framework that draws from Critical Race Theory, Disability Studies, and other scholarly work to examine how constructs about race and ability, and subsequently racism and ableism, are often interdependent and work together to uphold ideas of normalcy (Annamma et al., 2013, 2018). Within the framework's tenants, there is a call to recognize the legal and historical acts that have suppressed, and continue to suppress these identities, and that activism is required for equity and social justice to honor and amplify these voices as experts (Annamma et al., 2018). The early childhood field sees the intersections of race and

disability with the disproportionality of children from marginalized populations in special education and the higher likelihood that they may experience discipline and/or expulsion in preschools (Aratani et al., 2011; US Department of Health & Human Services [USDHHS], 2014). The need for culturally responsive and justice-driven personnel in the early childhood workforce is indisputable (Love & Beneke, 2021; USDHHS, 2014). Moreover, authentic leaders must seek to understand the impact of policies and practices on the early childhood field, take action within their role and capacity, and intervene in the face of injustice.

### **Enacting Change at All Levels**

Advocacy can come in many shapes, forms, and different levels (Stegenga et al., 2022). The promotion of meaningful inclusion can be supported by anti-bias curriculum, education, and care (DEC, 2020; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019; Lalvani & Bacon, 2018). With the collaborative efforts led by the “Power to the Profession” initiative (American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees et al., 2020) and work stemming from the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015), it is predicted states and IHEs will be evaluating their current standards, requirements, and curricula to meet the evolving needs of the field, including the promotion of equity and inclusivity. In early intervention/ early childhood special education, new personnel preparation standards (DEC, 2020) promote inclusion and responsiveness to cultural diversity, encouraging reflection and action towards dismantling ableism and other forms of marginalization in personnel preparation (Love et al., 2022) and in-service professional development (Tomcheck & Wheeler, 2022). These initiatives provide a unique opportunity for stakeholders and personnel at different levels of the greater early childhood workforce to be informed, follow their intuition, and partner together with those from diverse backgrounds and histories, including those with intersectional identities and those with different lived experiences.

Whether one’s role focuses on personnel preparation training, professional development, research, policy, or advocacy, all individuals must do their part to dismantle oppressive systems and advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (NAEYC, 2019). Further, there is a need for interaction across personnel, professional preparation and development, and local, state, federal, and organizational governing bodies in order to best support the early childhood workforce and ecosystem (DEC, 2014, 2020). It is time to rise to the occasion for

all early childhood personnel to reflect on their role, their actions, and embody authentic leadership in their own context.

### Conclusion

While there has been awareness and a growing discussion, inequities in our current systems of early childhood learning and care continue to exist for many children and families including individuals of color and/or diagnosed with disabilities. There is an ethical and shared responsibility for every individual to do their part in leading the disruption of oppression and separation that have historically been the status quo in early childhood. Without intentional action of individuals at different leadership levels of the early childhood ecosystem, including the workforce development (e.g., personnel preparation, professional, policy, advocacy), outcomes and overall well-being of all young children and families will remain stagnant. Adopting anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020) and DisCrit frameworks (Annamma et al., 2013, 2018) within development of the early childhood workforce can help to develop inclusive early childhood learning environments and elevate authentic leaders who go on to directly impact young children and their families. Persistent advocacy and standing up for what is right in the face of injustice ensures early childhood learning environments honor diversity and are accessible and inclusive to *all* young children.

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